

LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

Standards and Assessments: Where Are We and Where Are We Headed?

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As a result of policy-making events of the past decade, everyone involved in education must deal with issues related to standards, assessment, and accountability. What follows is a brief explanation of how we arrived at our present circumstances and where we are headed next with regard to standards-based reform.

How Did We Get Here?

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, national and state policies have made unprecedented forays into curriculum and instruction. When the initial waves of reform produced disappointing results, growing concerns about the educational preparation of the nation's youth prompted President Bush and the nation's governors to call an education summit in 1989. At this summit, President Bush and the governors agreed on six broad goals for education to be reached by the year 2000. This led to the creation of the National Education Goals Panel, which concluded that to measure meaningful progress on the goals, consideration should be given to creating national education standards to define what students should know and be able to do.

Congress then established the bipartisan National Council on Education Standards and Testing, which



reported in 1992 that national standards and tests were both feasible and desirable. Subsequently, the U.S. Department of Education pursued a purposeful strategy of education reform based on high standards. The implicit model was California's education reform program started in the mid 1980s, which took as a starting point the idea that educational improvement should begin with an agreement on content standards that could be forged at both national and state levels. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, which had published Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for

School Mathematics in 1989, provided guidance in developing national standards.

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What Is the Role of Title I in Standards-Based Reform?

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was created in 1965 to provide financial assistance to elementary and secondary schools serving disadvantaged students to compensate for the advantages enjoyed at schools with more affluent students. The 1994 reauthorization of Title I drew on the concept of standards-based reform and substantially changed the focus of the law from treating Title I recipients as a distinct class of beneficiaries to addressing the academic needs of disadvantaged students in the same terms as those of all other

students. Specifically, the 1994 law required states to develop challenging standards for student performance and assessments that were the same for all students, regardless of whether they were eligible for Title I.

In 1997, the National Research Council (NRC) formed the Committee on Title I Testing and Assessment to review the research on the use of testing and assessment for accountability purposes. The goal of the Committee was to develop a practical guide for states and districts to use in developing the systems they were creating under the Title I law. In the fall of 1999, the Committee issued its report entitled *Testing, Teaching, and Learning* (National Research Council, 1999).

According to this report, the provisions of the 1994 law reauthorizing Title I carry with them an implied “theory of action” that suggests how the larger goals of improving teaching and learning will be achieved. This theory suggests that by setting challenging standards states hold high expectations for all students regardless of their backgrounds or where they attended school. Aligning assessments to the standards then allows students,

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parents, and teachers to monitor student performance against the standards. Providing flexibility to schools permits them to make the instructional and structural changes needed for their students to achieve the standards, and holding schools accountable for meeting the standards creates incentives to redesign instruction. Embedded in this theory of action is the assumption that teachers will institute effective practices if they have both the freedom and the motivation to do so. This implies that motivated teachers will seek guidance about improving instruction, and that districts will provide the

support teachers need largely by making more widely available the existing array of professional development opportunities.

How Well Has Standards-Based Reform Worked?

The record of states in implementing the 1994 law shows that the new statute poses a substantial challenge. For example, although nearly every state has adopted content standards, as the law requires, reviews of such standards show that their rigor and usefulness vary widely. An analysis of early reading standards (Wixson and Dutro, 1999) revealed differences such as the following:

- 1.** Only 14 of the 42 states examined provide grade-by-grade standards at the early grade levels. When documents do not provide detailed information for grades K–3, they often appear to miss important content that is unique to these levels;
- 2.** Benchmarks/objectives vary along a continuum from very general to highly specific. Highly specific benchmarks often read like lists of skills and instructional activities that are highly prescriptive, and extremely general benchmarks are often broad goals that do not appear to offer sufficient guidance for the development of district-level curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- 3.** Some documents include content inappropriate for certain grade levels, especially kindergarten, and/or ignore important content. For example, the closest that one document comes to addressing decoding skills in first grade is: “Recognize that written language can represent spoken language.”

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According to the 1999 NRC Committee report, there is evidence that if the link between standards-based policies at the state and district levels and instructional

improvement at the school level is not clear-cut, then higher student performance may not result. For example, there is evidence that schools threatened with severe

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penalties for low performance are not changing their instructional practices in fundamental ways. Instead, they seem to focus on short-term gains in test scores, rather than substantive improvements in student learning. There is also evidence that when teachers’ sense of collective responsibility for improving student learning is weak, they may lack the willingness to change their practice in fundamental ways to respond to external accountability pressures.

The experience since 1994 suggests that, although some schools have made progress, their practices are not widely shared. Implementing effective instructional strategies to help all students achieve challenging standards is difficult. It also appears that the amount and kind of professional development is inadequate to meet teachers’ needs, and that teachers continue to feel unprepared to teach all students challenging standards. These findings led the NRC Committee to conclude that the theory of action underlying standards-based reform needs to be expanded to make explicit the link among standards, assessment, accountability, instruction, and learning.

Where Is Standards-Based Reform Headed?

The NRC Committee calls their expanded theory of action an “education improvement system” that emphasizes teaching and learning and relies on information and responsibility. Everyone in the system from students to parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers needs high-quality information about the

quality of instruction and student performance. At the same time, everyone needs to be responsible for fulfilling his or her role in improving results. The key is everyone knowing what is expected, what will be measured, and what the results imply for what to do next.

The report also describes in some detail the primary components of an education improvement system—standards, assessments, monitoring the conditions of instruction, and accountability. These descriptions are written as a practical guide for everyone involved in educational reform. They provide findings, recommendations, questions to ask, criteria, and examples. They also include attention to thorny issues such as assessing young children, children with disabilities and English language learners, reporting assessment data, and performance standards.

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The recommendations for both monitoring instructional improvement and accountability are notable among the report's descriptions:

- 1.** Schools and districts should monitor the curriculum and instructional practices of teachers to determine if students are exposed to teaching that enables them to achieve the standards they are expected to meet;
- 2.** Districts have a responsibility to assist in collecting and using information on the conditions of instruction to require and support improvement of instruction and learning in every classroom;
- 3.** Teachers should use the information on conditions of instruction in their classroom, along with data on student performance, to improve the quality of instruction;
- 4.** Accountability should follow responsibility. Teachers and administrators, individually and collectively, should be held accountable for their part in improving student performance; districts and states should be accountable

for the professional development and support they provide teachers and schools to enable all students to reach high standards;

- 5.** Accountability mechanisms should be based on a range of measures, including indicators of instructional quality.

What Is Capacity to Improve Teaching and Learning?

Capacity building within the context of standards-based reform is the ability of the education system to help all students meet more challenging standards. If the capacity of a system is insufficient for accomplishing a desired goal, that capacity may be increased in a variety of ways such as: 1) enhancing the capabilities and improving the performance of the workers (e.g., individual teachers); 2) adding additional resources to the system (in the forms of personnel, materials, and/or technology); 3) restructuring the ways in which work is organized; and/or 4) restructuring the ways in which services are delivered.

Most capacity-building strategies in education today are targeted for individual teachers using a traditional “training model” of workshops and university courses that reflects a limited conception of the dimensions of teacher capacity necessary to support and sustain instructional reform. This model also ignores the role of the school and other communities of practice in teacher learning and educational improvement. A report from the Consortium on Policy Research in Education (CPRE) by Goertz, Floden, and O’Day (1995) provides a more comprehensive framework for thinking about the nature of teacher and organizational capacity in the context of educational reform using three themes derived from their work and the research on standards-based reform.

Theme 1 Teacher capacity is multidimensional and evolving. Teacher capacity involves knowledge, skills, dispositions, and views of self. Knowledge encompasses a variety of areas including subject matter, curriculum, students, and general as well as subject-

specific pedagogy. Research indicates that the more complex thinking and problem-solving abilities embodied in new standards require teachers to have a deeper and more flexible knowledge base than is either required of basic skills approaches or developed in preservice or inservice education. Knowledge of what and how to teach must also be combined with the skill to do so. Although skills and knowledge interact and develop together, researchers have found a considerable gap between what teachers know or believe they should be doing in the classroom and their ability to teach in the desired ways.

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In addition to knowledge and skills, enacting reform requires having the disposition to meet new standards for student learning and to make the necessary changes in practice. Important dispositions include teachers' attitudes towards the subject matter, their commitment to student learning, and their attitudes toward change. Studies also suggest that the capacity to teach in different ways is connected to teachers' beliefs about their roles in classroom activity and to their views of themselves as learners.

Theme 2 Individual capacity interacts and is interdependent with organizational capacity. Individuals, of course, do not operate in a vacuum, and their ability to perform their roles and accomplish the goals set out by the standards depends not only on their own capacity but also on that of their colleagues and the system within which they work. The dimensions of organizational capacity include vision and leadership; collective commitment and cultural norms to realize the vision; knowledge or access to knowledge; organizational structures and management conducive to learning and improvement; and resources.

A vision that focuses on curriculum and instruction, improved achievement for all students, and teacher responsibility for student learning is an important aspect of capacity building. The leadership to articulate the vision and mobilize the organization to support it is also an important factor. In addition to vision and leadership, there must be a sense of collective commitment and responsibility for students, and a set of cultural norms that stresses on-going reflection and improvement.

Just as individual teachers need knowledge, so does the organization at large. Where knowledge does not exist within the organization, it is important to know where to look outside for what is needed. There also appears to be a relationship between achieving reform goals and creating organizational structures that serve these goals. A final dimension of organizational capacity is resources, especially time for teachers to meet for planning, reflecting, and learning from their practice. Personnel trained to deal with highly diverse students and materials are other important resources.

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Theme 3 Organizational capacity, like individual capacity, can be galvanized and nurtured through infusions of ideas and perspectives from outside its ranks. Research suggests that districts and schools need external input and assistance to move significantly beyond current practice. There needs to be a specific conduit of information from outside the immediate organizational context to link reform ideas to the specific context. Although the relationship between external influences and the school community is likely to take different forms in different contexts, actively reforming organizations are characterized by what has been called

an “open collective cycle” (Huberman, 1995) of professional development. The open collective cycle provides opportunity for individuals to increase their

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professional competence through experiences that provide stimulation, challenge, and feedback about performance and support for efforts to develop new skills.

Conclusion

The evidence to date indicates that standards-based reform is only likely to improve student learning if it includes efforts to build the capacity of teachers and administrators to improve instruction. Furthermore, without the capacity to improve instruction, accountability leads to inappropriate practices such as efforts to increase test scores without improving student learning. If this report is heeded, we should be able to put a lot more of our time and resources into professional development efforts aimed at substantive improvements in teaching and learning.

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