

Chapter 4: Standards-based Schools

Introduction

One of the most significant recent changes in the education community for parents, students, and professionals has been the inclusion of standards as a central component of the schools' curricula. Standards are statements of the outcomes, detailing what each student is to learn.

Prior to the inception of standards some incredibly ineffective practices occurred in schools¹.

- Do you remember taking spelling tests where your score could range from 0-25? If you spelled all 25 words correctly, which were often selected randomly for this week's list, you were thought to be a good speller. But were you? If you spelled 80% of the words correctly, were you ever told which spelling skills (not words) you needed to work on? We think you were more likely told to just spend more time memorizing the words you missed. Spelling wasn't a set of skills—it seems to have been a score based on your ability to memorize.
- Do you recall when you were told “it will be on the test” and then, whatever “it” was, everyone got busy and tried to memorize “it”? The reason we all memorized “it” was because our performance was going to affect our class grade. Typically, we didn't need to know how to analyze “it” nor use “it” in a socially constructive manner. We only needed to memorize “it”. The teacher only wanted to know if we mastered “it” so she would know what grade we had earned. If 7-8 of her pupils didn't learn “it”, the instruction tomorrow continued as if everyone had learned that piece of content. And the 7 or 8 just got further and further behind.
- Assessment wasn't used as a golf or piano teacher would use it—to try to discern what we needed to learn next and what we needed to review. Assessment was used to give us a mark that would identify us as good or bad learners. Such information tended to leave most students with an unpleasant view of assessment. It lacked utility to them as learners; assessments seldom served to help improve one's performance.
- In PE classes, as well as art and music classes, your course evaluation was often based on “participation”. A high score on “participation” often meant you were viewed by the teacher as being happy and cooperative. If you were sullen or recalcitrant, no matter how much you learned about physical education, your

¹ The implementation of standards will never overcome all ineffective practices. Insensitivity, thoughtlessness, ineptitude, laziness, and exhausted teachers will always exist. But the frequency of occurrence of the examples which appear in the bulleted items above will be diminished, we hope, when the standards-approach becomes fully implemented.

course grade suffered. Your grade was based on your disposition, not your acquisition of physical skills. Be a good boy/girl and we will reward you.

Under standards-based school procedures we think you will find education is more logical and more likely to aid progress by students. Practice has become a teaching activity to help students make progress rather than just something PE and music teachers inflicted upon you without any clear purpose—though they were correct in using practice activities. Your main focus will be on the degree to which your students learn rather than on your skillfulness in employing a teaching strategy recommended by a neighboring teacher. Teaching strategies are important—but not as important as student learning. Teachers, under standards-based education, may actually compliment students on their progress, not just when they exhibit high achievement or a sunny smile. Don't compliments for making progress towards the outcomes seem more logical to you as a student and as a prospective teacher?

Overview

If you had to define what a high school diploma means about a graduate we think you would find the task difficult. One can't be certain what content the diploma holder knows; what skills of being a citizen have been acquired; what work habits are now part of the holder's method of approaching job tasks; or, even, if the person learned to show up for school. Holding a high school diploma doesn't seem to clarify what the holder knows, can do, or how s/he will function in society.

Business people, in particular, want some clarity around what they can expect from their prospective employees who hold a high school diploma. Can the holder actually read, write, and compute; get along with colleagues; and understand and exemplify concepts such as punctuality and personal responsibility. Society at large wants to know all that about diploma holders plus they hope the person will have learned financial responsibility, hold an ability to attend to their personal hygiene, and to respect the possessions and property of their neighbors. But many schools have been lax in providing an unambiguous definition as to what a diploma holder has acquired and assurance that those attributes will truly be found in high school graduates.

Along with that bit of disenchantment with public education (see the timeline in the next section for a more thorough discussion) many authors have been calling for a reform in schooling. Diane Ravitch made one compelling case through a comparison of a diploma to a driver's license.

Students should meet some reasonable standard of accomplishment in the major realms of knowledge. In recent years, the diploma has come to represent very little. . . . We do not give driver's licenses to those who cannot drive, even if they mean well and even when they have mitigating reasons for the incapacity. . . . If we took learning as seriously as driving, the high school diploma would be of far more value to those who hold it (Ravitch, 1985, p. 15).

As pressure mounted for changes to be made in the schools, the solution many scholars came to support was called standards-based reform. The reform came to mean a

systemic, or education-wide, reform in how schooling occurred. Del Schalock summarized the types of changes made:

The meanings of outcomes-based [standards-based] instruction and the various ways it has been expressed, include:

- The alignment and integration of curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- Clarifying what students are to know and be able to do;
- Tailoring instruction to foster the outcomes desired;
- Designing assessment to match the outcomes desired;
- Using assessment information to guide instructional planning and student learning;
- Adapting both instruction and assessment to accommodate differences in learners and context, as well as differences in outcomes to be accomplished; and
- The wedding of instruction and assessment in the classroom (Schalock, 1994, p. 125).

We don't expect you to comprehend all that is implied in the above list—yet. But, by the end of this chapter we hope one of our friends, Del Schalock², summarization will be quite clear to you. Mark his list as something you need to review before you leave this chapter. Now, however, we turn to the task of condensing the content in this chapter to two crucial ideas.

Standards-based schools are based upon a few central ideas and most of them will seem to you, we hope, quite logical. But of all the concepts we will try to convince you to employ when you teach, Del Schalock, who was a leader in the standards-based school movement, wrote something, with his colleagues, we think summarizes well all that we will say to you.

Both individual teachers, and members of a school's faculty collectively, need to find ways to engage *all* students productively in learning, and help *each* student progress in his or her learning from where they are to where they are expected to be (Schalock et al., 2006, p. 2).

If you acquire nothing else from the chapter, please retain the two most significant concepts from Schalock et al's quote.

- You are to help each student learn.
- You need to focus on each student's progress—not just achievement.

Those two ideas mean that in standards-based schools a teacher's task is to focus on all students, not just those who are attentive or those who smell good or those whose parents look over your shoulder, so to speak. You will be paid to teach them all. Secondly, you don't need to just focus on where they wind up during your instruction but to continually monitor how far they have come. Not everyone will be able to achieve all your objectives but you need to help them move beyond where they were when you started. That doesn't mean limit your goals for some children. If your objectives are important then you want all the students to master those that are possible. But you can't

² Del Schalock spent just over two years working with us as we planned these three volumes. He was to write this volume. But, unfortunately, in 2006 Del passed away. We lost a good friend and you missed a chance to read the work of a wonderful scholar.

be expected to work miracles. You may, after all, have a one-armed boy in your archery class. You can, however, be expected to help even the less adept come closer than they were when you began working with them. We don't think either of those two significant ideas are unrealistic nor are they ones your supervisors will disrespect.

But you may feel vulnerable in standards-based schools. In teacher preparation programs from the past, students like you were expected to master certain skills like “write clearly stated objectives” or “prepare a visually appealing bulletin board”. If prospective teachers could do tasks like those, they were thought to be competent. Now, if you are to be judged competent, you must bring about a change—progress in your pupils. That is a much more sophisticated expectation but, we are sure you will agree, a much more important outcome than writing explicit objectives or designing eye-catching bulletin boards. Teaching for knowledge gain versus writing clearly is the more worthy goal—one we think is more important than determining your teaching competency by whether you can write a clearly stated sentence. The difference is prospective teachers in the past only had to account for themselves—“I can now write a clear objective”. Now, though, you are to ensure all your students make progress toward a standard—and you need to have had a clear influence on their change in behavior. You have to rely on your skills and knowledge and charisma so you can help your students to make you look competent. That is a scary way to lead your life—but it is a much more important goal than designing an attractive bulletin board.

But to put this all into context, this is the same set of expectancies physicians, financial advisors, and lawyers live with every day. They all need to help their customers lead a better life. And that is your role as well. If you plan a course of instructional action and your students do not respond productively then you need to recognize this and change your lesson design.

That is what a physician or a group of physicians in a clinic does for a patient who does not respond to a first medication or operation. A teacher or a school should not give up on a child any more than a physician or clinic would give up on a patient. Any less constitutes a breaking of public trust and a likely response of viewing the profession as weak or failing (Schalock, 2002, p. 53-54).

If you hoped teaching would be easy, we don't think you will believe that much longer. In the latter parts of this chapter we lay out how standards-based schools will impact your life, the lives of your students, and the lives of your fellow teachers and supervisors. Again, much is to be asked of you but we think you will agree these expectancies are reasonable given the two concepts Schalock and his associates stated for us earlier in this chapter:

- You are to help each student learn.
- You need to focus on each student's progress—not just achievement.

A perceptive reader would ask “Will all this effort in standards-based reform really change what goes on in classrooms once teachers close the door?” If you asked that question, good for you. Skepticism is a useful trait. If all that we will discuss in these three volumes leaves teachers doing what they did 30, 50, or 100 years ago, then

the reform failed as did we in our writing. But thankfully changes have been noted. [Research exists] “ that standards-based professional development programsseem to be....successful in changing teachers’ practices” (Supovitz, 2001, p. 84).

The above quote summarizes analyses of classroom behaviors as teachers responded to standards-based reform and was noted in research completed by Supovitz and Turner (2001) and Cohen and Hill (1998).

Standards-based reform, as we told you, is undergirded by two significant ideas noted above by Schalock. But you may ask, will my authors employ those ideas just as they expect of me?

A Brief History or the Standards-based Movement

To understand what motivated the educational community to orient their instructional and assessment efforts around school standards and how that step looks today one needs to know a bit of the history from the movement. And, thankfully for you, it is a relatively short history.

We present our discussion in the form of a time-line. Only ten dates or time frames are shown because so much of the movement is still maturing. A caveat: When writers employ a timeline it can mislead a reader into believing events occurred in a very linear pattern. The history of the standards movement was neither as linear as it appears nor as simply caused as we may seem to imply. Certain significant events occurred because the time was right. We have shown only those events which were significant in our minds and which depended on the zeitgeist of that time.

1965 Under President Lyndon Johnson, legislation was passed at the federal level which dramatically changed how education in this country operated. This country has long expected its 50 states to manage educational efforts with the federal government taking only a small role in funding and in encouraging new educative efforts. But in 1965 legislation called Title I, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, was passed as part of President Johnson’s war on poverty. The act guaranteed equal access for all to the educational resources of the community.

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) was passed [in 1965]. The ESEA was legislation that provided federal funding for schools for the purposes of improving education for all children, helping children break the cycle of poverty, and fighting inequality in the schools. To ensure that schools would be accountable to the goals of the ESEA, Congress has required schools to evaluate and report on their effectiveness in meeting the ESEA requirements (Horn, 2004, p. 17).

1972 Many schools and districts put children with learning, physical, and emotional special needs in settings removed from their neighborhood peers. These actions came to be considered an affront because these children were, in some cases, hidden away. The federal government

passed a land-mark piece of legislation called 94-142 The Education of all Handicapped Children Act. That act specified education was to occur in the “least restrictive environment” for all children. In other words, general educators, as well as special educators were required to teach all children—not just those who were convenient. Today, we provide all children a school setting where we claim it is a “non-restrictive environment”. That bill was a major civil rights law intended to foster inclusive schools for all.

1970-80 Within Washington DC, there was a great deal of concern about the safety of the country from attacks by Communist countries such as Russia, China, and Cuba. The federal government, influenced by “military-driven security needs, stressed academic standards in mathematics and science” (Horn, 2004, p. 37). This again confirmed for many that education needed to become more like business while focusing on preparing people to be scientifically and mathematically literate; in other words schools needed to be held *accountable* for preparing students in carefully chosen topics stated as *standards*.

1980 When Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States, along with the rise of the Moral Majority, a more politically conservative administration came into power. That administration was instrumental in deciding how public education would be evaluated. Legislation was enacted to bring public education (and private education if it was receiving federal monies) under laws that would bring order to the curriculum and its implementation would, it was argued, benefit the effort to make education a world class effort. Excellence, not equity, became the catchword (Horn, 2004).

Because of this conservative power surge, business leaders (typically conservative in view) pushed for a focus on a business type model of education. Outputs, *pupil learning*, would become the point by which students, teachers, schools, districts, and states would be judged. To accomplish that task many agencies and organizations began to write statements defining what schools should be teaching students and how test data used to assess those outcomes would be used to judge which sets of people were performing their tasks fruitfully. The former, outcome statements, became known as educational *standards*. That latter or second set of expectations became accountability systems—or commonly referred to as a need for *accountability* within the schools

1983 Publication of the book *A Nation at Risk* fueled further dissatisfaction which had begun in the 1970s. In that document it was written that "...unless public education received a major overhaul and unless expectations for student achievement were raised, America's economic security would be severely compromised" because comparisons of the test results and dropout rates of American public school children portrayed a picture of mediocrity (Nichols & Berliner, 2008, p. 4)³. The fact that those testing procedures and comparative analyses have been shown to be dramatically flawed did not slow the wide-spread view that our nation was truly at risk of losing its leadership position due principally to the decline of American education. A major *change in public education* was called for. Please do recall that the standards movement received much of its initiation from the publication of *A Nation at Risk*.

When this reform notion emerged in the late 1980s, educators and policymakers were still experiencing the despair about lagging American achievement that drove the publication and response to *A Nation at Risk* (Fuhrman, 2001, p. 1-2).

....policymakers at the state and local level responded by raising standards for both students and teachers (Fuhrman, 2001, p. 2).

States were to report not just whether each standard had been met by the student-body, but the degree to which prescribed sub-sets of students were approaching attainment. Those two requirements were based on the need for *accountability* and the expectation that individual students would make *progress*.

1990 In July, 1990, George H. W. Bush signed into law the American Education With Disabilities Act. The ADA is a wide-ranging civil rights law that prohibits, under most circumstances, discrimination based on a disability. It affords similar protections against discrimination to Americans with disabilities as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination based on race, religion, sex, national origin, and other characteristics illegal. Disability is defined as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity." In our case, those words meant it was against the law to ignore a part of the student body even in the classroom. Again, educators were told to provide education for *all students*.

Another piece of federal legislation was passed during that same time period. Improving America's Schools and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was passed to ensure that all children, specifically, those needing special services had them provided. This congressional action confirmed that education was now expected to provide services to all

³ Nichols and Berliner have been severe critics of the *A Nation at Risk* book, as have several other educational scholars. For example, Nichols and Berliner's very next sentence following the above quote was "American education became the scapegoat for a host of bad business decisions" (ibid, p. 4).
Girod, G.R., & Girod, M. Example chapter
Volume 1, Chapter 4

children. We could no longer “warehouse” special children in separate schools or just refuse to accept children with unusually complex disabilities, both common practices in this country⁴. The focus on *all children* was a significant breakthrough as was the expectation that schools would report their work to *evaluate* their progress.

2001

Certainly one of the most controversial pieces of federal legislation ever passed that impacted public schools was that devised by a politically conservative president (George W. Bush) and congress, the act commonly called *No Child Left Behind*. The most controversial component of the act included a mechanism for requiring accountability. Standardized tests were to be employed with all students, even those for whom the most complex special education services were required. Students who did not yet speak English were also to be assessed though they may have entered school only yesterday. Students, teachers, administrators, and states were to be evaluated on the basis of standardized test scores. If performance was judged to be too low, consequences followed that included public announcements and eventually, if inadequacies continued, a school could be shut down and reformed under the management of the state, the federal government, or a privately owned company. As you might guess, those steps were met with fierce debate. Almost every scholar in education agreed then, and still do, that the use of standardized tests, in their present form, will never answer the question about accountability in a valid manner.

One of the most compelling arguments against the NCLB provisions attacks it “design flaw”. Horn argues that the problems include:

....design flaws in NCLB such as overinvestment in testing accompanied by an underinvestment in capacity building, ungrounded theories of school improvement, weak knowledge about how to turn around weak schools, perverse incentives for quality and performance, and policymaking by remote control (Horn, 2004, p. 21).

As of this writing, mid-2009, the NCLB Act is still being challenged across the nation. But the concept of *accountability* was strengthened by the NCLB act though some scholars were even more specific in their antagonism for the Act⁵.

⁴ The author of this chapter taught the sixth grade in Oregon from 1962-65 in a large district. During that time children who would, in the present time, be receiving special education services in neighborhood schools their age-mates attended were, instead, put on busses and sent to a single elementary school where the entire student body, drawn from the whole district, received special services. Some children likely attended that school with other youngsters they had never seen before nor might ever see again.

⁵ “Here is the heart of NCLB. This is the theory of action behind the law. This law is designed to push lazy teachers and lazy students to work harder. It is based on the premise that children and teachers are not performing as well as they should, an easy belief to hold and an impossible one to verify empirically. Girod, G.R., & Girod, M. Example chapter
Volume 1, Chapter 4

- 2004 Most recently reauthorized in 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act came into being as a part of the ADA (see above). This law clarified even further the services teachers, schools, and districts needed to provide for *all children* and reauthorized the NCLB legislation. The IDEA stated “students must be provided a free appropriate public education that prepares them for further education, employment, and independent living” (www.ed.gov/policy/speced/leg/idea/q-and-a Aug. 2009).
- 2005 A study completed for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation portrayed the intractability of graduation rates. It was found nearly one-third of the U. S. high school students don’t graduate. Those data added additional fuel to the conviction that minor changes in schooling would be insufficient to provide higher graduation rates (Mariotti, 2009, p. 2).
- 2009 A project called the Common Core State Standards Initiative was organized by the Council of Chief School Officers and the National Governors Association. Speculation exists at this writing (late-2009) that this work will serve as the basis for the first national curriculum. Support seems to be mounting behind this effort (Cavanagh, 2009). **UPDATE:** To date 48 states, including Oregon, have signed on to Common Core State Standards in both English/Language Arts and Mathematics. Science standards are coming quickly!

Though much of the most recent legislation has attempted to remove what some members of Congress deemed to be “restrictive requirements” the above pieces of federal mandates are still operational and will influence how you deal with your students⁶.

We hope you noticed the use of Italics within several of the above paragraphs. What we were trying to show was across the last half decade, events had transpired to bring about a *change in education*. Though your authors are painfully aware of the shortcomings of the book *A Nation at Risk* and the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, we are pleased with the impact on bringing about *standards-based education, accountability,* and an educational system that *accounts for all children*. The latter two concepts are still

Based on our hundreds of school visits, we have come to believe that the percentage of lazy teachers we have is considerably smaller than the percentage of lazy politicians who do not read the legislation they support” (Nichols & Berliner, 2008, p. 12).

⁶ Some of you seeking to become a general (as opposed to special) education teacher may have noticed that much of the important legislation governing standards-based education came about as a result of work by those in special education. The earliest influences came from legislation enacted to advance civil rights—and those efforts were directed toward the right of “special” children to receive an equitable education. The efforts from those federal legislative actions impacted special education as well as general education. We hope you don’t think, if you are preparing to become a general educator that special education directed the standards movement. Rather, the standards-based movement owes much of its impetus to the civil efforts of the national government.

not being managed well but standards-based education is now well established across the nation's schools.