Standards-Based Reform:
Panacea for the Twenty-First Century?

by Bobby G. Malone and Jacquelyn S. Nelson

Introduction

The issue of accountability for student achievement stands at the forefront of American education. Educators, parents, and business representatives have joined forces to support improvements in hopes of requiring our children to attain the knowledge and develop the skills necessary for life. As a result, high standards, assessments, and benchmarks have been established. However, critics cite numerous problems with standards. For example, just what are students expected to learn? And how do we go about implementing the standards? Have we gone far enough in the standards movement? To become productive members of society, students need to know more than standardized-test items. How should students be prepared for their future roles as citizens? Ethics and values, even if difficult to measure, are essential in such preparation.

Education is in a constant state of change, and one of the most active areas of change is the standards movement. The major premise of the movement lies in the expectation that one hardly knows where to go or what to do without a firm grasp of projected goals or outcomes.

The History of Standards

The Carnegie Unit was developed in 1906 as a means to create uniform time and content standards throughout our schools. Each core discipline area would meet five times a week for fifty-five minutes per session (Marzano and Kendall 2000). The impact of the Carnegie Unit is still with us today; however, we now know that students do not learn at the same rate—some need more time, while others master content more quickly. The Carnegie Unit was the main approach to structuring time for almost a century. The emphasis is no longer on structuring time but on structuring it to enhance student learning.

During the Cold War and Sputnik periods, the standards movement focused on the curriculum areas of math, science, and foreign languages. By the 1960s and 1970s, the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement began effecting societal change (Lunenburg and Ornstein 2000). Legal issues related to separation of church and state were reexamined (the Engel and Schempp cases are examples). The Coleman and Jencks studies on equality of educational opportunity of the 1960s drew attention to the social educational agenda of the times. The 1970s saw the formation of a cabinet-level position on education as well as the new prominence of issues related to handicapped persons in our society.

In 1983 *A Nation At Risk,* the report of a presidential commission, claimed that our schools were being "eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity" (Marzano and Kendall 2000). Educators and policymakers set out immediately to make changes, and broad educational goals were developed (see appendix, "Goals 2000," cited in Gratz 2000). Those goals have become the yardstick to measure and establish accountability for student progress. Four types of standards have been developed: literacy standards, traditional subject-area standards, thinking and reasoning standards, and lifelong-learning standards. Nagging questions remain, however. Will standards-based reform result in the changes in education the public wants? How can we know if the standards-based movement has been successful?

The first wave of reform focused on the problem of basic skills, the second wave on the improvement of teaching. Underlying both these movements were concerns about student scores on achievement tests, international competition, and quality of teaching. National needs and
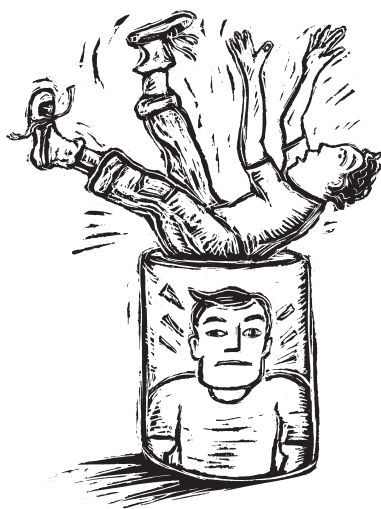
goals have come to outweigh those of local or pluralistic ones (Lunenburg and Ornstein 2000). Every child is expected to achieve at higher levels than before, and we do have some evidence that it works. When content standards were clearly stated and reinforced, achievement increased by 10 to 35 percent (Berger 2000).

We gain little by not supporting the standards movement, but we gain immensely in learning what we do not know; what we do know that is flawed; and what we need to know to exist in the global age. Standards provide a measure of readiness to compete internationally. Locally, standards serve as coordinates to help school districts focus on student learning. In either case, standards need to be flexible and adaptable, irrespective of level.

Problems with Standards

Standards-based reform may be related to the purposes of the standards and what teachers need to do to follow them. A few relevant questions arise: Are the standards sufficiently clear? Are state and professional standards documents really helping to achieve success? Consultants and curriculum coordinators the authors have interviewed indicate that the current system not only actually encourages teachers to teach what they like to teach, but that there is no sequence or coherence necessary at the same grade level, subject, or even school. Teachers make their own judgments about what to emphasize and what to delete from lengthy textbooks. Such huge differences only add to the problem (Schmoker and Marzano 1999).

U.S. educators attempt to cover 350 percent more topics than their Japanese counterparts, yet Japanese students consistently outscore their U.S. counterparts in mathematics. For all the standards being taught, perhaps much less is learned. Besides, on a sarcastic note, when would students have time for lunch, football, and band (Jones 2001)?

Many unintended consequences flow from the standards movement. Children lose recess time; homework issues constitute an area of growing concern; social promotion is a considerable factor; and increasing issues of inequity and motivation arise where children fear failure (Gratz 2000). Students often consider their assignments only marginally relevant to the world around them.

Skeptics of standards-based reform question how to measure student achievement effectively and efficiently. How can states avoid the tendency to focus on minimum levels of acceptable performance and thus "dumb down" the curriculum? Standards may be vague to the point of unintelligibility, yet other requirements are so specific and numerous that effective instructional coverage is nearly impossible. Many educators find themselves unable to interpret the meaning of the standards (Jones 2000).

Today, schools must accept all students within a certain geographical area regardless of their attitudes and abilities. Obviously, it is more difficult to attain higher standards with such a broad range of student ability. There is also a commitment to preserving local control in education (Labaree 2000). When we do not obtain the desired results due to the misuse and abuse of standards for political purposes, whom shall we blame? The answer is obvious: teachers and students, of course. Is that true "local control" or merely designating a group on which to place the responsibility?

Paralleling the standards movement, test-based reform causes educators to make the curriculum more focused and narrow, and quality instruction may be reduced in the guise of "prepping" for the test. Judging academic progress or lack of progress by high-stakes tests does little to advance the attainment of standards (Thompson 2001). Cheating, "teaching to the test," and keeping low scorers out of the testing pool, however, are common behaviors associated with the pressures of testing (Lemann 2000). In addition, drill and memorization often suppress real understanding and mastery of the knowledge base (Marx 2000).

Critics see a variety of problems related to teaching to standards. Teachers have too many students, too many demands on their time, and not enough hours to focus on world-class standards. Exams written in English may make it difficult for students from different cultures, backgrounds, and languages to achieve mandated standards. The growing consensus is that schools must develop greater "cross-cultural and cross-generational understanding" to meet the challenge (Marx 2000, 18). Will such underachievers receive the individual help they need to become successful? Without adequate resources—e.g., multilingual teachers, smaller class sizes, and professional development for instructional improvement—this task seems formidable (Marx 2000).

What Should Students Know and How Should It Be Taught?

Standards have two purposes. One deals with economic realities: we must not fall behind other countries in achievement. The second purpose addresses the disparity between high-achieving and low-achieving students. The goals of the No Child Left Behind legislation remind us that such issues as low attendance, high dropout rates, and graduation rates are non-negotiable. Standards and accountability are intended to combat these problems.

However, many classroom teachers do not agree with standards, and it is difficult to document that standards are actually taught. How many weeks to allocate to teaching the Civil War is furiously debated in some schools (Jones 2001). How much time should be spent on grammar in English? Literature? Differential equations in algebra?

Some say the answer is simple: just organize it, take it to the schools, and demand that teachers teach it and students learn it (Brady 2000). What constitutes the absolute minimum level of knowledge or skill a person needs to live in today's (and tomorrow's) society? Does the standards-based reform movement, whose standards often focus on training students for a bygone industrial age, meet the critical needs of the global knowledge and information age? Traditional curricula touch on the disciplines separately at different levels and at different times as if there were no relationship between them, and recall is usually as far as the thinking process goes. The "big" ideas are lost for the purpose of remembering facts. To endorse such a simplistic idea without qualification may create a progeny poorly prepared to cope with changing reality (Brady 2000).

A Vote for Values Education

What can be done to make standards-based reform work? A starting point could be to decide exactly which standards should be actually assessed. In this view, determining what students need to know to become responsible citizens would become an integral part of standards. Withrow, Long, and Marx suggest that the school of the twenty-first century must ensure that students "learn to think, reason, and make sound decisions and demonstrate values inherent in a democracy" (1999, 12).

Standards can improve achievement, but they should be designed properly, implemented fairly, and used to help rather than punish. Determining where to start with each child is extremely important; otherwise, the added stress on children and teachers can harm the very values that underlie the system and the concept of citizenship itself. For example, two-thirds of high-achieving high school seniors acknowledged copying someone else's homework, and 40 percent admitted to cheating on a quiz or exam. A larger national sample surveyed by the Josephson Institute for Ethics in 1998 showed similarly disturbing results: 70 percent confessed to cheating on a test, and 47 percent said they had stolen something from a store during the previous year. Both figures constituted an increase from a 1992 survey. From 1969 to 1989, the proportion of students using a cheat sheet on an exam increased from one in three to two in three, and a 1995 survey of 4,300 students at highly selective colleges showed that nearly two-thirds admitted to cheating on a test or written assignment.

To help students move from the often-destructive goal of "knowledge for its own sake" to the "ability to gather and use knowledge," some experts advocate teaching across disciplines—i.e., integrating the curriculum (Daggett 1996, 10). Programs in which students identify social problems—drug abuse, environmental issues, crime prevention, home-

lessness, computer ethics, and, more recently, stem-cell research and appropriate uses of cloning technology—could help. Once such societal issues are identified, students might understand how to develop solutions that could become recommendations for changes in public policy.

In our view, then, the most important goal of standards-based reform should be emphasizing civic responsibility and understanding civic virtue. The concept of preparing students to become a "constructive force in society" while understanding the consequences of their own actions and the effects of those actions on others is certainly not new (Marx 2000, 66): consider that an important rationale for mandatory schooling was helping democracies teach children values necessary for citizenship. Public education was intended not only to teach knowledge but to build and mold character. Should that mission lapse for even one generation, wrote H. Richard Niehbur, "the whole grand structure of past achievements falls into ruins" (quoted in Myers 2000, 237). Indeed, eight of the fourteen men who helped formulate Hitler's Final Solution were doctors of philosophy. Many of their subordinates returned home daily after working in the death camps to enjoy good food, drink, and classical music.

Plato once asked, "What is the good of education?" His answer was simple: "[E]ducation makes good men, and . . . good men act nobly." Many centuries later, another philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote, "Character is higher than intellect" (Emerson 1837, in a speech before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Harvard University).

Some critics worry that teaching moral values in the nation's schools would produce yet another responsibility for the educational system or that virtues should be taught at home. Religious conservatives fear parental authority will be undermined. Liberals, for their part, express doubts about the existence of universal ethical standards (Myers 2000). Yet however important the separation of church and state, we believe society's preservation and its interests as a whole should determine what is taught in our schools. Elevating the viewpoints of a minority that does not promote society's continuation and interests above the majority trumps the protection of the whole (Nicoson 2003).

In this article, we have argued for flexible and adaptable standards at any level, be it national, international, state, or local. Although such allowance permits broad discretion in applying standards, it can hardly be argued that standards as currently written and applied include character education and ethical implications. If the purpose of schooling is to perpetuate the culture, any investigation of culture must include serious inquiry into its ethical standards, its customs and mores, and the unique fit of the individual into that culture.

Appendix
Goals 2000

- All children in America would start school ready to learn.

- The high school graduation rate would increase to at least 90 percent. As part of this goal the dropout rate was to be reduced and dropouts were to complete a high school degree or its equivalent.

- All students would leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America would ensure that all students would learn to use their minds well, so that they would be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.

- The Nation's teaching force would have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.

- United States students would be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.

- Every adult American would be literate and would possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

- Every school in the United States would be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and would offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

- Every school would promote partnerships that would increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

(<http://wwe.ed.gov/legislation/GOALS2000?The Act/see102.html>)

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