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# Quality (and/or?) Control: Perils and Promises of Standards-Based School Reform in Urban Contexts

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*This article looks at the perils and promises of standards-based instruction in urban environments. We begin with an outline of the rise of the current standards movement. Then turn to the con position which contends; states, schools and districts do not always implement standards-based ideals effectively, especially in urban settings where resources and educators prepared to teach well with standards are scarce. Standards can lead to standardization of curriculum and instruction, sacrificing student interest, real-world connections, and creativity and critical thinking. The pro position reports that research and evaluation has shown that standards can support better communication between schools and parents, and provide a framework for accountability and school improvement that focuses on academic achievement, leading to curriculum, instruction, and assessment with the potential for a system of mastery learning based on learners' needs.*

*“All children can learn.”*

The above phrase is a common mantra for reform efforts, but it is also too often a simplistic truism, rarely meant to bolster enthusiasm for teaching “one’s own” children. In many schools and communities, “all children can learn” does not go nearly far enough as the basis of belief for true school improvement. It has become a platitude that lets reformers feel good about their intentions for “those children,” while avoiding the deep, difficult decisions necessary for true change that *will* support the “all children” to which the phrase obliquely refers. All children can learn *what*, to what levels, in what contexts, for which purposes? Who is responsible for supporting them in their learning? Can and should *some* children learn additional or different things? Can and should *some* children receive additional support from the community and society, in the form of schooling and other services that other children already receive from private sector sources? These types of questions uncover reform issues that, if effectively addressed, may help us become more successful in supporting the achievement of a greater number of all our youth.

Several constituencies have viewed the development of standards, with various forms and focus, as one way to address these tough questions. However, standards have so far served as only an initial

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uncovering. Competing philosophical camps and the social, political, and economic forces that push our educational institutions toward particular ends have all used standards as a banner in recent years, so that while standards have clarified some matters, they have simultaneously complicated others.

In this article, we debate some important nuances of the development and application of various types of standards and discuss their impact on urban schools, communities and students. Of course, taking a simple stand for or against something as far-reaching as standards-based reform is a bit unrealistic, but we hope that the arguments presented will help the reader gain a more sophisticated understanding of the issues. We hold different views of what standards and their roles should be, as well as how they have affected the real world of schools. We agree, however, on a number of key points.

First, the achievement of students must be the core of the discussion. We believe that educational institutions exist to impact student achievement in some positive fashion. Standards are one way to make explicit what exactly the expected achievements should be.

Second, standards have not yet met their full potential, regardless of what that potential is imagined to be. This is due to a variety of barriers to implementation as well as to the fact that some standards-based efforts are in competition, pulling schools and communities in different directions. We discuss how this is happening in both the pro and con sections below.

Finally, the most essential role that standards can play is to spotlight issues in need of improvement in order to better support student achievement. But this can't and won't happen if we remain content to pat ourselves on the back for having put standards—and accompanying tests—into place without the sometimes difficult in-depth examination of what these actually mean for our schools and society. What exactly are the political, social, and economic outcomes that accompany the student achievement results we expect to see from our assorted reforms? Our children are indeed our future, and the shaping of their learning shapes our future society. We hope the following debate inspires readers to ask why—and why not—so that hidden assumptions can begin to be uncovered to help support real change for all children.

### *The Evolution of Present Day Standards*

The idea of basing curriculum development, instruction, assessment, and evaluation of the work of the school on a set of desired outcomes is far from recent. Ralph Tyler is often credited with spreading the approach broadly within the education field with his “four-step analysis” (1950). He encouraged schools to move from the casual setting of expectations, often based on skills, interests, and whims of a teacher or

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school leader, to an approach that took more formal notice of community and societal interests, at least at the local level.

1. What educational purposes shall the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain those purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

However, the creation and use of such “standards for student learning” as a widespread basis for formal accountability is more recent. Some states experimented with “outcomes-based education” and other approaches to specifying student learning expectations in the decades following Tyler’s publication, but as a nation we did not focus our attention on standards—and aligned assessments—until the end of the 1980s. In 1989, president George Bush and a number of prominent business executives, led by IBM president Lou Gerstener, brought the nation’s governors together for a first-ever summit on student learning. The focus was assessment, as their primary interest was to compare states with each other and with other nations in the context of a rapidly expanding “global economy,” but the newly published standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics figured prominently. It soon became evident that content-learning standards of one sort or another were needed, if for no other reason than to provide a comparable set of learnings to underlie the assessments. This assessment focus was then expanded by a strong push from disciplinary professional associations as well as the National Academy of Sciences and other national agencies. This resulted in a broader view of content area standards, with the goal to define “what every student should know and be able to do.” One of the basic tenets agreed to by the leaders of more than three dozen national education and policy organizations at two Curriculum Congress meetings organized in response to the 1989 national governor’s summit was that “curriculum should inform assessment, not vice-versa” (Curriculum Congress records, 1990).

Politically, the standards movement has received bi-partisan support, with related legislation evolving from the first Bush administration, through the Clinton administration, to the second Bush administration. Professional organizations developed national content standards and promoted teaching models to support these standards, but these experiences varied greatly. The national history standards and national standards for English language arts, for example, were strongly politicized and vehemently attacked. The national history standards were officially rewritten, and the federal funding was pulled from the groups tapped to develop the English standards, largely for their refusal to develop content standards without accompanying “opportunity to learn” standards, an issue important to our discussion here. The National

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Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association then proceeded to develop standards without federal funding. Other content area standards proliferated with an assortment of federal, private, and association funding throughout the 1990s, including civics, dance, geography, health, music, physical education, sciences, social studies, theatre, technology, visual arts, world languages, and others. Standards for multi-disciplinary areas were also created, including support for English language learners and special needs students, information literacy, early childhood, and the like.

At about the same time, states began developing their own standards, some of which were modeled on these national standards, and some of which preceded them depending on the content area. In addition to content standards, other standards were developed including teacher preparation standards, accountability standards, and so-called “opportunity to learn” standards.

Opportunity to learn (OTL) standards—that is, standards which specify the educational supports needed to meet the content learning standards, from books to science equipment to teacher quality to time in class—were originally part of the Goals 2000 legislation advanced by the Clinton administration. Of all the standards proposed, these were the only ones defeated by the legislature, in all likelihood due to fear of lawsuits over the adequacy of education for all students. The Opportunity to Learn standards would have provided the basis for arguing for a redistribution of funds to remedy inequities that have been known to exist for decades, spotlighting some of the most pernicious arguments related to educational haves and have-nots. While standards and accompanying assessments at the state level have been successfully used to obtain judgments of unconstitutionality among funding formulas for schools, very few states have moved past endless visits to the appeals courts, with some going on for nearly twenty years at the time of this writing. It is also worth noting that methods other than standards have been used to determine minimal constitutional expectations for learning, such as a New York state lawsuit that used as its basis an analysis of knowledge and skills required to act as an informed voting citizen for a set of ballot issues (see Campaign for Fiscal Equity, 2006). There too, the courts found New York unconstitutional in its distribution of funding and educational supports, but so far to no avail. Sadly, the legislature continues to struggle for a solution that will pass muster some 24 years later.

**Perils: Whose Knowledge is the Right Knowledge, and  
How Can We Make the Reality Match the Promise?**

Standards-based curriculum is going to transform education and schooling for American students in urban schools. If everyone would just

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comply with standards-based reform we can overcome the equity and achievement gaps that are currently so pronounced in urban/suburban school dichotomies. Plus, the beauty of standards-based reform is that it is so simple, since we *all* know what is important to teach, and if we teach this to *all* children then we will *all* be equal. With these marvelous content standards in place, we can write teachers' guides, create daily lessons and everything will be fine.

At least this is what proponents of standards-based educational reform would like us to believe—the differences between urban schools and students and more affluent schools and neighborhoods are simply the result of an undefined curriculum. I would like to counter these arguments on two fronts. First is the belief in the ease with which we can define content standards that will be equal and accessible to all students. I base this argument on the reality of the selection of content for standards, and the underlying assumptions that guide the selection of which knowledge to include and whose knowledge this represents. I use examples from current state and national content standards to demonstrate how content standards systematically disenfranchise students in urban schools. I then address the idea of simplicity of implementation of content standards by examining cases of how standards are actually being implemented in urban districts. Finally, I explore examples of successful urban school reform based on the now lost opportunity to learn (OTL) standards and how these are the standards to consider if we are interested in addressing the renewal of urban schools.

### *Content Standards: My Knowledge is your Knowledge*

The 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE]) identified students in U.S. public schools as noncompetitive with children from other nations. The role of education was defined as the maintenance and growth of economic viability. For affluent students this translated into preparation for high paying jobs leading to the creation and leadership of entrepreneurial companies and corporations. For traditionally disadvantaged students—urban, minorities, poor, and all intersections of these traits—this translated into increasing their knowledge and skill base leading to employment in service jobs that would allow for continued global expansion. This message became doctrine in spite of there being little evidence of a direct connection between standards, performance on tests, and economic advantage or workplace productivity (Levin 1998).

With this established as the role for public education, standards could be developed to support a globalization of the economy. Feuerstein (2001) commented that the “movement to develop educational standards in our nation’s schools is ...premiered on a set of hyper-rationalized

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assumptions” (p. 108). Feuerstein cited Wise’s (1978) description of hyper-rationalization as that of applying scientific rationality to public education resulting in an over-emphasis of “measurable (though not necessarily important) educational goals; viewing teachers as technologists trained to help students develop well defined competencies; and understanding schools as factories in which raw materials (uneducated students) were turned into products (educated students)” (p. 108).

Of course we know that students are not standard inputs, rather they enter schools with a variety of cultural and social experiences that shape their educational experiences. Proponents of standards acknowledge this, claiming that by defining clear content standards we can overcome these differences. They believe that “success is achieved when those seen as ‘educationally disadvantaged’ conform and accommodate to the dominant culture” (Hodson, 1999), which allows them to take their appropriate place in a global economy. However, critics of standards generally agree that standards-based curriculum reforms fail urban students in each of the following three ways.

First, they are blatantly assimilationist in their educational approach (Hodson, 1998; Forbes, 2000). By defining what everyone must know, multicultural and pluralistic ways of knowing are rendered useless and invalid. Brady (2000) in her critique of standards suggested that when business and political leaders respond to the rhetorical question, “What should be taught in school?” they simply answer, “They should be taught what those of us who are educated know” (p. 648).

Second, the desire for equity based on standards is derived from a deficit view of urban youth and non-majority culture. Deficit views claim that urban minority youth lack significant historical and cultural experiences that would comprise an education (Weiner, 2000; Hodson, 1998). Further, Diamond and Spillane (2004) explain that urban minority youth are seen not only lacking in useful historical and cultural knowledge, but to be personally deficient. Thus high standards are needed to provide external motivations for students since on their own they lack the necessary internal motivations.

Finally, content standards are premised on the belief that there is an “essential knowledge” for all students that is culturally and politically neutral therefore should be an uncontested part of all schools’ curriculum. This view is typified by the following description of how standards-based content is determined. “In their efforts to clarify what students should learn, subject-matter specialists have come up with a curriculum that is overwhelming to teachers and students. Now, unbiased experts must be brought together to determine the fundamental and significant ideas of their disciplines” (Marzano, Gaddy, & Kendall, 1999, p. 68). This essential knowledge is defined as the knowledge already held

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by those in power who hold influence within the disciplines, and divergent views are not welcome.

The following two examples of content standards, one at the state level and one at the national level, demonstrate how the points above become incorporated into standards. They illustrate the powerful assumptions and messages embedded in content standards to reinforce who has the right to hold power in our society, resulting in the maintenance of the status quo.

In California, a state with many large urban centers and a diverse public school population, the social studies standards clearly reflect a singularly Anglo-American point of view. Forbes' (2000) analysis of the history of California "history" standards indicated that they ignore the history of the state prior to the arrival of Anglo-Americans. He concluded the use of the term "America" is a pseudonym for lands that were controlled by Anglo-Americans who fought against the British, thus making "Americans" those Anglo-Americans who populated these lands. He quoted from the overview to the California History Standards pointing out how they disregard any history of the "America" prior to the coming of the white man:

... the standards proceed chronologically and call attention to the story of America as a noble experiment in constitutional democracy. They recognize America's on-going struggle to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution .... While emphasizing western civilization as the source of American political institutions, laws and ideology... (California State Board of Education, 2000; p. v)

The roles of other groups are only important insofar as they have been filtered through the needs of this "American" culture. The message to our urban students is simple: if you want to share in America then you had better accept this truism and assimilate into the Anglo-culture. To do otherwise is to be un-American. And those of you who have not shared in the wealth of the Anglo-culture, you are a separate form of American.

The second example of how standards limit the scope of knowledge to that of the already powerful comes from the National Science Standards (NRC, 1996). The National Science Education Standards (NSES) not only outline what science students should know, they also provide pedagogical suggestions for teachers. Rodriguez (1997) discusses the effects and the invisibility of cultural and contextual indicators. Examples in the text use non-descriptive statements about who teachers are and their classroom composition, such as, "Ms. B. in a fifth grade classroom." Rodriguez goes on to cite a specific example in NSES to exemplify how these standards reinforce traditional knowledge claims. The example (p. 215) suggests how teachers may employ inquiry to find the circumference of the earth. In this example the inquiry

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problem is contextualized as Columbus needing to know the circumference of the earth for his sailing. Relative distances for calculations are based on European cities. This teaching situation reinforces the idea that science (and knowledge) arose in the Western Hemisphere and that important knowledge is the knowledge of Anglo-Americans. The standards and example do not mention that the method for finding the circumference of the world was developed in Egypt much earlier or that it was known and used by the Aztecs and Mayans in South America, although obviously not with European cities as reference points.

The students who populate our urban schools are led to believe that these cultures, and their own cultures, had little or no impact on the development of our current knowledge. The unspoken message attached to this is that their cultures, and they themselves, will have little impact on important knowledge in the future. Standards driven by the need to maintain economic superiority will lead to curricular contraction, since by definition they seek to limit what is to be taught to what is important for enhancement of the status quo. This curricular contraction disadvantages urban students by trivializing their role in American society and reinforcing their marginality in relationship to it.

### *Standards in Practice*

Standard based reform requires effective implementation at the school and district levels. Unfortunately this does not readily happen. In this section I present two case studies of standards-based implementation which highlight why standards are not the route to urban school renewal.

The first example comes from the Chicago Public School system and demonstrates how standards-based reform has not improved educational attainment or decreased achievement gaps. Chicago's large, centralized district used standards-based accountability tests to rank its schools. Diamond and Spillane (2004) compared how two (magnet) schools ranked at the highest and two (neighborhood) schools ranked at the lowest levels of performance enacted the content standards. Although each of the four elementary schools studied were teaching the same standards, local school policies and daily implementation resulted in significantly different educational experiences for the students.

The case study investigation found that the neighborhood schools lowered their standards to meet the minimum acceptable student performance level. In order to achieve this they provided tutoring and extra instruction only to students just below the minimum standard, and focused instruction on the skills and basic facts that would allow the students to reach the minimum threshold. The magnet schools implemented the standards in qualitatively different ways. They geared instruction to the needs of students and expected it to be carried out in the

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classroom, rather than through separate external programs. Teachers offered enrichment and remediation on skills or topics as needed by the students in classes. These schools focused on complex instructional goals that integrated the learning of basic skills while developing their students' critical thinking and problem solving in mathematics.

Diamond and Spillane (2004) concluded from their study that content standards failed to decrease achievement gaps because the local enactment resulted in different goals. "In probation schools, responses ...emphasize getting off of probation" (p. 1159) not the improvement of the learning for all students. They cautioned that "the situated nature of policy implementation should be an important consideration for school reformers. "Policy implementation is very much a local affair and understanding the variation in context (even within districts) appears critical" (p. 1160). The clear implication of this study is that although each school was addressing the same district and state standards, those students already disadvantaged continued to be disadvantaged.

A second example comes from an urban Southern California school district. The poor performing district was in the process of aligning their mathematics curriculum across the elementary, middle and high schools to the California Mathematics standards. This study exemplified how urban districts implement standards in ways that limit their students' academic potential based upon assumptions about urban students' learning potential (Tucker and Coddling, 2001).

Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner's (2004) found that rather than using the state standards to raise the academic expectations of their urban population, the district determined the state standards were out of reach for their students. Therefore the district created new standards that resulted in their students lagging behind state and national standards. The district explained this gap by stating that the national standards did not respond to their students' local needs and "were bloated and quite 'world class'" (p. 1182), implicitly indicating that their community was not a "world class" community. A district position paper stated that "many state standards are ambiguous, and most would argue with their ...imbalanced emphasis on the highest level of critical thinking at most grade levels" (p. 1182).

The district responded with local standards that pushed the teachers toward teaching minimal skills and that emphasized instruction focused on drill and practice rather than conceptual understanding. The study's authors concluded that schools and districts that have historically performed poorly interpret standards-based reform as another occasion for failure for their students, schools, and the district. Thus content standards are selectively taught, rather than pushing all students toward academic excellence, with urban schools typically focused on achievement at the minimal level.

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This leads to questioning the simplicity with which standards-based reform can be enacted in American schools. Evidence from unsuccessful and successful urban schools leads to the same conclusion: increasing academic expectations without increasing the resources at hand for the most struggling schools ensures these schools will make minimal gains. This brings me to my final point and why standards-based reform will fail urban schools.

*The Lost Standards Are What Mattered*

In 1994 when the Clinton administration proposed *Goals 2000* and the implementation of high academic standards there was a parallel set of Opportunity-to-Learn (OTL) Standards that were to be simultaneously implemented. The OTL standards recognized that just having "...all teachers using the same materials in the same way at the same time...did not mean that all kindergarteners had an even start" (Starnes, 2000, p. 110). The OTL standards obligated states that were using federal money to create academic standards to also create equity standards to address issues such as school financing, quality of learning facilities and curriculum materials, teacher qualifications and teacher professional development. These measures would be used to determine the level of support different schools and districts needed to ensure that all students had the necessary support to meet new academic standards (Fritzberg, 2000). However, the OTL standards did not make it through the legislative process, leaving urban and impoverished schools to meet high standards without leveling resources. This led to a situation that Starnes (2000) described as "the federal government's latest efforts to cure fundamental educational problems by focusing on the symptoms rather than on root causes" (p. 109).

What these OTL standards might have done for urban schools is force States to measure the inequities in school districts and develop mechanisms to resolve them. Examples from successful urban school reform help to define what these OTL standards might have looked like. Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) examined three successful urban contexts implementing academic standards in conjunction with accountability standards to ensure true learning opportunities for all students. The common themes that arose from these successful urban environments resemble Fritzberg (2000) suggested measures of OTL, including improved teacher training in pedagogy with a specific focus on multicultural literacies; re-assessment and reduction of current tracking and ability grouping practices (explicit and implicit); reduced class sizes and smaller school size; increased programming for compensatory programs; and increased opportunities for community involvement. What Darling-Hammond found was that successful urban schools spent dollars on recruiting and hiring excellent teachers, followed by coherent teacher

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professional development that focused on improving and individualizing instruction. Schools were restructured to an optimal size of 300-500 students and teachers worked with teams of students. Assessment practices were redesigned to include performance assessments, measures of progress on a coherent curriculum, and to provide feedback on instruction. Finally, the schools targeted funds for the students with the greatest needs.

It is possible for urban schools to improve and for urban students to achieve on rigorous educational standards, but it is doubtful that current standards-based reforms will achieve these goals. The implementation of economically driven and externally created content standards will continue to alienate students who have historically been oppressed. Current standards elevate the idea of essential cultural knowledge to new heights. Further, the singular use of student performance on standards to evaluate educational quality ignores basic facts of the American society. When schools and school districts are forced to comply with these rigid standards, they will find ways to ease the pain for themselves and their students by restricting teaching to only minimal requirements, developing instructional strategies that drill students on these requirements, and focusing on the minimum needed to keep schools open. Unless we reinstate and enforce the opportunity to learn standards acknowledging that different schools and students need different supports and instruction, standards-based reform will only reinforce the status quo and create greater educational disparities between our urban and suburban youth.

**PROMISES: Standards Enable Students to Participate with Knowledge, and They Serve as a Foundation for Supporting Students, Teachers, and Schools.**

I will first note that there is not a large body of evidence about the effects of standards over the course of what is now, for some content areas, more than 15 years of work, but this is perhaps to be expected. While the “standards movement” dates back to the late eighties, many content area standards were developed just ten or fewer years ago at the national level, with state-level efforts coming even later. Some content areas have not been enacted at state or local levels at all. Finally, there is an issue of evidence about standards-based reforms, with school personnel, policymakers, and researchers confounding “standards” with “standardized assessments.” The literature too often looks only at limited, standardized tests of student performance, rather than exploring the real reach and potential value of standards in school reform. As Elmore (2002) laments:

The standards and accountability movement is in danger of being transformed into the testing and accountability movement. States

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without the human and financial resources to select, administer, and monitor tests are now being forced to begin testing at all grade levels. This is the surest way to guarantee that the test will become the content. Instead of creating academic standards that drive the design of a standards-based assessment, low-capacity states will simply select a test based on its expense and ease of administration.... A test with no external anchor in standards or expectations about student learning becomes a curriculum in itself, which trivializes the whole idea of performance-based accountability. (para. 20)

Teachers agree. *Quality Counts* (Olson, 2001), an annual report of state progress in school reform, recently polled public school teachers and found that a majority felt that “the curriculum is more demanding than it was three years ago, and that students are working harder, in part because of state standards” (para. 3). But the teachers went on to assert that states place “too much emphasis on state tests to drive changes in education” (para. 4).

However, when one looks at content standards and the related teaching and OTL standards that support them, and NOT just at standardized tests that have unfortunately become their sole representation in many schools, we find well-reasoned purposes and a growing body of support for standards-based reform. Standards identify knowledge and skills essential for students to understand a discipline and to participate within it, and in doing so they provide a framework for communication among educators, parents, and policy leaders about educational goals. This framework for educational practice has the potential to empower traditionally underserved students to become active players in the larger society. Additionally, some core set of educational goals helps equip educational systems to better address challenges commonly faced by urban schools, including high mobility among students and teachers, under-qualified teachers, and lack of resources targeted on student learning.

#### *Content Standards: Some Knowledge Should be Everyone’s Knowledge*

The question of whose knowledge is taught in schools and reflected in the content standards needs to be redefined. Content standards make what it to be learned in classrooms transparent to all educational stakeholders. Recent research into standards-based reforms suggests that one of the most powerful ways that standards contribute is as the basis of clear communication between schools and parents about student achievement. Giving parents access to what students are expected to learn allows for communication that draws attention to the responsibilities of the schools for assisting and supporting students in their learning, while empowering parents to take an active role.

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Additionally, a system of standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment potentially allows for mastery learning based on learners' needs and growth within a content area, and has been used by schools as a structure for effective differentiated instruction (as opposed to retention in grade and other harmful practices). Perhaps the deepest change that occurs in successful standards-based reforms is a true shift in thinking about the students, their ability to succeed, and the role of the educators and school system in that success. Having studied a number of successful middle schools, Wheelock (1998) concludes:

A deep belief that every student can develop thinking skills, learn for understanding, apply knowledge, become smart, and meet standards is fundamental to school cultures that support standards-based reforms.

A second belief—that schools themselves have responsibility for developing the conditions that foster learning for understanding—closely follows. (p. 2)

But a generic increase of expectations—the afore-mentioned “all children can learn” mantra—is unlikely to translate to real results. Detailed content standards must organize a discipline area into a scaffold of essential learnings that will support student progress and provide explicit indicators of progress. And as noted above, attention to test scores alone as the progress indicator is a red herring. Ironically, the idea that test scores indicate accountability in a performance-based system that is assumed to confer upon students an advantage in the future workplace has also been called into question. Consider that researchers, notably Levin (1998), found little correlation between higher test scores—the coin of the realm for judging school effectiveness—and future success. “At the moment, there are no specific performance assessment standards that have been validated as strong predictors of economic productivity or the quality of the workforce, despite this being a major rationale for standards” (p. 8). The determination of the value of content standards cannot be adequately measured by current accountability systems; other measures, such as increased access to curriculum and parental and student knowledge of learning expectations, must also be measured.

Given the above, one might argue that the best role for content standards then is to identify the knowledge that is important in relation to the *content area and discipline* and, to a lesser extent, to the majority culture in power, so that students can compete effectively in the future economy. Once such standards are made explicit, there exists a means to draw the attention of parents, community members, and educators to existing inadequacies. As adults, these groups of people are given the responsibility to act in the best interests of the children in our society.

In 1996, prior to the institutionalization of content standards, Steinberg, Brown and Dornbusch's research found that the majority of

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parents did not know what their students were learning in school, and whether what they were learning would affect their students' future, either positively or negatively. Specifically, in surveying American high school students, Steinberg, et al. (1996) found that "nearly one-third of students say their parents have no idea how they are doing in school" and "about one-sixth of all students report that their parents don't care whether they earn good grades in school or not" (p. 19). "Similarly... when parents are asked to "grade" their child's school, they award A's and B's; when asked to evaluate the nation's schools in general, they give much lower grades" (p. 42). Steinberg et al. (1996) also notes that:

When finer measures of school quality are used—measures that look closely at the quality of classroom instruction—studies show that school practices can in fact make a difference, albeit a modest one. In one extensive program of research on young adolescents in London schools [Rutter et al, 1979], for example, researchers found that... [g]enerally speaking, students behaved and performed better in schools where teachers were supportive but firm, and maintained *high, well-defined standards for academic work* [emphasis added]. (pp. 50-51)

Standards permit a compelling basis of comparison of student achievement across varied and inequitable contexts. Such a comparison can make evident to parents and the community that reforms are needed within the system in order to support students in their quest for achievement.

Finally, a principal described the ability of standards to improve communication of educational expectations this way:

I remember standing outside one day.... I saw in the behavior and in the mien of students a look that broadcast a certain disregard for learning, and school.... I think I even shook my head as I lamented to myself that for the most part our students didn't even know what rigor, challenge, and excellence look like.... The lamentation in the bus lane became one of the reasons that a standards-based approach appealed to me. If nothing else, our students would have the chance to find out what the expectations and standards are in a larger context.... They would have the chance to meet the challenges and compete. They would have a chance to find out that education and real learning go far beyond the pages of a text. (Welch, 2000, p. 21)

### *"Teaching and Learning for Social Justice"*

In order to give students a chance at learning that will permit them to have a future voice in the established academy, so that they too might create important future knowledge, we must ensure that they learn the essentials of the discipline, to think critically, and to apply their knowledge and skills in context. Regarding critical thinking, Gutstein (2003) reports on a two-year action research study on "teaching and

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learning mathematics for social justice” in an urban, Latino classroom. He asserts that the *Standards* of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics were essential to the success of the students:

As Ladson-Billings (1994) puts it, “thinking critically” is something students need to struggle successfully against racism and for justice.

One can argue that a curriculum [based on the *Standards*] can play a role in teaching for social justice because it helps develop the critical thinking that is necessary in the struggle for equity and justice. (p. 66)

However, critical thinking is contextualized within the discipline—as Gardner (1999) states, one thinks “like a historian,” “like an artist,” “like a scientist.” To participate in the world, students must first understand it. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) discussion resonates with Ladson-Billings:

New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is about. But because these changes do not happen automatically as in biological evolution, it is necessary to consider the price we must pay for creativity to occur. It takes effort to change traditions. For example, a musician must learn the musical tradition, the notation system, the way instruments are played before she can think of writing a new song; before an inventor can improve on airplane design he has to learn physics, aerodynamics, and why birds don’t fall out of the sky. (p. 10)

The national standards, developed primarily to describe learning growth in particular disciplines, address not only the content and skills students need to be successful in school but also the critical thinking and related skills necessary for students to participate in the world of the discipline. Such learning prepares students to make their own contributions to future important knowledge regardless of their cultural and socio-economic status. Furthermore, history has shown that novel and important contributions to the sciences, arts, and humanities have often been made because of the unique perspectives brought by individuals who are not “in the majority”—but in almost every case, an understanding of prior knowledge in the discipline was the key.

An analysis of the national content-area standards conducted by a majority of the national professional associations ((National Study of School Evaluation, 1998, p.108) developed a list of “schoolwide goals for student learning.” These standards define a powerful set a standards that include thinking and reasoning skills that students need to “learn for social justice.” The major topics within these schoolwide learning goals include: Learning-to-Learn Skills; Expanding and Integrating Knowledge; Communication Skills; Thinking and Reasoning Skills (*Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving, and Creative Thinking*); Interpersonal Skills; Personal and Social Responsibility. When schools implement content-area standards in an integrated and scaffolded process, all students have access to critical and creative learning which

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will allow urban youth to understand their role in creating their communities future.

*Putting Standards for Student Learning into Practice for Teachers and Schools*

Content standards can raise expectations for student achievement. However, if this is the goal of standards-based reforms, then schools have a very distinct task before them. Such standards have clear implications for teacher learning and teaching quality. Content standards must become an integrated part of teacher training and professional development. Content standards will also require schools to rethink their use of resources—everything from time to facilities to instructional approaches, and for the relationship of school and curriculum to the community and the academy. Wheelock (1995) summarizes the multiple roles of and potential benefits of standards in improving schools for all students:

By promoting idea-rich content and complex problem solving, they anticipate the kinds of teaching and learning for understanding that can enliven classrooms and counteract student disengagement. As descriptions of the endpoints of learning, they can prompt teachers to direct students toward generating products that demonstrate their mastery of basic skills within content areas.... They can offer a gauge against which teachers can assess the degree to which all students experience opportunities to learn challenging academic content (cited in Wheelock, 1998, pp. 7-8).

In the pages above, my colleague presented a compelling rationale for revisiting the missed Opportunity to Learn Standards. I agree with her assessment, but argue that effective OTL standards derive from clear content-area standards with a basis in the discipline and with the goal of supporting teachers as they guide students through learning. This guidance is not a trivial matter, nor easy to master. There is growing evidence that a standards-based curriculum and qualified teachers to enact it are the most important aspects of improving education for urban, minority, and poor children (e.g, see Haycock, 1998; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Elmore (2002) argues that:

The work of turning a school around entails improving the knowledge and skills of teachers—changing their knowledge of content and how to teach it—and helping them to understand where their students are in their academic development. Low-performing schools, and the people who work in them, don't know what to do. If they did, they would be doing it already. You can't improve a school's performance, or the performance of any teacher or student in it, without increasing the investment in teachers' knowledge, pedagogical skills, and understanding of students.

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To get specific about how teachers' capacity must be turned around, we can turn to *How People Learn*, a review of "scientific work on the mind and brain, on the processes of thinking and learning, and on the development of competence" (p. 3). The authors conclude that expertise in content alone is not sufficient for good teaching, nor is knowledge of teaching methods alone—teachers need an interactive mix to be successful:

Effective teachers need 'pedagogical content knowledge'—knowledge about how to teach in particular disciplines, which is different from knowledge of general teaching methods... Expert teachers know the structure of their disciplines and this provides them with cognitive roadmaps that guide the assignments they give students, the assessments they use to gauge student progress, and the questions they ask in the give and take of classroom life...In short, teachers' knowledge of the discipline and their knowledge of pedagogy interact.... The misconception is that teaching consists only of a set of general methods, that a good teacher can teach any subject, and that content knowledge alone is sufficient. (p. xviii)

The follow-up report *Knowing What Students Know: The science and design of educational assessment* (NRC, 2001), concludes that "every assessment, regardless of its purpose, rests on three pillars" which includes "a model of how students represent knowledge and develop competence in the subject domain" (p. 2). Content standards clearly provide the underlying framework for sophisticated and effective teacher work.

However, content standards alone are not enough; they must be connected to the teaching and learning process. As Ball and Cohen (2000), put it:

Even if we can offer more grounded ideas about the specific content that teachers need to know, the important question is not just what teachers need to know about the subjects they teach, but how they use content knowledge in teaching. Take, for example, figuring out what students understand and what they are learning, sizing up an activity in the textbook and revising it to make it work more effectively, or managing a classroom discussion toward a set of goals. Each of these depends on the ways in which the teacher can flexibly bring to bear her own understanding of the content. (p. 31)

A recent analysis of teaching systems recorded in classrooms in a number of countries as part of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study 1999 Video Study (Hiebert et al, 2005) concluded that:

The goal toward which these [educationally significant] changes should be directed is a teaching system well aligned with clear and widely accepted student-learning goals. Although work remains on developing a consensus on learning goals, the contrasts among systems presented in this article provide information that can be used

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to work toward a teaching system that is more effective in helping students achieve the more ambitious goals around which consensus is building. (pp. 128-129)

While there is unquestionably much work to be done in developing the most effective content standards and in understanding their relationship to schools and systemic reform, their potential for focusing teaching and learning on high-quality work and worthwhile student achievement is strong enough to warrant continuing our journey. Content standards hold particular promise for urban schools, assuming that inappropriate, “knee-jerk” responses to accountability pressures don’t lead educators and parents astray. To close by returning to the students, our reasons for standards in the first place, I cite a study of urban middle school reforms. Storz and Nestor (2003) found that too often, “since standards have been adopted, schools, and urban schools in particular, have felt pressured to focus on standards rather than on students as they plan instruction” (p. 18). However, in interviewing students, the need for high expectations was clearly supported:

Students want their teachers to expect a great deal from them academically and personally. They want difficult work, but just as importantly, they want work that challenges their thinking and understanding. They want teachers to help them set goals and monitor their progress toward their own goals. (p. 18)

We owe all of our children a rich, comprehensive, balanced—*standards-based*—education that will prepare and encourage them to become active participants in our society—as engaged citizens, creators of new knowledge and culture, and yes, even as productive workers.

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