



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Kathryn H. Au is chief executive officer of SchoolRise LLC in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Taking ownership of standards-based education

"I've been working with standards for such a long time, but I feel like I'm just going around in circles." I've heard words to this effect from teachers at many schools.

How can teachers approach standards in a manner that will help them bring their students to higher levels of literacy? This is a critical question as the United States moves toward common standards for literacy, likely to be adopted by almost all states. New Zealand and other countries are working with national standards as well.

The big idea that I would like to share with you in my final column is that of teachers taking ownership of standards-based education. I believe that the success of the standards movement in the United States and around the world depends on teacher buy-in. And teacher buy-in depends on leadership that treats standards as vision and guidance versus top-down mandate.

My home state of Hawaii is now on its third set of standards, with a fourth set likely to be written soon. Most other states also have gone through several iterations of standards, indicating that the challenge is not with formulating new standards documents.

Why has the introduction of new standards often failed to bring about the desired improvements in students' literacy achievement? I believe the problem lies in treating standards as an event centered on the release of a new document, rather than as an ongoing process of educational change requiring an investment in the professional development of teachers. For standards-based education to prove effective, teachers must have adequate time and support to consider standards thoughtfully and to work out the practical implications for themselves and their students.

How can classroom teachers and literacy leaders take ownership of standards and work with standards in ways that improve students' literacy learning? I believe the starting point is study and discussion with colleagues. This study and discussion are necessary if teachers are to gain a deep understanding of standards as a process of improving their practice.

Questions to consider

Here are four questions that you and your colleagues may find useful in getting standards to work for you and your students.

1. Are we teaching everything addressed in the standards? This first question requires you and your colleagues to explore the alignment between the standards and your classroom expectations and practices. This is not a simple task.

Well-designed standards provide a broad vision and are few in number. Standards are meant to highlight important outcomes for student learning. Standards cannot and should not be highly specific because they are always written for students in general, not the particular students in a single classroom.

Standards can and should be written in a manner that encourages teachers to interpret and delve into key constructs. For example, reading standards often include summarization. Yet summarization can mean different things to different people.

You and your colleagues might write down your own definition of summarization, appropriate to the age level of your students, and compare your ideas with those in published sources. You could share the texts you have students summarize, as well as samples of students' written summaries. You could engage in collaborative planning of a lesson on summarization and later discuss your experiences teaching this lesson (a practice called lesson study).

2. Are our expectations at least as rigorous as those in the standards?

This second question requires an exploration of supporting documents. Most standards projects include rubrics and samples of student work that provide a clear picture of performance judged to meet the standards. Often, there is commentary discussing the critical features of student work (for example, a summary must stick to important ideas rather than minor details). You and your colleagues will want to familiarize yourself with the rubrics and samples of student work so that you can make certain

that your expectations match or exceed those reflected in standards documents.

At a workshop at an elementary school, I reviewed with the teachers sample passages and written responses to literature, judged to reflect grade-level performance. The teachers found the passages similar in difficulty to those they were having students read in class. However, they realized that they needed to teach their students to write more detailed responses, incorporating evidence from the text to back up their conclusions.

As this example suggests, standards help teachers to establish the floor for student performance. However, standards should not be seen as setting a ceiling on what teachers and students can do.

I worked at a suburban school where teachers spent three years developing their own writing curriculum aligned to state standards. Because the teachers built a staircase or coherent curriculum in writing (a concept discussed in my second column), they found after several years that the consistency in instruction across the grades was enabling students to exceed state standards in writing. The teachers were adamant about not lowering their expectations, and I realized that standards should never be a reason to limit students' learning.

3. Are there literacy outcomes or experiences, important for our students, not addressed in the standards?

The third question focuses on what might be missing from standards yet important to students' growth as readers and writers. When teachers are knowledgeable about literacy education and know their students' needs as literacy learners, they are likely to spot gaps in the standards that should be addressed in the classroom curriculum.

To take an obvious example, standards tend to be focused on academic learning and seldom address students' ownership of literacy or their valuing of reading and writing. Many struggling learners, in particular, benefit from activities that increase their motivation to read, and this motivation is a necessary prerequisite for improving their literacy achievement.

Another example centers on the prominence of multicultural or local literature. Teachers in classrooms with many students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may find it important and effective to include such works in order to make the connection to students' own experiences. However,

references to such works tend to be downplayed in many standards documents in favor of classic or canonical literature.

4. Given our discussion of standards, what appear to be the strengths and weaknesses in our teaching and assessment of literacy?

This final question encourages you and your colleagues to look at the big picture of your practice as literacy educators. Teachers often find that they are confident and comfortable with some aspects of the teaching of literacy but uncomfortable with others.

For example, I have worked with many teachers who knew how to teach their students lower level skills such as phonics but wanted to learn how to promote higher level thinking with text. A group of first-grade teachers had developed their own standards-based comprehension assessment. When they tried the assessment for the first time, one of the teachers was very disappointed in her students' performance. She said she could see that her students had learned exactly what she had taught them. Because she had not focused on comprehension, her students had had difficulty with all but the easiest questions.

To take another example, I worked with a group of primary grade teachers who had been quite successful in teaching their students to read stories or narratives. Through their study of standards, these teachers learned of the increasing emphasis on the reading of nonfiction or informational text, even in the early grades. As a result, they became interested in identifying suitable nonfiction books for their students and in learning strategies for helping their students to comprehend these texts.

Conclusion

Teachers come to own standards when they have the professional development that enables them to delve into the underlying concepts and research, and the time to work with colleagues on possible implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Standards can and should be interpreted both in light of teachers' knowledge about their students' needs as literacy learners, and in light of their professional knowledge of literacy and literacy instruction.

You may have heard the saying, "Programs don't teach; teachers teach." To this I would add, "Standards don't teach; teachers teach." ❖

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