FIVE KEY CONCEPTS KICK OFF THE PROCESS

Professional development provides the power to implement standards

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

When the standards movement began more than 15 years ago, most educators welcomed the prospect of having clearly articulated student learning goals. The publication of the first set of standards by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989 was greeted with unprecedented optimism. Standards offered educators a direction for reform initiatives by providing consensus about what is important for students to learn and what skills they should acquire. In addition, standards brought much-needed focus to curriculum development.

FOUNDATION OF A STANDARDS-BASED SYSTEM

1. Standards are not new.

2. Standards reflect our philosophy of schooling.

3. Ideas are more important than terminology.

4. Good ideas can be implemented poorly or not at all.

5. Success hinges on what happens at the classroom level.
efforts and provided the impetus for fashioning new forms of student assessment. But the standards movement also posed new challenges for professional development leaders charged with ensuring that educators have the knowledge and skills needed to help all students reach the high levels of learning described by these newly defined standards.

As they took up these challenges, those planning professional development efforts quickly discovered that the problems they faced were far more complex than they originally anticipated. Political controversies related to accountability threatened the best-intentioned efforts. Helping teachers develop lessons tied to standards-based curricula and align their classroom assessments with local and state standards required a lot of work and significant change for most. And more recently, the stringent timelines in the No Child Left Behind Act for demonstrating adequate yearly progress put additional demands on systems already straining to show clear evidence of results.

To solve these problems and to

If standards-based reforms are to succeed, powerful professional development is essential.

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"If an educational program is to have any chance of success, it must be based on what students learn and are able to do. In other words, the goals being sought must be addressed: What do we want students to learn and be able to do, but on what their students learn and are able to do. All we know for sure, argued Tyler, is how much time they spent in the school environment.

Tyler further emphasized that the best indicators of teaching effectiveness are based not on what teachers do, but on what their students learn and are able to do. In other words, teaching and learning must be seen as intrinsically linked. For a teacher to suggest “I taught it to them, they just didn’t learn it” was to Tyler as foolish as saying, “I sold it to them, they just didn’t buy it.” It was like saying, “I taught this fellow to swim, even though every time he jumps in the water he still sinks.” Tyler stressed that teaching is not something one can go off alone into the wilderness and do — not even if curricular frameworks, textbooks, and lesson plans are carried along.

Powerful professional development helps educators recognize that defining learning goals and identifying specifically how those goals will be measured or assessed are not new ideas. Thoughtfully addressing these issues always has been essential to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Once these decisions are made, powerful professional development then follows through by helping educators acquire the instructional procedures and scientifically research-based strategies they need to help all students reach the articulated learning goals.

UNDERSTANDING #2: Standards reflect our philosophy of schooling.

Standards-based reforms are particularly complicated when those involved hold different philosophies of schooling. These philosophies reflect not only what we value as individuals, but also what we hope for and value as learning communities and as a society (Sirotnik, 2002). When philosophies differ, the goals being sought differ, and so do approaches for achieving those goals. Again, Ralph Tyler (1949) pointed out:

"A fundamental first step in the process of defining our educational goals is to make our philosophies of schooling clear. ... Should the school develop young people to fit into the present society as it is, or does the school have a revolutionary mission to develop young people who will seek to improve the society? ... How these questions are answered affects the educational goals we select. If the school believes its primary function is to teach people to adjust to society, it will strongly emphasize obedience to the present authorities, loyalty to the present forms and traditions, skills in carrying on the present techniques of life. Whereas if it emphasizes the revolutionary function of the school, it will be more concerned with critical analysis, the ability to meet new problems, independence and self-direction, freedom, and self-discipline” (pp. 35-36).

Philosophical conflicts about how traditional or revolutionary schools should be are at the heart of many current debates regarding standards and learning goals. If we are going to

UNDERSTANDING #1: Standards are not a new idea.

Many educators today believe the push to define standards and clarify learning goals is a recent phenomenon in education. The dominant educational theme of the last decade certainly is to “get serious about standards” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996). But the importance of well-defined learning goals has been recognized for decades — we just haven’t done much about it.

More than 50 years ago, renowned educator Ralph W. Tyler (1949) stressed that prior to teaching anyone anything, two fundamental questions must be addressed: What do we want students to learn and be able to do, and what evidence would we accept to verify that learning? As Tyler put it:

“...If an educational program is to be planned and if efforts for continued improvement are to be made, it is necessary to have some conception of the goals being sought. These educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed, and tests and examinations are prepared. All aspects of the educational program are really means to accomplish these basic educational purposes” (p. 3).

As self-evident as this may seem, Tyler also pointed out that most curricular decisions are based not on student learning, but on time. We tend to worry more about what content should be covered in the time available than we do about what students acquire. As a result, we cannot say with certainty what the graduates of our schools learned and are able to do. All we know for sure, argued Tyler, is how much time they spent in the school environment.
move ahead with standards-based reforms, powerful professional development must help clarify these philosophical differences and move educators, as communities of learners, toward meaningful compromise and functional agreement. It also must work to bring a shared vision of success to improvement efforts by uniting various stakeholders in the process: parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and community leaders. Only when we agree on what we want to accomplish and the value of the goals we are striving to attain can true success be achieved.

UNDERSTANDING #3: Ideas are more important than the terminology we use.

Another problem thwarting progress in standards-based reforms is the tangled thicket of terminology involved. Educators’ confusion about terminology and the arguments such confusion creates often squander precious time and detract from the important work that needs to be done.

I became acutely aware of the problems associated with terminology several years ago while working with a school district’s curriculum development committee. This group of dedicated educators spent an entire morning debating the differences among standards, goals, and objectives. To help resolve the debate and bring new focus to their discussion, I wrote a statement on a sheet of paper. My statement began with the phrase, “The student will be able to ...” I then added the ever popular, performance-oriented verb demonstrate and ended with some elements of content. Finally I shared my statement with the group and asked if they would consider the statement a(n):

- a. Standard
- b. Goal
- c. Objective
- d. Competency
- e. Outcome
- f. Benchmark
- g. Proficiency
- h. Performance
- i. Expectation
- j. Aspiration
- k. New Year’s Resolution

What I intended as a tongue-in-cheek gesture served only to extend their debate! Frustrated, I left the room with my statement in hand and walked down the hall to the cafeteria where the students were having lunch. There, I shared my statement with 10 different high school students and asked them the same question. Unlike the teachers and school administrators on the curriculum development committee who were unable to reach consensus, every student gave me the same answer: “Who cares?”

Powerful professional development avoids battles over terminology by maintaining a laser focus on learning and learners. In dealing with standards, it keeps discussions centered on what students should learn, what they should be able to do, and what evidence best reflects that learning. The specific labels attached to those things really don't matter. Distinctions in terminology that facilitate communication and promote understanding are noted and used with consistency. But the confusion and distraction that different terminology can cause are kept in check so precious energy isn't wasted and improvement efforts don't get sidetracked.

UNDERSTANDING #4: Good ideas can be implemented poorly or not at all.

Most states’ standards for student learning are outlined in a series of documents typically labeled “curriculum frameworks” or “sets of content and/or performance standards.” These documents consist of large notebooks, usually color-coded by level or subject area. They are the pride of school district and state curriculum directors. Sadly, whether or not these documents are used as intended, adapted appropriately, or ever used at all, is rarely considered.

For modern standards documents to make a difference in classroom practice and lead to improvements in student learning, the documents must be paired with powerful professional development that focuses specifically on procedures for implementation. Without it, these documents likely will end up in the same place as the curriculum guides developed in the 1970s. They, too, were carefully designed and color-coded by level. But because little attention was paid to how they could be practically and efficiently used, most teachers looked at them briefly and then put them into desk drawers or on bookshelves where they did little more than gather dust — and the teachers continued to teach using whatever textbooks and materials were available.

An essential aspect in designing any curriculum is to consider how it will be implemented (Joyce, 1993). This involves bridging the sometimes wide and deep chasm between the goals we set and prevailing policies and practices. Powerful professional development centers on the types of professional knowledge and skills teachers and school leaders must have to implement these new educational goals. It provides the time and direction they need to adapt available textbooks and materials to ensure that all students learn well. It also helps them acquire and learn how best to use the new materials and resources that may be required.

Regardless of the work that goes into clarifying standards for student learning, the true value of this work will depend directly on the quality of its implementation.
UNDERSTANDING #5: Success hinges on what happens at the classroom level.

Studies of change convincingly show that success in any change effort always hinges on what happens at the smallest unit of the organization (Senge, 1990). What this says to educators is that success in improvement efforts based on standards always will hinge on what happens in the classroom. The hard lesson we have gleaned from analyzing various waves of education reform is that it doesn’t matter what happens at the national, state, or even the district level. Unless change takes place at the school building and classroom levels, improvement is unlikely. As Cooley (Cooley, Gage, & Scriven, 1997) lamented: “I have concluded that most educational reform takes place in our literature and on the pages of Education Week, not in schools and classrooms. ... It seemed to me that all this talk about waves and waves of reforms really refers to trends in the reform literature, not changes that are really taking place in real schools. Of course, that’s true of waves. They tend to be highly visible at the surface, but do not affect what’s going on down in the lower depths” (p. 18).

Improvement in education simply means more students learning better, and the only level at which that generally takes place is in classrooms. Sadly, judged by the criterion of classroom impact, most educational reforms have a poor record of success (Sarason, 1990). Even reforms that include developing higher-level learning standards for students paired with performance assessments on which teachers are held accountable for results have resulted in relatively modest changes in classroom practice (Guskey, 1994, 1999). Significant change at the classroom level is tied more directly to the provision of powerful, ongoing, job-embedded, professional development (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey & Huberman, 1995).

Standards that clarify what students should learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school are vitally important. They provide essential focus and direction in reform efforts at all levels. But clearly specified goals are just the first step in the improvement process. If these efforts are to lead to the significant improvements in student learning for which they are intended, they must be paired with powerful professional development that yields a direct and significant impact on classroom practice, for that is where student learning takes place.

CONCLUSION

Implementing standards-based reforms will never be easy. The process is enormously complex and highly political. In addition, because of the dynamic nature of our society and the world, it is a continuously evolving process.

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