Eight people crowd around a table in what looks like a storeroom, with boxes and equipment along the walls. One person explains an assignment. Others reach for snacks in the center of the table and listen, nodding, frowning, concentrating. The principal is among them, but you wouldn’t be able to pick her out. She is as focused on the assignment as are the others.

“The students were supposed to read the story about a group being forced into exile and then to write a letter to a government, asking them not to send people into exile. They’re 8th graders, going into high school next year. The letter had to follow the power paragraph scheme — you know, the first sentence has the topic or reason, the second has the explanation or significance of reason, then

Building a Better Assignment

Standards in Practice helps teachers learn to increase the rigor of assignments and the achievement of all students through a collaborative, reflective process

Construction starts with six steps

1. The teacher bringing the assignment tells the team how and when the assignment was given and what its purpose, that is, what the students were expected to learn.
2. The team questions the assignment: What did the students have to know and be able to do to complete it successfully?
3. The team identifies the standards and the levels of Bloom’s taxonomy that apply to the assignment.
4. The team creates a draft scoring guide for the assignment based on the standards.
5. The team scores the student work, using the scoring guide/rubric.
6. The team discusses either revisions to the assignment or how to reteach without repeating.
the details, and so on,” explains the teacher who assigned the work the group is examining.

After discussing the knowledge and skills the students need to complete the assignment, the group moves to the next step of the process for putting standards into practice.

“What standards does this assignment relate to?” asks the group’s mentor, who is visiting the school. The educators rifle piles of papers and bags of books for copies of the local standards, stapled between fluorescent green covers. They find the standards, note that the assignment is aligned, and go to work on a scoring guide with zero to four points.

“To earn a score of three, it has to be grammatically correct and there mustn’t be a single spelling mistake,” says one teacher, “and it has to follow the power paragraph scheme and have the proper letter form.”

“Yes, fine, but what about the quality of the work?” the mentor asks. “I can imagine a flawlessly written piece that doesn’t persuade me at all and isn’t in any way related to the story. We want to get that quality into a description of a score of four.”

“OK, but that’s hard to explain to a student or a parent,” objects a teacher. “I can justify a grade when I can count mistakes, but when I’m talking about what I like or don’t like, it doesn’t seem fair.”

“But we can write a description of what a paper deserving a four looks like, can’t we? Then we can find examples, so that we can explain to the students and the parents,” the principal suggests.

“And then we can show the scoring guide to the students ahead of time so they know what they’re aiming at,” says another teacher.

Another has a seemingly bold suggestion. “We could even get them to help construct the scoring guide.”

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A team of teachers meets regularly and uses a six-step, structured conversation about the regular assignments they give students. They may meet every two weeks, but less frequent meetings (monthly or on professional development days) do not produce results because the goal is to examine as many assignments as possible to ensure that the next time the assignment is used, it isn’t as flawed. These changes also can affect subsequent assignments the teacher may create in another area.

The purpose is accomplished if the assignment emerges more rigorous than it began, even if the team skips steps or alters the sequence.

**STEPS**

Team meetings are the heart of Standards in Practice. They take place on site, in any room in a school where eight or 10 teachers can meet around a table (or desks pulled together facing each other). The teachers can be members of a vertical team — representatives of each grade in an elementary or middle school — or they can be teachers in the same grade or the same academic discipline.

Although an hour a week is ideal, most teams can meet for 45 or 50 minutes weekly if the time is used efficiently.

**Step 1: The teacher bringing the assignment tells the team how and when the assignment was given and what was its purpose, that is, what the students were expected to learn.**

The teacher also spends a few minutes (about three) working through the problem (if it’s math) or describing the expected answer.

The facilitator brings the meeting to order. Then the teacher bringing the assignment gives a short, three- to five-minute description of it: when it was given, why (quiz, homework, class work, etc.), and the expected answer.

The teacher also explains the assignment’s purpose — what he or she expected students to learn from it.

**Default to Step 6:** Teams faced with worksheet assignments or assignments in which the purpose is nonacademic (learning how to follow instructions, for example) should default to Step 6.

Defaulting to Step 6 can happen at any point before Step 5. In Step 6, the team discusses how to revise the assignment, adding academic content. The teacher uses the revised assignment in class and brings the resulting student work to a subsequent team meeting. The Standards in Practice process is an iterative forum in which teachers help each other continually improve their work.

**Step 2: The team questions the assignment: What did the students have to know and be able to do to complete it successfully?**

All team members pitch in to list what students must demonstrate to show they have been taught and have learned the content for this assignment.

Teachers must recognize what students need to know to complete the work successfully and must think deeply about how learning occurs. For example, teachers often don’t recognize that for students to solve math problems, they must have been taught to read instructions and to write the explanations now frequently required on tests. Teachers often recognize here what skills students have been taught in earlier grades — or what skills they lack, leading to articulation meetings.

**Step 3: The team identifies the standards and the levels of Bloom’s taxonomy that apply to the assignment.**

The team members take out their standards books and look for the standard most clearly aligned with the assignment in front of them. Most teachers know the standards — some
districts require teachers to write the relevant standards on every assignment. Knowing the standards, however, doesn't guarantee that teachers can align assignments with the standards, so they must read the words of the assignment in parallel with the standards.

To increase the rigor of an assignment, the team should look at the assignment according to the levels of Bloom's taxonomy. A rigorous assignment goes beyond having students recall information (what one teacher called “retrieval”) to asking them to apply what they know, and if possible, to analyze.

The facilitator's role at this point is to guard against “Bloom's creep” — the claim that an assignment is higher in the taxonomy than it really is.

**Step 4: The team creates a draft scoring guide for the assignment based on the standards.**

The scoring guide/rubric constructed in a team meeting is not intended to be used for grading. It is a statement of expectations for a particular assignment, intended only to train teachers in making their expectations explicit. Teachers often flounder when asked to write the answer to “What do I want from my students?” Their expectations are in their own minds.

The scoring guide has four levels, from 4 to 1. Levels 4 and 3 describe student work that exhibits mastery. Work at Levels 2 and 1 shows a need for reteaching.

To establish a scoring guide/rubric:

The facilitator sets up chart paper or an overhead and tells the group to begin by constructing a scoring guide first for Level 3. Looking at the learning outcomes contained in the assignment and the standards, the group works cooperatively to establish what features must be present for the work to be adequate for Level 3. These are features that must exist, not yet anything about the quality of the response.

For example, a Level 3 math problem would require:

- The correct answer.
- A written explanation.
- Everything the teacher asked for — work shown, justification, etc.

A Level 3 English/language arts assignment would require:

- The form requested — three or five paragraphs, notes, bibliography, etc.
- The treatment required — application, analysis, description.
- No errors in mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling.

Level 3 demonstrates basic mastery. Some teachers want only Level 3 responses — this gets students the A or the 100% they crave. But this level is not really enough if a school is moving toward more rigor in the curriculum. **Level 4 represents mastery plus a high level of quality.**

For Level 4, the math problem would require that:

- The explanation is so clear that it can be followed easily.
- The work shown in the justification is not only clear and complete but uses the appropriate mathematical language correctly.

For the English/language arts assignment, Level 4 work has:

- Sophisticated language, with the student accurately using a large vocabulary.
- Appropriate, well-chosen details and elaboration.
- A persuasive analysis (or the treatment required) that commands the reader.

Level 4 guides also, of course, include the mastery elements the team first created for Level 3. The team now returns to complete the Level 3 description, adding supplementary quality statements for a description of accomplishment that is a little less brilliant than Level 4, but adds to the necessary features first drafted.

For example, a complete Level 3 scoring guide for the English/language arts assignment would read:

- The language is clear, using varied sentence structure.
- Details and elaboration are appropriate.
- The analysis (or the treatment required) follows a clear pattern.
- The student uses the form required — three or five paragraphs, notes, bibliography, etc.
- The student uses the treatment required — application, analysis, description.
- The paper has no errors in mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling.

Placing quality statements first in the scoring guide helps teachers value them. Too often, teachers see formal features as sufficient. The major part of the work is done. The team next constructs Level 2 by subtracting from Level 3 — one or more of the required features is missing, quality features are mostly lacking. However, a Level 2 piece of work is not far from being satisfactory. It needs only a word or two, even just pointing to missing features, to become Level 3 work.

Level 1, again described by subtracting elements, requires that the teacher reteach some elements from the conceptual stage. It may not only be completely wrong (as in a math problem), but it may also be so poorly
expressed as to be incomprehensible.

The facilitator lists the completed
four levels at the front of the room for
all to see. The group now begins to
apply the scoring guide.

Step 5: The team scores the
student work, using the scoring
guide/rubric.

Team members have been
waiting for the moment they
get to see the student work. But
they now look at the
work with different eyes.

Instead of seeing a range from
the best in this class to the least
accomplished, they see work that
meets one of the levels in the scoring
guide/rubric. It is frequently a sobering
experience.

Group members begin by reading
the papers silently, taking turns with
individual pieces and making their
own judgments. As all members of
the team finish a piece of work, the
facilitator looks at the scores to see
where there are major discrepancies,
between 4 and 1 or 3 and 1 for example.
The most important discrepancies,
however, are between 3 and 2 —
the difference between mastery and
needing reteaching, between passing
and not. The facilitator holds these
pieces aside for the group to discuss.

When the group has finished all
the student work, the facilitator intro-
duces the pieces with scoring discrep-
ancies, one at a time. Team members
then talk about the standards they
used to judge the student's work.

It is important that the facilitator
help the group focus on the work at
this step and maintain a positive, sup-
portive atmosphere so teachers do not
need to feel defensive. The focus on
the work is essential to the process.

Step 6: The team discusses either
revisions to the assignment or
how to reteach without repeating.

Revising. If the team is revising
an assignment, the group will not
have gone through all the steps. The
process will have defaulted to Step 6
after Steps 1, 2, or 3, perhaps even
Step 4 — whenever it becomes appar-
ent that a scoring guide/rubric can't
be written for it.

The facilitator asks the team
members to suggest ways to improve
the assignment. No one is allowed to
say, “Throw it out and start a new
one.” Every assignment can be
improved. A math worksheet can be
rescued by adding a problem embody-
ing the skills learned in the worksheet
as well as requiring a written explana-

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tion of how the problem was solved.

Reteaching. If the assignment is satisfactory and the process included all the steps, including scoring students’ work, the facilitator asks the group to again look carefully at the work or their notes about it. Meanwhile, the facilitator prepares chart paper or an overhead with two columns:

- What students know and can do.
- What students need to be taught.

The facilitator asks the group what to write under each heading. For example, under “what students know and can do,” a multiple-step math problem might have listed simple arithmetic and ability to begin a problem solving process. On the “what students need to be taught” side, the group may suggest incomplete understanding of the problem, inability to progress beyond the first step, no persistence to the end, poor writing skills for the explanation.

The group now has a guide for helping students with this and similar problems.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and administrators sometimes ask, “How long does this professional development go on?”

The best response is, “Why should it ever stop?” The Standards in Practice model resembles that of other professions, where reflecting on practice is an expected part of professional duties throughout one’s career. Once schools and districts have gotten in the habit of providing meeting time and teachers have begun to depend on their colleagues for professional help, team meetings will be expected and welcomed.

Standards in Practice is not one-shot or short-term. Standards in Practice works to move teaching as a profession to a high level of consciousness about teachers’ obligations and opportunities. It brings teachers face-to-face with the meaning of accountability for student progress, upending the belief (often taught in college and university schools of education) that teaching cannot overcome the negative effects of social and economic forces. Standards in Practice works best when all members of the community, especially district and school leaders, understand its purpose and support teachers as they reflect on their work. Critical reflection on practice should never end.