
STANDARDS

Standards represent benchmarks for school achievement. In particular, *content* standards specify the subject matter that students are expected to learn. *Performance* standards identify the levels of proficiency that students are to meet in mastering particular skills. *Opportunity-to-learn* standards define the levels of available resources (such as school staff and instructional programs) that are required for students to learn appropriate content and skills. Overall, standards have been central to educational policy for more than two decades, especially at the national level. The standards movement has also played a pivotal role in the rise of school accountability and high-stakes testing. Moreover, standards are important because they exemplify key traditions in public education.

This entry is divided into three parts. Part one focuses on today's standards movement by tracing its recent origins and contemporary developments. Part two briefly examines earlier incarnations of the standards movement, including the efficiency movement of the early twentieth century and the objectives movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Part three looks at the recent coupling of standards with accountability schemes and high-stakes testing. This configuration of standards and assessment practices represents a new, and some would say dangerous, approach to school reform.

The Standards Movement

The 1983 watershed report *A Nation at Risk* initiated the standards movement of today. In strident tones, the authors of this report lambasted the quality, rigor, and efficiency of American schools. Such criticisms were hardly new, but the report was widely acclaimed because it tied education dramatically to the nation's economic well-being and global security. Moreover, the report's dire predictions of national peril struck a chord with a public that was already concerned with more than a decade and a half of gradually falling college admission test scores.

Calls for higher standards offered a ready political response to public concerns that students were not learning as much as had earlier generations. In the

1990s, for example, the Clinton administration promoted Goals 2000, a national education policy that urged schools to voluntarily adopt world-class standards. Supposedly, the absence of such standards would undercut the nation's ability to compete economically with foreign countries.

Some scholars viewed concerns over economic security and failing schools as a misleading and manufactured crisis. Nevertheless, national subject area associations responded by developing content standards in mathematics, science, reading, and other subjects. It was not long before states developed their own content and grade-level standards that trumped those of national associations. The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated standards as a component of all state accountability systems. Schools and school districts no longer had a choice but to accept state standards, and in order to tighten accountability further, many districts now require classroom teachers to identify the state standards addressed in their daily lessons. Finally, major textbook publishers recognized a marketing opportunity in this push to ensure compliance. To promote their products, publishers now tailor the teacher's editions of their textbooks to match content with a state's particular standards.

Past Incarnations

In the current rush to standards, it is easy to forget that standards are hardly new to education. On the contrary, today's movement represents a long tradition in education. This tradition looks to efficiency as its primary virtue. In particular, the contemporary movement is rooted in the early twentieth-century social efficiency thought of writers such as Edward L. Thorndike and Franklin Bobbitt. Thorndike, a founder of educational psychology, argued that a new science of education would eventually provide detailed and predictive explanations of all forms of learning and thereby establish a clear set of standards for educational practice. Bobbitt, an educational scholar, lamented what he saw as tremendous waste in the traditional academic curriculum and the outmoded instructional methods of his day.

Bobbitt began from the premise that the purpose of education is to prepare children for adult life, and that

adult life, however varied, could be broken down into specific tasks. This process of creating standards based on an examination of practical roles became known as activity analysis. It was the basis for several major surveys conducted by school districts and universities to formulate thousands and tens of thousands of highly specific educational objectives. Through such work, Bobbitt believed that social efficiency could modernize schools just as American industry had modernized production methods through standardization.

The social efficiency movement contributed to the bureaucratic-corporate model of schooling that emerged and took root during the twentieth century. With more children going to school and staying there longer, activity analysis also may have helped realign a highly academic and elitist curriculum with one that served more practical ends. Yet whatever successes the social efficiency movement might claim are balanced by the host of practical difficulties the movement encountered. First, faced with thousands and tens of thousands of objectives, educators needed some criteria by which to sort or rank potential objectives. In the absence of such criteria, teachers were simply overwhelmed. Second, specific objectives in many areas only served to trivialize adult roles. Would-be efficiency experts found themselves hard pressed with the job of defining a prespecified curriculum for adult roles such as being a good mother or father.

Today's standards movement is an ideological offspring of the social efficiency wing of early progressive thinking, but it is also akin to other trends. In particular, today's standards harken back to the objectives movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This movement had a significantly different impetus from the earlier social efficiency movement. Whereas Bobbitt and his supporters hoped to make schools more relevant to their growing student populations by tethering education directly to adult life, the objectives movement was employed as a corrective for such pragmatic efforts.

In the wake of *Sputnik* and decades of life adjustment programs, the mood shifted back toward academic, discipline-based education. Nevertheless, the objectives movement embraced the same underlying assumptions of both social efficiency and today's approach to standards. These assumptions include the belief that specific ends of education could be defined

prior to instruction, and that the programs designed to meet these ends could be applied broadly across time and place. Unambiguous aims were seen as the key to making this means–ends model work. Thus, an entire generation of preservice teachers was carefully instructed in how to plan curriculum by first writing long lists of behavioral objectives in highly specified formats.

Although the objectives movement was promoted widely in colleges of education, it failed to capture the hearts and minds of classroom teachers. As with the social efficiency movement, the problems with behavioral objectives were largely practical. Objectives may have helped a few teachers think more conscientiously about their aims, but the vast majority of teachers were never unclear about their expectations or what they hoped to achieve. For these teachers, writing objectives seemed like a forced exercise and a waste of time. The challenges of teaching were too often not in knowing one's objectives, but in finding ways to make content relevant and accessible for *particular* students at a *particular* time and place. As interest in objectives waned at the end of the 1970s, proponents predicted their return once technology increased and pre-prepared objectives alleviated the need for teachers to write their own.

Objectives were not destined to return, but standards have taken their place. Therefore, it is relevant to ask two questions. First, what lessons from these past movements might be useful today? Second, how does the contemporary movement differ from its earlier versions?

Lessons for Today

A primary lesson drawn from the social efficiency and objectives movements is to temper any expectations that standards will necessarily or automatically improve educational practice. As with the standards movement of today, its past varieties were touted with great fanfare and optimism. Yet for all their seeming potential, activity analysis and objectives were often resisted, and sometimes flatly rejected, by classroom teachers. Past reformers in this tradition were quick to blame teachers for not finding their approaches useful. Yet the lesson for today is not to blame teachers, but to

reconsider the claims of utility made on behalf of these top-down reforms in the first place. For example, standards are now said to be absolutely essential to maintaining quality schools. A bit of skepticism would be appropriate on this point. As John Dewey observed more than a half century ago, standards do not *necessarily* lead to quality. In Dewey's view, standards tell us about quantities—how much and how many. Quality, however, depends on judgment. Standards may well inform judgment, but they are not a mode of judgment; they are a mode of measurement. Thus, to expect that standards are able to replace or substitute for judgment is a mistake.

This limitation is evident in all three types of standards mentioned early in this entry. Content standards are the most popular of the three types today, and they might also seem the most straightforward. X, Y, and Z are what we expect students to learn. Period. Still, such statements leave many important questions unanswered. Should students, for example, learn everything that is taught? Many good teachers teach more than they expect all of their students to learn. Is providing such a rich curriculum a mistake? Moreover, students may surprise a teacher by learning content or skills that the teacher did not anticipate. Again, should such unplanned learning be discouraged?

In similar ways, performance standards may ask too little of teachers and students. Performance standards are usually formulated in ways that will apply across a relatively large group of students, such as all the fifth graders in a given school or school district. Some enthusiasts want to specify the same level of performance for all students in a given state! Because it seems unfair to create such standards in ways that a significant percentage of students cannot meet, the standards default to *minimal* levels of proficiency. Only for small groups, and perhaps only for individuals, can we set ideal or significantly challenging standards. However, if these standards apply only to a few cases, in what sense are they still “standard”?

Opportunity-to-learn are the least common type of standards, probably because of their cost. Without resources to back up these standards, they constitute little more than an empty gesture. It would be meaningless to say that all students have an opportunity to learn basic health practices, for example, unless appropriate

lessons and skilled health teachers are available to make such an opportunity real. The contemporary standards movement has not increased school resources. On the contrary, because this movement is accompanied by mandated testing and financial sanctions, standards have often diverted significant resources away from opportunities to learn.

The social efficiency and behavioral objectives movements were not complete failures. Nevertheless, their limited successes suggest the conclusions previously stated. First, standards alone are an insufficient basis for school reform. Second, the limitations of standards are most likely to be felt in their practical applications rather than at the level of policy. Finally, although standards may inform teaching in nontrivial ways, they neither provide the necessary resources for education nor ensure its quality.

The Standards Movement Today: Success or Failure?

Today's standards movement is not simply a repetition of its past heritage. Indeed, every reappearance of the efficiency tradition in education is unique to its times. In particular, the contemporary movement differs from the past by closely coupling standards with high-stakes testing, new state accountability schemes, and federal mandates. States that receive federal dollars for education are now required to set standards, test students to determine what percentage of students meet the standards, and then use the results to rank individual schools.

This interlocking of standards and testing has become far more formalized than it was in past accountability systems. Whereas the reforms of the previous century urged efficiency through a variety of means, today's reforms demand it through mandates alone. As a result, the role of assessment has changed. Prior to the standards movement, assessment measures usually followed the aims and content of the curriculum, thereby providing teachers with information about what their students learned. Now that relationship is reversed; instruction follows assessment. With rewards and sanctions tied directly to test results, many teachers believe they have no choice but to teach to the tests.

Moreover, teaching to the test has reached the level of official policy as school districts purchase expensive test-preparation curriculum packages and hire consultants from private companies. These programs focus on intensive drill and practice, eschewing both substance and higher-order thinking skills. Scholars refer to such test-prep programs as a “noncurriculum” because they disconnect skills from other forms of learning. In addition, because these isolated skills require such a great deal of rote memorization, students are quickly deskilled by having their work made a matter of routine.

Although these concerns are important, they beg the question of whether standards have served to raise test scores. On this question, research is not yet entirely conclusive. Nevertheless, early studies of the standards movement have not prompted much optimism. First, these studies suggest that most of the gains associated with standards and accountability are both modest and temporary. Gains found in the elementary grades, for example, typically wash out well before the end of high school. Second, researchers have not been able to link any of these gains with other measures of educational achievement, including student grades, high school graduation rates, or college admissions. They have, however, been linked to stress. In short, research thus far indicates that children are simply learning how to take tests, and that this alone is a poor substitute for education.

This entry has reviewed the origins and recent developments of today’s standards movement, described earlier versions of standards-based school reform, and identified the lessons to be learned from such reform efforts. Finally, the close links between the standards movement, accountability, and high-stakes tests were identified as unique features of today’s policies. Although the social efficiency and behavioral objectives movements were never wholly embraced at the levels of classroom practice, their successes may have been more symbolic. As a branch of progressive education, social efficiency reforms signaled an effort to bring education into the modern age of enlightened industrial and corporate thinking. In contrast, the objectives movement signaled the reawakening of academics as central to the school’s mission. What will the contemporary standards movement come to symbolize? The current path of the

movement seems to signal not so much an affirmation of education as it does a perceived need to control the work of teachers and students.

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See also Accountability; High-Stakes Testing; *Nation at Risk*, A

Further Readings

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