

HIGH STANDARDS

Giving All Students a FAIR SHOT



The goal of standards-based reform is to help all students reach higher levels of performance, not to set impossible goals or create winners and losers. Achieving that goal requires implementing policies that give all students a fair shot at meeting standards. States are moving in this direction because they know giving students a fair shot is the only way to provide educational opportunities for all.





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Now that nearly every state has set standards for student performance, the hard work begins. This may be difficult to believe in light of the battles waged in recent years as states struggled to decide what was important for all students to know in core subjects and determine the level of performance they should demonstrate.

Still, the real challenge will be helping all students reach the standards. And this is the crucial part — the reason why states embarked on reform efforts in the first place. Despite what critics say, the purpose of standards-based reform is not to set impossible goals or create winners and losers. The objective is to help all students reach high levels of performance. That is what parents, teachers, business leaders and policymakers want.

Reaching that goal means, first of all, not backing down from high standards and making sure that they matter to students, parents, teachers and administrators. Reversing course would only reinforce the status quo and deny millions of children the opportunities for fulfilling, productive futures. Moving ahead means improving standards, strengthening the curriculum, bolstering teacher quality, providing support for struggling students and making sure test policies are fair. If states do not establish these conditions, the result will continue to be a nation where some students succeed, while many others graduate without adequate knowledge and skills.

HIGH STANDARDS FOR ALL

Fairness is at the heart of the standards movement. A decade ago, policymakers, educators, business leaders and the public realized that a system in which some students learn at high levels and many do not was grossly unfair and denied millions the very opportunities public schools were supposed to provide. As historian Diane Ravitch reminds us in her recent book, *Left Back*, despite the efforts of late 19th century reformers to establish a common curriculum

for all students, the idea that those bound for work need a different and less rigorous academic preparation than those headed for college dominated education policymaking for decades. Because this view prevailed for so long, schools and school systems have not been set up to enable all students to reach high academic standards.

In the 1990s, the creation of standards, new assessments and accountability systems began to change this situation. By setting high expectations for all, states and school districts are challenging the belief that many students cannot handle an academically rich curriculum and are not capable of achieving at high levels. And tying consequences to results creates incentives for schools to raise performance and encourages students to work hard.

IMPROVING THE STANDARDS

The idea at the outset of the standards movement was that states would set standards, which would make the goals of instruction clear. Local schools and districts would then be free to develop curriculum and instructional programs they thought appropriate for their students to meet the standards. According to many teachers, it hasn't worked out as planned. The standards have been set, but they do not always provide the clear guidance teachers need. And schools do not yet have access to top-quality curriculum materials aligned with the standards. Without these tools, teachers are right to cry foul if they are being held accountable for raising student performance.

In order to provide teachers with the right tools, standards must be as strong and clear as possible. Low or vague standards cannot guide teachers to develop challenging and creative lessons that will stretch students' minds and enable them to achieve at high levels.

Although standards vary widely across the country, there are encouraging signs that their quality is improving markedly. Achieve has set out to identify some of the strongest standards and to

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use these documents to help states strengthen their practices. Achieve's experts have identified exemplary standards — California and Massachusetts in English language arts; North Carolina, Texas and New Standards in early literacy; and Arizona and Japan in mathematics. Each of these proves it is possible to set rigorous goals for students that encourage challenging instruction and to provide sufficient guidance to teachers without impinging on schools' autonomy or creativity.

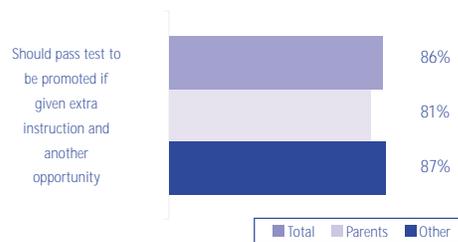
The next step in providing tools teachers need is to tackle the tough challenge of producing instructional materials aligned to the standards. Most of the materials used in schools today are produced by commercial publishers, who tailor them to the needs of many states and school districts. Because the standards are so different across the states, aligning materials to one particular set of standards is difficult. Although some states have the authority to establish a statewide curriculum and approve textbooks for statewide use, the development and use of curricular materials often is a local decision. Educators and policymakers in those states must find creative ways to arm local districts and schools with high-quality materials, such as providing models or encouraging districts to pool resources to develop new materials.

One way in which states can influence the development of standards-based materials is by banding together and creating a larger market. One such example is the Mathematics Achievement Partnership (MAP), a consortium of 11 states brought together by Achieve. MAP is developing a common set of expectations for middle school mathematics, and participating states will administer an eighth grade assessment based upon them. While the partnership plans to develop materials, it also may stimulate enough demand to encourage publishers to align their materials with the expectations the states have jointly produced.

Public Support

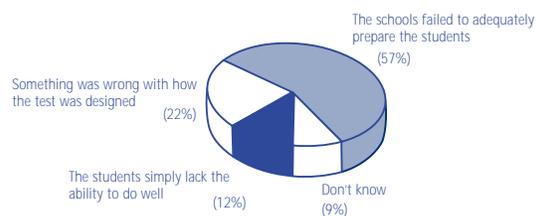
Two recent surveys show the extent of public support for high standards. They also show that the public supports holding students accountable for performance if schools provide them with instructional support.

In a survey sponsored by The Business Roundtable, three-fourths of parents and other adults support requiring fourth graders to pass a test to be promoted. But support increases to more than 80 percent if students are given extra instruction and additional opportunities to take tests.



Source: The Business Roundtable, September 2000

In a survey sponsored by Public Agenda, a majority of the public expressed the belief that a low test score signals that schools failed to prepare students adequately, rather than there being something wrong with the test or the students.



Source: Public Agenda, October 2000



Critics of current reform efforts contend that the policies begin and end with tests and that the purpose seems to be to flunk students or drive low-performers out of school. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Advances in technology also provide new and powerful ways for states to further the development and use of curriculum materials tied to high standards. A few states, notably Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Texas and Vermont, are building electronic tools that allow teachers to share lessons and other materials directly related to state standards for student performance. In addition, five states — Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Washington and Wisconsin — are working with Achieve’s standards database to share materials aligned with standards across states.

PREPARING TEACHERS

In addition to having high-quality curriculum materials, teachers also need the knowledge and skills to teach all students to high standards. Educators and policymakers increasingly are recognizing that teacher quality is perhaps the most important factor in raising student performance, and efforts to enhance their skills are rising high up the agenda in most states and the federal government.

As part of that agenda, professional development, which is intended to enhance the knowledge and skills of teachers already in the classroom, is getting more attention. Yet while policymakers increasingly are recognizing that professional development has received short shrift in the past, they also are becoming aware that simply doing more of the same will not do. Many current efforts are unrelated to the content teachers are expected to teach, and the typical one-shot sessions are quickly forgotten. What is needed are sustained opportunities for teachers to build content knowledge and expand their repertoire of skills and strategies to help children learn English, mathematics and other subjects.

States can do a great deal to support effective professional development. Many providers are private organizations with good ideas but little evidence of

their success. Through a form of quality control, states could certify suppliers — just as they certify teachers — to provide assurances to the public that those receiving state funds must meet minimal qualifications. States also could change the salary structure so teachers receive credit toward pay increases only if the training improves their ability to teach to high standards. In most cases, teachers now can receive credit for taking any course, regardless of content.

States also could create their own professional development options. Some are doing this and are tying professional development to improving teachers’ abilities in low-performing schools. For example, California has created Professional Development Institutes for teachers of reading, English and mathematics, with an emphasis on pre-algebra and algebra. The institutes provide intensive instruction to both beginning and veteran teachers in subject matter and teaching techniques. Priority goes to teachers of low-performing students. About 90 percent of first graders taught by teachers who attended the reading institute reached state benchmarks in 1998–99; many of these students were English language learners.

Enhancing professional development does not necessarily mean spending a lot more money; it does mean spending money more wisely. Community District #2 in New York City — which has achieved wide acclaim for dramatically improving student performance by focusing on instructional improvement — dedicates a significant portion of its budget to professional development focused on helping students achieve high standards and uses funds from a variety of local, state and federal sources to support these efforts. Making professional development a high priority means that these funds cannot be used for other purposes, forcing administrators to make hard choices. As results show, the investment pays off.

PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

Just as states need to do more to help teachers, they also must have policies and practices to help students succeed. This means monitoring them throughout their school careers to be sure that they are on track to meet standards. And it means providing support when they fall off track. A comprehensive system of student support would include early warning signals — such as performance on elementary and middle school tests — to indicate where students are meeting standards and where they might need help. The system would offer before- and after-school learning opportunities, tutoring and summer school to provide that assistance.

Some states are starting to build pieces of support systems for students. Of the 43 states that prepared action plans following the 1999 National Education Summit, 10 indicated that they are creating new or enhanced initiatives to provide special programs or additional learning time for students falling short of standards, joining 13 pro-

grams already under way. Six states also reported new or enhanced summer school programs.

Although few states have instituted a comprehensive support system, one worth noting is under development in Maryland. Under that program, schools will monitor the progress of all students in grades 3, 5, 7 and 8 and identify those falling behind standards in reading and mathematics. Schools will be required to provide additional help for those students, either as part of in-school or after-school activities, on weekends, or during the summer. The state will provide support to local districts to train teachers to diagnose learning problems and provide effective assistance. Maryland also will coordinate childcare and early learning programs to provide all students with a solid foundation for learning.

MAKING TEST POLICIES FAIR

The final piece of the puzzle is establishing logical test policies that provide a reasonable opportunity for students to demonstrate that they have met standards.

In order to ensure tests give students a fair shot, states must make sure they truly measure what students are expected to learn. Policymakers should not just assume that tests adequately measure their standards. As Achieve's work has found, many state tests do a good job of measuring some knowledge and skills included in the standards, but states have more work to do to verify that tests tap the full range of knowledge and skills students should demonstrate. For example, Achieve has discovered some tests tend to measure

What Is 'Fair?' The Facts, Not the Rhetoric

Critics of efforts to raise academic standards contend that the reforms most states are pursuing are unfair. They feel students who do not do well on the tests will be denied opportunities for promotion or graduation. This objection begs the question: Was the previous system fair?

One way to measure fairness is to look at results and see if all students were achieving at the same level because they had equal opportunities for high-quality schooling. Here, sadly, we see vast inequalities. In the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test, poor twelfth grade students performed at the same level as more affluent eighth graders. This is not a result of an equitable system.

Another measure of fairness is the number of opportunities students had when they left school. Since the critics charge that denying students diplomas until they demonstrate a certain level of knowledge and skills is unfair, surely students with diplomas now must have ample opportunities.

Here again, though, we see significant disparities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the proportion of white high school graduates qualified for college entrance is much higher than that of blacks and Hispanics. And among those who enter college, many do so with serious deficiencies; a third of all college freshmen are required to enroll in at least one remedial course, and most who do so drop out without receiving a degree. Businesses also see a shortage of skilled employees; the proportion of companies reporting a lack of skilled employees as a barrier to growth rose from 27 percent in 1993 to 69 percent in 1998.

The next time a so-called expert seeks to demonize standards and tests as unfair to young people, consider the facts. Despite the claims of "fairness," critics do not offer a viable strategy for improving educational opportunities for all students — particularly those least well served by schools in the past. Standards-based reform is such an approach, and as public opinion surveys have shown, the American people fully embrace it.

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High-Stakes Testing and the Law: Implications for States

As the courts will surely remind us, failing to give students a fair shot to meet high standards could place states in a vulnerable position. Legal precedents are clear: If states set standards that students must meet in order to earn a diploma, students have a right to the opportunity to meet them. Court rulings provide guidelines for states to follow.

Testing policies have ended up in court for two main reasons: First, the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and federal civil rights statutes prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin and other factors. Because white students tend to outperform blacks and Hispanics on exams, tests have been challenged as discriminatory.

Second, the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution protects individuals from being “deprived of life, liberty or property, without due process of law.” Individuals challenging test policies have claimed that they have a property right to a high school diploma.

Federal courts have determined the conditions under which test policies can withstand such challenges. In the leading case of its kind, a federal appeals court in 1981 upheld the use of a Florida test that was required for high school graduation. The court ruled that the requirement was permissible (even though whites passed at a much higher rate than blacks) because the state had an interest in setting educational standards and because it provided remedial instruction. In addition, the court dismissed the due process claim, ruling that the state had given adequate notice of the graduation requirement (four years) and that the exam represented “a fair test of that which was taught.”

Two recent rulings have used similar findings to uphold newer high-stakes testing requirements. In a closely watched Texas case, U.S. District Court Judge Edward Prado upheld that state’s requirement that students pass the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in order to graduate from high school. He ruled that,

despite differential passing rates among racial and ethnic groups, the test does not discriminate against minorities. In fact, he wrote, “there is evidence that one of the goals of the test is to help identify and eradicate educational disparities.”

In a separate case in Indiana, Judge Susan Macey Thompson barred an injunction sought by a group of students with disabilities that would have blocked the use of that state’s test as a graduation requirement. She ruled that the state had given notice of the requirement since 1994, that it provided “multiple remediation opportunities” and that the students had studied subjects tested on the state test.

These rulings suggest that states should take the following steps to be sure that their policies give students a fair shot at meeting standards:

- **Demonstrate that their tests are a necessary element in their education reforms.** States should show that tests provide vital information about progress toward standards and identify inequalities.
- **Provide reasonable notice of the test requirements.** A lead time of at least four years is necessary to enable students and teachers to implement the changes needed to reach high standards.
- **Ensure that the tests measure what students are taught.** The tests and curriculum should be aligned to standards, and the standards should be widely disseminated.
- **Provide additional learning opportunities for students who do not pass the test on the first try.** To permit this, students should have multiple opportunities to take tests.

Tests should not be one-shot, make-or-break experiences. If students fall short of standards on the first try, they should be encouraged to go back and study in the areas where performance was weak.

the least complex content and skills at the expense of more challenging expectations in their state standards.

Second, states must maintain their practices of giving students multiple opportunities to pass tests. Tests should not be one-shot, make-or-break experiences. If students fall short of standards on the first try, they should be encouraged to go back and study in the areas where performance was weak. The purpose of the tests, again, is to allow students to demonstrate that they have attained the required knowledge and skills; it is not to catch them failing. If students study and do pass the tests on a later try, so much the better for them, for the schools and for the state.

Third, tests can be fair to students only if there is a reasonable phase-in period before they “count.” Students cannot be expected to pass a test if the instruction they are receiving is only now being aligned to the standards they are expected to meet.

How much time is needed? Courts have ruled that two years is too little but that four years is adequate. It is important not to allow too much time, however, or else the pressure is off. Educators who need to make changes will lose their focus. Moreover, states should not become gun-shy if initial results are low. They almost always are, since students and teachers had been operating under the old system. But experience shows that performance typically improves as students and teachers become accustomed to the new expectations and build new practices around them. By the time students and schools are held accountable, the scores will be higher than they were at the outset — if everyone takes change seriously.

CONCLUSION

Critics of current reform efforts contend that the policies begin and end with tests, and that the purpose seems to be to flunk students or drive low-performers out of school. Nothing could be further from the truth. If students fail or drop out of school, then the policies have failed. The purpose is, and always has been, to help all students reach high standards.

Tests are vital elements of the reforms. They provide information on how students and schools are performing and where they need to improve. The stakes on test results are needed to create incentives for students and schools to make the necessary improvements. And although states are putting policies and programs in place to enable students to reach the standards, there is much more work to be done.

Improving standards, strengthening the curriculum, bolstering teacher quality, helping students succeed and making test policies fair are vital steps toward the goal policymakers and the public share: all students meeting high standards. When that goal is reached, everybody wins. States will have a population well prepared for citizenship and the workplace. Schools will have achieved in their basic mission: educating all students to high levels. And above all, students will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed.

Achieve Policy Briefs are bimonthly reports on critical issues in education reform. They are designed to help policy-makers, business leaders, educators and others address the challenges they face in improving the nation's schools.

Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help raise standards and performance in American schools. Achieve was founded at the 1996 National Education Summit and subsequently sponsored another Summit in the fall of 1999 that brought together more than 100 governors, business leaders and educators from around the nation.

Achieve's principal purposes are to:

- provide sustained public leadership and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- help states benchmark their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- build partnerships that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- serve as a national clearinghouse on education standards and school reform.

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