

## The standards movement: History and Importance

With the 1983 publication of the report "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education), the modern standards movement was born (Marzano and Kendall, 1996). In an attempt to respond to the charges that the American public school system was not adequately preparing students for future demands of work and life, educators turned to standards as an attempt to raise student expectations and performance. In 1989, President George Bush invited all governors to convene at an education summit at which six broad goals were set for the year 2000. Among these goals was one that said American students would leave grades four, eight and twelve "having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography". As a result, states and the federal government were charged with developing performance standards that could be used to measure competency in these subjects.

The statement of philosophy from which Standards was generated embodies the goals and beliefs of the foreign language (FL) profession. "Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience. The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language.

### What is standards-based education?

Standards-based education is a process for planning, delivering, monitoring and improving academic programs in which clearly defined academic content standards provide the basis for content *in instruction and assessment*. In standards-based education, the standards help to ensure that students learn what is important, rather than allowing textbooks to dictate classroom practice. Student learning is the focus of standards-based education. Standards-based education aims for a high and deep level of student understanding that goes beyond traditional textbook-based or lesson-based instruction.

Although standards define individual skills, standards-based education does not promote a skill-by-skill methodology. Multiple standards can and should be integrated in instructional activities.

Standards is a discipline-specific document that is an out-growth of the long-term national strategy proposed by the President and state governors at their 1989 education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, referred to as either "America 2000" or "Goals 2000.. The strategy was designed to accomplish six national educational goals that have far-reaching consequences for all schools at all levels and for all subject areas. To realize the goals of America 2000, academic disciplines were expected to delineate national standards for instruction and learning. A task force of 11 FL teachers, representing the gamut of FL professionals from literature instructors to public classroom teachers to second language acquisition researchers, was born. Hundreds of additional FL professionals had a chance to provide input and suggestions throughout the many drafts of the Standards.

The FL standards are essentially content standards that define what students should know and be able to do in FL instruction in a K-12 sequence. Granted, most public school systems in the United States do not have a K-12 FL instructional sequence at this time, but the standards provide a way to focus on a common vision to reach that very goal. In this sense, the standards document is a political one, delineating the goals of the profession and making a case for institutional and instructional change in the way FL programs are conceived on the local, regional, and national levels. It also serves as a means for public relations between FL professionals and administrators, parents, and students by stating content goals at distinct intervals for all FL learners.

The standards are not, however, a curriculum guide. They are not meant to dictate local curricula or even assessment. Indeed, evaluation and assessment are to be defined locally: at district, school, and even individual course levels. The assessment becomes, then, the cadre of performance standards by which students are evaluated. Nor are the standards tied to any particular instructional method. To do so would be to limit their applicability, flexibility, and universality. They are instead a statement of what FL education should prepare students to do. Given certain overriding goals of FL education, the standards articulate the essential skills and knowledge language learners need in order to achieve said goals.

Standards, therefore, are seen as a way to come to a common understanding of what students should be learning and teachers should be teaching in school. The move toward using standards as the beginning point for

education is based on several important beliefs. First is the belief that *all* students can achieve to higher levels *if* expectations are set high, *if* standards are clearly defined, and *if* teaching is designed to support the achievement of students. While standards differ greatly from state to state, they share a common purpose: They lay out the essential core of knowledge of what students should be taught. They also share two other ideas: standards should be high, and they should apply to all students. The intended result of standards-based education is that all students, including students with disabilities, will learn more.

### Organization of the Standards

The standards are organized around five main goals: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. Eleven standards in total, distributed among these goal categories, are the content standards that ostensibly give FL students "the powerful key to successful communication: knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom". Each standard is accompanied by sample progress indicators for Grades 4, 8, and 12, which reflect student progress in meeting a particular standard but are not standards in and of themselves. The premises of the indicators are that they can be realistically achieved at some level of performance by all students, they can be arrived at through a myriad of instructional modes, and they are measurable or assessable in a variety of ways. The indicators are meant to be interpreted by FL teachers and curriculum developers who will transform them into classroom lessons and activities. The sample progress indicators can also be used to assist in establishing acceptable performance levels for FL learners at the local level.

The primary message conveyed by the five Cs--communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities--is that each of these goal areas is important and has a place in the FL curriculum. Thanks to the profession's longstanding focus on the role of communication and context in language learning and the recognition of the functional and sociolinguistic aspects of language, the goals of the standards are not new to most teachers. The national standards are not a curriculum, but their specific organization can help us analyze our curriculum by looking closely at what we are doing to see to what extent we are already implementing the standards in our classes.

### Content and Performance Standards

In discussions of standards-based reform, two kinds of standards are usually referred to: content standards and performance standards. These standards are defined in the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* enacted by Congress in 1994:

**Content standards** are "broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire in a particular subject area."<sup>7</sup> Sometimes content standards are called "curriculum standards," "curriculum frameworks," or "essential learning." They provide guidelines for what schools should teach; they define the overall goals of student learning. If content standards are to inform curriculum development, they must be clear and specific. National and state documents often have content standards written in broad terms followed by indicators or benchmarks that guide curriculum development and instruction.

**Indicators or benchmarks** describe the set of skills that learners need to develop and achieve to meet the more broadly stated standards. Indicators or benchmarks

- provide more detailed information on the specific skills and contexts for learners to meet the standards;
- reference specific performance levels in terms that are concrete and observable;
- serve as checkpoints to monitor learner progress toward meeting a standard; and
- lead to the development of measurable performance standards and assessments.

**Performance standards** are "concrete examples and explicit definitions of what students have to know and be able to do to demonstrate that [they] are proficient in the skills and knowledge framed by the content standards." Performance standards describe how well a student must perform to demonstrate achievement of the content standards. Usually, they indicate how well the student must read, write, calculate, and so on. Performance standards are the link between the content standards and assessment.

## Why are standards important?

**Standards delineate what matters.** When standards are developed by teams of education professionals and community members, the resulting statements define the importance of skill, knowledge and performance in key content areas. Standards provide an experience and research-based picture of how students develop academically from grade to grade in order to perform successfully in educational and real-world settings.

**Standards provide clarity and a fixed point of reference for students and teachers.** Academic Content Standards provide a set of clear and rigorous expectations for all students. Academic Content Standards provide clarity to teachers on what content and skills to teach at each grade-level. In a standards-based system, teachers know what they are expected to teach and students know what they are expected to learn. A standards-based system provides a common set of expectations and helps educators identify and measure what students know and can do.

**Standards guide instruction that is focused on student learning.** Standards serve as a basis for instructional planning that ensures all teachers first consider what they want students to know and be able to do as a result of their instruction.

**Standards provide a common language with which to have conversations about educational attainment.** In order for teachers, students, parents and administrators to clearly communicate about student performance, there needs to be a common language by which to engage in conversations about performance. Standards provide the basis for this common language.

**Standards help ensure equal educational opportunities.** If all districts adopt their state standards, they can help provide a level of consistency to the educational experiences provided in all schools and districts within a state. Standards help ensure that in districts with high levels of student mobility, children will not be left behind academically because of a family move to a new school or district. Standards can help narrow the achievement gaps between different student populations, such as white and minority students, urban or rural and suburban students and U.S. and international students.

**Standards assist in identifying struggling students.** One of the benefits of a standards-based system with assessments that are aligned with the standards is that students who are struggling can be identified early and provided with the targeted assistance that they need to become successful.

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