Student Learning Standards 1

WHAT ARE LEARNING STANDARDS AND BENCHMARKS?

Standards are statements of what should be taught. They establish levels of achievement, indicators of a quality performance, and degrees of proficiency expected from students. Some states use the terms *competencies, objectives*, or *goals* in place of standards. Standards are, generally, broad and contain somewhat arbitrary categories of knowledge. Almost every state has established their own standards at all grade levels and in most subject areas. Benchmarks, on the other hand, are used to explicate the standards. Benchmarks explain what students must do in order to meet the standard; they focus on explicit student behaviors or specific products or performances.

Foriska (1998) describes benchmarks as the guideposts that "identify a progression of reasonable expectations detailing what students are capable of learning at different ages with regard to the content standards. This makes the structure of the curriculum appropriate for the cognitive development of the students" (pp. 31–32). Benchmarks provide the framework for teaching and assessing key concepts because they are more specific and concrete than most standards. Marzano and Kendall (1996) suggest that benchmarks can be written as statements of information and skills (declarative and procedural), performance activities, or performance tasks. A standard that requires students to "write a narrative essay" is broad, whereas the benchmarks drill down and tell students to include specific items such as "organizing structure, engaging beginning, plot, context, significance of events, dialogue, figurative language, and sensory language." Benchmarks are the "nitty gritty" of standards-based learning.

Some states use the terms *objectives, competencies, descriptors, indicators,* or *elements* instead of benchmarks. Butler and McMunn (2006) believe "The important thing is not the exact terms that are used but that the definitions of the chosen terms are clear so that everyone in the district speaks the same language and can identify what it is that students are expected to learn" (p. 23). Even though many subject areas have national standards and benchmarks, not all state standards are created equally. Some standards are more descriptive and specific to a content and subject area and, therefore, more helpful for teachers when

making decisions about what instructional and assessment strategies would help students. Regardless of the quality of the state standards, teachers must align both their instruction and assessment to the standards and the benchmarks.

WHAT IS THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT?

According to Ardovino, Hollingsworth, and Ybarra (2000), "The standards movement is about assessing 'what was taught and what was learned.' Educators can no longer be independent contractors with multiple game plans. Standards provide cohesiveness that will certify the content our students are learning" (pp. 90–91). Teachers are expected to teach the standards to all students and assess their students' progress toward meeting and exceeding them. In addition, most high-stakes state tests are based upon students' knowledge and understanding of the content and concepts of the standards. Lachat (2004) explains:

> Holding all students to high academic standards is the centerpiece of a national agenda to improve schools and ensure that no child is left behind in the journey towards the American dream. The evolution of standards over the past decade has been driven by the need to define what all students should learn in school in order to participate successfully in the twenty-first century. (p. 1)

Darling-Hammond (1997), in her book *The Right to Learn,* discusses how standards of practice are used to license professionals and guide the work of architects in constructing sound buildings, accountants in managing finances, engineers in assembling space shuttles, and doctors in treating patients. She adds, however, "These standards are not prescriptions; instead they reflect shared norms and knowledge about underlying principles of practice, the effects of various techniques, and decision-making processes" (p. 213). Standards clarify expectations and consensus about what constitutes quality products and practice.

Not all education experts and parents, however, believe that standards contribute to the teaching and learning process. Some would argue that the standards movement has not met the expectations that were predicted when first introduced. Despite the attempts to achieve equity and close the achievement gaps, Moody and Stricker (2009) believe that "contrary to the hopes of legislators and educators involved in the advent of No Child Left Behind, *standards have not proven to be the equalizer they were intended to be"* (p. 4). In fact, some would argue that standards have hurt students by focusing on reviewing and taking tests at the expense of more meaningful educational experiences.

HOW DID THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT BEGIN?

Most educators attribute the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education) in 1983 as the impetus for setting

standards at a national level. The concern over education was also the focus of the first education summit, held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in September 1989, where the nation's fifty governors and President George H. W. Bush adopted national educational goals for the year 2000. One of the goals was to establish challenging national achievement standards for five school subjects—English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. As a result of the summit, a number of national organizations representing various subject areas published numerous documents that represented what teachers of mathematics, language arts, and science should be teaching (Marzano & Kendall, 1996).

Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary of Education, is recognized as one of the chief proponents of the standards movement. In 1995, she equated how Americans expect standards for their food, health, and quality of living to how they also expect standards for their schools (as cited in Marzano & Kendall, 1996). Since then, controversy has emerged surrounding the challenges of each state establishing its own standards, implementing how they are used, creating its own high-stakes test, and establishing its own cut-off scores for determining how students perform. Educators and policymakers are concerned with the "nonstandardized" criteria and worry that how students do depends as much on what they know and can do as well as the state where they live. Reeves (2003) says:

> Unfortunately, the link between the promise of standards and the reality of their implementation is a tenuous one. States that adopt new standards but retain old assessments should not be surprised that the test content will drive educational practice. Unless standards are linked to assessments, the standards become little more than a political slogan full of good, but empty, intentions. (p. 35)

The standards-based movement is much more than having teachers post all the standards in their rooms and administrators asking students what standards they are studying when they do their "walk-throughs" to evaluate staff. The linkage among standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment has not been made in many cases and that linkage is critical to improved learning for all students.

WHAT ARE PERFORMANCE STANDARDS?

Content standards focus on teaching and testing students' knowledge and skills, and performance standards focus more on how students apply those skills in real life or simulations of real-life situations. The performance standards define levels of learning that are usually labeled as "in progress," "meets standards," or "exceeds standards." Solomon (2002) says that the performance standard is a translation of the content standard and is intended as a clearly discriminated level of the bar or model of acceptance. It answers the question of "how good is good enough?"

A language-arts standard on oral communication states that students in middle or junior high should "speak effectively using language appropriate to the situation and audience." The benchmark describes specific criteria related

to the standard. These criteria can be developed later into a checklist or rubric for assessment purposes.

Checklists

A checklist derived from the vocabulary of the standards provides a step-by-step sequential road map to help students know the steps for completing a project or performance. By using the language of the standards (LOTS), teachers prepare students to complete their oral presentations while at the same time preparing them to recognize and understand the key words from the standards that might appear on their state assessments. Figure 1.1 shows an example of an oral presentation checklist that is correlated to the language of the standards and benchmarks.

Rubrics

A rubric is a scoring tool that uses words and numbers to describe the scaled levels of student achievement necessary to perform a task. Rubrics include indicators or descriptors at different levels that provide written feedback on the students' progress toward meeting and exceeding standards on the performances. Solomon (2002) says that "for the purpose of meaningful assessment of student performance, the standards or performance indicators need to be translated into rubrics" (p. 58). Figure 1.2 on page 18 shows what a rubric would look like if it were developed from the Oral Presentation Checklist shown in Figure 1.1. Note that the language and sequence used on the checklist is repeated on the rubric. The major difference is that the checklist asks the students to merely check off if they have completed an item, but the rubric describes levels of quality using a scale to show levels of graduated performances. The rubric shows "how good is good enough" whereas the checklist just tells students what to do.

WHY DO WE NEED STANDARDS?

Standards provide a blueprint to ensure that all students are learning the necessary knowledge and skills. Once an outcome is established, "effective instructional practices can be designed to teach the standards, and appropriate multiple measures can be developed which are reliable, valid, and fair to ascertain the level at which students are learning the standards" (Ardovino, Hollingsworth, & Ybarra, 2000, p. 90). The expression "begin with the end in mind" signifies the importance of knowing the outcome before planning the instruction. If the end result is mastery of the standards, then standards are the alpha and the omega of education. The teacher begins by knowing the standards students are expected to master and then develops the curriculum and utilizes the instructional strategies that will achieve those goals.

Marzano and Kendall (1996) cite several reasons why standards represent one of the most powerful options for school reform. They believe that the erosion of the Carnegie unit, variations in grading practices, and the lack of concern about educational outcomes have caused states to move toward standards.

Oral Presentation Checklist Correlated to Standard

Oral Communication Standard:
Students will plan oral presentations that use appropriate language and vocabulary, support their main ideas with facts and statistics to clarify main ideas, integrate technology to enhance the presentation, and create effective visual aides appropriate to the audience and the purpose of the speech.

Benchmark:
Deliver planned oral presentations using language and vocabulary appropriate to the purpose, message, and audience; provide details and supporting information that clarify main ideas; and use visual aids and contemporary technology as support.

Criteria/Performance Indicators	Not Yet 0	Some Evidence 1
Did you use language and vocabulary that was . . .		
• Appropriate to the purpose?		
• Appropriate to the message?		
• Appropriate to the audience?		
Did you provide information to support the main idea, such as . . .		
• Details? Give one:		
• Examples? Give one:		
• Statistics? Give one:		
• Quotes? Give one:		
• Anecdotes? Give one:		
Did you select at least two visual aids?		
• Graphic organizer		
• Picture		
• Poster		
• Prop		
• Pamphlet		
• Costume		
Did you select at least two types of technology?		
• Transparencies		
• Slides		
• PowerPoint		
• Audio		
• Digital pictures		

Figure 1.1

E X A M P L E S

Oral Presentation Rubric Correlated to Standard

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Scale: Criteria:	1 **Practiced in Front of Mirror (Novice)**	2 **Enrolled in Toastmaster Course (In Progress)**	3 **Voted Class President (Meets Standards)**	4 **Nominated for an Oscar (Exceeds Standards)**
Appropriate Language/Vocabulary				
• Purpose • Message • Audience	• Inappropriate language • Limited vocabulary	Language and vocabulary appropriate to purpose	Language and vocabulary appropriate to the purpose and the message	Language and vocabulary appropriate to the purpose, message, and audience
Information Supports Main Idea				
• Details • Examples • Statistics • Quotes • Anecdotes	Limited use of details to support main idea	Use of • details • examples	Use of • details • examples • statistics • quotes	Use of appropriate • details • examples • statistics • quotes • anecdotes
Visual Aids (Minimum of 2)				
• Graphic organizer • Picture • Poster • Prop • Pamphlet • Costume	No visual aids used in presentation	Use of *one* visual aid to support main idea	Use of *two* visual aids to support main idea and keep the attention of the audience	Use of *two or more* visual aids to support main idea, keep the attention of the audience, and motivate the audience
Technology (Minimum of 2)				
• Transparencies • Slides • PowerPoint • Audiotape • Digital pictures	No use of technology	Use of *one* technology tool that supports main idea	Use of *two* technology tools to support main idea and keep the attention of the audience	Use of *two or more* contemporary technology tools to clarify main idea and inspire the audience to action

Student Comment:

Teacher Comment:

Total points _____

Scale 15–16 = A
13–14 = B
9–12 = C
1–8 = Not Yet

Figure 1.2

They also cite the fact that most competing countries have adopted educational standards in their goal to improve student learning. The following section describes the reasons in more depth.

Erosion of the Carnegie Unit and the Common Curriculum

Veteran educators remember the shift away from the standard concept of credit hours (based on the Carnegie unit—a measure of class time) and proliferation of elective courses in the 1960s and 1970s. It was not unusual for students to elect to take "Science Fiction Short Stories" or "Gothic Mystery Writers" in lieu of American literature or composition. Furthermore, studies have shown a disparity among teachers concerning the amount of time spent teaching a particular subject area or skill. How many teachers have spent six weeks covering the Civil War in a history class, and then not have sufficient time for World War I or II? Because teachers sometimes make arbitrary decisions regarding what they teach, there is often a lack of uniformity in a given district or state's curricula and little consistency in the knowledge and skills covered within subject areas.

Variation in Current Grading Practices

Grading has always been an ambiguous process. What does a "B" really mean? How many teachers average effort, behavior, cooperation, and attendance into the academic grade, thus conveying an inaccurate portrayal of a student's achievement? It is difficult to know how a teacher arrives at a grade because grades are often imprecise and sometimes are not indicative of what students know and can do in a subject area. Moreover, some teachers assign zeros for work not attempted, whereas others allow students chances to redo work or drop a number of grades. Other teachers weigh work more at the end of a grading cycle to show improvement. Because of the inconsistency in grading procedures, parents and policymakers often depend on standardized test scores to know whether or not students are improving.

Lack of Attention to Educational Outputs

The outcomes-based education movement attempted to focus attention not so much on the input of instructional delivery, but more on the outcome of the results. Unfortunately, some of the outcomes were difficult to measure objectively, and some parents felt educators should not be measuring outcomes that included values. Glickman (1993, as cited in Schmöker, 1996) feels too much emphasis has been placed on new instructional strategies, the innovation, or the "hot topic" rather than on the results for the learner. For instance, using white boards in classrooms is technologically advanced; integrating the theory of brain-based learning into each lesson is motivating. The bottom line, however, should always be: How does it affect student achievement? Today, schools are paying more attention to results, not intentions. If Nathaniel Hawthorne were writing today, the letter "A" would symbolize accountability.

Competing Countries Do It

The fourth reason for implementing standards for school reform addresses the issue of competition with other countries. Proponents of standards often point to countries such as China, Japan, France, and England to show how setting standards and developing a national curriculum, national exams, and cut-off scores help students attain academic excellence. Many business and community leaders have vigorously supported the establishment of student performance standards to create a world-class workforce. Behind this expectation is the assumption that higher educational standards and student performance are keys to higher workplace productivity (Marzano & Kendall, 1996). Recent research from countries such as Canada, Australia, and Finland show how professional learning communities, an emphasis on teacher training, mentoring, a reduced curriculum load, and formative assessments have improved their students' learning as well as their international performances.

The standards movement has gathered momentum on the basis of these four reasons as well as the public's dissatisfaction with the quality of students the public schools are producing. Headlines about scores on international tests showing the placement of the United States have fueled the groundswell of support for high standards for academic excellence. Moreover, the members of the business community have expressed concern over the skills their employees lack and the inordinate amount of time and money they are spending to teach their employees what they feel they should have learned in public schools. The public seems to support the concept that teachers provide clear and appropriate expectations to students and evaluate their progress accurately.

HOW CAN WE USE STANDARDS?

The introduction of standards into the field of education serves as an essential foundation for the development of curriculum, the emphasis on differentiated instruction, and the creation of performance assessments. Educators are told to "begin with the end in mind" (the standards) and then plan backwards to create curriculum units, implement differentiated instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students, and create valid and reliable formative and summative assessment tools aligned to the standards.

Darling-Hammond (1997) advises that standards can be most useful when used as "guideposts not straitjackets for building curriculum assessments and professional development opportunities, and when they are used to focus and mobilize system resources rather than to punish students and schools" (p. 213). The idea that standards provide guideposts that may differ depending on the student and the situation adds more flexibility and differentiation to the standards-based movement.

Standards as Guideposts

When used by administrators, teachers, and parents effectively, standards target nine important goals:

1. Synthesize Educational Goals

Educators need to focus on attaining important goals that will benefit all students. Establishing a few clear and specific goals focuses a faculty on developing action plans and unifying efforts to achieve the goals. Teachers working in professional learning communities (PLCs) target specific learning goals and work as a team to create meaningful instruction and assessments for all students. (See Figure 1.3.)

Standards as Guideposts

Standards benefit students by helping educators to

S ynthesize educational goals

T arget student achievement

A lign curriculum systematically

N otify the public of results

D etermine criteria for quality work

A nalyze data

R efocus instructional methodology

D edicate resources for professional development

S erve the needs of a diverse population

Figure 1.3

2. Target Student Achievement

The primary purpose for standards is to focus attention on student work and improved student achievement. The emphasis shifted from the "input" of what teachers teach to the "output" of what students learn. Standards are not really the end; they are a means to achieve the end—improved student achievement. Vocabulary development plays an important role in helping students score well on standardized tests and deepen their understanding of critical concepts. Districts may adopt different textbooks to help their students meet state standards, but teachers need to focus more on the vocabulary, essential questions, and big ideas of the standards. High-stakes state tests target the vocabulary of their state standards rather than the vocabulary included in as many as ten different textbooks that could be adopted by districts or counties in each state.

3. Align Curriculum Systemically

The standards and benchmarks provide guideposts and key concepts that help focus teachers on a relatively small set of core ideas. The curriculum has become so overwhelming that teachers are forced to either cover a great deal of information superficially, or leave out portions of their curriculum. Many districts are also working on curriculum mapping to develop a blueprint of not only *what* essential skills are taught, but also *when* they are taught. A curriculum aligned with meaningful standards and valid assessments provides a pathway to improved student achievement.

4. Notify the Public of Results

One of the reasons the public is demanding standards is because they are concerned about the quality of the schools. Stories about how students in the United States compare with students on international tests, the decline of some standardized test scores, and the rising dropout rate cause alarm among parents and business leaders. Elmore (2002) states that the accountability movement expresses society's expectation that schools will solve the problems that lead to the academic failure of a large number of students and the mediocre performance of many more. "Failure will lead to erosion of public support and a loss of legitimacy" (p. 3). Economic conditions that impact the housing market, the financial sector, the job market, and the credit industry have exacerbated the calls from politicians and policymakers to require educators to prepare students for the new challenges that demand a quality education that emphasizes rigor and relevance. The public expects today's schools to meet these real-world challenges that are not addressed in many textbooks.

5. Determine Criteria for Quality Work

One of the most important by-products of the standards movement is the emphasis on establishing specific criteria for quality work. Teachers often involve students in determining the criteria for assignments and the indicators of quality in order to determine, "How good is it?" Conversations among teachers, parents, and students about what constitutes "A" work and the creation of checklists and scoring rubrics have demystified the grading process. Students

know not only the expectations but also the specific steps they need to take to meet the expectations. The emphasis on reflection and metacognition about performance assessments helps students internalize the criteria and become critical self-assessors of their own work.

6. Analyze Data

School personnel have found that if they use standards to drive student achievement, they need to measure a school's progress with hard data. Accurate data such as the analysis of standardized test scores, pass-fail rates in courses, drop-out rates, attendance, and retention and promotion statistics inform teachers, parents, school administrators, and district leaders about what works and what needs more work. Data collection and analysis, therefore, serve as critical components of standards-based education and provide the documentation necessary to adopt or cancel instructional programs and redesign professional development to meet school goals.

7. Refocus Instructional Methodology

The most comprehensive standards in the world will not, by their very existence, improve education. The key to improving student achievement is effective instruction. In order to meet the needs of a diverse student population, teachers need to implement a repertoire of instructional strategies to help all students learn. Though the drill-and-skill lecture method may appeal to some parents and students, fewer and fewer students are responding to that mode of instruction.

Research on brain-compatible learning provides strategies teachers implement to enrich the learning environment, foster reflection and self-evaluation, and stimulate student interest in new areas of study. Darling-Hammond (1997) believes real improvement will come about because "the standards come alive when teachers study student work, collaborate with other teachers to improve their understanding of subjects and students' thinking, and develop new approaches to teaching that are relevant and useful for them and their students" (p. 236). It seems like a contradiction in terms, but a great deal of differentiation by teachers is critical for helping students meet standards and pass standardized tests.

8. Dedicate Resources for Professional Development

Standards-based learning requires dedicated and competent teachers to implement a variety of instructional interventions to help all students learn. The emphasis on qualified teachers goes beyond a deep knowledge of content and skills. Today's teachers must also be trained in how to use diagnostic tests to determine students' prior knowledge. Based on the results of these pre-assessments, teachers differentiate by using a variety of tiered lessons, performance assessments, problem-based learning projects, or experiential learning units. Professional development provides the ongoing training needed to help all teachers succeed with all students. And, just like with students, one size of professional development does not meet the needs of all teachers. Teachers need job-embedded staff development built around their individual needs as well as the individual needs of their students.

9. Serve the Needs of a Diverse Population

One paradox of the standards movement is requiring all students to meet the same standards, regardless of their prior knowledge, ability levels, interests, motivation, socioeconomic status, quality of early education, or effectiveness of previous teachers. Not every student enters school with the same abilities, and Darling-Hammond (1997) says we must allow for "differing starting points and pathways to learning so that students are not left out or left behind" (p. 231). Establishing the standard will not help a student meet the standard. Teachers will have to work with a diverse group of students and experiment with a wide variety of instructional and assessment strategies to see which ones work best. All students may not reach the standard, but teachers and students need to know where they are and what they still need to do. They may all begin "with the end in mind," but they will travel many different roads to arrive at the same destination.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Arthur Costa once addressed an audience at an educational conference and asked, "How many of you are old enough to have been through three back-to-basic movements?" The audience members laughed and nodded their heads. The members of that audience, like so many veteran educators, recognize how many educational movements have come and gone, sometimes sapping the strength and enthusiasm of those involved and making educators somewhat cynical of "innovations" and "systemic reform." New math, transformational grammar, time on task, outcomes-based education, and whole language are just a few of the many educational reforms that have been implemented and, in some cases, abandoned.

The standards movement will probably continue in the twenty-first century, but it is facing many challenges. States have different textbooks with different content, different curriculum frameworks, different criteria for judging the effectiveness of teachers, different high-stakes state tests with a different degree of difficulty, and, in some cases, different cut-off scores for passing. In other words, the standards movement lacks standardization. In addition, the focus of most state standards is performance but the focus of most state tests is knowledge and content skills measured mostly by multiple-choice questions, not performance-based assessments. Teachers know this and are often torn between engaging students in meaningful performances that foster deep understanding or practicing multiple-choice "benchmark testing." Is their job to prepare students to score high on the high-stakes tests or to prepare students for life? Should they do both? The chapters in this book focus on how teachers can and should do both. Each chapter offers strategies to help teachers create assessments to help students meet the standards on tests and also apply the standards in life.