

## *Why Standards Matter*

### **The Bigger Picture**

Few want to say that our schools are failing. And indeed, many schools are not. But we're not effective enough with too many students. District and school reports continue to show on the whole middle class white middle class students performing higher than varied special needs, low income level students and racial groups on state tests. It's not that teachers aren't trying. The system as a whole must more fully support this growth. With the federal US Department of Education 2011 *Race to the Top* program goal of narrowing the achievement gap, we can and must work to help all students learn at the levels of students coming from more advantaged home lives. These are the students who depend on teachers to learn.

New Standards and assessments ratchet up expectations nationally. Common Core State Standards are more complex and high level than Standards of the past decade. States that have adopted the *Race to the Top* program in addition have Educator Evaluation criteria that expand areas earlier assessed for self-directed teacher growth. We have the tools that can help students learn, now better technology applications, more time on learning, better resources and differentiated instruction and inclusion. Now teachers are asked to use these tools, and districts must provide the supports needed.

*Katherine Scheidler, October, 2014*

## Testing Critics

Already overwhelmed school administrators and teachers often chafe at national tests, accountability, and regulations. Parents who don't fully understand the Common Core Standards fear their children won't get a good education. Academics criticize the state tests as too narrow, constraining, and simple-minded an approach to assessing students. Teachers and administrators are busy enough with simply maintaining schools.

Conformance with other state and federal regulations keep district managers, principals and teachers busy enough. Moreover, school with its hundreds of students are sitting in classrooms, there for school. Education reform is often referred to as changing the tires while the car is moving.

Critics complain of too much "Standardized testing." But these tests are not the old secret Standardized test, to test what students already know. They're a different type of test that is criterion-referenced tests in which teachers are provided the test information of the Standards in advance. Teachers and students see expected test items, as has long been done with SAT and Advanced Placement tests.

"Bubble tests," critics say, are not sufficient, though long used as learning measures on AP and the high stakes Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) tests that determine college acceptance, and Graduate Record Exam (GRE) tests for college graduate school acceptance. Students have long practiced for the SAT test and other tests such as for law school, to move up their scores. Such types of assessments are the best we have to determine learning of huge numbers of students.

We can and must focus on higher levels of learning, and for all students. Tests used are a good measure of our success.

### **Raising the Bar**

When we hear of a special needs child not learning to read in school, when we have absenteeism and student class behavior problems that shut down learning, look at percentages of students not attending college, or worse, not graduating from high school, see students floundering after college in what seems a jobless world today for many, we wonder. Can we do better? Can non-learners become learners? We have students doing exceptionally well, students doing adequately, and a marginalized group not succeeding at a proficient level of math understanding and reading and writing at higher levels. We know those students. They may well be self-defeating in school behavior. We see them in classrooms. Can we turn these students around?

### **How do we change to serve all students well in learning growth?**

As we continuously hear of and read derision and concerns on “testing” children in our schools today, an old theory of change still referred to today is worth taking a closer look at. The thoughts behind the concept of a paradigm shift shed light on the issue and may enlighten us with ways of understanding of how to help schools address new learning expectations. The paradigm shift is much more than a cliché.

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The old system taught -- and some classrooms still teach -- to our better students. These are students who do school well, who most often come from families of relative wealth and education. Low income family students and racial minorities as a group do more poorly. We can do better with children with disabilities that interfere with learning.

We can't blame teachers for not assisting students who are not engaged in school, for whom school doesn't speak to them, who are impatient and act out their frustrations in class. It hasn't been by structure the focus of teachers' job to focus on these students with their learning. In the past, this hasn't been recognized or rewarded. Many students come to school hungry, sometimes from difficult, chaotic home lives in which survival is the mode of living. Some students simply feel not able to compete; the bar is too high. These students may well have the potential to excel, under the right conditions. New state and federal regulations insist that we try.

These marginalized, struggling students exist in all schools. Current thinking in school reform, as it has been for over thirty years, is to better serve all students. As group, high level Standards, challenging state tests, student growth, and a new Educator Evaluation system constitute a paradigm shift. These new rules set a different focus. It's a tsunami for schools. It's no wonder that we hear and read the waves of criticism. Administrators are left with just trying to steady the ship as well as steer it. Many teachers come on board and work to learn new areas. Some do not get on board, and discourage others. Their voices may shut down forward movement. Others, who may be able to meet the new expectations, feel lost, abandon ship and leave the profession. The expected change

is often hardest for more veteran teachers trained and long experienced under the earlier “factory system” of teacher-centered, not student-centered, teaching.

### **We’re Finding Bright Lights of Success**

The real wonder is that we see efforts made and success with rigorous Standards and challenging tests, but not by magic. These changes come from devoted, sincere attempts by administrators and teachers. Successful pockets of reforms that preceded current regulations are well documented on small scale levels. Some charter schools work with the most challenging students, and dependent upon strong test scores for survival, with smaller numbers of students and a strict focus on learning bring children along. These schools go beyond just teaching for the test, and accomplish what can’t be done in larger public school systems. Or can it?

Our past decade of state Standards, state tests and accountability expectations which were at first shocking eventually became accepted and integrated into school life. Scattered examples of high quality, focused education have produced significant gains in learning as seen subjectively in classrooms and on state test score results.

Many states and districts managed to sail through that decade fairly smoothly. Many students have learned more during this past period. Special Education student learning has been transformed with the higher expectations. However, after ten years of clear Standards for all students in math and literacy, we’re still left with an achievement gap. Still our low income students, children of color and special needs students as groups have not attained the level of Proficient, and score below middle class white students.

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Asian students as a group, with strong cultural support and parent expectations, consistently out-perform white students. Cultural patterns trump school in the big picture still.

### **Narrowing the Achievement Gap**

*The Race to the Top* goal and Common Core State Standards goal is to narrow the achievement gap between children of less advantaged homes and middle class white children, while also raising the bar with high national Standards. This speaks to our internal sense of fairness. It's why we became teachers, to help children.

We now have a fairer accountability system currently that looks at student growth, not requiring students with a disability that interferes with learning and English language learner students, low income and students of color to reach Proficient, but to show growth. Some still call this unfair. It's the status quo that's unfair to our students.

We can't say that school people aren't trying. But even high performing school districts, in high demographic communities, aren't always making the progress in growth with traditionally under-performing groups that we want to see. Having high expectations for all is assailed by many, but it may be a worthy goal. We know well the challenges, but have to keep trying. It's a well worth the effort. We've seen underperforming students learn to succeed. We can't write off any student. This requires a new school focus.

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## **Opening the Doors to Learning**

Classroom practice is no longer private. Test scores reflect the quality of teaching on Standards learning. While teachers may have more challenging students one year, or for two years, which is reflected in scores, over time teachers are expected to show strong student performance on outside objective tests. Teachers who consistently have strong test scores are noticed. The few teachers who don't show learning on state tests are urged to seek out means of improvement. The school and district must assist these teachers. This is a new way for schools and district to work. Districts must pick up this responsibility.

The specific tested Common Core Standards are at our fingertips, with multiple databases of the Standards available on the internet. A teacher can easily access the version of the Standard for his or her grade level. Many higher achieving students can easily score well on higher level tests. The grade level mastery level Standards can be used to help a special needs or struggling student learn, to help guide instruction.

In addition, the past decade has brought to schools a multitude of means of supporting struggling learners. Such information also is easily accessed on the internet. We have the tools of differentiated learning, varied learning strategies, self-paced technology applications, technology for ease of student research, varied materials via technology, more time on learning, individual tutoring, and a school culture in many schools that supports collaboration, with teachers helping and learning from others.

## **A Change in Beliefs and Action**

This period of new higher level Standards and more rigorous assessment with student growth expected requires a goal in which earlier reform efforts have failed.

The effort to improve the quality of learning requires a paradigm shift in beliefs, actions and skills from earlier years – for some a greater change in beliefs and actions than for others. Higher level Standards understanding, moving more struggling students along in annual growth, preparing for more challenging national assessments, and constantly seeking practice that will help each child is demanding work.

However, much of the Reading and Writing Standards are familiar to us as teachers. Adopting these Standards for all our students is the challenge. As the Standards become adopted by all teachers, teachers have a framework to build on each year, and it becomes easier. This grade level Standards mastery framework is better than the curriculum anarchy of earlier days.

Teachers can independently determine how they teach these skills and understandings, though the more commonality, the better, especially for more struggling students.

Including science and social studies content area teachers in teaching the reading and writing skills and understandings, to help support literacy growth across the content areas to reinforce literacy development understandings and skills, as well as helping students with content learning through enhanced reading and writing ability.

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These writing pieces aim to help inform professionals of what the Reading and Writing Common Core Standards are, what they mean for students' lives, and provides thoughts on how these excellent Standards can best be taught. The goal is to assist professionals in smoothing the way toward Common Core Standards learning. You may well know the Standards. You may be teaching them now. In this case, this writing will confirm and validate your work.

If ideas here inspire and ignite thinking on Standards learning, the goal will be achieved. Thoughts based on these readings can only help teachers and all students.