

WHEN ALL MEANS ALL

Standards-Based Education Reform and English Language Learners

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The standards-based education reform movement is catalyzing changes in instruction, assessment, curriculum, and programming in schools and districts across the United States—changes that greatly impact English language learners (ELLs, also known as limited English proficient or LEP students). The standards in standards-based reform identify what students should know and be able to do as they progress through school. They are meant to be anchors, aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The purpose of this article is to analyze the intersection between current education reform efforts driven by standards and students who are ELLs.

This analysis points to two main challenges that have arisen thus far in the implementation of standards in schools where ELLs are present:

- While many school districts have begun the process of using standards to guide teaching and learning, efforts to include ELLs have lagged far behind.
- Too little attention has been paid to the complex process of implementing standards in classrooms; rather, the current focus is on accountability. Within this context,

the potential for standards to inform instructional practice is being overshadowed by an intense emphasis placed on high-stakes testing.

This article explores the place currently held by ELLs within standards-based reform, and examines the challenges that have surfaced as these reforms make their way into classrooms across the nation.

Standards as National Education Policy

Standards and assessment are pivotal themes in current reform efforts—and cut across much of the federal legislation passed by Congress in recent years to improve the education of all students. Six broad reform goals to improve education and raise student achievement by the year 2000 were passed into law by Congress in 1994 in the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 1994); these goals became the basis for the present standards. *Goals 2000* is aimed at **all students** and specifically includes **students or children with limited English proficiency.**

Along with the passage of *Goals 2000*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as

amended by the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act, required states to adopt challenging academic content and performance standards, and assessments aligned with these (Riddle, 1999). *Goals 2000* and the ESEA have worked together to set many of the principles of standards-based reform, including the expectation that **all** students will attain high standards of academic excellence.

In the wake of this federal legislation, efforts are being made to ensure student attainment of the standards. Standardized tests have become increasingly high stakes to ensure compliance is demonstrated through measurable student progress. Additionally, new efforts have been made to include ELLs in the same wide-scale tests as those used to evaluate native English speakers. By the completion of this 2000-2001 school year, each state must put into place an assessment system that includes ELLs. Within this developing framework of accountability to the standards and the emphasis on inclusion of all students, performance by English-language learners on assessments (typically standardized tests) can greatly affect the positive or negative evaluation of a teacher, school, district, or state (Menken, 2000).

What Do Standards Mean?

Standards are divided into three types: *content standards*, *performance standards*, and *opportunity-to-learn standards*. *Content standards* refer to what students should know, what schools should teach, and what instruction should be about. *Performance standards* identify what students should be able to do to show they possess the skills and knowledge in the content standards. They answer the question: "How good is good enough?" (New Standards, 1997). The purpose of the third type of standards, *opportunity-to-learn standards*, is to guarantee "the level and availability of programs, staff, and other resources sufficient to meet challenging content and performance standards" (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995, p. 5).

The National Academy of Education Panel on Standards-Based Education Reform articulates the vision driving the standards movement in the following passage:

Internationally competitive standards for what American students should know and be able to do are expected to improve the substance of school curricula and to increase the motivation and effort of students, teachers, and school systems (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995, p. 7).

The belief behind standards-based reform is that expectations for student performance must be articulated and made explicit, thereby providing a set target that makes it easier to measure growth. Standards offer a means to hold students, teachers, schools, districts, and states accountable for that growth. They also guide instruction by making clear to students and teachers what is expected; in this way, students can become more directly involved in their own learning process, while teachers and others within the education community are better able to assist in the learning process.

Perspectives differ regarding the meaning of standards in implementation. For some (particularly politicians and other policymakers), the primary focus of standards and corresponding assessments is on the creation of a system of accountability at state and local levels. By contrast, others (e.g., teachers and

other practitioners) are also interested in the potential use of standards and assessments to guide and inform instructional practice. It seems the latter purpose is getting lost in the shuffle, however. As found in *Quality Counts 2001*, an exhaustive evaluation of standards-based education reform conducted by *Education Week*:

Indeed, no aspect of the standards-based agenda has generated more debate—or stirred more dismay among teachers—than the heavy reliance on state tests to measure student learning and to dole out rewards and penalties to schools and students. "When we talk about standards-based reform in Chicago, and it's actually true everywhere, don't show me the standards documents. Show me what you test," says Anthony S. Byrk, a professor of education and sociology at the University of Chicago, "because the load-bearing wall in all of this is not the standards documents, it's the assessments." Forty-five states now compile report cards on schools, and 27 rate school performance, primarily on the basis of test scores. (Olsen, 2001: p. 15)

The survey of public school teachers conducted by *Quality Counts* indicates that 70% feel standards have led to too much emphasis placed on wide-scale assessments in teaching. The national emphasis placed on tests to ensure student attainment of the standards that have been set is currently outweighing the potential to use standards as an instructional tool.

Inclusion of ELLs in Standards-Based Reform

Within the standards movement is a strong emphasis on educational equity. Not only are standards intended to make

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expectations clear and measurable, they also set high expectations for all students—including ELLs. As school systems adopt standards with more rigorous expectations for the performance of ELLs than ever before, greater attention is being paid to ensuring student attainment of those standards.

For students who are English language learners, the attainment of these rigorous academic standards is fully reliant on the presence in our schools of high-quality programming, teachers, and all of the other resources necessary to meet their learning needs. Opportunity-to-learn standards for ELLs would offer a framework that articulates what this entails, and could be used as a lever to ensure equity. However, these standards have not been created or adopted yet.

Conversations about how to include ELLs in the content and performance standards are beginning to take place in most states and school districts. At present, all states have adopted content standards and about half have performance standards (Blank, Manise, & Brathwaite, 1999). While a few states have also created standards and curriculum frameworks for ELLs, others are only developing them now—and still others have not yet begun. The standards that have been developed for ELLs vary greatly by state and school district, both in the language of the actual standards and also in the ways the needs of this population of students are addressed.

Examples of Standards for ELLs

In 1997, the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) organization produced *ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students*. The development of these standards was "motivated by a desire to ensure educational equity and

opportunity for ELL students” (Cummins, 2000, p.154). These standards set learning goals for ELLs that center on personal, social, and academic uses of English. As described in the examples that follow, most states and districts have shaped their standards for ELLs primarily or at least partially on the TESOL standards.

Chicago Public Schools

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has created a set of English as a second language (ESL) standards closely aligned to TESOL’s ESL standards. In their standards document, CPS states its vision as follows:

Students will learn to understand, speak, read, and write English fluently, competently and proficiently in order to succeed academically and participate actively in the United States’ social, economic, and political environment (Chicago Public Schools, 1999).

Along with this general mission statement, CPS lists three goals that identify the elements of the English language they feel students must possess in order to succeed:

1. Use English to achieve in all academic areas and settings,
2. Use English for all social and personal purposes, and
3. Tailor the English language for various and specific purposes and uses (Chicago Public Schools, 1999).

Each goal is supported and further defined by several standards focused on English language acquisition. Like Chicago, a number of districts (e.g., Redwood City, CA and Oklahoma City, OK) and states (e.g., New Jersey and Florida)

have adopted standards that are closely aligned to TESOL’s ESL Standards.

New Mexico and Texas

The standards for English language learners created by the states of New Mexico and Texas offer a different approach. While incorporating the TESOL standards, they are not based primarily on them. And, they also address home language development. In New Mexico, standards for ELLs are aligned to standards for native English speakers. As they write:

At the time of the development of the NM standards, the NM [State Department of Education] bilingual education unit was careful not to give the message that ESL students were held to different standards than any other student. The message is clear: ALL students should be held to high standards (New Mexico State Department of Education, 2000).

New Mexico identifies language arts as an umbrella category under which lie English language arts (ELA) for native English speakers, ESL, and language arts for native speakers of other languages (e.g., Spanish language arts [SLA] for native Spanish speakers in bilingual education programs).

Aligned to New Mexico’s language arts standards are strategies that each school district has created for ESL and for the different home languages being taught (M. López, personal communication, April 28, 2000). The New Mexico State Department of Education makes it the responsibility of school districts to develop the means by which ELLs will attain the standards that have been set. For example, while ELA and ESL share a common core of standards,

differing instructional guides are provided for each.

The Texas Education Agency has taken a similar approach to that of New Mexico but has also created and adopted specific standards for Spanish language arts. Their approach is described in the following explanation of how to implement their English Language Arts Essential Knowledge and Skills:

Students of limited English proficiency (LEP) enrolled in Spanish Language Arts and/or English as a Second Language will be expected to learn these same knowledge and skills through their native language, and students in English as a Second Language will apply these skills at their proficiency level in English (Texas Education Agency, 1998b, p. 3).

Each English language arts standard for elementary and middle grades students corresponds to a Spanish language arts standard. In addition, the Texas standards document encourages home language instruction for native speakers of other languages. In both Texas and New Mexico, ELLs are expected to attain the identical standards to those set for native-English speakers; however, they may do so while using their native language.

Issues in Standards Implementation

One of the primary findings from the implementation of standards across the United States thus far has been that the creation of standards alone is necessary, but not sufficient, to affect changes in teaching and learning. Rather, attention must also be paid to the complex process of standards implementation. One of the limits of standards is that they do not tell teachers how to help their students attain them. As Kate Nolan explained in her discussion of standards-based education reform at the conference of the Education Commission of the States:

Policies will not create change in the classroom unless educators and policymakers have a visceral understanding of what a standards-driven classroom looks like (O’Brian, 1998).

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process of their implementation; therefore, teachers themselves must translate the language of the standards into instructional practice. This requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of standards and standards-driven teaching and learning. However, most teachers do not feel well prepared to use standards in the classroom. The National Assessment of Title I found, for example:

In 1998, only 37 percent of teachers in [Title I] schools reported that they felt very well prepared to implement state or district curriculum and performance standards. This sense of preparedness is a key factor in predicting student outcomes, according to the [Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance (LESCP)] study of 71 high-poverty Title I schools... The LESC also found that district reform policy had an influence on teachers' familiarity with standards-based reform and their implementation of such reform in their classroom. Teachers in higher-reform districts were more likely than their peers in lower-reform districts to be familiar with content and performance standards and assessments and their curriculum was more likely to reflect the standards. (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary Planning and Evaluation Service, 1999, p.14)

These issues are not limited to Title I teachers. In the School District of Philadelphia, for example, academic content standards were adopted in 1996; five years later they are still working to connect standards for ELLs to classroom practice.

The effective implementation of standards requires extensive professional development for teachers. The quotation above from the National Assessment of Title I indicates that professional development and preparation for using standards positively impacts teachers' ability to implement standards-based curriculum and, subsequently, improve student performance. While a great deal of additional research and further supports for practitioners are needed, a number of national initiatives already exist to help teachers implement standards in their classrooms.

TESOL, for example, has recently created a training manual to help edu-

cators implement TESOL's ESL standards. As part of this project, members of TESOL's Standards Committee are currently working with several school districts to offer technical support in their implementation of standards. Through their *Standards, Assessment, and Instruction* initiative, the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University also works with states and local districts serving ELLs as they strive to implement standards and meet the educational needs of their diverse student populations. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform, along with other organizations, focuses on the need to bring together groups of educators to use standards as a lens through which to examine student work collectively. This work exemplifies how to make standards-driven instruction a reality.

Conclusion

It is clear that high-quality professional development aids in the process of standards implementation. However, far greater attention needs to be paid to turning standards documents into changes in practice. Although several initiatives like the ones described above exist nationally, very little emphasis has been placed upon the critical need for sustained professional development to assist with the implementation of standards:

In 1998, public school teachers, regardless of the poverty level of their school, spent a limited amount of time on professional development, although they did focus on topics that supported standards-based reform. Most teachers are not participating in intensive or sustained training—two essential characteristics of effective professional development. Given the relationship found between teacher preparedness and student achievement, this is a troubling finding... Over two-thirds (70%) of teachers in high-poverty schools reported receiving less than 9 hours per year of professional development related to content and performance standards (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary Planning and Evaluation Service, 1999, p. 15).

Rather than focusing on professional development to foster the use of standards in instruction, the current focus of the national conversation about standards is on accountability. Standards are linked to high-stakes assessment that holds students and their teachers accountable for student performance. Unfortunately, districts and states are moving to high-stakes assessment before putting the necessary structures in place to ensure that all students can actually meet the standards that have been set for them; opportunity-to-learn standards are not the current focus. Standards hold the potential to guide and dramatically improve the instruction and assessment of students who are English language learners but, in order for these reform efforts to be effective, it is critical that every aspect of the process of standards implementation be considered. ●

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