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New Report by UNH Professor Tracks Impact of Education Standards

By [Tracy Manforte](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- Standardized tests, student ability and teacher accountability rank high on educational agendas across the country. Lawmakers, administrators, even the general public are asking: Do today's students measure up? If not, who's to blame? Furthermore, what is a state's role in mandating standards?

University of New Hampshire English Professor John Lofty has interviewed teachers in the United States and abroad to determine how the standards movement is affecting classroom instruction.

Among his findings, published in a recent issue of the English Journal, Lofty says teachers must be included as professional partners in developing standards. This team approach gives teachers a stake in the curriculum that will eventually guide their teaching. "Teacher commitment to implementing standards and the potential of standards to transform practice are undercut when government agencies do not substantially involve teachers," he says.

For his study, Lofty interviewed K-12 school teachers in Maine and his native Britain and found both groups believe they are meeting standards set by their respective governments. The challenge, he says, is "documenting and demonstrating where, how and to what degree teachers have fulfilled the standards."

Furthermore, Lofty says, while educational standards may ensure balance and rigor, teachers he spoke with say they tend to stifle curriculum creativity. It's the difference between "standards" and "standardization," says colleague Tom Newkirk, UNH professor of English and director of the Freshman English Program.

"You can have educational standards and goals, and at

the same time, teachers meeting them differently," says Newkirk, who also trains future teachers and works with teachers on curriculum development in 16 New Hampshire school districts. His fear is that governments are looking for a quick, centralized fix to a complex problem.

"Recently I asked to visit the class of a teacher known for her excellent writing program," he explains. "She told me that, yes, I could visit, but because of the state assessment she had abandoned her writing program and was instead having students do a series of test-like prompts. Hers is a common story across New Hampshire as pressure to boost test scores increases."

While New Hampshire has yet to move towards high stakes testing like Maine, Massachusetts, or Britain, New Hampshire state legislators are proposing an accountability bill that would give the state new power to intervene in local schools when students don't reach expectations.

Improving performance is a valid concern, says Lofty, but a volatile one, considering his research findings.

According to his study, a veteran Maine teacher attending a workshop to involve teachers in curriculum development said she felt patronized by the process. "Why did they bring us here? Just to say teachers had input? I was so discouraged. I think it's a shame to pretend that you are asking people to have local input."

A push for curriculum reform led to the [Learning Results](#), approved by the Maine state legislature in 1997 to outline what students should know and be able to do at various checkpoints in their education. Learning Results are not as rigid as the U.K.'s 10-year-old National Curriculum, which over the years has evolved into a prescription of what will be taught and how it will be taught. Students are tested at various stages, and schools can be shut down if students repeatedly perform poorly.

Lofty got mixed reaction to the program while conducting interviews overseas.

One teacher remarked: "The (National) Curriculum makes you more rigorous. Before, the learning

objectives were sort of implicit . . . Now I know what children will have covered in every class before they come to me, how the teachers will have spoken to them. I know where my class fits into the whole link."

One curriculum consultant views the standards, as just that -- standard. "There is a danger of regression to the mean. Many effective teachers . . . are rapidly becoming functionaries of the system."

Lofty adds that increased surveillance of teachers' work has led to stress and lowered morale.

One way teachers can make a difference is by making themselves visible. Rather than waiting to be asked to participate in standards and curriculum development, he says, teachers must position themselves in the conversation early on.

"Teachers have to learn how to talk convincingly with those people who make decisions -- school board, voters, principals. It could be such a rich conversation, but I'm afraid we're reaching that point of us versus them."

For more information, contact Professor Lofty at 603-862-2799 or Professor Newkirk at 603-862-3981.

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