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Standards-Based Reform: The Power of External Change Agents

By Kris Kurtenbach

In the often fractious and single-issue advocacy that characterizes education change, the movement to implement academic standards has qualities that other reform efforts have lacked. For one, standards have broad appeal—to business leaders, parents, educators and students. Every state but one has adopted standards and all but three have developed performance measures tied to them—at least for students.

Standards are here to stay, they are not another “reform du jour” that loudly comes and quietly goes. We have to figure this one out. Still, it’s difficult work, and education leaders

and practitioners deserve credit for sticking with it.

Standards are not standardized, nor are they a set of curricula. Standards are sets of well-articulated and well-understood student competencies. Standards have a great value as a communications device—a tool for adding clarity and making connections. Early on, conversations about developing standards created a vehicle for states and communities to come to agreement on what students should know and be able to do. Launching standards helped to build the rationale for why *all* students must achieve at higher levels.

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The Public Education Network believes that improving public school systems is the responsibility of whole communities.



Wendy D. Puriojoy

President's Message

Across the nation, citizens, educators, and parents are organizing to address the most fundamental issue of education reform—how to create high-quality public schools that lead to high achievement for every child. Local education funds (LEFs) are leading this movement and playing key roles in framing issues, developing strategies for school improvement, and most critically, involving and informing parents, students, educators, and community members in the school reform process.

The work of LEFs is evidence that as communities think about standards-based reform, any and all implementation efforts must include the many key stakeholders—both inside schools and in the larger community—who

are so essential to promoting and sustaining change.

From mini-grants for classroom innovation to designs for whole-school change, from awards that recognize effective teaching, to provision of teacher professional development in our nation's largest school districts, LEFs continue to focus on improving the quality of school and classroom leadership. Our greatest opportunity for increasing student achievement rests upon our collective ability to vastly improve the quality of the teaching and curricula in our public school classrooms. This is difficult work, but we thank you for being a friend to America's public schools, and are grateful for your partnership. ●

community resources

"Community Counts." PEN's newest report by Milbrey McLaughlin, of Stanford University, examines ways for youth-serving organizations to support student learning. Based on 12 years of research, Community Counts shows evidence that youth make strides

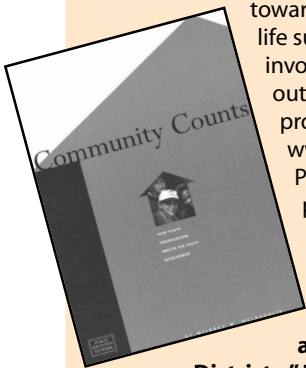
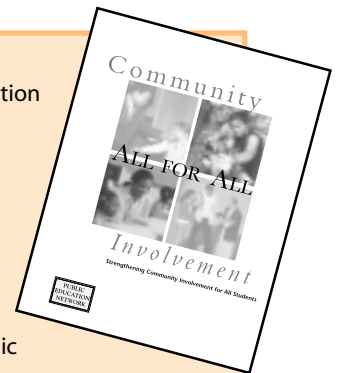
toward better school and life success by being involved in effective out-of-school programs.

www.
PublicEducation.org/
pubs/cc.htm

and accountability systems for disadvantaged children. This book includes a new "decision framework" for policymakers examining how their own systems support student learning and work toward improvement.
www.nap.edu

Public Education Network's "All for All" national public opinion poll paints a hopeful picture of individuals willing to support and to get involved in their local public schools. While debates

about public education often center on abandoning public schools, the poll shows that Americans want to find ways to express a renewed, shared commitment in improving the public schools. <http://list.PublicEducation.org/survey/execsum.htm>



"Testing, Teaching & Learning: A Guide for States and School

Districts." Richard Elmore and Robert Rothman are the editors of this collection of effective examples of designing state and local assessment

new on
PEN's
Web site

Visit www.PublicEducation.org/standards for more resources on issues relating to standards. Read about LEF efforts at overcoming barriers to standards and strategies for improving student achievement.

(For more information on the standards initiative "Helping Every Child Achieve at High Levels," contact Bob Saffold at BSaffold@PublicEducation.org)

Sign up for the "PEN Weekly NewsBlast"— get news on local education funds, school reform, and grant opportunities ... a free service available by signing up at www.PublicEducation.org/news/signup.htm

Snapshot of Standards Implementation in Action

by Melissa Silverstein

The United States is known for its social movements, but not for its educational movements. But if you look at schools across the country you will notice a new ambitious educational reform movement taking hold. Schools, districts and states are moving towards establishing minimum standards that all students need to achieve. But each educational institution and community approaches standards in its own way. Some motivated communities are using the standards debate to change the entire essence of schooling, while others are trying to just make sure that kids are not left behind by the educational system.

Local Education Funds across the country each approach the standards debate from the needs of their individual communities. Several LEFs consider standards as the focus of their work while others are still struggling to figure out how it fits into the bigger picture.

“Standards move the whole system,” argues Public Education Network board member Ron Wolk. Standards look at the big picture. In order for standards to be effective, curricula needs to be changed, assessments need to be redone, and most importantly teachers need to be retrained to teach to the high standards.

There is tremendous work to be done in order to integrate standards into day-to-day school life. Teacher support and training is a consistent theme echoed by LEFs throughout the country. Kathy Turner, executive director of the San Francisco Education Fund believes that teacher

development is crucial to the success of standards. “As a nation we have to decide to support teacher training. We need to see its value. Teachers across the country must be energized and encouraged to teach differently or students will be left behind.”

Colorado has been working on standards statewide since 1993. As executive director of the Public Education & Business Coalition, Barbara Volpe spends most of her time supporting standards in the schools. And Margie Edwards of the Public Education Fund in Providence, Rhode Island states, “The focus of the whole district is to raise the scores of all children.”

One of the pitfalls of standards is that people are anxious to set high stakes for students right away. They want immediate results. These unreasonable expectations put tremendous pressure on the students. Educators feel that initially there will be tremendous failure rates in communities across America, which will cause people to respond that standards are not working. But all the experts agree that implementing standards is not going to happen quickly. Another barrier is the lack of the alignment of standards with the assessments. In order for people to gauge if standards are working, the assessments need to reflect what is being taught.

Local education funds play a key role in helping communities stay the course toward high standards for all students. They can arm people with unbiased information. Because standards profoundly change

educational systems, it is imperative for the community to be informed and involved. Ultimately, the public pays for public education. If the public—including parents, business, and community leaders—are not supportive of reform efforts they will not succeed. Parents need to understand standards and help support schools as they attempt to meet high standards and LEFs are uniquely positioned to accomplish that task.

**Standards move
the whole system
. . . they're here
to stay.**

“Standards are here to stay,” states Robin Pasquarella, president of the Alliance for Education in Seattle, Washington. Pasquarella echoes the sentiments of other leaders in the LEF movement. They all agree that there is much work to be done for standards to take hold. But what fuels the passion of LEF leadership is the desire to give every student the ability to receive the education that he or she rightfully deserves. ●

Melissa Silverstein is a freelance writer and editor (MelSil@earthlink.net).

Standards-Based Reform

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Dynamic Evolution of Standards

The standards movement has dynamically evolved. Reformers are no longer making a case for *why* standards should be adopted and promoted. We are concerned with *how* we're going to implement them.

The “teacher crisis” is often translated as a “public education crisis.”

Standards are still providing a catalyst for meaningful discussion. Indeed, the same argument we make to teachers and parents is true for those of us working to influence their behavior: Focusing our attention on a common destination allows us to act more purposefully in addressing what stands in the way of getting there.

Standards have evolved into a reliable tool for prioritizing and organizing what once was a tangle of disjointed problems, giving us renewed vigor for results. We're asking what were once blasphemous

questions: What's the influence of such things as the rigor of instruction, school safety, student motivation, parent and community involvement, principal leadership, and classroom setting on the bottom line of getting more students to achieve at higher levels?

This has led us, in essence, to a new mantra. The refrain “all kids can learn” is rhetoric unless we demonstrate that all adults can believe and act with equal courage.

Good Teachers Needed

Evidence is piling up that the greatest impact on student performance is the performance of adults. And chief among the tasks adults perform is teaching. Over the past few years, a set of significant studies shows that some things do indeed make an extraordinary difference on student achievement. Studies show clearly that the single most important variable in the delivery of a quality education is whether a child has good teachers.

What do we mean when we say good teachers? Simply this: Teachers who know their subject material and can effectively teach.

According to the most recent issue of “Quality Counts,” (an annual assessment of state progress in standards implementation published by *Education Week*) the percentage of qualified teachers in a state is one of the strongest predictors of its students' improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

One report has even indicated that every dollar spent on more highly qualified teachers produces greater increases in student achievement than a dollar spent on other resources less oriented toward instruction.

The public is equally concerned. One of the key reasons cited for waning support of public education is the prevalence of low-performing teachers. Yet, while the public perceives teacher quality as important to student achievement, they don't make a connection between on-the-job professional development and improved teacher quality. There is also the serious question of where exactly—in the midst of an enormous and ever-increasing teacher shortage—these quality teachers will come from. Specifically, there are not enough high quality teachers in classrooms with the highest needs.

So what can local education funds do?

Local education funds are not instructional leaders or education administrators. What LEFs do is employ a “champion strategy.” They urge, nudge, frame, catalyze, lead and push the dialogue on teacher quality. All reform movements need a champion. Local education funds are ideally positioned to champion standards-driven reform. LEFs are, by nature, engagers. The heart of their work is to create collaborative constituencies for school change—the very definition of engagement.

Patty Barth of the Education Trust, suggests that LEFs can be both advocates and supporters. She sees LEFs as positioned to inform parents and the public of the status of teacher quality in their communities and at the same time to encourage school district efforts to improve quality. “We know that the neediest students get the least qualified teachers,” she says. “Districts have to confront that.”

The underlying message is that real change happens slowly and requires persistent effort from a number of people—people working together. Engaging these people in deliberate action is a necessary part of the process. Teacher quality is an excellent place to start. ●

Kris Kurtenbach is the president of Collaborative Communications Group (Kurtenbach@PublicEngagement.com)

LEFs are ideally positioned to champion standards-driven reform. They urge, nudge, frame, catalyze, lead and push the dialogue on teacher quality.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Shine a spotlight on the problem.** Ask tough questions of the schools and the district. Identify and highlight schools and communities and states working to solve this problem.

- **Keep the conversation focused on teacher quality.** Work with the school district to create initiatives to promote excellence in teaching and help identify community resources to support it. Help the district raise or shift resources so that teachers have the time and skills to teach in ways that raise student achievement. Develop mentorship, orientation, and induction programs for new teachers.

- **Gather data about teacher quality and get it out.** Data often creates motivation. Boston and Dallas, for instance, have been willing to put explosive data in front of people as a catalyst to shatter myths and make the case for change. Urge principals, teachers, and parents to closely examine student work.

- **Broker relationships among partners who can accelerate progress.** Make connections between higher education institutions and the K–12 district. Help determine ways institutes of higher education can change the way they are preparing teachers for the profession.

- **Demand policy supports for raising the quality of teaching.** Recognize and promote the value of building strong relationships with educational policymakers. Use media outlets, teacher union partners, and organizational alliances to create public understanding and support for your effective strategies for making significant improvements in enhancing teacher quality and student learning.

Communicating with Parents about Educational Standards

by Christine Nevius

Parental understanding and support is a crucial ingredient in educators' efforts to help students meet academic standards. Yet only 53% of adults surveyed in a 1998 Council for Basic Education national poll said their local schools provide parents with enough information about what their children are expected to know and to be able to accomplish.

Parental support is a crucial ingredient in teachers' efforts to help students meet academic standards.

Standards 101

Many parents may not understand what we mean by "standards." Even fewer caregivers understand the specific content and skills their children will need to master in order to meet your state's and city's adopted educational standards. We must find ways to clearly explain what the standards are, how they came about, and how student progress and academic achievement will be measured.

- *Help your schools create a take-home flier* or PTA handout that details "What Every Parent Needs to Know About Standards." If you have a web site, post it there. Make sure you use clear, concise language—stay away from technical phrases and educational jargon.

- *Explain how the standards were developed*—this gives them credibility. How many people were involved? What kind of experts were called upon? What type of input and feedback did parents provide? How long did the process take?

- *Show parents "before" and "after" assignment samples.* Mock-up a typical "pre-standards" assignment and a new standards-based challenging assignment and get schools to either display them in places where parents will see them or to include them in a take-home flier.

- *Explain "standardized" testing.* Do not assume parents understand the basics—this is not their area of expertise and they need you to guide them through it. What are the tests that will be administered in your school(s)? What's the difference between "norm-referenced" and "standards-referenced" tests? What information will schools get about the student from each of the tests? How will this information be used to improve teaching and learning?

- *Communicate your city's or state's adopted educational standards clearly and often.* Don't treat standards as a "special" topic or a "once a year" conversation—the concept of standards-based education should become integrated into every written and oral communication you have with parents.

Marshalling the Troops

Once parents understand some basics of standards, the next challenge is to build enthusiasm and participation from the parent community. Parental support and backup—both in school and at home—are necessary in order



to ensure that students have the best chance possible for meeting their standards goals.

- *Make sure that your schools prepare parents for testing periods* by letting them know the testing schedule—dates, times, and duration—well in advance. Parents need to know what success requires. In preparation for testing, they should be informed of specific information their child will be tested on. For example, your child will need to be able to do X, Y, Z in order to pass this upcoming test.

- *Train a small group of willing and enthusiastic parents* and have them serve as “standards ambassadors.” This is an especially important area of outreach for parents who may not speak English and may feel more comfortable getting information from another parent who shares a cultural connection.

- *Send parents back to school.* Give parents a chance to follow their children through a typical school day. Offering parents a window into the children’s education gives them the opportunity to see standards-based learning in practice.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What questions have parents been raising about standards in our schools? Are we effectively addressing their concerns?

- What is the best forum we currently have for addressing parent concerns? Are there other ways we can communicate with parents about standards?

- How can I, as a teacher, stay current with standards and new instruction methods?

- Have standards been incorporated into professional development efforts in my school, in my district?

RESOURCES

- **www.PublicEducation.org/standards/**
This site offers in-depth information on the Public Education Network’s *Helping Every Child Achieve at High Levels* standards initiative, which works with local education funds to promote high standards for all students in inner city, rural, and other school districts serving high-poverty areas.

- **www.bpe.org**
A wealth of downloadable publications, resources, and related links can be found at this Boston Plan for Excellence site.

- **Pittsburgh Council on Public Education**
As part of their Building Leadership in Schools and Communities initiative, the Pittsburgh Council on Public Education has developed materials and programs to inform parents about the district’s academic standards. For more information, contact: Bette L. Hughes, Executive Director, Pittsburgh Council on Public Education, 13 Pride Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15219; phone: 412-434-0851; fax: 412-281-6683; www.PublicEducation.org/about/pittsburgh2.htm.

- **A Parent’s Primer**
This resource from New Visions for Public Schools (New York) illustrates what teaching in a standards-based environment looks like and uses teachers, students, administrators, and parents to explain what standards are, how teaching and learning are different in a classroom using standards, and who benefits from standards. To order a copy, or for more information about the topic, visit the New Visions web site at www.newvisions.org/home.html.

- **For Our Children: A Parent’s Guide to New Standards**
Published by the National Center on Education and the Economy, this guide is available in Adobe Acrobat (PDF) format at www.ncee.org/OurProducts/parents.html.

working together

The Mott Foundation's History of Community Building

It was during the Great Depression that the C.S. Mott Foundation got its start



advocating and funding around the issue of community involvement in education. Over the last 70 years

that commitment has remained steadfast. According to the Public Education Network's program officer at Mott, Zoe Gillett, "The goal of the Foundation's work is to enable communities to research and identify what is causing students to have problems in school, and then to help implement those changes." For the Mott Foundation, standards are a part of the process because they are a measure that helps communities determine the level of student achievement, and the work that needs to be done.

Reform takes place in classrooms only when it is a real collaborative effort between the school and community.

Mott works at the community level because it believes that it is not just educational experts that can bring about systemic reform. The people most affected—parents and students—can, and should have a substantial role in the reform effort.

According to Gillett, "LEFs have the community connections, as well as the educational experts, who can come

together to improve public education in communities throughout the country." For more information on the Mott Foundation visit, www.mott.org.

The Grable Foundation: Embracing Standards-based Reform

Susan Brownlee, Grable's executive director, believes that standards will not only help improve student achievement, but will provide important analysis for the philanthropic community to assess and analyze its financial commitment to the movement.

Many Americans are having their faith in public schools tested.

The Grable Foundation

Some are unsure that public schools will be able to prepare young people to be productive adults in this ever-changing technological world. "Standards impart expectations for learning based on the premise that all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, can reach for higher levels of achievement," says Susan Brownlee.

Grable's work with LEFs strengthens a shared vision of enabling all children to achieve their potential at a time when communities need both resources and encouragement that they can make a big difference for their students. Susan Brownlee emphasizes that, "Local education funds in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region are actively reaching out to communities to encourage a strong investment from all residents in the success of our public schools."

In For the Long Haul: The Pew Charitable Trusts

A strong and steady commitment of many national funders has made the long-term work on standards-based reform possible. The Pew Charitable Trusts was an early supporter, having promoted standards-based reform since the early 1990s. While the Trusts are a major player in the educational reform movement, its staff recognized the



importance of strategically leveraging its funding. "The standards movement represented a way for the Trusts to establish a national school reform infrastructure, as well as to encourage states to set up policy structures which would then influence local school district



policy," says program associate Jennifer Lee.

The Trusts understand that if the standards movement is to be effective they need to work with people in their local communities. Jennifer Lee believes, "Reform takes place in classrooms only when it is a real collaborative effort between the school and community. This means looking beyond the walls of the school."

As a funder, the Trusts look to PEN as a clearinghouse to provide assistance and technical support for local education funds as they undertake this difficult and challenging reform process. Jennifer Lee recognizes the value of having a national infrastructure. But she recognizes that without a movement in our nation's classrooms and communities there will never be any long-term change. For more information, visit www.pewtrusts.com.

A Hard Look at Assessments in the Boston Public Schools

by Mary Ann Cohen

It's Friday. Everyone knows the drill: Get out your pencils for the end-of-week test. And, if it's May, get ready for SATs and other tests.

Both kinds of tests, while useful, have their limits. End-of-week classroom tests usually are not designed to capture what content and skills each student still needs to learn.

assessments—are helpful in comparing district and school progress from year to year and developing reports to the public. But they are not very useful for teachers: Scores are not ready until the next school year—when students are in another classroom, or even another school.

Boston Plan's Pilot Project Last Year

“Formative” assessments were piloted last year by 25 schools whose reform work is funded by the Boston Plan/Boston Annenberg Challenge. The schools were asked to give an assessment—such as a “Writing Prompt” or an “Observation Survey”—to every student at least three times during the year. They were also asked to aggregate and analyze the results regularly.

While getting the process started was sometimes slow and collecting the data was fraught with problems—deciding what assessments to use, how to record results, who would manage the data, and what the results mean—teachers and principals in many schools used the findings to make frequent adjustments to practice, individually and collectively.

A District-Wide Effort This Year

At the direction of Superintendent Thomas Payzant, all Boston schools are now administering formative assessments in reading,

Effective ongoing assessment of teaching and learning is essential to our work to improve student achievement.

writing, and math. “Any business leader with a strong bottom line will tell you that you can't wait until the end of the year to take stock of how you're doing,” says Dr. Payzant. “You must monitor along the way and continually assess, document, and share with one another. That is how you determine what's getting done and what isn't and make sure that resources are being allocated effectively. It also helps to inform decisions about professional development. Effective ongoing assessment of teaching and learning is essential to our work to improve student achievement.” ●

Boston Plan for EXCELLENCE
IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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And, because each test is different, teachers can't compare notes with colleagues, share best practices, or use results to identify the types of professional development they need.

Boston's end-of-year district-wide tests—often called “summative”

Six Points of Effective Partnerships

by Philip C. McCullum



In his research on partnerships between communities and schools, Philip C. McCullum of the University of Oregon has found that successful partnerships are built on six critical principles. As Local Education Fund leaders consider collaborative efforts, they should consider these themes.

1. Mutual Goals and Benefits.

Shared views, or a common vision of what might be accomplished in the future, are necessary to develop partnerships which bring together members of different organizations. Participants in partnerships should be aware of the reality of turf issues when promoting collaborative efforts.

2. Trusting Relationships

Partnerships, by their very nature, provide many opportunities for participants to develop relationships based on trust. Collaboration provides opportunities for members of different organizations to meet and discuss important issues and concerns. By maximizing communication and understanding between members on all sides, a trusting relationship may be developed.

3. Open Communications

Vital to collaborative endeavors is the ability of partners to communicate and to be understood. Communication is an essential link to building trust. Members' sincerity in their dialogue, intentions, and actions is necessary to build the trust and relationships that support successful collaborations.

4. Nurturing Relationships

Personal relationships are the key to everything. One can't mandate trust in an organizational sense. It grows out of personal interactions and communications. Discussing and planning collaborative efforts provide opportunities for members to meet, dialogue, and establish professional relationships. People in successful partnerships view relationships as significant in bringing together talented people to solve problems, set goals, and move a collaborative project forward.

5. Effective Leadership

Leadership must provide the vision, courage, and support to bring together separate and distinct organizations to promote shared goals. The support of top leadership is a significant factor in the development of collaborations.

6. Shared decision making

Participants in a partnership will feel more connected and committed to it if they have ample opportunity to discuss ideas, values, and beliefs about the larger goals of the partnership with other participants. Devoting several meetings early in the process to this discussion can lay a solid foundation for future collaborations.

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mission statement

to create systems of public education that result in high achievement for every child.

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