



# **MAKING GOOD ON THE PROMISE: HIGH STANDARDS FOR ALL**

*By Patricia Maunsell*

The Cross City Campaign's mission is the dramatic improvement of public education so that all urban youth — especially Black, Latino, Asian, Native American students and students from low-income communities — are well prepared for post-secondary education, work and citizenship. Historically, these students have been grossly under served by the nation's public schools. Urban students suffer as a result of inadequate books and materials, watered-down curriculum, over worked and often under-qualified teachers and a general misconception that they are less capable than other students.

The belief that some students are less capable than others has led to lower expectations for students who are disproportionately students of color and students from low-income communities. Lower expectations have a devastating effect on the education urban students receive now, and the educational and career opportunities available to them in the future.

The belief that only a portion of students can and will do well must end.

A "culture shift" must occur within schools — and beyond — that puts an end to low expectations for some and high expectations for others. Differing expectations based on race, ethnicity, class and gender are unacceptable. Standards require the belief that every student — with varying amounts of time and instructional strategies — can achieve. This

demands a significant change in educational philosophy — from one that is predicated on students predetermined ability to one where student effort and the quality of instruction produce results.

Unfortunately, in some places, standards have not led to changes in

**In one urban district, for example, only 51% of African American and 42% of Latino students who qualified (by the district's own measure) to take algebra, were placed in the course. In stark contrast, 87.5% of qualified White students and 100% of qualified Asian students were placed in algebra.**

Standards for what students should know and be able to do have been or are currently being designed and implemented by national organiza-

tions; federal, state and local governments; as well as individual districts and schools. In some instances, standards are used as an excuse to track and otherwise sort students into those who deserve a high quality education and those who do not. Those who test well are often labeled "high ability" and given interesting, challenging material while those who test poorly are given far less. Saying there are standards is not enough — the focus must be on instruction or curriculum but have been oversimplified into a test — a test that measures little or none of what students are taught but determines much of their academic future. Those who test well are often labeled "high ability" and given interesting, challenging material while those who test poorly are given far less. Saying there are standards is not enough — the focus must be on

what is needed to ensure standards are achieved by all students.

Standards — and quality standards-based instruction — make clear to everyone what students should know and be able to do. The focus of everyone involved in education should be to support the crucial relationship between teachers and students. Teachers need to provide expert instruction. Employing multiple teaching methods; using assessment as a tool to gauge student progress and redirect teaching; and providing rich, interesting and relevant content are just some of the important elements of quality instruction. Teaching is intensely hard work that requires time, constant dialogue with colleagues, research, reflection and readjustments and a lot of good support. Ignoring the focal point of teaching and learning — the classroom and what happens between teachers and students — is to doom standards and students.

When standards are implemented well, they can provide teachers and students with exciting opportunities to do what they are in school to do — teach and learn. For teachers, implementing standards demands thinking about what they expect of students over the course of a year as well as within individual lessons and assignments and affords them the opportunity to do this. Not only does this change assist in the necessary culture shift within the classroom and the school but it also provides students with a sense of clarity because, for perhaps the first time in many students' school experience, the teacher clearly communicates her expectations to the students. Taking the mystery and guess work out of assignments — "what exactly am I supposed to do?" "what is the teacher looking for in an A paper?" — provides students with more time and energy to focus on doing the work and achieving the goals of the assignment.

### Achieving standards requires shaking things up:

- classrooms look different — students exchange and support each other, learning is often noisy and messy
- teachers see their jobs differently — collaborating with colleagues, facilitating student learning rather than lecturing
- central office staff (and all others) see their jobs very differently — "what have we done to ensure student achievement lately?"

## THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION

Working with leaders in each city within our network, the Cross City Campaign has identified a strong common concern within the standards discussion: the connection between standards and what happens in classrooms. For standards to be meaningful, they must be fully integrated into what happens in classrooms. This, in turn, requires the support of the entire school and the school system as a whole. Standards should not be oversimplified and punitive but rather seen as a complex catalyst for meaningful and systemic education reform.

Members of the Cross City Campaign see standards as a powerful way to potentially transform urban schools. The Cross City Campaign has identified essential elements necessary for the successful implementation of high standards. These elements are not a menu of choice but are necessary and interwoven parts of a radically restructured education based on high standards for all.

### *High standards are for ALL students*

- High standards apply to all students — different standards for different

students based on race, ethnicity, income and gender are inherently inequitable.

- Adequate resources and support are provided to ensure all students achieve the standards and the distribution and use of resources and supports is informed by student performance data.
- Performance data—based on actual student work—is collected, analyzed and is continually used to readjust teaching and reallocate resources to ensure standards are met.

There have always been standards but they have rarely been articulated and measured objectively. Teachers, school districts, parents and others have always had ideas about what is possible and who is "capable." Equity must be integral in setting and achieving standards. The standards for all students must be the same — lower expectations for any student is unacceptable. While expectations for all students are the same, achieving standards requires more than one educational approach and a variety of resources.

All people learn differently and come to new learning situations with different

experiences and areas of previous knowledge — and some have learning disabilities or limited experience with English. Using a "one size fits all" approach to education will, by definition, leave many children behind. For all students to achieve standards, schools and, particularly, classroom teachers must be given the support needed to provide all of their students with appropriate educational opportunities. Parents and community members must also understand standards so they can support their children's education and hold schools accountable.

To ensure the equitable use of resources and achievement of standards, data must be collected, analyzed and acted upon. While anecdotal evidence of success and failure is important, it does not replace quantifiable data. Careful scrutiny of student work and analysis by a number of variables including race, ethnicity, gender, first language, family income and previous achievement levels is the only way to measure equity and make the necessary adjustments to ensure equity.

One example of "data" would be to look at what students are taught — essentially, the curriculum. Upon close examination, it is often discovered that students in urban schools in general and more specifically, students of color and students from low-income families, are given a severely watered-down curriculum. Knowing this, parents, teach-

ers and others are armed with information to respond to criticisms about the students lack of achievement — it is not the students that are lacking but what they are being taught. Further investigation will likely unearth other systemic inequities such as a lack of funds available for updated textbooks and other materials that better explain why some students are not achieving.

***Standards-based education requires SUPPORT — without support, standards aren't worth the paper they're printed on***

Supports include:

- reflective professional development for teachers
- adequate and consistent funding— alignment and realignment of existing and new resources
- ample and flexible use of time
- strong leadership development and support at all levels of schools and community
- superior educational materials and curriculum

Having specific, articulated standards is important but what happens in the classroom and system-wide in the name of these standards is much more important. Translating standards into practice requires a lot of work by many different people. Standards require

conversations and problem solving — at all levels of the educational system — that allow all students to achieve.

Support is critical and multi-dimensional. Teachers need professional development that addresses their specific classroom needs and provides the ongoing support necessary to truly improve their craft. Schools need adequate and consistent funding that they control in order for them to respond to the particular needs of their students. They need top notch educational materials and supports (e.g. high quality computers, science labs, staffed libraries). Schools also need time. Time is an invisible yet vital resource. Teachers need time to meet and discuss student work, teaching strategies and many other educational topics. Schools also need the flexibility to extend the school period, day or year to meet student needs. Leadership at all levels — students, parents, teachers, principals, community, central office — is also critical to ensure schools have all that it takes to support student achievement at high levels.

***Implementing standards is a PROCESS — not a one-time, quick fix***

- Standards must be "owned" by the entire school community, students, teachers, parents, principals, community members.
- Implementing standards is a continually evolving process.


Whether standards are developed at the local school level or are adopted from a national organization or government entity, it is critical that everyone — students, parents, teachers, other school staff and community members — has the opportunity to make the standards their own. Developing a broad understanding and ownership of standards is critical if standards are to be implemented equitably across all schools

**Standards clarify what students should know and be able to do, the data measures achievement of those standards.**

**Data comes in many forms. Some things to look at include:**

- Curriculum
- Instructional methods
- Assignments given to students
- Student work generated by assignments

***Is there alignment among all of these?***



and achieved by all students. Making time for everyone to fully understand the standards (and their individual role in achieving them) is critical — enthusiasm and clarity are essential for people to do the work it takes to implement and achieve high standards. Even the best ideas, when imposed without room for discussion, are highly unlikely to be implemented or achieved.

Implementing and achieving high standards does not take place in a workshop, over a few days or even over a school year. Standards-based education is an ongoing, evolutionary process that requires continual reflection and readjustment. Teaching strategies, educational materials and other supports must constantly be evaluated in terms of student work and achievement. Schools and entire school systems must be prepared to completely rethink what and how they educate students. Teachers must constantly modify their curriculum and teaching methods. Principals and central office administrators must likewise be ready to increase certain supports or provide additional resources to ensure all students are achieving standards. Parents and other community members must also be active in evaluating student progress and lend additional support and resources when necessary.

***Standards cannot be  
a pilot project in  
one or two schools  
— they must be  
SYSTEMIC***

- A systemic approach is the only way to ensure equity.

- Individual schools will not thrive unless they reside in a support system.

Successfully achieving standards demands a systemic approach. All students deserve the very best education possible. When given the opportunity, all children and youth are eager to achieve and succeed and will take initiative and responsibility for their learning. High quality education must not be reserved for a few students who happen to go to a certain school or live in a certain neighborhood. Standards-based schools, therefore, demand standards-based systems.

The central office and the system's leaders must be ready and able to provide the support and resources needed by schools to implement standards. Everyone in the central office needs to see their job as supporting student achievement. The messages and actions coming from the board, the superintendent and the central office administrators need to signal that their highest priority is student achievement. As a result, system policies should lead to student achievement; administrative guidelines should lead to student achievement; how schools and staff are held accountable and what they are held accountable for should be measured by student achievement. The role of the superintendent becomes the role of instructional leader. Administrators become facilitators — their job is to do what needs to be done to support student learning and high achievement.

In a standards-based system, there must be constant dialogue and cooperation between those people charged with issues of curriculum and instruction and those who man-

age the money and resources. Additionally, it is the central office's job to create and support a high quality learning environment for adults providing time, money and other resources to ensure teachers have what they need to support student learning at the highest level. In general, the central office — and the people who work there — must "walk their talk" and require of themselves the same professionalism, high standards and vigilance for student achievement that is expected of schools.

A systemic approach to standards implementation is also necessary because schools benefit greatly from supporting each other. Schools must have opportunities to share struggles and success strategies with others — the support and exchange of ideas is essential to continually improving. The alternative — pilot projects — not only creates gross inequities among schools, they also create isolated schools that have to do the tough work of implementing standards alone.

---

There is no silver bullet to improving education in our public schools but standards do offer the potential of a level playing field where all students are expected to achieve at the highest level. The work of implementing standards demands deep introspection about what we as a society, a school system, a school and as an individual expect of our students and why. These are no easy tasks but teachers from across the country believe the effort is well worth the challenge because helping students to enjoy learning and achieve academically is the very heart of why they became teachers.