

Best Practices/Tom W. Many, EdD

Are We Making A List or Delivering On A Promise: The Unintended Consequences of Believing All Standards Are Equal



Administrators from districts across the nation continue to express their belief that “every standard is equally important thus, every standard must be taught” but by perpetuating that belief, they create unanticipated consequences for their schools.

“If everything is important then nothing is important.” -Patrick Lencioni

One of the hoped for benefits of adopting consistent state and national standards was better alignment and a more coherent curriculum. Educators expected that a common set of standards would generate greater consistency around what was taught from grade to grade and school to school. Unfortunately, rigid adherence to the belief that “every standard is equally important thus, every standard must be taught” is actually creating opportunities for more, not less variance in classroom curriculum.

Teachers recognize that not all standards are equally important and routinely make decisions of what and what not to teach. However, since the practice of prioritizing standards is neither sanctioned nor supported in most districts, teachers are left to figure things out on their own and approach this task without the benefit of consistent criteria. According to Larry Ainsworth, “Left to their own professional opinions when faced with the task of narrowing a voluminous

number of student learning outcomes [standards], educators naturally pick and choose those they know best, like best, the ones for which they have materials and lesson plans or activities, and those most likely to appear on state tests.”

The practice of prioritizing or identifying the most important standards based on unique and individually created criteria leads to inconsistent choices by teachers, undermines the consistency of what students experience in classroom, and creates exactly the opposite effect of what educators hoped for when the various state and national standards were adopted.

The truth is that while all the standards are important, some are more important than others. We can begin to make an important shift by acknowledging what we already intuitively know and support teachers’ efforts to identify the most important, high priority standards in systemic and systematic ways. (For a description of how to prioritize the standards see *Prioritizing the Standards Using R.E.A.L. Criteria*, TEPSA News, January/February 2014, Vol. 71, No. 1).

“Learning has little or nothing to do with what a teacher covers. Learning has everything to do with what students can accomplish.” -Harry Wong

Any reasonable definition of teaching incorporates the notion that learning has taken place. The purpose of teaching the standards is to ensure students learn the knowledge, skills and dispositions described within the standards. Thus, by definition, ‘teaching’ the standards is different than ‘covering’ the standards.

Despite successful efforts to refine and improve standards at the state and national level, most teachers continue to believe there are still too many standards to teach. An unbending belief that “every standard is equally important thus, every standard must be taught” forces teachers to abandon the deep, meaningful mastery of the most important standards in exchange for the broad, superficial coverage of all the standards.

In some districts, administrators have enacted policies and procedures that require teachers to document when and where they have addressed each and every standard. This policy sends the wrong message and places the emphasis on quantity rather than quality. (A far better approach would be to identify and track mastery of the high priority standards.) While many teachers will do their best to ‘cover’ all the standards, most will not be able ‘teach’ them all to mastery.

We know people support that which they help create so, the critical question is, “Have teachers—those responsible for helping students master the standards—been involved in deciding which standards teachers should teach and students should learn or have teachers been handed a list of standards designated and decided upon by someone else?” Even the exceptional teacher who ‘covers’ all the standards will find it difficult to adequately assess them all, and even more challenged to remediate them all. Insisting that every standard be taught, regardless of a standard’s relative importance to the student or other standards, promotes compliance to district policies rather than a commitment to student learning.

Teachers should be encouraged to exercise sound professional judgment and focus on teaching—as opposed to covering—the most important standards. We must reject the notion that ‘covering’ the standards is an acceptable alternative to ‘teaching’ the standards.

**“The purpose of unwrapping the standards is to get at the essence of what we expect students to learn.”
-Nicole Dimich Vagle**

Another consequence of believing that “every standard is equally important thus, every standard must be taught” is that teachers are often required to teach all the standards without the opportunity to thoroughly understand the standards. If standards truly define what teachers should teach and students should learn, principals should engage teachers in a process of prioritizing and then unwrapping the most important standards.

According to Nicole Vagle, “The purpose of unwrapping standards is not to create another standards document, instead, it is to get at the heart, at the very essence of what we expect in student learning.” It is by understanding the essence of each standard that teachers are able to create engaging and effective classroom lessons.

Doug Reeves suggests the only time the argument that “every standard is equally important” makes sense is when every student is working at or above grade level and therein lies the problem. It would be rare indeed to find a class, school or district where *every* student was working at or above grade level. Teachers know they must constantly adjust and prioritize. They recognize it makes no sense to teach a standard for which students lack the necessary prerequisite skills. The best teachers formatively assess their students, identify their instructional level, plan lessons that address the missing prerequisite skills, and remediate any gaps in student learning before moving on to teaching the grade level standards.

The most successful principals engage teacher teams in a collaborative process to promote deep understanding of the rigor, content and connection of one standard to another. Arguing that, “every standard is equally important thus, every standards must be taught” only discourages teachers from taking the time to understand the standards so crucial to their student’s success.

“You are not making a list, you are making a promise. This is the information we promise our students will learn.” -Tim Brown

Whether state and national standards result in higher levels of student learning will depend, in large part, on the beliefs administrators hold regarding the implementation of the standards. Will standards be used to guide instruction or will they be measures of accountability with consequences for individual teachers, students and schools?

Tim Brown asks educators to reflect upon what they believe about standards. On one hand, if teachers look at standards as the content they are required to cover during a particular class, course or grade level, they will likely generate a list of standards to post on the walls of their classrooms. On the other hand, if teachers look at standards as a promise they make, they will more likely make the commitment to ensure students master the standards.

The answer to Brown’s question—whether we are making a list or delivering on a promise—will go a long way to resolving some of the unintended consequences created by the belief that, “every standard is equally important thus, every standard must be taught.” ■

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