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Target the Standards

Research repeatedly stresses the importance of collaboration within school environments and supports strong links between a sense of cooperative community and positive effect on schooling.

—Conzemius and O'Neill (2001, p. 67)

DEFINITION ■

Targeting the standards is the process whereby teams of teachers target the standards and work either individually or as a team to design curriculum, implement differentiated instructional strategies, and develop assessments to meet the standards. Each state has developed its own standards and benchmarks from which they create their high-stakes standardized tests that determine whether or not students have met or exceeded the standards and can move to the next grade or graduate. The movement toward the Common Core of Standards by 48 states indicates "genuine political will to move away from disparate standards across the country. The bottom line? K–12 public education is as close as it has ever been to saying every high school graduate must be college ready" (Phillips & Wong, 2010, p. 37). Having a Common Core of Standards will allow states to share what works but allow flexibility to decide how best to teach the core standards. It will also ensure that the standards are coherent by having minimal repetition and having the big ideas that thread the content together. Moreover, Phillips and Wong talk about the importance of making sure the standards are "aligned to assessments, and use formative assessments to determine proficiency. Higher does not mean piling on content. Rather, it means being able to apply learning, to transfer learning from one context to another, and to measure up to international standards" (p. 39). The high-quality assessments correlated to the Common Core of Standards will become a critical resource for teachers' capacities to prepare students for college-level work. Whether teachers focus on state standards, the Common Core of Standards, or international standards, the important concept is that the standard drives instruction and assessment.

Standards are the end result of the teaching and assessment process and teachers must always "begin with the end in mind."

DuFour (2004) describes a professional learning community as a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. He believes the professional learning community model focuses on the core mission of education—student learning. Rather than emphasizing what the teacher taught, the emphasis is instead on what the student learned. DuFour believes that every professional in the building must engage his or her colleagues in the ongoing exploration of three crucial questions that drive the work of those within a professional learning community:

1. What do we want each student to learn?

2. How will we know when each student has learned it?

3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

When teachers collaborate to learn the answers to these three critical questions, they engage in rich conversations that guide their instruction and their assessment. Teachers analyze the data and target the important standards that students need and then work collaboratively to design powerful curriculum units and authentic assessments to help all students succeed. Stiggins and DuFour (2009) believe that "common assessments—those created collaboratively by teams of teachers who teach the same course or grade level—also represent a powerful tool in effective assessment in professional learning communities" (p. 640). They believe that professional learning teams working together to create common assessments "can redefine the role of assessment in school improvement" (p. 640).

In addition to teachers who teach the same course or same subject area working together, many schools and districts are using vertical teams of teachers teaching the same subject area at different grade levels to target similar standards that thread throughout multiple grade levels. For example, the standard targeting "informational writing" is first introduced in Grade 3 but it is threaded throughout upper elementary grades, middle school, and high school. The basic framework for the standard is the same, but additional criteria and levels of difficulty are added each year. One vertical team could target the standard together and then show how each teacher at each grade level can reinforce what has been introduced and build upon it by adding layers of rigor that are developmentally appropriate. Why have a team at each grade level spend time doing exactly what another team is doing at the next level? Vertical teams focus on the vertical alignment of the standards and the curriculum.

■ RATIONALE

The title of Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is from the theologian John Donne's 1623 sermon "Meditation 17." Part of the sermon reads, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part

of the main . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." Donne warned his parishioners to be concerned about their fellow humans and to grieve for anyone who dies—not just friends and relatives. Hemingway used the same theme when he wrote about the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and warned how the world's apathy could signify bigger problems to come if people ignored the plight of their fellow citizens.

Failing students and failing schools may not be as life threatening or dramatic as war, peace, or death. There is, however, a parallel between the traditional isolation of the classroom teacher and high-stakes testing. It is not enough for classroom teachers to walk into the classroom, shut the door, and worry only about their students' development. It is important for all students in the school community to do well on their classroom assessments and on state and national assessments. In today's world of No Child Left Behind legislation and sanctions for "needs improvement lists," teachers must abandon the island mentality in a school or district. Everyone must work together as a community of learners to ensure no child is left behind see Figure 1.1. If the special-needs student, the English-as-a-second-language learner, or the at-risk student with behavior problems fails the high-stakes test, the entire school could face sanctions. It is not appropriate to blame parents, other teachers, or the students themselves for damaging a school's reputation; it is more important to work together as a school community to help all teachers and all students succeed. No teacher or student is an island; every student's failure diminishes everyone.

In recent years, organizations engaged in professional development and school reform have started "bringing teachers together to do *collectively what* they generally do alone; that is look at student work and think about students' performance in the classroom" (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003, p. 185). The purpose of these collaborative efforts is to foster teacher learning, which, in turn, fosters student learning. A professional community provides a spirit of collaboration where teachers work with other teachers, special education teachers, support staff, curriculum specialists, and administrators to achieve a common goal. Conzemius and O'Neill (2001) believe that "people in collaborative environments feel appreciated, valued, and respected; the system brings out the best in them. There is a hard sense of mission and goals" (p. 67).

RESEARCH ■

Many schools and districts feel that all their teachers engage in standards-based teaching but the reality is that some teachers are in fact demonstrating standards-referenced teaching instead. They may have the state standard posted in their room and written on every assignment, but they continue to teach the way they have always taught. Authentic standards-based teaching means embedding the language of the standards (vocabulary, people, and concepts) into their curriculum development, instructional strategies, and assessments. Standards should permeate the district and guide all instructional decisions. New research is showing that strategic planning done by "planners"

Figure 1.1   Team Results

In order for teachers working in teams to get results, they must do the following:

1. Focus substantially—though not exclusively—on assessing standards.

2. Review simple, readily available achievement data to set a limited number of measurable achievement goals in the lowest-scoring subjects or courses and target specific standards where achievement is low within that course or subject area.

3. Work regularly and collectively to design, adapt, and assess instructional strategies targeted directly at specific standards of low student performance revealed by the assessment data (e.g., "measurement" in math; "voice" in writing; "sight reading" in music).

Source: Schmoker, M., "UP and Away—Lifting Low Performance," *Journal of Staff Development,* Spring 2002, Vol 23, No. 2. Excerpted with permission of the National Staff Development Council, www.nsdc.org, 2005. All rights reserved.

before the school year begins is less effective than planning done by teaching practitioners throughout the school year. Schmoker (2004) believes most productive thinking is "continuous and simultaneous with action—that is, with teaching—as practitioners collaboratively implement, assess, and adjust instruction as it happens. The most productive combinations of thought and action occur in team-based, short-term experimental cycles" (p. 427). Teachers who, through short-term trial and error, find ways to improve students' persuasive writing or use a Venn diagram to help them learn how to compare and contrast items should celebrate their successes. Schmoker believes that when teams of teachers work together to achieve these short-term wins in specific areas where the assessment data show students are struggling, the chances of attaining continuous improvement are greater.

Educators throughout the world engage in a wide variety of processes to help improve student achievement. Almost all the processes in today's age of accountability involve data. Data are more than just reams of paper stored in school cabinets. Data lead to self-analysis and effective innovations and strategies. Schmoker (2001) states, "A rapidly growing number of schools have made a momentous discovery: when teachers regularly and collaboratively review assessment data for the purpose of improving practice to reach measurable achievement goals, something magical happens" (p. 1).

In addition, Schmoker (2002) has found substantial evidence that desirable results are virtually inevitable when teachers work in teams to assess standards. The teams meet to review achievement data and set a limited number of measurable goals. He recommends teachers focus on one standard, such as measurement in math or voice in writing, to target specific skills. He says that teams should "work regularly and collectively to design, adapt, and assess instructional strategies targeted directly at specific standards of low performance revealed by the assessment data" (p. 11).

Roy (2004b) describes how staff developers during the early 1970s focused on content. She states they were more concerned with the good presenters and good programs. The staff developers believed everything would fall into place provided the right content was selected. However, the Rand Studies published in 1978 found that many factors other than the content impacted the effectiveness or sustainability of the Title IV-C three-year projects. The study showed that teacher involvement was necessary for project success and that even though district support was essential, neither top-down nor grassroots efforts were sufficient—collaboration was the key. The study also described how the greater the scope of change, the more time and effort were required. The study authors also recommended that the "staff may need to 'reinvent' their own process for implementation—implementation plans cannot be *taken off the shelf*" (Roy, 2004b, p. 3).

In other words, the *process* was as important as the *content,* and few formal programs developed by others meet all the needs of the district. Roy (2004b) describes process as the use of data to determine priority goals, the development of collegiality to support change, the use of a variety of models and designs to ensure development of knowledge and skills, and the quality implementation of innovations. As a result of research, classroom coaching is now considered a *necessity,* not a frill, if quality implementation is to occur. Even top performers in sports or in the classroom never outgrow their need for coaching. What worked in the past or what worked for most students may not work today with students.

Guastello (2004) believes that parents should also be included in the community of learners because they are the key motivating dynamic in a child's life. Parents must also understand the expectations placed on their child in terms of learning outcomes and achievement. Guastello cites Walberg's 1984 research that contends "parent involvement and home factors are more important for student achievement than are student characteristics, instructional strategies, environmental factors, and increased time in academic learning" (p. 80). Teachers can help students know the expectations for quality work; parents can reinforce and support the teachers' efforts by helping the students at home.

Roy (2004b, p. 3) discusses the importance of the results-based process that involves both teacher and student learning see Figure 1.2. The process begins with three steps:

1. Determine what students need to know and be able to do.

2. Determine what teachers need to know and be able to do.

3. Plan and design staff development to accomplish the intended results.

By beginning with the end in mind, teachers plan backward and design the performance task scenario, the activities, strategies, checklists, and rubrics that show evidence that the students have, in fact, mastered the standard. Hopefully, they will also attain a deep understanding of the important concepts embedded in the benchmarks and standards.

Figure 1.2 Results-Based Process

What students need to know and be able to do.	What educators need to know and be able to do, know and be able to ensure student success.	Professional development that ensures educators acquire necessary knowledge and skills.

■ THE SIX-STEP PROCESS

The first step in the process described in this book involves bringing together teams of teachers to analyze both the formal data from test scores and the informal data from diagnostic and classroom assessments see Figures 1.3–1.6. The teachers then determine what key standards need to be addressed to help their students succeed. These grade-level or content-specific groups of teachers collaborate to design and implement the curriculum unit, select appropriate instructional strategies, and develop the authentic assessments they will use to help all the students in their classes. Once they decide what they need to do, the teachers may request a specific type of professional development that will help them achieve their own goals. In many schools, these teams engage in mini action research projects to explore effective practices to help their students. Teachers become "embedded" staff developers who then coach or train other teachers to use the best practices.

Once they have analyzed the data, teachers examine the standards and generate the big ideas and the essential questions they want students to be able to understand and answer at the end of the unit. After unpacking the standards to find the key understanding, teachers break down the criteria in the standard and rearrange them (repacking) in sequential order. When the key steps are arranged or chunked in sequential order, the teachers can more easily organize their own teaching. Teachers also focus on the language of the standards (LOTS). After the teachers feel comfortable with the vocabulary terms and concepts, they design an engaging problem scenario. The performance task scenario should be linked directly to one of their curriculum units and designed to cluster many of the standards to provide a context. Students should be able to see why they must *use* all the content knowledge and skills they are learning. The tasks also motivate the students because they resemble real-life problems people regularly face in life.

The last two steps involve embedding all the vocabulary and essential ideas from the curriculum objectives and the standards into student-friendly checklists. The checklists provide the students with a step-by-step process to complete each of the projects and the performance and provide specific feedback to the students to help them improve their learning. These formative assessments help teachers know which students still need help—before the project is due so that the teachers can differentiate their instruction to help the students succeed.

Checklists also help students organize themselves and internalize the process so eventually they can accomplish the same task without the scaffolding provided by the teacher.

The final step addresses the issue of quality. Although the checklist tells the student what to include, it does not describe the levels of quality. When the criteria checklist is converted to an analytical rubric, it describes the degrees of quality and answers the age-old question, "How good is good enough?"

Throughout the process teachers collaborate to examine student work, analyze and interpret the data, and decide how best to help the students who have not mastered the standards. The collaborative ongoing process can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual teachers and students.

Figure 1.3   From Standards to Rubrics in Six Steps

Step 1: Target the Standards	How can teachers work collaboratively to analyze data and target the standards?
Step 2: Find the Big Ideas	How can teachers analyze the standard and determine the big ideas and the essential questions that students will need to understand?
Step 3: Organize Teacher Checklists	How can teachers define key terms from the standards and organize the criteria into checklists to guide their instruction?
Step 4: Create Performance Tasks	How can teachers create motivating tasks correlated to curriculum and standards to establish a relevant context for the students?
Step 5: Develop Student Checklists	How can teachers guide students sequentially through each step in the process of completing an assignment?
Step 6: Design Teaching Rubrics	How good is good enough? How can students attain excellence by achieving the indicators described in the rubric?

Figure 1.4   Step 1: Analyze the Data and Target the Standards

What are your data sources?

Based on the results of the third-grade state tests last year, students are having a difficult time writing a narrative in class and on standardized tests. The fourth-grade teachers agree that students do not understand the narrative writing process when they write papers in class. They tend to switch from a narrative approach to an expository approach in the middle of their papers and cannot maintain a consistent first-person point of view.

What areas of weakness need to be addressed?

We need to help students develop plot, establish point of view, include descriptive language, and organize a narrative appropriately.

(Continued)

(Continued)

What key standard targets this area of weakness?

Standard

The student demonstrates competence in a variety of genres. The student produces a narrative that

a. engages the reader by establishing a context, creating a point of view, and otherwise developing reader interest;

b. establishes a plot, setting, conflict, and/or significance of events;

c. creates an organizing structure;

d. includes sensory details and concrete language to develop plot and character;

e. excludes extraneous details and inconsistencies;

f. develops complex characters through actions describing the motivation of characters and character conversation;

g. uses a range of appropriate narrative strategies such as dialogue, tension, or suspense;

h. provides a sense of closure to the writing.

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Figure 1.5   Application: Target the Standards

What are your data sources?

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What areas of weakness need to be addressed?

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What key standard targets this area of weakness?

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Standard:

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What are the criteria, indicators, descriptors, or elements that describe this standard in detail? List them.
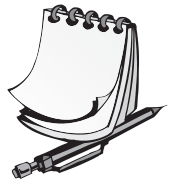
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Figure 1.6 Reflection: Target the Standards

How can teachers work collaboratively to target analyze the data and the standards?

1. What role do you think data plays in education today? How do you collect, analyze, and interpret data? What do you do with the results of the data analysis?

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2. How do teachers in your school collaborate? Do you work in grade-level or content teams? Do you work in vertical teams? Do you have professional learning communities? Explain.

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3. Reflect on how standards-based teaching is impacting the way you teach.

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