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# Feedback, Accountability, and the Standards-based System

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# Feedback, Accountability, and the Standards-based System

The standards-based system provides feedback and accountability, and, more importantly, it challenges educators to re-examine basic assumptions about teaching, learning, and schooling. These assumptions are

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## Dannelle D. Stevens

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changing as a result of the standards-based system, and this has positively affected practices in the classroom.

### Assumptions of the Standards-based System

#### 1. All Children Can Learn.

Fundamental to education is the assumption that all children can learn. If all Oregon children can learn, all children can eventually make it to each of the 3rd, 5th, 8th grade benchmarks and receive their Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) in the 10th grade. To receive their CIM, they must meet pre-determined standards in reading, writing, speaking, and mathematics. They will receive feedback on their progress toward these goals at each of the benchmarks. Of course, as teachers we know that children come to us with a variety of talents, some of which are not measured by any standardized test. Yet, the standards-based system admonishes us to teach all children to read, write, speak, and calculate at a pre-specified level of performance as defined by the state standards.

Many schools have taken on this challenge by fine-tuning their assessment system so that they can match their instructional strategies to help children in areas in which they really need help. Even though some schools are struggling to find quick and accurate assessment systems, others have matched assessment and instruction. For example, according to state indicators of SES (socio-economic status), Wichita Elementary in North Clackamas School District was expected to have only a third of their children reach benchmark at 3rd and 5th grades. Through strategic use of assessment and matched instruction, all children have met their 3rd grade benchmark, and 80 percent have met it in 5th grade.

Wichita Elementary School identifies kindergarten children who do not know the alphabet, do not know how to hold a book, and who are not ready to read. These children attend all-day kindergarten where Title I teachers work with them on basic reading readiness

skills. Another practice at the school is to restructure the typical day for Title I aides. Aides now work before and after school to remediate skill deficits in reading, writing, and math. By using the adult time differently, children have more opportunities to succeed. This school believes that all children can learn, and, to make that a reality, they not only have to assess and teach differently but also to deliver instruction in a variety of formats.

Another new practice in the elementary schools is reading block. After assessment of reading skills, students are placed in one of 25 levels across all the grades. Every teacher in the building, including special educators, has one leveled group for one hour a day. Teachers inform parents that this is a "sacred time" – no field trips, no dental appointments, no tardies, and there are no calls over the intercom to classroom teachers. Students are assessed every six weeks and may change levels depending on their progress. Surveys of students indicate that they like the system because they are with students who read as they do.

#### 2. Standards-based System Is a System-wide Change.

In the past curriculum, key elements of the educational system – instruction, curriculum, and assessment – have been loosely coupled. Teachers had much independence in selecting of teaching methods and the curriculum. State assessments tested general knowledge and were not matched with what teachers taught. Except for special education and other civil rights issues, the state and federal governments were minimally involved with what was directly happening in classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

During the last 15 years, the federal government and most state governments have become more involved in school curricula, instruction, and assessment. In Oregon, for example, because sixty percent of the state budget goes to schools, legislators have become very involved in assessing school and district learning outcomes. Development of the state-wide standards-based system is an indicator of this. These trends do not appear to be lessening in the near future.

The ultimate changes in schooling are enormous. At a recent state meeting, Ron Naso, Superintendent of North Clackamas School District, said, "In the past, there was a dichotomy between assessment and instruction. Now we must realize that assessment should be a

form of learning which impacts instruction." The elements of the system need to be linked more closely together. What teachers teach should be tested. What is tested should be in the curriculum. What is in the curriculum needs to be taught. To do this well, everyone – teachers, parents, students – needs to be aware of what students are expected to learn.

The implementation of the standards-based system has led to substantial changes within the school system that enable teachers, students, and families to understand more fully what is expected of them. These changes include scoring guides, curricular articulation within and across grade levels, and common state testing programs. Of these, two most central to success seem to be scoring guides and curricular articulation.

Scoring guides are lists of criteria by which a task will be judged. The lists indicate what is the level of performance for a score of 2 (developing), 4 (meets benchmark), and 6 (exceeds benchmark). State writing, math, speaking, and reading scoring guides are written in both adult and student language and are the same for 3rd through 12th grades, allowing students and teachers to become familiar with expectations over the years. Whether the teacher uses the state scoring guides or makes up his or her own for the task, the key to scoring guides is that students know ahead of time the expectations for quality performance. Teachers have also worked together as a community to score student work. In the process the teachers have come to share a common language of assessment criteria and learned more about the criteria by which to judge student work. In this way, the scoring guide has served as professional development for teachers.

Curriculum articulation provides teachers with a clearer sense of direction than they had before. In the past, teachers seldom had much sense of what their students had previously been taught. Curriculum guides offered a few suggestions but allowed for much latitude, and there was no way to be sure of what the students had actually learned, or what they needed to be prepared for in the coming year. The state standards challenge school districts to map their current curriculum and examine the content taught within grade levels, across grade levels, and even across school levels. The goal is to create a curriculum with fewer redundancies and more coherence than they had before. Benchmark teams, school-wide teams, and even cross-district teams have been established to chart the connections between what is taught at every stage of the benchmark from kindergarten up.

During the process of curricular alignment, teachers are assessing which of their teaching strategies seem to

work well with the state curriculum and which do not. When the curriculum is aligned, teachers can also offer more explicit student feedback about past progress and future expectations. When curriculum, assessment, and instruction are linked, we have a more cohesive and coherent system. Now, a child who writes a good paper about a little red wagon will be more likely to learn what she did right and how she can use that accomplishment to improve her writing in the future.

### **3. Teachers Cannot Implement the System Alone.**

If all children can learn, how can all teachers make this happen? The third fundamental assumption of the standards-based system is that teachers cannot make this difference alone. Schools, school districts, families and communities are partners in the learning of all children.

Some school practices have broadened the responsibility for student learning. At the middle and high school level, for example, a student's CIM portfolio must contain a daunting number of examples of student work, called performance tasks. The responsibility for preparing performance tasks for language arts has fallen to teachers outside of the language arts department. Many schools have doled out the state performance expectations to departments other than language arts just to accomplish all the expectations. The science teachers may be assessing student ability to write an expository essay using the writing scoring guide. The social studies teachers may be assessing student ability to give a speech according to standards in the state scoring guide.

Sharing tasks across the school has other residual, long lasting effects as well. When teachers work together, share their craft knowledge, and refine their practices together, children benefit. As Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) say,

Collegiality among teachers, as measured by the frequency of communication, mutual support, help, etc., was a strong indicator of implementation success. Virtually every research study on the topic has found this to be the case. (131-2)

Since the standards are more public and the students are more aware of expectations through the scoring guides, it is more likely that families can assist students to accomplish these goals. Molalla River School District, for example, has a report card that describes the levels of performance from kindergarten to 5th grade in reading and math. They chart the child's accomplishment of these expectations along a continuum. Unlike the traditional assessment system, everyone – teachers, families, students – is more aware of what is expected of students and where their children stand on the continuum.

#### **4. Standards-based Education Is Ultimately More Equitable than the Traditional Educational System.**

The assumption that the standards-based system is more equitable than traditional classroom assessment is the most difficult to understand. When a standard is set and the expectation is explicit and the assumption is that all must meet that standard, some may meet it and, for any number of different and totally acceptable reasons, some may not. Thus, it appears that standards are not equitable.

In reality, what is happening in Oregon is that schools are devising many new strategies to help all children meet the state benchmarks. Some of these include the practices mentioned above – restructuring adult time, curriculum articulation, scoring guides, and reading block. Schools are mobilizing their resources to be more systematic in assessment and instruction, particularly for the struggling students. With a more consistent and coherent curriculum, more thorough assessment and linked instruction, less successful students are getting more, not less, opportunity to learn.

#### **Implications of the Standards-based System**

The basic way the educational system works has changed since the advent of standards-based education. Teachers are no longer independent decision-makers about curriculum, assessment, and even instruction in their own classrooms. Children in the second grade are hearing the same vocabulary of assessment as those in the 10th grade. Families are more aware of state expectations. All in all, the system is more cohesive, more open, and more equitable. It provides more information to more people in a more consistent manner. For instance, we score students' writing using six meaningful writing traits, which we have taught them ahead of time – very different from what I remember about my own English classes where my teachers' praise of my writing included no substantive feedback which would have provided clues to help me repeat my success.

For some teachers, however, more cohesion, consistency, and common expectations can be a problem. More legislative control can deaden the creativity and excitement that teachers generate when teaching their own favorite topics. Yet, in many schools, increasing expectations and control by external agencies have led schools to institute different and positive practices. Schools are attending more closely to the children who are not succeeding and figuring out a variety of ways to meet their needs.

The standards-based system has the potential of meeting the needs of many more children and families than the traditional system. Our fundamental assump-

tions about what is possible in education have changed. Indeed, all children can learn, not only if teachers and schools begin to think more carefully about assessment and instruction, but also, if more people are involved in the process. This is truly a system-wide change which has begun to benefit and include more children, families, and communities in the education of our youth.

#### **Reference**

Fullan, M., and S. Stiegelbauer (1991). *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

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