

Move the Beehive Gently

*By setting minimum standards
one state has improved
instruction in its schools.*

A LEGISLATURE passes a law, ties its enforcement to disbursement and withholding of state school money, and directs that this measure is for the purpose of improving the quality of instruction through the application of standards. What have you—a dangerous instrument, a powerful club, a wicked centralization policy? Or do you have a means of helping districts to provide more equal educational opportunities—a way of helping administrators, teachers and boards to take a more objective look at the local educational situation? Have you provided a need for communities and educators to join in planning for the future of their schools? Many educators would say, "No, you have not." In general, they would subscribe to the concept that state-wide standards enforced from the top are really not very effective in developing quality education and usually vitiate creativeness and desire to improve at the district level.

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Can minimum school standards bring quality education to schools? Yes, this can happen to a degree not thought probable in both large and small districts. What you have in any situation depends upon a variety of forces, facets, and factors. Most instruments for measuring quality at state-wide level are very limited. All estimates must rely heavily upon informed opinion.

Significant Improvement

What is the nature of quality? Quality is a stage and state of perfection which is accepted as being good. What is considered good has many relative aspects. It is dependent upon the generally accepted values of a person or, in larger group life, those of the community.

Since the term "standard" is basic to the problem in hand, there should be a clear understanding of this term. A standard as used in this discussion is a legalized value implemented through the authority of the State Board of Education.



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This outmoded building at Port Orford could not sustain a modern school program.

Changes in action patterns and acceptance of new values by society do not occur quickly. It has been 12 years since the legislature provided for standardization of schools in Oregon. During this period improvement of instruction state wide has been evaluated three times, twice by formal studies and in 1959 by three committees (a professional committee of 42 persons, a state school board association committee, and a study by an interim committee of the legislature).

The first study was by Dr. T. C. Holy.¹ He used as part of the evaluative base 67 of the objectives of the American Association of School Administrators goals for education as abstracted from *Schools for All American Children* covering school organization, administration, teaching staff, curriculum, buildings, equipment, and teaching supplies. This

¹T. C. Holy Report. *A Study of the Public Elementary and Secondary Education in Oregon*, 1950, p. 119.

report contains the statement: "There is much evidence that the quality of education is rapidly improving as a result of the standardization program."

In 1954, under the auspices of the University of Oregon, the state was again surveyed to determine the effects of the Basic School Support Fund and the standardization program in improving instruction. The opinions of the school board members and county school superintendents were used in this evaluation. A few quotes from the study follow:

"The county superintendents report some significant improvements made as a result of the standardization program. . . . The physical condition of school plants has been materially improved. . . . Along with construction of new buildings, the standards have resulted in the renovation of older buildings, the improvement of lighting, and progress in making the school an attractive center in which children live and learn. . . . One



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Community pride is shown in the new school building at Port Orford.

of the chief strengths which they have noted has been improvement in the attitudes of the school boards and communities as a result of the progress made in both facilities and school programs. One superintendent said, 'We are proud of our school plants where we used to make excuses,' and another wrote, 'As the schools improve, the community spirit improves.'²

"There was a general feeling that what has been done has been done well and the demand has now far surpassed the ability to supply. One superintendent said, 'The people are crying for assistance and appreciate that which they receive.'³

In 1958-59 three committees studied state education and standards. The first statement of the professional committee of 42 members follows: "The present

high position of Oregon's schools in the nation can be attributed in large part to the elementary and secondary school standards and their relationship to the Basic School Support Fund. Professional educators generally are of the opinion that the standards have been a powerful motivating force for the improvement of Oregon schools and should be maintained."

Evidences of Growth

The school board report contained no specific recommendations for change of standards and stated that items in areas of concern were so few that it was impossible to locate distinct points of criticism.

The Legislative Interim Committee summarizes: "Finally, the committee unanimously agreed that the setting and application of standards has had a powerful effect in improving the school pro-

² *A Study of the Basic School Support Fund in Oregon*. University of Oregon, 1954, p. 188.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

gram in Oregon and should be continued.”⁴

Among the other evidences of quality of a school system are the honors and academic ranking of students and the type and activities in which teachers and students engage. During the past five years, Oregon leadership has produced national presidents of the following voluntary professional associations: The National Education Association, the Secondary School Principals Association, Elementary School Principals Association, Classroom Teachers Association, Student NEA, the Rural Department of NEA, The National Society of State Directors of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, National Association of State Consultants in Elementary Education, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education, National Rehabilitation Association, and the American Driver and Safety Education Association. In addition, Oregon educators are included in many important national commissions and executive committees.

Oregon's schools and communities in one decade have changed remarkably. As an evaluation is made through the use of criteria found in the standards, it has always been the practice to ask schools to prepare and send to the county superintendent and through him to the State Department of Education a report of the plans that the district has made for improving its status. It is with much amusement that a reply to an early evaluation is recalled. The school was

quite “run down” and the supervisor had called the board's attention to a leak in the roof that was keeping children's clothes damp. The suggestion had been made that a remedy ought to be found immediately. The reply from the district clerk came back promptly: “About the leak in the roof—we have taken care of that. The water is not standing in the hall. We have bored a hole in the floor.”

Other early experiences and situations which existed only a short ten years ago are so far from conditions today that, if they were not recorded in the records, they would not be believed. Even then Oregon's children had hot lunches. In a one-room mountain school, the teacher and children made lovely oilcloth doilies for the desks, and just before serving the lunch the children were dismissed for handwashing. The supervisor went, too, only to find all the children down at the creek washing in the cold mountain stream. They came back invigorated. Today it would be almost impossible to find children who did not have hot water under pressure, good washing facilities, and beautiful lunchrooms.

Beneficial Effects

In the early days of the program a board wrote, “How do we get our school to spend the \$500 we put in the budget each year for library books?” This was not atypical. Many teachers told the supervisor that boards were unwilling to do this or that at the same time boards were wondering why this same action was not taken. Many boards have said, “We don't know if our school is doing right; we don't know what good education is.” One of the important beneficial effects is that the standards have provided a base of communication upon

⁴ Report of the Legislative Interim Education Committee, 1957, p. 5.

which boards, administrators and teachers can reach a common understanding.

Requests today ask for a program consultant—someone to help organize a study, someone to help the district start a self-evaluation project, someone to work with a lay committee, someone to coordinate college consultants. The number of requests is legion and overwhelms the State Department. This poses a serious problem. Will the profession assume the responsibilities of self-evaluation rapidly enough to keep the standardization program from breaking under its own weight? The requests for help that have been generated must largely be cared for at district and county levels if a good balance is maintained.

Typically Oregon's children work in warm, evenly heated, colorful, clean, light, airy classrooms. The furniture is blond, movable and adjustable. A multiple selection of modern texts is available as well as a good supply of supplementary materials and a place in which to store them. Ample school sites, playground equipment, and gymnasiums are the rule at elementary and secondary level. Instructional material is plentiful. This was not always so.

Most principals are expected to be the instructional leaders of the schools and are given time and secretarial help for this reason. As new and better equipment has been provided, in-service programs at state, county, and local district levels have been developed to aid teachers in feeling at home with these tools.

It would be presumptuous to attribute all progress to standardization, but it has seemed to provide the broad base. Why has this powerful standardization program with a potential for undesirable results not become an albatross around our necks? There are several reasons:

1. The standards represent the thinking of a broad sampling of the school people of the state and are essentially what the educators had been asking be established. The demand for them came from within the profession. (A group of educators who were used to working together closely at all levels.)

2. The goal of the program, as directed by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has been to help the districts to plan for themselves.

3. The philosophy of the implementation has been that each district is different. Just as children vary in their potential and capacity, so the plans of the districts as to manner and time of fulfillment of standards must likewise vary. The principle of flexibility within a given framework has been most helpful.

4. There was an easily developed readiness within the profession to make instruction better.

Being able to analyze and assess the readiness of a community and school is not easy. It is far easier to work on buildings, equipment and instructional materials than to raise the questions: Is this good for girls and boys? For which children is this good? Why?

The area of instruction is closely related to us personally as well as professionally. It is an area in which educators can lose "face" rapidly. It is so easy to bruise the very fibers of professional respectability. It is in the area of practices for improving instruction that the rivulets of power should all but disappear. Every educator, whether in a group or alone, needs commendation and inspiration to stand mentally on tiptoe as opportunity for improved quality in the education of children is developed. Yes, standards do help quality, and as we pioneer in using them we grow professionally.

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