

Standards, Not Standardization: Evoking Quality Student Work

Our schools must no longer accept token efforts judged by variable criteria. We must expect quality from every student based on models of outstanding performance.



In order to raise the performance levels of all students, we must ensure that they are routinely given quality work to do—they deserve a student Bill of Intellectual Rights, and the first right is equal access to high-quality intellectual tasks. And faculties should be the ones to develop the standards of performance of this work that they are willing to uphold.

Photograph by John McNamara

What would you picture if I asked you to imagine a person of high intellectual standards? Surely not someone who merely earned good grades or scored well on tests. The term *standards* implies a passion for excellence and habitual attention to quality. A school has standards when it has high and consis-

tent expectations of *all* learners in *all* courses. High standards, whether in people or institutions, are revealed through reliability, integrity, self-discipline, passion, and craftsmanship.

Alas, it is thus not too strong to say that many schools exhibit no standards. Imagine, for example, going to a diving meet where the judges alter

their standards from dive to dive based on each diver's background, "track," or effort. Further imagine that they do not agree as to what constitutes a well-executed dive nor about the difficulty of the dive—and feel no obligation to agree. This would be intolerable at any high school diving meet in America; in classrooms everywhere it is business as usual.

The solution is not to mandate a few paper-and-pencil "items" on diving that can be "objectively" scored. Standards have nothing to do with standardized proxy tests and arbitrary cut-off scores. Standards are educative, *specific* examples of excellence on the tasks we value: the four-minute mile is a usable standard as well as a genuine one; so is the ability to read and effectively cite articles in the *New York Times*. Standards are upheld by the daily, local demand for quality and consistency at the tasks we deem important; standards are met by rigorous evaluation of *necessarily varied* student products and performances against those standards.

The only way to improve schools, therefore, is to ensure that faculties judge local work using authentic standards and measures. We need concrete benchmarks for judging student work at essential tasks, and we need to feel duty-bound by the results if they are unsatisfactory. That means meeting *self-imposed targets* relating to the quality of work expected from *all* students, not just those in advanced classes. And it means doing away with the current extremes of private, eccentric teacher grading, on the one hand; and secure, standardized tests composed of simplistic items on the other: in both cases we prevent students and teachers from understanding intellectual excellence and raising their own standards.

What Is a "Standard"?

There are different meanings to the word *standard*, and we would do well to clarify them. When used in the singular to describe human accomplishment, a "standard" is an exemplary performance serving as a benchmark. The music of Yo-Yo Ma and Wynton Marsalis each sets a standard



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Authentic standards give us a means to understand and monitor the daily work required in working toward them. But with this discipline eventually comes freedom.

for other musicians; the fiction of Tom Wolfe and Mark Twain each sets a standard for American writers. These standards are educative and enticing: they provide not only models for young musicians or writers but a set of implicit criteria against which to measure their own achievement. Progress involves successive approximations in the direction of the exemplary.

But there is no single model of excellence; there are always a variety of exemplars to emulate. Excellence is not a mere uniform correctness but the ability to unite personal style with mastery of a subject in a product or performance of one's design. There is thus no possible generic test of whether student work is "up to standard." Rather, the "test" of excellence amounts to applying a set of *criteria* that we infer from various idiosyncratic excellent performances, in the judging of *diverse* forms of local student work.

Here we see where American education has gone so wrong: we have uniformity in testing, but no exemplars; we have standardization of *input*—the items on the test—but no standards for judging the quality of all student *output*—performance on authentic tasks. We have cutoff scores, but no way of ensuring that scores correspond to qualitative distinctions in real-world performance—authentic standards. By over-relying on these audits of performance, our students are just as the Resnicks declared: the

most tested but the least examined in the world.¹ Or we devise standards that offer only vague statements of value or intent, providing neither exemplars of them nor insight into how the standard might be met.²

The greatest harm of these proxy tests and standards is their reliance on secrecy. People improve—that is, raise their own standards—by judging all their work against the exemplary performances that set the standard and by valuing the performances in question. But if test validity depends upon secure tests with seemingly arbitrary standards, how will students and teachers improve their performance?

Nor are we likely to meet a standard if it isn't used to judge our work when we are young. Giving grades only according to age-related norms prevents students from knowing where they stand in terms of genuine excellence. Why don't districts publish the best teacher assessments and student products at all grades? How can a 3rd grade teacher of reading demand excellence without knowing what 6th grade students are routinely expected to produce in our best schools? Why don't middle school social studies teachers routinely use the questions and rubrics on Advanced Placement history essays for practice—just as the basketball or music coach uses genuine exemplars to improve the performance and raise the sights of student performers?

It makes no sense, therefore, to talk of different standards and expectations

for different groups of students. A standard offers an objective ideal, serving as a worthy and tangible goal for everyone—even if, at this point in time, for whatever reason, some cannot (yet!) reach it. Watch kids play basketball, Nintendo, or the keyboard. They are making measurable progress toward meeting the high standard set by the best performers before them. Our task in assessment is to similarly provide students with a record of the longitudinal progress they make in emulating a standard. (We can still give age-cohort letter grades in addition, so that useful comparisons might be made if that seems desirable; and we might set targets whereby students who are far from meeting standards would have some guideposts along the way to judge the quality of their progress.)

Eight decades ago, Thorndike called for evaluation that would compare student work to standards instead of to each other's work.³ We are no closer to it, but the British have developed such a scoring system for their new national assessment.⁴ Student work would be judged on a 10-point scale built from a standard of exit-level excellence and used *over the course of the student's career*. Thus, elementary students are expected to produce good work (in the sense of norms for one's age-group), but the best work would likely receive a 3 or 4 out of 10. No stigma to low scores here: the point is to give students a realistic sense of where they are in terms of where they ultimately need to be. A smaller-scale effort is under way in Upper Arlington, Ohio, where language arts teachers are scoring all work across the K-3 grades using the same rubrics and locally devised reading tests that use real books deemed worthy by the faculties of those schools.

I remain mystified by the view that such a system would be debilitating to the less able, thus increasing the drop-out rate. If such a view were true, no novice would persevere at any challenging task—where initial failure is *unavoidable*. We persist with music, debate, soccer, or computer games because we perceive value in the challenge. We see models of those before



To excel in any field—whether it be sports, music, science—one must experience some failure along the way. But having a standard of excellence to strive for is a powerful motivator to keep going.

us who prove it can be done well, and there is a record of our slow but tangible progress toward a standard we can be proud of.

Standards are thus not abstract aims, wishful thinking, or the effect of arcane psychometric tricks. They are *specific* and guiding pictures of worthy goals. Real standards enable all performers to understand their *daily* work in terms of specific exemplars for the work in progress, and thus how to monitor and raise their standards.⁵ We are losing the standards battle because faculties assume that the only tests that matter are the secure ones over which they have no control and about which they know far too little to adjust *their* standards. Without high-quality local assessment, by which faculties gain control over the setting and upholding of standards, site-based management of schools may turn out to be an empty promise or a cruel hoax.

Standards as Intellectual Virtues

If a *standard* is an exemplar, the plural form, *standards*, means something quite different. When we speak of persons or institutions with standards—especially when modified by the word *high*—we mean they live by a set of mature, coherent, and consistently applied values evident in all their actions. Ultimately, mastery of a subject and autonomy as a thinker are completely dependent on such virtues: our work will be “up to standard” only if we work to high standards in all we do. Higher standards are not stiffer test-result quotas but a more vigorous commitment to intellectual values upheld consistently and daily in the face of entropy, fatalism, and the occasional desire on everyone's part to not give a damn.

A harmful consequence of multiple-choice tests, therefore, comes from

their exclusive concern with mere right answers. High standards are only to be found in completed tasks, products, and performances that *require* such intellectual virtues as craftsmanship, self-criticism, and persistence; when complex tasks are done consistently well, we easily and validly infer that the worker has high standards. By requiring only a circling of an already formed answer to a simplistic question, our tests cannot reveal anything about student intellectual virtues or vices. And worse, such tests may be abetting the very vices we deplore: students learn to quickly go through each test item without lingering too long on any one, and they learn that being right matters a great deal more than whether one can justify a result.

Unless we recapture this view of standards as intellectual virtues, we will fail to see the harm of linking standards to cutoff scores on sets of test items, given to students once a year on a rigid schedule. We now wrongly chastise the merely slow, thus confusing learning speeds with standards. Is a 5th grader reading at a 3rd grade level necessarily working in a substandard way? Our state and national testing assumes so. But what of the bright 5th grader who writes at the 7th grade level, yet who regularly produces substandard work in class—absence of precision, style, thoroughness, and so forth? Our tests overvalue their right answers and underexamine the quality of work they can produce—*given* the material they have mastered to this point in time.

Virtues are habits, reinforced or undermined by what is valued daily at the local level. If we are serious about raising standards, therefore, we need to look where few would-be reformers have the patience to look: in the grading policies, criteria, and standards used in judging (and thus reinforcing) student performance. Here is where we find *de facto* standards, irrespective of professed values: are grades and comments routinely sending the message that diligence, craft, insight, and “voice” matter? Or do teacher evaluations routinely focus only on the mistakes easiest to count (such as spelling, computation, or cor-

rectable errors of fact) or on “student attitude”—neither of which have much to do with work that meets high standards? Are there shared teacher exemplars and criteria for assessing student performance? Are teachers consistent in their grading—as individuals and across teachers? Clearly not, on all counts.

Large-scale performance assessment is no better. On even the best state writing tests, the prompts are woefully generic and devoid of links to curriculum, to high-quality tasks. The anchor papers used in statewide writing assessments may be the best of the batch, but not necessarily the highest quality. By comparing only 8th grade work to itself and by using rubrics that rely heavily on general, comparative language (*excellent, good, and poor* show up frequently in the scoring descriptors), we end up with merely a fancy norm-referenced test.

To develop scoring criteria linked to real exemplars, “testers have to get out of their offices . . . and into the field where they actually analyze performance into its components.”⁶ The foreign language proficiency guidelines

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of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages show what such a system would entail. There, the scores reflect significant and specific strengths and weaknesses about the speaker's performance. The guidelines go so far as to identify typical errors for each stage of language performance. For example, the mistake of responding to the question *Quel sport préférez-vous?* with the answer *Vous préférez le sport tennis* is noted as “an error characteristic of speakers” at the mid-novice level, where “utterances are marked and often flawed by repetition of an interlocutor's words . . .”⁷ These are the kinds of standards that need to be developed in all subjects.⁸

Standards as Consistency and Quality Control

To speak of exemplars and intellectual virtues is still to think of standards in terms of the individual student. But if we are to obtain better quality from schools, we are going to have to challenge the current low expectations for all students in a course, age-cohort, and entire school population.

A quality school is not judged by the work of its best students or its average performance. An exemplary school is one in which the gap between its best and its worst student performances is approaching zero or at least far narrower than the norm. In quality organizations there is a team ethos: our performance is only as good as our weakest members—a far cry from schools, where tracking often institutionalizes low expectations and exaggerates differences.

Standard-setting in schools thus begins with specific targets and public plans to reduce performance differences by school subgroups—track, socioeconomic status, gender, courses, and departments—to near zero, over a set period of time. Otherwise we remain imprisoned in the low (and sometimes racist) expectations that doom schools to mediocrity and students in lower tracks to an alienated intellectual life.

It is also essential to ensure that all students are judged against the same standards of performance, regardless of tracking or special needs, if we are

to have any handle on a school's overall performance. Again, such standards are concrete: one superintendent argued that since we profess that "all children can learn," it makes sense to expect 100 percent of the students in her New York district to pass the Regents Exams in every course. This was greeted with howls of protest by the high school faculty, who pronounced it impossible. She then turned it right around: What, then, was the faculty willing to set as a specific target percentage for next year? After some discussion the faculty set themselves the goal of a passing rate some 11 percent higher for the year than preceding years—and proceeded to meet the target. South Carolina did the same when it quadrupled the number of students taking Advanced Placement courses and tests and successfully sought to keep the state passing rate constant.

Our grading system actually encourages teachers and administrators to avoid such considerations. That is not a slur: I am talking about the absence of specific policies for judging and adjusting school and teacher performance by the performance of cohorts of students. Few teachers and admin-

istrators are compelled now to answer the questions: What are you willing to guarantee? What exit-level results for the cohort will you regard as "up to standard"? Effective reform begins with such self-obligating standards. But if we lack tests with face validity or standards for judging exit-level performance (as almost all schools do), we will be unable to pose, never mind act on, the questions. If we want to see greater consistency in student performance, we have to begin by meeting a more basic, prior standard: consistency of grading by teachers. We need to begin from the commonsense view of standards that grades should represent a stable set of shared exemplars. School performance would improve overnight if superintendents and school boards said something like: "We do not feel it is our place to tell you how to assess student work, but we expect different teachers to agree on grading policies and to agree on the grade for a given piece of work within a tolerable standard. Please devise such a policy and uphold it." It would follow that districts should devise standards for the *tolerable variance in the grading of student work across teachers, departments, schools, and districts where the same papers are scored by different teachers*. In fact, to gain public credibility for local assessing, faculties must periodically seek and publish audits of their own grading practices.

Standards and Quality

To meet standards is not merely to comply with imposed quotas. It is to produce work that one can be proud of; it is to produce quality.

We do not judge Xerox, the Boston Symphony, the Cincinnati Reds, or Dom Perignon vineyards on the basis of indirect, easy to test, and common indicators. Nor would the workers in those places likely produce quality if some generic, secure test served as the only measure of their success in meeting a standard. Demanding *and getting* quality, whether from students or adult workers, means framing standards in terms of the work that we undertake and value. And it means framing expectations about that work

which make quality a necessity, not an option. Consider:

- the English teacher who instructs peer-editors to mark the place in a student paper where they lost interest in it or found it slapdash and to hand it back for revision at that point;

- the professor who demands that all math homework be turned in with another student having signed off on it, where one earns the grade for one's work *and* the grade for the work that each person (willingly!) counter-signed;

- the social studies teacher of 6th graders who demands a book report that is "perfect" in execution. We might quibble with what *perfect* means here, but the kids understand. They drop business-as-usual, blasé, behavior. They scurry and scramble for help—from each other and other adults. They double-check spelling and facts. They make the prose interesting. And students who typically turn in substandard work find to their delight that they can produce excellent work.

Until we send the message, from day one in each classroom, that quality matters and that work will be rejected unless and until it is up to standard, then students will know we do not require excellence. Why don't we routinely require poorly done work to be resubmitted in acceptable form? Why don't standards for passing grades require the student to have produced at least *some* quality products (thus undoing the harm to quality caused by computing only averages that do not reveal shoddy, inconsistent work)? Though many of the Mastery Learning and Outcome-Based Education programs have been plagued by poor-quality assessment tasks and exemplars, the guiding ideas remain sound and need to be emulated: by requiring students to work until standards are met, we teach students and teachers that work is not done until it is done right. Too many students learn now that work is satisfactory if they merely followed the directions and turned something in.

The key to any quality control is to avoid substandard work *before* it happens, before the final "test." The aim is to adjust our practices *before* it is too

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late to avoid substandard performance: this is true for teachers as well as students. When we operate in a school system with authentic standards, we do not wait for year-end results on external audit-tests, nor grade work in a vacuum. We routinely alter syllabi, teaching methods, schedules, and policies as necessary to *ensure* that students end up meeting the standard.

Since quality is a function of being dissatisfied with our work to the point of revising it until it is excellent, it is absurd to use only tests that cannot be known in advance or retaken because their validity is compromised, whether they be externally or internally designed tests. Quality emerges only when we are held to higher and higher standards on essential "tests" of performance. How else will students learn that we are serious about the virtues such as persistence and craftsmanship that we claim to value unless important tasks keep recurring?

Assessment that effectively improves performance is ultimately inseparable from accurate self-assessment, therefore impossible, if the only standards come from secure, one-shot tests. Using explicit benchmarks and criteria, we should routinely assess the student's self-assessments in the upper grades if we want to ensure that they are capable of independently producing quality work.

Intellectual excellence is not about conformity or uniformity of views but of conformity of all kinds of work to high standards. Think of the ultimate educational test: the graduate thesis and orals. We expect high-quality written and oral performance on what must always be a unique challenge. Other countries use local and diverse assessment for accountability at the school level.⁹ In German *gymnasia* each teacher designs his or her own oral and written exams for the *Abitur* and has the exam approved by a regional board; in England, candidates for the secondary certificate (GCSE) submit individualized portfolios for scoring according to standard criteria. Similarly, on the Advanced Placement art portfolio exam in this country, the student submits a variety of work to be judged according to fixed criteria.

The view that only high-quality curriculums can yield high-quality work leads to the truly undemocratic and dysfunctional view that students taking low-level courses cannot be held to high standards.

Output, Not Input

The standards question is ultimately twofold: What are the essential tasks worth mastering? And how good is good *enough* at those tasks? The former question concerns the quality of the *input*—the work we give to students to do. The second question concerns *output*—what are the criteria student work must meet, and how demanding should the standard be?

But many people assume that a good answer to the first question will solve the problem of the second question. A better curriculum and better tests will surely help raise standards.¹⁰ But while necessary, such improvements are not sufficient to obtain excellent student performance. Putting Yugo assembly-line workers in a Mercedes plant will not necessarily yield quality cars. Some of our alternative schools, for example, involve students in authentic and engaging tasks; but because work is not compared to exemplars and the criteria used in assessing may involve no more than the student's good-faith effort, the results are often not of high quality.

The view that only high-quality curriculums can yield high-quality work is more than myopic. It is pernicious because it leads to the truly undemocratic and dysfunctional view that students taking low-level courses cannot

be held to high standards. In the lower tracks we rarely give students quality work to do, and we rarely expect quality products in return. Why is this so? Isn't it more sensible to say that the point of tracking (as in band or athletics) is to maximize our expectations of students and *increase* the quality of their work, that using easier versions of *worthy* tasks should make it *more* likely that student work should exhibit style, craftsmanship, thoroughness, "voice," and so on? Pride in one's work depends on such traits being expected by all forms of assessment.¹¹

College admissions offices are no help. They perpetually send the message that the quality of student performance equates with the quality of work assigned—that is, course title or track. Thus, a *B* in a course called Physics or European History is considered a better performance than an *A* in Consumer Math or Home Economics. Local grading only completes the vicious circle: since grades are not given according to set standards and criteria, the transcript is unreliable, and colleges have to increasingly rely on test scores and hard-sounding courses.

To reverse the trend we need to realize that high test scores follow from excellent local assessment and uniform standards. We thus need standards for both input and output. For, if we are going to raise performance levels of all students (especially those in the lowest tracks), we will need to ensure that they are routinely given quality work to do. Thus, we need standards for the design of *all* local assignments and assessments—what I would call a Student Bill of Intellectual Rights. For me, the first right is for all students to have equal access to high-quality intellectual tasks, but faculties should be the ones to develop the standards they are willing to publicly uphold and be judged by if reform is to take place.

Exit-Level Standards

Schools would meet a higher, more apt standard if officials took seriously the idea that *de facto* high standards are set by the quality colleges and jobs we wish students to enter. A comment by a Dow Chemical quality control

executive shows how far we have to go in terms of linking our standards to the wider world's:

Specifications should define what it takes to satisfy the customer. . . . Quality is the customer's perception of excellence. Quality is what the customer says he needs, not what *our* tests indicate is satisfactory.¹²

This is old news in most vocational programs, athletic departments, and in many art, music, and debate classes, but it is unfortunately a novelty in the traditional academic subjects. Let's get beyond myth, anecdote, and intramural guessing about standards, then. How good is good enough—as determined by the actual expectations of the best schools our students now enter? Survey your graduates and their teachers; collect the tests routinely given at the nation's best colleges and what it takes to earn A's and B's on them; examine the current records of your former students; get from the faculty and employers of your alumni samples of assigned tasks, criteria for grading, and an assessment of how your graduates stack up against others from similar schools.

Two high schools in Colorado have made a modest start in redressing this problem by requiring an essay for graduation. All faculty, trained by the English department, grade the student papers. The essay prompt and the criteria and scoring standards used in the assessment are borrowed from the local university's freshman placement exam and scored in terms of those standards. The average score last year in one school was a 4.2 on a 9-point scale—showing, by the way, that local control of standards is not necessarily a conflict of interest: when asked to publicly set and uphold standards, the faculty is quite demanding.

Once such high standards were set, younger students could obtain practical insight about exit-level standards by having to regularly submit some work to be judged against such standards. With each piece of work judged "blind" (so that neither the author's name nor year is known), younger students—and their teachers—would know where they

A school has standards when it has high and consistent expectations of all learners in all courses.

stand because they would receive grades as if they were seniors.

Standards Must Empower

Standard-setting and -upholding is a paradoxical affair. The work must be local, but it must be done in terms of exemplars that come from a national benchmarking process. Tests, and the criteria by which results on them are judged, must themselves be standard-setting and standard-revealing.¹³ We will need standards for local standards, therefore, if we are to retain the promise of local control of schools while remaining mindful of the historical weaknesses of local assessment.

Developing local quality control will challenge deep-seated habits and beliefs, however. Impatient policymakers will clamor for the efficient external leverage provided by multiple-choice tests that allow for easy (if misleading) comparability. And naive teachers will continue to think that their groundless and unreliable grading habits are adequate to uphold, never mind raise, genuine standards. Let us somehow find the vision and confidence to resist both views, and salvage the promise of local control of schools by helping them develop commitment to uniform quality. Let us

have standards and measures that empower their users: through exemplars and criteria that give insight into the performances and virtues most valued by the wider society and through the requirement of quality, whatever local form it might take. □

¹See Resnick and Resnick (1985).

²As much as I think the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' Standards in mathematics are wonderful, they are really not Standards at all. They are more like Principles or Worthy Objectives.

³See Thorndike (1913), p. 262.

⁴See Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office, (1989), and the publications now available for each subject area in which the 10 levels of performance are specified. See also the recently developed *Literacy Profiles Handbook* (1990) from the Victoria, Australia, schools, for a similar set of criteria and standards in language arts.

⁵See Gilbert (1978).

⁶See McClelland, (1973), pp. 7–8. This is an essential but little-known earlier paper on assessment reform. McClelland offers a series of important principles upon which test reform might be built.

⁷From the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* (1982).

⁸Note that most of the British scales mentioned above and the proposed scales in New York and other states do not solve this problem. The rubrics use vague, general language that invariably leans too heavily on relative comparisons—a "5" is "less thorough" than a "6" paper, for example. There is thus no criterion-referenced standard at work. Look at state writing assessment rubrics used for different grade-levels: they are almost indistinguishable, showing that the "standard" is relative to the anchor papers they choose, not embedded in the language of the rubric.

⁹Invariably the use of tests designed primarily for easy comparability stems from the tester's desire to quickly rank and sort for gate-keeping reasons, not educational reasons—and from having the one-sided power to do so. See the report of the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy (1990).

¹⁰See Resnick and Resnick (1985), for example.

¹¹Higher standards are inexorably linked to better incentives for students, in my view. Space doesn't allow me to develop these ideas here; on offering better extrinsic incentives, see Wiggins (1988); on

the intrinsic incentives found in more engaging and thought-provoking curriculums, see Wiggins (1989b).

¹²Peters (1987), pp. 101-102. This does not imply that the schools are fodder for business! It implies that every level of schooling must judge the quality of its work by the success of students at the succeeding levels of education and in adulthood.

¹³See Wiggins (1989a) and (1989b).

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