

EDUCATION WEEK

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Give the Standards Back to Teachers

By John Ewing

A standard is a statement that can be used to judge the quality of a mathematics curriculum or methods of evaluation. Thus, standards are statements about what is valued. [← Back to Story](#)

—From 1989 standards released by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics

When the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers commissioned a small body of scholars to create **national standards for mathematics** in spring 2009, it seemed astounding that anyone paid attention. We have been inundated with standards for more than 20 years. A Google search for the phrase “mathematics standards” produces about 300,000 results, many referring to the various NCTM standards; to multiple guides created by individual states, often in conflicting versions; to publishers and software companies; and so forth. Here was *one more set* of standards, and it was likely irrelevant, people could be forgiven for thinking. But when nearly all the states (at last count, 45 of them, plus the District of Columbia) agreed to adopt both the math and English/language arts standards, people paid attention. This gave those states, if not a common K-12 curriculum, a common foundation for a national curriculum. It was an unexpected opportunity.

Or was it? After two decades of standards, we still wring our hands about student declines, unfocused curricula, and dreadful textbooks. There is little evidence that previous standards substantially improved education, and the fact that we continually replace old standards with new does not suggest success.

Why have previous standards failed? I think the answer is simple and evident: Standards failed because *everybody* owns them—politicians, administrators, teacher-educators (not to mention policy experts, publishers, and others)—everybody except the people who actually have to implement them, who have to use them as guides for the real work of instruction, and who



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have to determine whether the standards really are “statements about what is valued.” Teachers have never owned standards.

Politicians take ownership of standards before any other group. They play on the confusion of language. They use the phrase “high standards” in speeches and boast about “raising standards in every classroom.” Political reporters, mainly through ignorance, equate standards with the notion of quality. Politicians have an agenda: They want to show they are improving education, and touting higher standards is an inexpensive way to give the illusion of change.

Like politicians, administrators (principals, superintendents, state schools chiefs) embrace standards, but tie them to accountability. Rather than a framework of educational values on which teachers can construct a curriculum, standards become a way to shift accountability. Teachers need to “measure up” to the new standards. Standards are used to commodify instruction, to make it more efficient, to create a checklist by which not only students but teachers, too, can be judged.

And university faculty members—mathematicians and teacher-educators—are also fond of standards. With the best of intentions, they promote standards as a crutch to help teachers who do not know enough content to navigate the curriculum themselves. Simply put, standards fix broken teachers. As evidence, since the release of the common-core math standards, university mathematicians and educators have been everywhere, creating tools, running workshops, and looking for ways to aid teachers who are “challenged” (the most frequent modifier of “teacher” in articles about the standards).

The fact that standards are owned by politicians, administrators, and university faculty, but not by teachers, guarantees that standards are viewed as top-down reform. It redefines their purpose, not as a tool used by teachers to improve education, but as a tool used by everyone else to improve “the system”—to give the illusion of progress, to enforce accountability, and to fix broken teachers. So, is it surprising, then, that standards haven’t worked to improve education itself?

The ownership of the new standards is currently being established, as the common-core standards are overtaken by the common-core assessments. The assessments will be accountability on steroids. They will produce vast amounts of data generated from a nationwide system, used to compare students, teachers, schools, districts, states, ethnic groups ... every imaginable aspect of K-12 education. Before long, everyone’s focus will move from standards to assessments, and for those who believe in data-driven education, the shift in focus will be a bonanza. Every governor, every superintendent, every principal, and every teacher will concentrate on “student achievement”—that is, performance on the assessments. The assessments, not the standards, will be the measure of success; the standards themselves will become unimportant.

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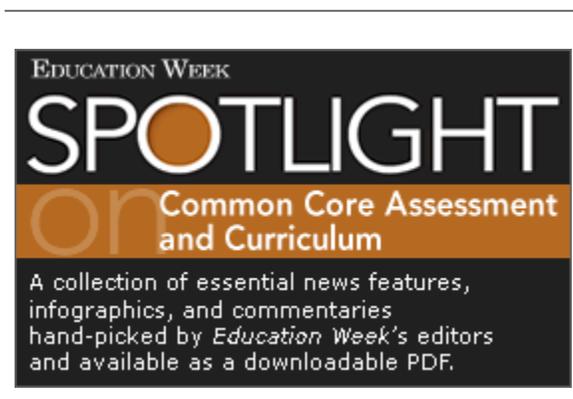
This fits perfectly with the goals of politicians, administrators, and teacher-educators (not to mention education researchers). It does not fit well with the goal of teachers—to know what ought to be valued in education.

Unless teachers are the owners, these new standards will fail like all those before. But to make them owners, we must do more than invite a few token teachers to the next standards workshop. Teachers themselves must become the leaders when implementing the standards. Those who have mastered the ideas and content must mentor their peers. Those who are challenged must work with their colleagues; those who are indifferent must become engaged; those who are cynical must be won over. Teachers must shape both the standards and their assessments as educational tools rather than data-gathering instruments.

Communities of teachers, spanning grades and locales, can study, discuss, and create materials for standards implementation. A consortium of mathematics and education organizations, the **Ad Hoc Committee on Teachers as Professionals**, has fostered this idea by bringing together outstanding teachers from across the country to create toolkits for daylong workshops. These will be workshops run by teachers for teachers, and they give a sense of what standards can accomplish when teachers have a genuine stake in their success, that is, when teachers own them.

A change in ownership will not only make successful implementation more likely, but also demonstrate teaching at its best—as a thoughtful, forward-looking profession that leads reform rather than resists it.

Will we succeed in transferring ownership? Most likely not. All those other groups would have to relinquish their claims, and the people who view standards as a way to assemble vast new sources of data have strong motivation to protect their position. Also, turning over leadership to the teachers requires trust, and politicians, administrators, and even university faculty have spent decades convincing themselves (and the public) that teachers can't be trusted. Teachers themselves have become unused to leading.



But if the core of the standards morphs into assessments alone—if they are administered from above, seen mainly as a way to compare things (students, teachers, and schools), and used largely to identify and weed out “failure”—then the new standards will become one more reform that arrives with great fanfare and gradually dissipates with little lasting effect.

If we really want the Common Core State Standards to succeed, give them back to the people who will use them as a measure of what is valued in education. Give them back to the teachers.

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