

# STANDARDS ARE WORKING

## *But States and Districts Need To Make Some Mid-Course Corrections*

BY SANDRA FELDMAN

**A**FT IS DOING its part and more, and our locals are working very hard. But, my friends, it shouldn't have to be so hard. The fact is, too many of our political leaders and school officials are not doing their part. Too many of them have reneged on their end of the bargain in the standards movement: that they would support our teachers in undertaking the hard work of teaching to much higher standards—not deny them the tools they need or seek to deprive them of their dignity and rights; that they would support our students, especially our neediest children, in their efforts to reach much higher standards of achievement—not drag their heels on early childhood education or class-size reduction, or other help youngsters need.

They promised we'd get new curriculum aligned with new standards. Where is it? They said tests would be better and used more responsibly. In how many places is that true?

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*This is an excerpt of the keynote speech delivered by AFT President Sandra Feldman at the 76th convention of the American Federation of Teachers, July 3, 2000, in Philadelphia, Pa. The full text, with related documents, can be found on the AFT Web site, [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org).*

Of course, what worries us about these stumbles, unintended or otherwise, is the effect on teaching and learning. What worries us, too, is that they have provoked a backlash, especially among parents, that is understandable but also threatens everything that's right and working in the standards movement—a movement that parents, the public, and, not least of all, our members still strongly support.

It is time for elected officials and school officials—not just educators and their students—to be held accountable.

So, I'd like to lay out a few proposals for how they can go a big distance toward being accountable.

First, in the area of curriculum: We cannot continue to tolerate teachers' being left to fend for themselves with a list of state standards and without curricula, or any other materials, that are based on those new standards. State standards do not curricula make.

There is absolutely no other profession whose practitioners are denied their most basic tools and expected to invent them and try them out, all on their own, while simultaneously practicing their profession. It would be considered intolerable. It is equally intolerable for our teachers and grossly unfair to the children they serve.

How to get the job done?

While we know that the federal Department of Education is prohibited from developing curriculum, it is not prevented from inviting the states to enter into a

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national consortium that solicits proposals to develop, try out, and evaluate new curricula, including high-quality educational software.

I'm not talking about an effort to get one, so-called best curriculum, because one size won't fit all students. I'm talking about developing a variety of outstanding and effective curricula in each subject area, each of which is based on high standards.

This would be federalism in action. The federal government would contribute funds, but so too would the states. Plus, the states would have the added benefit of comparing their standards and following the example of the best. And by working together, they would have more resources, more intelligence, and more checks and balances than if any or each of them were to do it on their own.

Now, maybe there's a better idea for how to do this. But if there is, I challenge our public officials and school officials to come up with it, because our teachers and our students need this work to be done—and done well.

There's another important job this consortium can do: work together to straighten out the problems in testing.

Obviously, if we had curriculum, then the problem, in too many places, of tests becoming the curriculum would substantially disappear. No test, no matter how good—and all too many of them are not—can possibly capture the sum of education, let alone be a substitute for real education.

Yet, in too many places, that's what our officials are encouraging because they have lined up the incentives in all the wrong directions.

Let me be clear. I personally, and the AFT historically, support testing; it's a legitimate and necessary tool of diagnosis and evaluation. We also unequivocally support reporting out test results, fully and accurately, to parents and to the taxpayers who fund our public schools. And we support fair accountability for schools, for educators, for students—and for our officials.

But it is we and our students who are bearing the full and, sometimes, unfair brunt of accountability. It is therefore time for our officials to be accountable, too—and we'll be fair by just asking them to act responsibly.

So, let me add something to my proposal that federal and state officials form a consortium to spur curriculum development. Because curriculum and testing are related—I mean, should be related—I propose they use the occasion of such a partnership to sort out and fix the problems in testing.

I urge those officials to listen to the voices of parents and teachers. They are telling you, loud and clear, that they support testing but that there is way too much of it going on, at the risk of kids' not getting truly educated. They—not to mention the testing experts—are telling you that some tests do not reflect high standards and actually undermine high-standards teaching and learning. Look into this and correct any problems.

They are also asking you whether cut scores on some tests, challenging tests, have been set so high that they go beyond world-class standards into the world of the supernatural. Take these serious questions seriously. Look into them, and correct any problems you find.

I ask these officials to keep an open mind. Be open to other honest questions that have been raised about the misuse and abuse of testing, including, in some places, how it has become an instrument to punish students and teachers, rather than a guide to doing better, an incentive to work harder, and a basis for legitimate accountability.

But, do not back off from high standards, challenging and good tests, and legitimate accountability. Because, along with the problems, they have also done a lot of good—including showing us progress and which schools and which kids are struggling and spurring efforts to get them help.

Above all, I urge these officials not to succumb to extremes in the testing controversy. Because both those who just want us to stick with the status quo in testing and those who are basically anti-testing will place the standards movement, our public schools, and, most of all, our students—especially our neediest ones—at risk.

The need to address these curriculum and testing issues is urgent. I know that the delegates in this room and the people you represent understand the urgency very well. And I pledge that the AFT will work with parents and others who share our commitments and concerns to get our federal and state governments to act on these urgent needs.

I would like to make one more proposal. It is about how the standards movement can better reach secondary school students who are struggling. But since I'm on the subject of accountability, I would like to pause to say something about charter schools.

Now, we all remember what charter schools were *supposed* to be. They were supposed to be like laboratories that tried and tested innovative structures and strategies for educating students, which, if proven successful, would then be applied to other schools that

could benefit. They also were supposed to be models of accountability and for treating teachers professionally. In fact, in the original vision, charter schools were going to be initiated by teachers and parents; and the original ones were.

Well, it was a good idea. And there are some good charter schools, including ones we've fostered and support.

But, in too many instances, that good idea has been anything but good in practice: little or no innovation or evaluation; little welcome of high-need students; a strategy for denying teachers voice and rights; and a travesty of accountability.

It is high time for our public officials to hold charter schools to the same standards of academic achievement and accountability that they are demanding from every public school. And that is what the AFT executive council resolution demands.

**F**inally, I'd like to raise something that doesn't get much attention and make a proposal for action.

I am worried, as many of you are, about those secondary school students who were not the beneficiaries of high standards during the earlier years of their schooling. I am specifically talking about students who are dropping out, or at risk of dropping out, because they feel they have little or no chance of meeting new, tougher high school graduation requirements. And I don't have to tell you what being a high school dropout means in today's economy.

My friends, the plain, painful truth is that most of these youngsters are still not benefiting from higher standards. In fact, they are being victimized. But let me be equally blunt: They would be just as victimized if standards were lowered for them.

Overcoming this problem requires understanding it. The problem is that the middle and secondary school students I'm talking about do not have the reading, math, and other basic skills they need. And you and I know that it is almost impossible to teach, and for students to master, high-standards, secondary-level courses when students don't have secondary-level skills.

Their teachers are in a terrible double bind. On the one hand, if they teach material at a lower level that reaches these young adults and from there try to move them up, they are criticized for not "believing" in their students and for being "resistant" to high standards. But if, on the other hand, they teach material at a higher level, they are criticized for failing to reach their students, thereby discouraging them and causing them to drop out. Of course, they also get slammed for being "resistant" to reform.

This double bind has terrible consequences for students. So, let me expose some other blunt facts. First, most secondary teachers don't know how to overcome

these skills deficits in young adults, and it's for the most legitimate of reasons: They were never trained to do so; they never signed up for it in the first place.

Second, the body of knowledge and practice for raising the basic skills of these youngsters, who are neither children nor adults, has never been pulled together and is still incomplete.

What we know for sure is this: If knowing how to get all young children to learn to read is "rocket science," which it is, knowing how to bring up the basic skills of these older kids to a point where they can achieve real, high-school level standards is "rocket science plus."

So, I first propose that the federal government stimulate an all-out effort to get programs that have already made some inroads into this problem up and running in middle and high schools where these kids are concentrated. The Talent Development Model and High Schools That Work are two examples of how to start making a difference now. And let's keep on evaluating these models and developing and testing new ones.

Second: I propose that we give these youngsters the time they need to catch up by guaranteeing them after-school and summer-school programs. And for those kids who may need even more help to meet the necessary standards to graduate, I propose a transitional-year program—either before they enter high school or during high school, as soon as they are identified. And I propose that such programs be staffed by teachers especially trained to accelerate the basic skills of young adults.

Third: I propose a federally sponsored effort, through the Department of Education or Labor—or, preferably, through their partnership—to pull together the knowledge and practices that exist in the adult literacy community and turn them into programs that can be applied and evaluated in our secondary schools.

Fourth: I also urge that educators in the military be centrally involved in this federal effort. Surprised? Here's why.

There have been three times, including and since World War II, when the military admitted young adults who failed the required aptitude tests for entry into service. Getting what was termed these "cast-off youth" up to the skill levels—including reading and math—necessary for them to perform was a challenge the military took on.

The results were spectacular—not only during their military service but when these people returned to civilian life. To quote from the evaluation of this experience: "Given an opportunity to prove themselves, and with support along the way, thousands of previously discarded youth...found a way to break the cycle of poverty that caught up their parents and themselves."

My friends, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience—and results—in the military, and we need to tap into that. We need to do whatever it takes to rescue these kids. □

