

# Calling for Clear, Specific Content

Nearly 20 years ago, the nation coalesced around a sound idea for improving schools: standards-based reform. The standards were supposed to establish what students ought to know and be able to do and, as a result, offer clear guidance to teachers, curriculum writers, textbook and assessment developers, and professional development providers. They were supposed to result in a well-aligned system that provides teachers all the resources and supports they need—at least, that's what we were promised.

Teachers know all too well just how broken that promise is. The typical state's standards are nowhere near strong enough to serve as the foundation for a well-aligned, coherent educational system. The AFT has been reviewing state standards for more than a decade, and our findings—that state standards are, for the most part, either much too vague or much too long (and sometimes, oddly, both)—have been confirmed by many other reviewers.

We should be outraged. As readers of *American Educator* know, cognitive science has established that knowledge builds on knowledge—the more you know, the faster you learn.\* And so it's imperative that standards offer carefully sequenced content from the beginning of kindergarten through the end of high school. But they don't. And as a result, we have some serious problems:

- Professional development is too often about pedagogical fads.
- Too many districts don't even try to flesh out the state standards, leaving teachers to face that challenge on their own.
- Students, especially those who change schools frequently, end up with gaps and repetitions—never doing an experiment with seeds, for example, but having *Charlotte's Web* read to them three times.
- Textbook developers try to “cover” the standards by creating 800-page back breakers.
- Teachers' (and administrators') guesses as to what will be on the state assessment often end up driving instruction.

All of these problems could be addressed if we had clear, specific, content-rich, grade-by-grade standards. That may be obvious to teachers, but it doesn't seem obvious to many policymakers. Instead of delivering the well-aligned, coherent system we



need, they turned their attention to accountability. Operating under the assumption that what gets tested is what gets taught, they've done a great disservice to the nation's children—especially the most disadvantaged children. As Heidi Glidden and Amy Hightower explained in the Spring 2007 *American Educator*, there's “a

dirty little secret that educators know all too well:

state tests and state content standards don't always match up.” In fact, they found that just 11 states have all of their reading and math tests clearly aligned to strong standards.

It should be abundantly clear that without strong standards, accountability is neither fair nor valid. We can, we must, do better.

We have to redo the standards so that they are clear and specific, yet of a reasonable length. The new clear, specific state standards could be designed to take about 75 percent of the school year to teach—leaving the other 25 percent open for teachers to respond to their students' interests, for districts to develop units on local history or local environmental problems, or for students who are behind to get intensive remediation without missing out on core content.

Once states have strong core standards, we could finally ask: what else do teachers need? Real instructional support. Kathi Cooper, a former teacher and administrator with the Sacramento Unified School District, said it well: “Teachers should not be expected to be the composers of the music as well as the conductors of the orchestra.” Strong standards are just one piece of a foundation that, at a minimum, should also include a content-rich, sequenced curriculum and aligned assessments. As for other instructional supports, how about standards-based guides for teachers (like the one shown on p. 34-37) that provide essential background knowledge? How about model lesson plans that new teachers could teach from and more experienced teachers could draw from as they see fit? How about pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development that prepare teachers to teach the specific content for which they are responsible? How about textbooks that, because they are based on clear standards of a reasonable length, are slim and focused?

It is not too much to ask. And it all depends on plugging the hole in state standards with clear, specific content.

—EDITORS

\* See articles by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and Daniel T. Willingham in the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*: [www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/spring06/index.htm](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/index.htm).