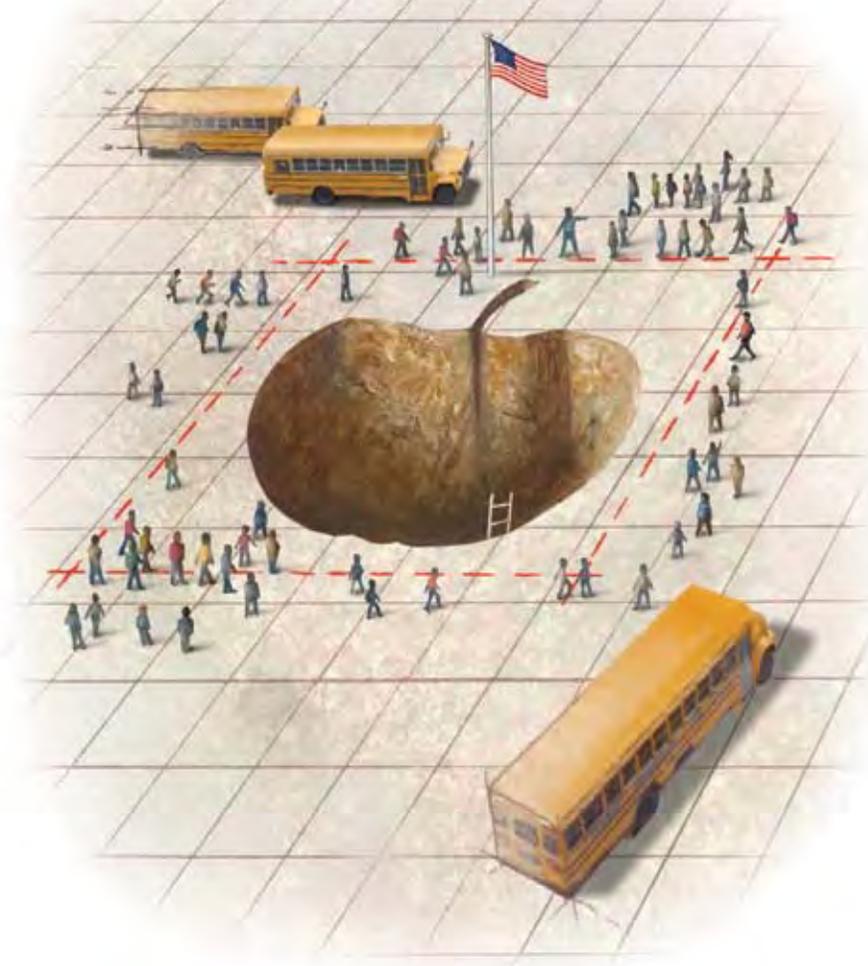


There's a Hole in State Standards

And New Teachers Like Me Are Falling Through



All states should have clear, specific, grade-by-grade, content-rich standards. When they don't, it's the students who miss out on a top-notch education and the teachers—especially the new teachers—who find more frustration than fulfillment. Below, we hear from a new teacher who laments the lack of direction she received in her first year on the job. We have withheld her name and school district to allow her to speak frankly and to emphasize that new teachers across the country are facing similar challenges.

—EDITORS

BY A SECOND-YEAR TEACHER

First days are always nerve-racking—first days attending a new school, first days in a new neighborhood, and especially first days at a new job. My first day as a high school

English teacher in a large, urban public school was no exception. It was my first “real” job after graduating college just three months earlier, and to add to my anxiety, I was hired just one day, precisely 24 hours, before my students would arrive. But my family and friends, mentors, and former professors all assured me that, like all other first days I had conquered, this day would be a successful start to a successful career. Unfortunately, this time they were wrong.

My first day on the job, I entered the building expecting to be greeted by the principal or chairperson, guided to my classrooms, and provided with what I considered to be the essentials: a schedule, a curriculum, rosters, and keys. Instead, the only things I received were a piece of paper on which two numerical codes were written, and a warning not to use the women’s bathroom on the second floor. After some

frantic inquiring, I learned that the codes signified that I would be teaching ninth- and tenth-grade regular English. As various colleagues pulled at my paper to get a glance, some nodded approvingly, while others sighed sympathetically. Eager to make a judgment of my own, I asked a question that, two years later, has yet to be answered: “What is taught in ninth- and tenth-grade regular English?” In response, I was given book lists containing over 20 books per grade, ranging from Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender* to William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* on the freshman list alone, and even greater disparities on the other three lists. I was told to select six books from the appropriate list for each grade I taught, and “teach a book for every six weeks of the school year.” Unsatisfied with this answer, yet slowly beginning to feel foolish for asking (Should

I know the answers to these questions? Am I unqualified to be a teacher if I don't know what ninth- and tenth-grade English means?), I gathered the courage to inquire further. "What concepts are we supposed to teach the students through these books?" Now growing visibly agitated, several colleagues responded, "Teach literary elements and techniques. They need to re-learn those every year, and prepare them for the state test, and teach them some grammar and vocabulary as well as whatever concepts each book calls for."

As everyone scrambled to inspect their classrooms and try out their keys, one experienced teacher kindly informed me that we don't receive any books for the first month as student programming issues are sorted out, so I should try to do poetry. Though I appreciated her advice, her recommendation frustrated me as much as receiving a book list in place of a curriculum. What does "do" poetry mean? What do these students need to know that I can teach them through poetry? Genre studies? Author studies? Iambic pentameter? Alliteration? What grammar should I be teaching them? Capitalization? Punctuation? Sentence structure? I surely can't teach the same thing to both ninth- and tenth-graders, so what separates ninth-grade poetry, literature, writing, and vocabulary from that taught the following year? What have my students already learned and what will they be expected to know by the end of the year when I pass them along to the next teacher?

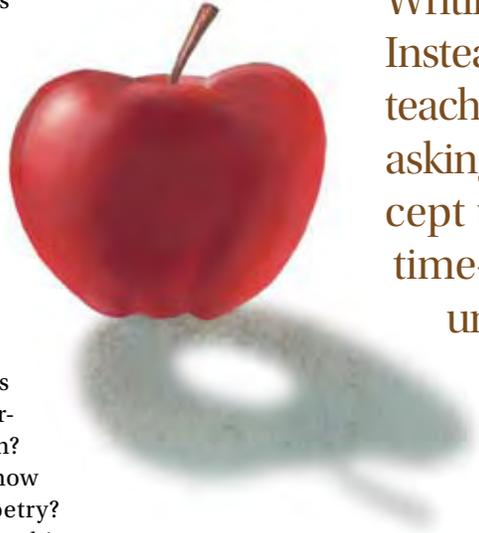
Before I had a chance to find answers and determine what was expected of me, my students arrived eager to know what was expected of them. And so I reproduced the same vague responses that were given to me, and informed each of my classes that they would be reading various forms of literature, working on improving their writing, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as preparing for the state assessment, which they would be taking their junior year. I felt sorry for my students that day, and every other day I saw them diligently copying down notes, faithfully returning to my class, believing, along with their parents, that they were receiving the education they were intended to receive, and not just whatever I culled from whatever text we

happened to be reading that grading period.

Besides putting students at a great disadvantage, particularly those who transfer classes or schools mid-year, the lack of clearly defined expectations adds an enormous amount of work and stress to my life.

Since becoming a teacher my entire existence has revolved around a single,

of struggle or conflict, characterization of the protagonist, etc. Then, I list any vocabulary the students may struggle with, any portions of the text that may have been challenging, and any passages that should be highlighted for them. After filling half a dozen sheets of scrap paper, I ultimately arrive at a topic or concept that I will teach and finally begin writing my lesson. Once



Writing lesson plans takes me hours. Instead of asking myself, "How will I teach this concept?" I must begin by asking, "What is an appropriate concept to teach?" This process is so time-consuming that I often work until 11 P.M. and wake up at 5 A.M. to finish planning for the day.

haunting question

"What am I going to teach next?" Unlike other subjects that call for a particular sequence (How could one teach World War II before teaching World War I? Photosynthesis before cell structure?), the book lists around which all planning takes place in my department aren't organized according to genre, time period, or topic, leaving teachers free to do whatever they choose. Of course whatever teachers choose to teach must be communicated through a written objective that must correspond to one of the state's English standards (which are so vague most physical education lessons could fulfill them). While more experienced teachers who are well acquainted with their students and their craft may see this lack of structure as a blessing, as a new teacher, I find the limitlessness overwhelming.

Writing lesson plans takes me hours. Instead of asking myself, "How will I teach this concept?" I must begin by asking, "What is an appropriate concept to teach?" To do this I read and reread the portion of whatever text the class is studying and I list all possible directions the lesson could take: feminism, iambic pentameter, themes

that is done, I repeat the same procedure for my second prep, and this year, once more for my third prep.

This process is so time-consuming that I often work until 11 P.M. and wake up at 5 A.M. to finish planning for the day. I look forward to weekends and vacations so I can catch up on the grading and organizing that have taken a back seat to deciding what to teach. When I hear the commonly cited statistic that roughly 40 to 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession in their first five years,* I wonder how many of those departures could have been prevented if teachers were provided clear and achievable expectations for the year (as teachers must provide for students). With such guidance, instead of dedicating so many hours developing a curriculum from scratch and worrying about whether or not my students are prepared for the next grade, I could focus on how to best present the specified content, how to engage my students, and how to meet the needs of those who are falling behind. In short, I could devote myself to doing what I was hired to do—teach. □

*Ingersoll, R. M. and Smith, T. M. (2003). "The wrong solution to the teacher shortage." *Educational Leadership* 60(8), p. 30-33.