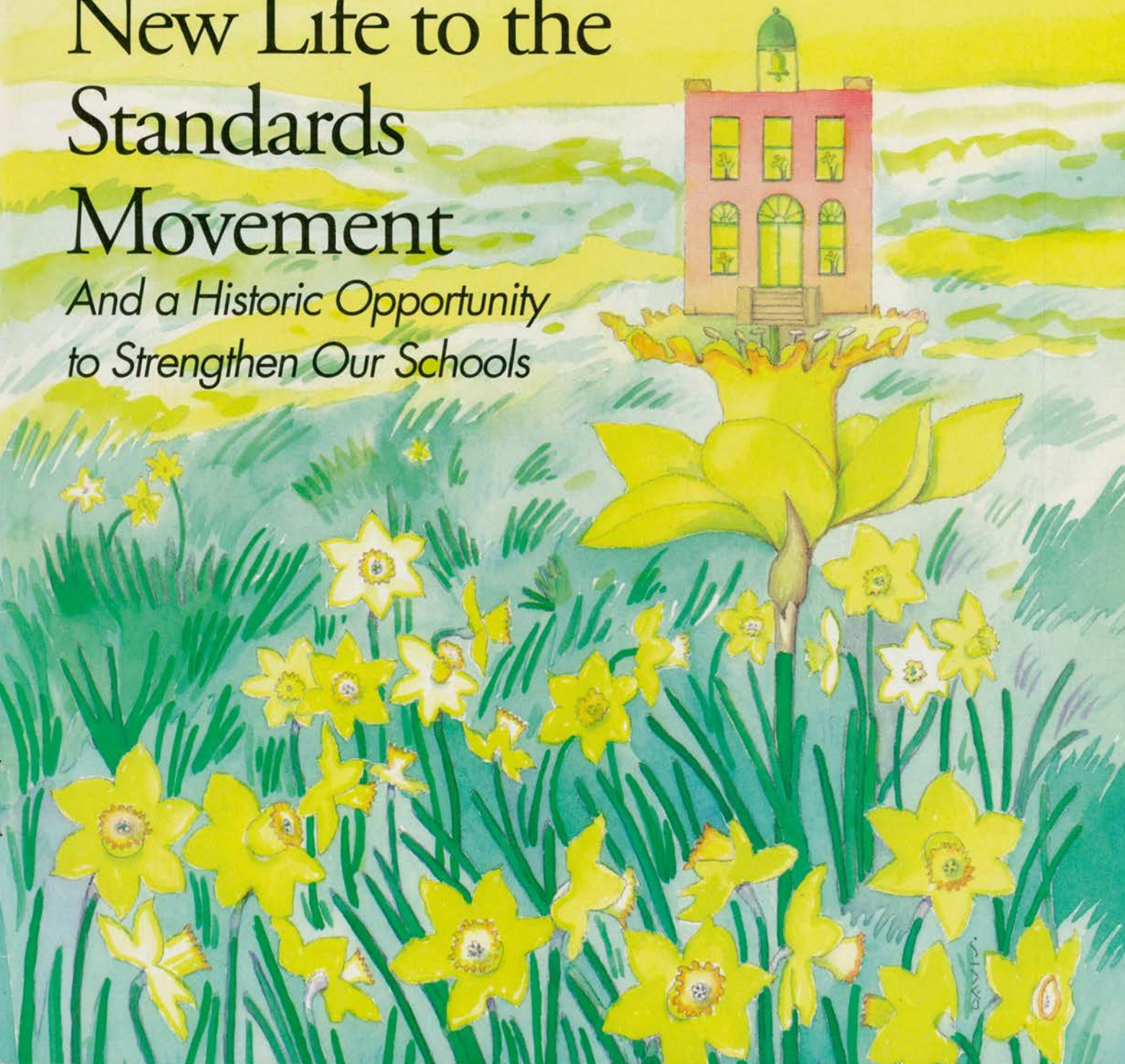


AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS  
SPRING 1996

# AMERICAN **Educator**

Spring Brings  
New Life to the  
Standards  
Movement

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## Spring Brings New Life to the Standards Movement

### INTRODUCTION

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*It seemed for a while there that the standards movement might falter. The attacks were coming from both left and right, and when the first round of attempts to write standards—with a few notable exceptions—produced some pretty awful results, the critics were ready to lower the casket.*

*But a good idea outlives the less-than-perfect attempts to implement it. Despite its wounds, the standards movement began to take root across the country. And with the spring has come both an emerging consensus and a series of historic events that bring an enormous feeling of hope that this movement will succeed. In this special issue of American Educator, we report on those happenings. There's still a lot of work to be done and a lot that could go wrong. But we will find a way—a uniquely American way—to do this. Those who would just as well see public education fade from this country's traditions are not going to prevail. Those who prefer to devote their energies to strengthening and renewing it will.*

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# LETTERS

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## ON THE DEFENSIVE TOO LONG

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Three of the first four articles listed in the table of contents of the Winter issue of *American Educator* deal ostensibly with the abuse with which teachers have had to contend for much of our teaching lives. Somehow we have accepted it as a *fait accompli*, with a kind of "It comes with the territory" attitude. But the reality is that we are saddled with abuse because we have been brainwashed into accepting it for some greater, unspoken good. We have stupidly run off with our proverbial tails between our legs because administrators have always gotten away with blaming the teacher, a kind of "What did you do to provoke the child?" syndrome. We have let them get away with it, and it is time that we did something about it!

When I began teaching in a Brooklyn, New York, vocational high school thirty-one years ago, I had a very wonderful department chairman, Sol Kantowitz, who taught me how to teach. What I came to understand some time later was how truly remarkable this man was. He could have taught any level class he wished.... But Sol always taught one of the worst classes in the school, term after term, year after year. I never thought to ask him why he did that, but I believe that he wanted to be in the trenches with us, that he wanted to always know how tough it was for us, that he wanted a yardstick to measure whether the demands he made on us were reasonable.

We should make demands, too. We should demand that every school administrator—every school administrator—is in the classroom at least one period per day. That includes not only the administrators who sit behind desks and closed doors in schools, but those who make policy for the schools—all the way up to the superintendents and

chancellors. And the classes they teach should not be "electives," designed by them to have no out-of-class obligations, such as grading homework, essays, examinations, etc. The classes they teach must come from among the mandated courses.

We must also reevaluate, as individuals, as a staff in a school, and as union members how we have responded to school procedures that have done nothing to alleviate the problems caused by the chronic wrongdoers. All of us have our stories to tell. For too long we have taken the defensive. We have permitted the decision makers to get away with blaming teachers for the failure of our schools....

A good example is the tenure issue. We have almost apologetically accepted the notion that we got away with something because there is a thing called tenure. We are pointed at as a union and as teachers and accused of being concerned only with keeping the jobs of members. I don't know anyone who likes to work with an incompetent or a malfasant. Those people make our jobs much harder than they ought to be, because their students enter our classrooms ill-prepared to meet the demands we place on them. But the larger and more significant question is how did they get tenure? They were passed along as satisfactory by malfasant administrators who were too lazy to do their jobs and now blame us for their shortcomings. That's something the press ought to know, alongside the ravings of administrators who claim that incompetent teachers prevent them from instituting magical educational reforms. We have permitted them to paint themselves as the good guys and us as the bad guys.

How many of us have had pressure put on us to pass students who did not deserve to be passed, because the pressure was on the ad-

ministrators from their higher ups to improve the passing percentage? How many of us have had our grades changed, more often without our knowledge? And what did we do about it when we found out?

Somehow we have accepted the notion that only *we* are accountable.... Blanket complaints against teachers that find their way into the newspapers must be challenged....

We will never regain the respect we once had, the respect that we had as educators, unless we respect ourselves. And we will never learn self-respect if we accept responsibility for the failures of society. We need only to look at some educational systems outside our country, in which students must measure up to reasonable standards or they do not continue. Curricula must no longer be watered down and watered down, until there is little left, until virtual illiterates are graduated from high school. That leaves open the door for criticism and public anger against us. That is what permits us to be cast in the role of scapegoat.

—ALAN KATZ

TOWNSEND HARRIS HIGH SCHOOL  
AT QUEENS COLLEGE  
QUEENS, NEW YORK

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## REACHING A WIDER AUDIENCE

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Somehow (I don't know how it could be done) John Bishop's article "The Power of External Standards," appearing in the fall 1995 issue of *American Educator*, should be read by students and parents as well as professionals who must be grateful to him, not because he has exposed anything particularly new to teachers, but because he puts so well what they (teachers) know *too* well. He does it succinctly, thoroughly, and in one place. Obviously, Mr. Bishop did not intend merely to "preach to the choir or even the converted" (could there still be pro-  
*(Continued on page 48)*

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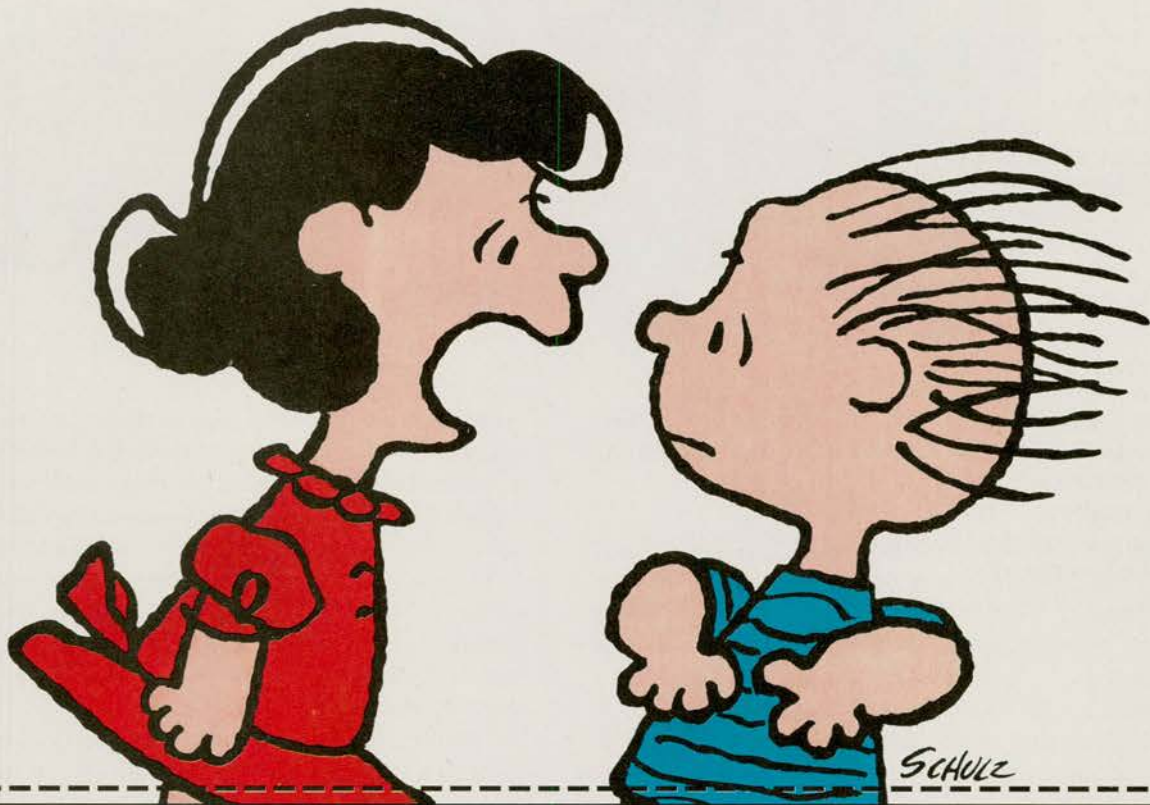
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# SPRING BRINGS NEW LIFE TO THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT

IT SEEMED for a while there that the standards movement might falter. The efforts to design our education system around a triad of rigorous curriculum standards, assessments, and incentives—that is, to spell out a challenging curriculum of just what it is we want our students to know and be able to do, to assess them regularly on how they are doing, and to tie their performance to real-life consequences that would motivate them to do their best—was under attack from all sides. From one side came the charge that the national government was going to be setting up shop in every classroom in America, dictating which day and month of the year two-digit subtraction would be taught and precisely which books would be used in sophomore literature classes. This historically familiar American fear—some would say paranoia—of “government intrusion” made its way onto countless radio talk shows and editorial pages around the country. While these charges were mainly identified with what is normally labeled “conservative” opinion in the country, a convergence of the political left and right occurred when, from some liberal circles, came the claim that a curriculum could only be “authentic” and “meaningful” if it arose from “the community,” an entity that was usually left undefined. Opposition also came from those who felt that any standards developed would be set too high or too low or that the standards would stray from academic content to include social and psychological measures that many parents feel are beyond the proper purview of the school. Hesitation was also voiced by those whose conception of self-esteem means telling students they are doing okay even if they’re not.

Then there were those—some for and some against the standards movement—who were nevertheless all united in their belief that it was tangential to the “real” sources of our problems: the “public school monopoly” and teachers’ unions. Their solution: dismantle our nearly 200-year-old public school system and substitute a system of vouchers and privatization; abolish the tenure system that has for many decades protected teachers from the whims of politicians and administrators and the latest fads in school re-organization. (And while you’re at it, some would add, see if you can’t get rid of teachers’ unions altogether.)

So, the list of opponents to the standards movement was a long one, with the shots coming from many different directions. And when the first round of attempts to write standards—with a few notable exceptions—produced some pretty awful results, the opponents to standards had the hole all dug and were ready to lower the casket.

But a good idea outlives the less-than-perfect attempts to implement it. While the critics kept up their clamor, the standards movement began to take root across the country. The debacle surrounding the development of voluntary national standards for history served not as the death knell for the standards movement—as many predicted it would—but as a first-round exercise from which could be learned how to do better the second time. Meanwhile, the Public Agenda Foundation issued a report (see p. 16) showing that 82 percent of the general public and 92 percent of African-American parents wanted clear guidelines on what kids should learn, while seven out of ten parents said students should have to pass a test before moving from grade school to high school. And a survey of AFT members conducted last fall (see p. 18) found that because there is such wide variation in what is taught and what is expected of students at each grade level, nearly three in five teachers say they must spend significant time reviewing old material so that less-prepared students are not left behind. As the article that begins on p. 36 of this issue brings to life, our staggeringly high rates of student mobility aggravate the problem caused by inconsistent, unaligned curricula.

Arguments for the need for high standards have come not only from bad news but also from good news. Earlier this year, the City University of New York (CUNY)—one of the largest college systems in the country—reported that its fall freshman class was the best-prepared group in more than twenty years. Only 26 percent of the 1995-96 CUNY freshman class was required to take remedial classes, down from 36 percent last year. The results are being attributed to tougher academic standards instituted in New York City’s high schools four years ago.

Last fall, the AFT launched a national campaign, “Lessons for Life,” which focused the country’s at-







tention on the two fundamentals of school reform: standards for student conduct and standards for student achievement. Since then, hundreds of local affiliates have galvanized their communities around a program of order and respect in the classroom and rigorous expectations in the curriculum. Meanwhile, during this embryonic stage of the standards movement, the AFT has produced an avalanche of materials (see p. 42-43) showing why standards and incentives are needed and making concrete the term "world-class standards" by translating and publishing the actual exams taken by students in other countries. The rigor of the exams—including the exams for the non-college-bound—was so much greater than ours, and the percentage of students passing them so much higher, they were hard to argue with. Unless one is prepared to assert that Scottish and French children are just more innately intelligent than American children, we have to ask, "What is it that allows these countries' students—at all levels—to perform so much better than ours do?" The answer, as Al Shanker has so tirelessly hammered home in his speeches and his weekly *New York Times* columns, is not that these countries have a privatized voucher system; they don't. It's not that they don't have teacher unions; if anything, theirs are stronger than ours. It's not due to our greater heterogeneity; many French schools, for example, now include an immigrant population that makes them every bit as heterogeneous as our urban schools. The primary reason these countries' students perform better than ours is that they have an education system designed to both expect and elicit the highest performance that each child is capable of—a system based on rigorous standards, assessments tied to those standards, and rewards and consequences for those who do and don't measure up.

By last summer, the AFT could report that forty-nine states were in the process of developing stan-

dards, many of them encouraged to do so by the Goals 2000 legislation. They were at different stages and the results were uneven at best, but they were digging in. And six weeks ago, on March 26 and 27, at the IBM Conference Center in Palisades, New York, a historic event took place. Mark it down. Governors from across the country, joined by leading CEOs from each of their states, reached consensus on a resolution (see p. 13) to move more swiftly to develop standards and assessments; and in a targeted message to the non-college bound, the country's leading corporate heads announced that high school transcripts will be examined when making hiring decisions. While steering clear of any language that would suggest the dreaded "national" standards, the group decided to establish a non-governmental entity to assist in the development of standards and to serve as a clearinghouse and information exchange as they continue to work on their state-by-state efforts.

President Clinton spoke at the National Education Summit (his speech begins on p. 8), offering strong support to the work of the governors, business, and education leaders and urging them to go even further: "No more social promotions, no more free passes," he declared. "I don't believe you can succeed unless you are prepared to have an assessment system with consequences." Referring to the need to offer every American child the opportunity for a world-class education, he recalled his earlier days in Arkansas. "I was always offended," he said, "by the suggestion that the kids who grow up in the Mississippi Delta, which is the poorest place in America, shouldn't have access to the same learning opportunities that other people have."

**W**HY DO we need the standards movement to succeed? Because right now we have a system that works against itself. A system that cannot guarantee that a world-class education will reach the children of the Mississippi Delta; a system that asks teachers to teach classes in which students' levels of preparation vary by as much as two years or more; a system whose vague and unarticulated goals make it more difficult to extend a helping hand to those youngsters who need it most; a system so bereft of external rewards and consequences that its older students become easy prey for every distraction and excuse.

While individual students and whole schools may and do excel, many more do not, cannot. It is not a question of individual fault; it is simply a poorly designed system. It is full of disconnects, and it produces enormous inequities. It has to change, and with the events of this spring comes an enormous feeling of hope that it will. Those who would just as well see public education fade from this country's traditions are not going to prevail. Those who prefer to devote their energies to strengthening and renewing it will.

There's still a lot of work left to be done and a lot that could go wrong. But we will find an American way to do this; we will.

—EDITOR

# PRESIDENT URGES STANDARDS THAT COUNT

*Excerpts from President Clinton's  
Address to the National Education Summit*

*Palisades, New York  
March 27, 1996*

**T**HIS IS an extraordinary meeting of America's business leaders and America's governors.

The governors, after all, have primary, indeed, constitutional responsibility for the conditions of our public schools. And perhaps better than any other single group in America, business leaders know well what the consequences of our failing to get the most out of our students and achieve real educational excellence will be for our nation.

So I am very pleased to see you here, doing this, and I want to thank each and every one of you. I also think you have a better chance than perhaps anyone else, even in this season, to keep the question of education beyond partisanship and to deal with it as an American challenge that all the American people must meet and must meet together.

All of you know very well that this is a time of dramatic transformation in the United States. I'm not sure if any of us fully understand the true implications of

the changes through which we are all living and the responsibilities that those changes impose upon us. It is clear to most people that the dimensions of economic change now are the greatest that they have been since we moved from farm to factory and from rural areas to cities and towns 100 years ago.

In his book *The Road from Here*, Bill Gates says that the digital chip is leading us to the greatest transformation in communications in 500 years, since Gutenberg printed the first Bible in Europe. If that is true, it is obvious beyond anyone's ability to argue that the educational enterprise, which has always been central to the development of good citizens in America, as well as to a strong economy, is now more important than ever before.

This means that we need a candid assessment of what is right and what is wrong with our educational system and what we need to do. Your focus on standards, your focus on assessments, your focus on tech-

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*The excerpts above, concerning standards, assessments, and consequences for students, constitute the primary theme of the president's speech to the National Education summit. In addition, he addressed a number of related topics, including the need to focus first on standards for reading and writing and the importance of getting parents to read to their children. He called for tougher licensing and recertification standards for teachers and a streamlined due-process system for removing teachers who are not performing up to standard. He complimented the work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and encouraged states to reward teachers who become board certified. He called for ways to hold schools and school districts account-*

*able for results and for incentives for schools and school staffs that markedly improve performance. He said that too large a percentage of school funds goes to administration while not enough makes its way down to the classroom. The president also expressed support for charter schools and for parental choice within the public school system. He encouraged districts to find ways to keep schools open longer hours, particularly to give children a safe and productive place to be during the after-school hours of 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. He also joined the governors and business leaders in emphasizing the promise that technology holds for educational improvement.*

*Minor, non-substantive copy editing was done when converting the spoken speech to written form.*





nology is all to the good. We know that many of our schools do a very good job, but some of them don't. We know that many of our teachers are great, but some don't measure up. We know that many of our communities are seizing the opportunities of the present and the future, but too many are not.

And, most important, we know that while the

schools and the students of this country are doing better than they were in 1984 and better than they were in 1983, when "A Nation at Risk" was issued, and in 1989 when the Education Summit was held at Charlottesville, most of them still are not meeting the standards that are necessary and adequate to the challenges of today. So that is really what we have to begin with.

America has some interesting challenges that I think are somewhat unique to our country in this global environment in which education is so important, and we might as well just sort of put them out there on the front end—not that we can resolve them today. The first is that we have a far more diverse group of students in terms of income and race and ethnicity and background and, indeed, living conditions than almost any other great country in the world.

Second, we have a system in which both authority and financing are more fractured than in other countries. Third, we know that our schools are burdened by social problems, not of their making, that make the jobs of principals and teachers more difficult.

Fourth, and I think most important of all, our country still has an attitude problem about education that I think we should resolve. It is a problem that even precedes the standards and assessment issue. The problem is that too many people in the United States think that the primary determinant of success and learning is either IQ or family circumstances instead of effort. I don't believe that, and I don't think any of the research supports that.

So one of the things I hope you will say in a positive way is that you believe all kids can learn. And I



hope you will say in a stronger way that you believe that effort is more important than IQ or income—given the right kind of educational opportunities, the right kind of expectations. It has often been said that Americans from time to time suffer from a revolution of rising expectations. This is one area where we *need* a revolution of rising expectations. We ought to all simply and forthrightly say that we believe that school is children's work and play; that it can be great joy, but that effort matters.

I'm no Einstein, and not everybody can do everything, but if you stack up all the people in this country from one to the other, all the Americans together in order by IQ, you couldn't stick a straw between one person and the next. And you know it as well as I do. Most people can learn everything they need to know to be good citizens and successful participants in the American economy and in the global economy. And I believe that unless you can convince your constituents that that is the truth, then all of your efforts to raise standards and all of your efforts to have accountability through tests and other assessments will not be as successful as they ought to be. And, I think, frankly, a lot of people, even in education, need to be reminded of this from time to time.

**N**OW, LET'S get back to the good news. Thirty or forty years ago, maybe even twenty years ago, no one could ever have conceived of a meeting like this taking place. Governors played little role in education until just a couple of decades ago. And business didn't regard it as their responsibility. In the late '70s and early '80s this whole wave began to sweep America. And one important, positive thing that ought never to be overlooked is that the business leadership of America and the governors of this country have been literally obsessed with education for a long time now. And that's a very good thing, because one of the problems with America is that we tend to be in the grip of serial enthusiasms. It's the hula hoop today and something else tomorrow. Boy, that dates me, doesn't it? (Laughter.)

The governors have displayed a remarkable consistency of commitment to education. And at least since 1983, the business community has displayed that commitment. And I think it's fair to say that all of us have learned some things as we have gone along, which is what has brought you to this point. We now understand that the next big step has to be to have meaningful and appropriately high standards and then hold people accountable for them.

I think it's worth noting that the 1983 "A Nation at Risk" report did some good things. Almost every state in the country went back and revised its cur-

riculum requirements. Many revised their class-size requirements. Many did other things to upgrade teacher training or to increase college scholarships.

In 1989, I was privileged to be in Charlottesville working with Governor Branstad and with Governor Campbell, as we tried to get all the governors together to develop the statement at the Education Summit with President Bush. And that was the first time there had ever been a bipartisan national consensus on educational goals.

The realization in 1989 was that six years after a "A Nation at Risk," all these extra requirements were being put into education, but nobody had focused on what the end game was. What did we want America to look like? It's worth saying that we wanted every child to show up for school ready to learn, that we wanted them to be proficient in certain core courses and were willing to assess our students to see if they were, that we wanted to prepare our people for the world of work, that we wanted to be extra-good in math and science and to overcome our past deficiencies. All the things that were in those educational goals were worth saying.

Another thing that the Charlottesville summit did that I think is worth emphasizing is that it defined for the first time, from the governors up, what the federal role in education ought to be and what it ought not be. I went back this morning, just on the way up here, and I read the Charlottesville statement about what the governors then unanimously voted that the federal role should be and what it should not be.

When I became president and I asked Dick Riley to become Secretary of Education, I said that our legislative agenda ought to be consistent, completely consistent, with what the governors had said at Charlottesville. For example, the governors said that the federal government has a bigger responsibility to help people show up for school prepared to learn. So we emphasized things like more funds for Head Start and more investment in trying to improve the immunization rates of kids and other health indicators. And it has more responsibility for access to higher education, so we tried to reform the Student Loan Program and invest more money in Pell Grants and national service and things like that.

The governors at Charlottesville also said that the federal government has more responsibility to give greater flexibility to the states in K-12 and to try to promote reform without defining how any of this should be done.

And so that's what Goals 2000 was about. We tried to have a system in which states and local school districts could pursue world-class standards based on their own plans for grassroots reform.



And Dick Riley, since he has been Secretary of Education, has cut federal regulations affecting states and local school districts by more than 50 percent. It seems to me that that is consistent with exactly what the governors in Charlottesville said they wanted done.

It would be wrong to say that there has been no progress since 1983. The number of young people taking core courses has jumped from 13 percent in '82, to 52 percent in '94. The national math and science scores are up a grade since 1983, half of all four-year-olds now attend preschool, 86 percent of all our young people are completing high school. We're almost up to the 90 percent target that was in the National Education Goals. That is progress.

But what we have learned since Charlottesville and what you are here to hammer home to America is that the overall levels of learning are not enough and that there are still significant barriers in various schools to meeting higher standards.

I accept your premise: We can only do better with tougher standards and better assessments, and you should set the standards. I believe that is absolutely right. And that will be the lasting legacy of this conference.

**L**ET ME just go through now what I think we should do to challenge the country on standards for students. I suppose that I have spent more time in classrooms than any previous president, partly because I was a governor for twelve years and partly because I still do it with some frequency. I believe the most important thing you can do is to have high expectations for students—to make them believe they can learn, to tell them they're going to have to learn really difficult, challenging things, to assess whether they're learning or not, and to hold them accountable as well as to reward them.

Most children are very eager to learn. Those that aren't have probably been convinced they can't. I believe that once you have high standards and high expectations, there is an unlimited number of things that can be done. But I also believe that there have to be consequences.

I watched your panel discussion last night, and I thought—the moment of levity was when Al Shanker said, "When I was teaching school and I would give students homework, they asked, 'Does it count?'" That's the thing I remember about the panel last

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*I don't believe  
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night. All of you remember, too. You laughed, right? (Laughter.) "Does it count?" And the truth is that in the world we're living in today, "does it count" has to mean something, particularly in places where there haven't been any standards for a long time.

So if the states are going to go back and raise standards so that you're not only trying to increase the enrollment in core courses but also trying to make the core courses themselves mean more—you're going to define what's in those core courses and you're going to lift them up—you have to be willing, then, to hold the students accountable for whether they have achieved that or not. And again, another thing that Mr. Shanker said and which I've always believed, is that we have always downgraded teaching to the test. But if you're going to know whether people learn what you expect them to know, then you have to test them on it.

So I believe that if you want the standards movement to work, first you have to do the hard work in deciding what it is you expect children to learn. But then you have to have an assessment system, however you design it, in your own best judgment at the state level, that says, "No more social promotions, no more free passes." If you want people to learn, learning has to mean something. That's what I believe. I don't believe you can succeed unless you are prepared to have an assessment system with consequences.

In Arkansas in 1983, when we redid the educational standards, we had a very controversial requirement that young people pass the eighth-grade test in order to go on to high school. And not everybody passed it. And we let people take it more than once. I think it's fine to do that.

But even today, after thirteen years, I think there are only five states in the country that require their young people to pass a test in order to be promoted from either grade to grade or school to school. I believe that if you have meaningful standards that you have confidence in, and you believe that if those standards are met your children will know what they need to know, then you shouldn't be afraid to find out if they're learning the material, and you shouldn't be deterred by people saying this is cruel, this is unfair, or whatever they say.

The worst thing you can do is send people all the way through school with a diploma they can't read.



And you're not being unfair to people if you give them more than one chance and if at the same time you improve the teaching and the operation of the schools they attend. If you believe these kids can learn, you have to give them a chance to demonstrate it. This is only a cruel, short-sighted thing to do if you are convinced that there are limitations on what the American children can do. And I just don't believe that.

So *that*, I think, is the most important thing. I believe every state, if you're going to have meaningful standards, must require a test for children to move, let's say, from elementary to middle school, or from middle school to high school, or to have a full-meaning high school diploma. And I don't think these tests should measure just minimum competency. They should measure what you expect these standards to measure.

You know, when we instituted any kind of test at home, I was always criticized by the fact that the test wasn't hard enough. But I think it takes time to transform a system. And you may decide it takes time to transform a system. But you will never know whether your standards are being met unless you have some sort of measurement and some sort of accountability. And while I believe the standards should be set by the states and the testing mechanism should be approved by the states, we shouldn't kid ourselves. Being promoted ought to mean more or less the same thing in Pasadena, California, as it does in Palisades, New York. In a global society, it ought to mean more or less the same thing.

I was always offended by the suggestion that the kids who grew up in the Mississippi Delta in Arkansas, which is the poorest place in America, shouldn't have access to the same learning opportunities that other people have, that they couldn't learn. I don't believe that.

So I think the idea—and the way Governor Engler characterized it last night was pretty good—is that you want a non-federal, national mechanism to sort of share this information on standards and assessments so that you'll at least know how you're doing compared to one another. That's a good start. That's a good way to begin this. I also believe that we shouldn't ignore the progress that has been made by the Goals panel

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and by the National Assessment on Educational Progress. They've done a lot of good things, and we can learn a lot from them. We don't have to reinvent the wheel here.

Let me just mention something else briefly. I don't believe you can possibly minimize how irrelevant this discussion would seem to a teacher who doesn't feel safe walking the halls of his or her school, or how utterly hopeless it seems to students who have to look over their shoulders when they're walking to and from school. So I believe that we have to work together to continue to make our schools safe and to hold our students to a reasonable standard of conduct.

We had a teacher in Washington, D.C., last week who was mugged in a hallway by a gang of intruders—not students—a gang of intruders who were doing drugs and didn't even belong on the school grounds. We have got to keep working on that. This entire discussion we have had is completely academic unless there is a safe and disciplined and a drug-free environment in these schools. (Applause.)

**I** BELIEVE that this meeting will prove historic. And again, let me say, I thank the governors and the business leaders who brought it about. In 1983, we said we've got a problem in our schools, we need to take tougher courses, we need to have other reforms. In 1989, we said we need to know where we're going, we need goals. Here in 1996, you're saying you can have all of the goals in the world, but unless somebody really has meaningful standards and a system of measuring whether you meet those standards, you won't achieve your goals. That is the enduring gift you have given to America's schoolchildren and to America's future.

The governors have to lead the way, the business community has to stay involved. Don't let anybody deter you and say you shouldn't be doing it. You can go back home and reach out to all the other people in the community because, in the end, what the teachers and the principals and, more importantly even, what the parents and the children do is what really counts. And we can get there together. We have to start now with what you're trying to do. We have to have high standards and high accountability. If you can achieve that, you have given a great gift to the future of this country.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

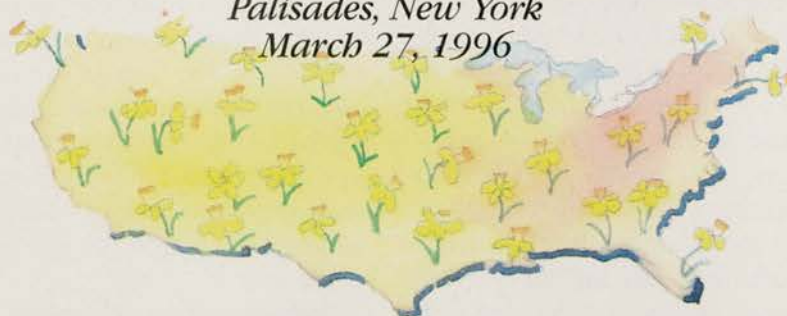
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# GOVERNORS, BUSINESS LEADERS PLEDGE SWIFT ACTION

*Excerpts from the Policy  
Statement Adopted  
at the National Education Summit*

*Palisades, New York  
March 27, 1996*



## **Explicit Expectations and School Accountability**

We believe that efforts to set clear, common state and/or community-based academic standards for students in a given school district or state are necessary to improve student performance. Academic standards clearly define what students should know and be able to do at certain points in their schooling to be considered proficient in specific academic areas. We believe that states and communities can benefit from working together to tap into the nation's best thinking on standards and assessments. We also believe that these standards and assessments should integrate both academic and occupational skills. However, standards and assessments are necessary tools to inform and direct our work, not an end unto themselves. We recognize that better use of technology, improved curriculum, better-trained educators, and other changes in the organization and management of schools are necessary to facilitate improved student performance. However, without a clear articulation of the skills needed, specific agreement on the academic content students should be learning, clear goals for what needs to be accomplished, and authentic and accurate systems to tell us how well schools and students are doing, efforts to improve our schools will lack direction.

We believe that setting clear academic standards, benchmarking these standards to the highest levels, and accurately assessing student academic performance is a state, or in some cases a local, responsi-

bility, depending on the traditions of the state. We do not call for a set of mandatory, federally prescribed standards but welcome the savings and other benefits offered by cooperation between states and school districts and the opportunities provided by a national clearinghouse of effective practices to improve achievement. But in whatever way is chosen, standards must be in place in all of our schools and must be in place quickly.

## **What We Commit To Do**

Swift action must be taken to address these issues. While we commend those states and school districts that have provided leadership to improve student performance, we urge greater progress, and for others, increased effort. We believe that standards can be effective only if they represent what parents, employers, educators, and community members believe children should learn and be able to do. However, the current rate of change needs to be accelerated, and no process or timeline should deter us from the results. We believe that governors and business leaders must provide powerful and consistent support to ensure that this effort moves forward swiftly and effectively.

This summit is intended to demonstrate—to parents, students, educators, and our constituents—our strong and nonpartisan support of efforts to:

- Set clear academic standards for what students need to know or be able to do in core subject areas;
- Assist schools in accurately measuring student

progress toward reaching these standards;

- Make changes to curriculum, teaching techniques, and technology uses based on the results;
- Assist schools in overcoming the barriers to using new technology; and
- Hold schools and students accountable for demonstrating real improvement.

## **What Specific Actions We Will Take**

We commit to the following steps to initiate and/or accelerate our efforts to improve student achievement:

**Implementing Standards.** As governors, we commit to the development and establishment of internationally competitive academic standards, assessments to measure academic achievement, and accountability systems in our states, according to each state's governing structure, within the next two years. For this purpose we agree to the reallocation of sums sufficient to support implementation of those standards within a clear timetable for a full implementation. Such funds should be available for the essential professional development, infrastructure, and new technologies needed to meet these goals.

**Business Practices.** As business leaders, we commit to actively support the work of the governors to improve student performance and to develop coalitions of other business leaders in our states to expand this support. As such we will clearly communicate to students, parents, schools, and the community the types and levels of skills necessary to meet the workforce needs of the next century and implement hiring practices within one year that will require applicants to demonstrate academic achievement through school-based records, such as academic transcripts, diplomas, portfolios, certificates of initial mastery, or others as appropriate. We commit to considering the quality of a state's academic standards and student achievement levels as a high-priority factor in determining business-location decisions. We also agree to adopt policies to support parental involvement in their children's education and in improving their local schools. Finally, we commit to developing and helping implement compatible, inexpensive, and easy-to-use products, services, and software to support teaching.

**Public Reporting.** As governors and business

leaders, we commit to be held accountable for progress made in our respective states toward improving student achievement in core subject areas. First, we will establish an external, independent, nongovernmental effort to measure and report each state's annual progress in setting standards, improving the quality of teaching, incorporating technology, supporting innovation, and improving student achievement. To review student academic progress, we will explore the use of a reliable benchmarked assessment. Second, we will produce and widely distribute in each of our individual states an annual report showing progress made by both states and businesses in meeting our stated commitments and educating the public on the importance of these issues. Outstanding reports will be recognized annually by the chair of the National Governors' Association at its winter meeting and will be widely disseminated within the states. Third, reports will be released at a high-profile televised media announcement in each state, and we will work to coordinate the release nationally to help focus public awareness on this critical issue.

**Information Sharing and Technical Assistance.** As governors and business leaders, we recognize that states and communities will need resources and technical assistance to develop and implement standards and assessments, to ensure these standards and assessments are of high quality and truly world class, and to ensure that other parts of the education system reflect and reinforce these standards and assessments. Where appropriate and on a voluntary basis, we commit to work together to pool information resources and expertise to move our states forward on this agenda. We also commit to designate an external, independent, nongovernmental entity to facilitate our work together on these issues, and provide guidance, help, and information to interested states and school districts. The summit planning committee within 90 days will design such an entity and present it for adoption by the NGA executive committee, which will then present it for endorsement to the NGA at the 1996 annual meeting. Finally, we commit to giving high priority to promoting professional development of educators, including efforts to improve instructional methods that use new technologies to help students achieve high standards.

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**Special  
Invited Guest:**  
Secretary Richard Riley,  
*Secretary of Education*



# PUBLIC BROADLY EMBRACES THE NEED FOR HIGHER STANDARDS, RIGOROUSLY ENFORCED



*Editor's Note: The commentary and public opinion data that follow are drawn from First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools, a report prepared by Public Agenda Foundation, a non-partisan research and education organization. © 1994, Public Agenda.*

There can be very little doubt that the American public supports the goals leaders have set for raising academic standards in the public schools. Surveys conducted in the last decade have repeatedly shown support for requiring students to pass an exam to qualify for a high school diploma. Six in ten (61%) Americans questioned in this study say academic standards are too low in their own local schools, a figure that rises to seven in ten (70%) among African-American parents with children currently in public school.

Even more significant, people overwhelmingly endorse measures designed to set and enforce higher standards. Almost nine in ten respondents (88%) support not allowing students to graduate from high school unless they demonstrate they can write and speak English well, and 82% support setting up "very clear guidelines on what students should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject."

More than two-thirds (70%) want to raise stan-

dards of promotion from grade school to junior high and let students move ahead only when they pass a test showing they have reached these standards. People say they believe all of these measures would be highly effective in improving students' academic performance; support is strong among the general public and among white, African-American, and traditional Christian parents.

## **Rejecting Social Promotion**

Moreover, public support goes beyond lip service. People say the schools should follow through: enforce the standards and hold students accountable for mastering skills—not just for trying hard. Eighty-one percent say schools should pass students *only* when they have learned what was expected; only 16% say it is better to pass students if they have made an effort and tried hard. Seventy-six percent of Americans say teachers should toughen their grading and be more willing to fail high school students who don't learn. People are somewhat less willing to see this "tough-love" approach applied to grade school students; nevertheless, 60% say we should do so.

Public Agenda explored public reactions to education standards in a 1993 series of focus groups conducted for The New Standards Project. That study

also revealed broad and spontaneous support for the notion that higher expectations produce better performance. For parents, teachers, students, and members of the general public questioned in those focus groups, the premise made common sense: If you ask for more, you get more.

The public's strong endorsement for higher standards is also a manifestation of its concern about basics. The current study presented respondents with 10 different proposals for improving student achievement—ideas that included removing troublemakers from classrooms, reintroducing spanking, and adapting teaching styles to students' cultural backgrounds. Respondents rated each idea from one to five, based on its effectiveness in improving academic performance,

with five being the most effective. At the very top of the list—with 76% of respondents giving it the top rating—is a proposal that responds to the public's dual concerns about the basics and the importance of standards: a proposal that would deny students a high school diploma unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well.

The chief difficulty faced by education reformers is not resistance to the call for higher standards. Americans broadly embrace the need for higher standards, rigorously enforced. Rather, the difficulty is that the call for higher standards can seem inadequate to people given the depth of their concern about matters that they see as much more fundamental: safety, order, and the basics.

## Changes To Improve Academic Performance

Question: "For each idea I'd like you to tell me if you think it would improve kids' academic achievement. Use a 5-point scale where 5 means that it would improve academic achievement a great deal and 1 means it would not improve academic achievement at all."

Percentages rating item 4 or 5	General Public	White Parents	African-American Parents	Traditional Christian Parents
Not allowing kids to graduate from high school unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well	88%	89%	80%	87%
Emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable and disciplined	88%	91%	92%	90%
Setting up very clear guidelines on what kids should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject so that kids and the teachers will know what to aim for	82%	87%	92%	91%
Permanently removing from school grounds kids who are caught with drugs or with weapons	76%	84%	83%	84%
Taking persistent troublemakers out of class so that teachers can concentrate on the kids who want to learn	73%	76%	79%	76%
Raising the standards of promotion from grade school to junior high and only letting kids move ahead when they pass a test showing they have reached those standards	70%	69%	72%	71%
Replacing multiple-choice tests with essay tests to measure what kids learn	54%	51%	66%	53%
Mixing fast learners and slow learners in the same class so that slower kids learn from faster kids	34%	38%	39%	35%
Allowing educators to paddle or spank students	28%	29%	32%	41%
Adapting how schools teach to the background of students, such as using street language to teach inner-city kids	20%	19%	24%	22%



# TEACHERS FAVOR STANDARDS, CONSEQUENCES ... AND A HELPING HAND

Last October, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, one of the country's leading opinion research firms, conducted a survey among a nationally representative sample of AFT teachers. The survey assessed teachers' experiences with and attitudes toward a range of educational issues, exploring two critically important areas in particular depth: classroom discipline and academic standards. The commentary that follows reviews the survey's main findings regarding academic standards.

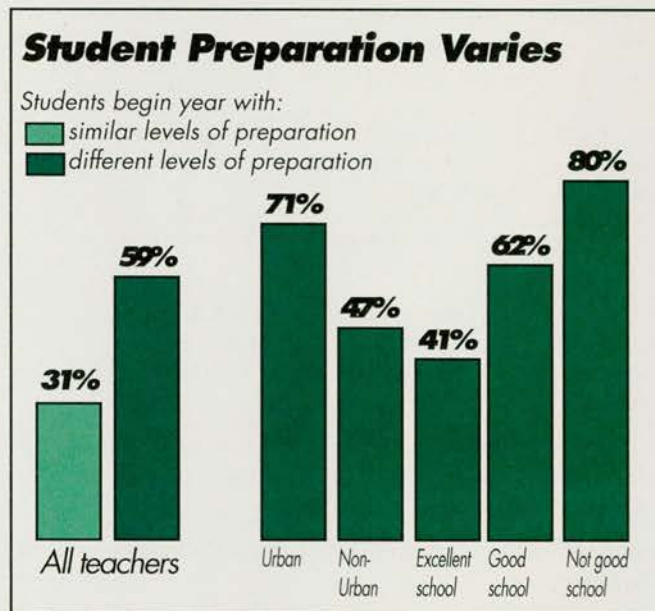
CONSIDERABLE TIME was devoted in the survey to the area of academic performance and standards, with a particular emphasis on the issue of "automatic promotion," that is, promoting children who have not truly mastered the academic skills and knowledge of the previous grade level. The results show significant teacher discontent in this area.

- Teachers receive students each fall with widely varying levels of preparation, which is a significant barrier to effective teaching.
- Automatic promotion is the single biggest cause of the tremendous disparities in student preparation, and teachers feel the practice should end.
- Teachers acknowledge that they play a role in automatic promotion, but describe conditions that often make it the lesser of two evils—teachers need better alternatives than choosing between retention and automatic promotion.

### **Variations in student preparation.**

Nearly three in five (59%) teacher members say that students arrive at the beginning of the year with such different levels of preparation that teachers must spend time reviewing old material so that less-prepared students are not left behind. This problem is particularly serious in urban areas, where more than 70% of teachers say that they must devote considerable teaching time to determining what students

know and then trying to get the entire class to the same starting point. Even in nonurban schools, though, nearly one in every two (47%) teachers say that differentials in student preparation cause them to waste valuable teaching time.



Teacher members pinpoint three reasons why preparation levels are mixed. The first problem is teachers at earlier grades within the district teaching different materials and preparing students differently. This does not appear to be much of a problem for primary teachers (just 14% say this happens very or fairly often), but does pose a problem at the secondary level (36%). While only about one in ten suburban teachers cite this problem, twice as many rural teachers (22%) and nearly three times as many urban teachers (31%) do. The lack of curriculum standardization is further confirmed in a survey question regarding latitude in teaching, as more than three in five respondents report that teachers in their districts have "a lot of

latitude" in deciding what to teach, within general guidelines set by the school or district.

The second cause of varying student preparation levels is students' transferring into new schools from outside districts. Secondary level teachers generally say that students changing districts (32% happens very or fairly often) is about as common a problem as intradistrict lack of standardization. In contrast, primary teachers cite district changes as the single most common cause of different preparation levels, with nearly half (46%) saying this happens very or fairly often in their school. Primary school teachers in urban areas, where families tend to be more transitory, face an especially tough challenge in this regard (54%).

The third and most important reason for inconsistent student preparation is that some students are promoted without truly mastering the previous grade's academic material, i.e., automatic promotion. This is a widespread problem, with two in five teacher members overall saying this happens very or fairly often. Especially alarming is the number of students in urban districts being inappropriately promoted. More than seven in ten (72%) teachers say they think over 5% of their current students (approximately one per class) were promoted without having mastered last year's academic material and skills, with 36% saying that more than one-fifth of their students are not adequately prepared (see the following table). In urban districts, the corresponding figures are 80% and 49%, meaning that for urban teachers today, it is commonplace to face a classroom filled with many academically unprepared students.

### **Students Promoted Without Mastering Materials or Skills**

	<b>All Teachers</b>	<b>Urban Schools</b>	<b>Nonurban Schools</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
More than 20%	36	49	22
6% to 20%	36	31	41
5% or less	28	20	37

Teachers clearly do not view the problem of automatic promotion lightly. They universally believe that automatic promotion is harmful to education, as 94% agree (77% strongly) with the following statement:

Promoting students who are not truly prepared creates a burden for the receiving teachers and classmates. Automatic promotion inevitably brings down standards and impedes education.

**Causes of automatic promotion.** Teachers recognize that they play a significant role in promoting students who are not truly ready for the next grade level. More than half (54%) of teacher mem-

bers say that they have promoted unprepared students during the past year. Indeed, the top two reasons cited as causes of automatic promotion center on decisions being made by teachers themselves that retention can be worse than promoting unprepared students.

### **Why Do Automatic Promotions Occur?**

(% saying each reason is a major/minor cause in their school)

**Belief that retention causes discipline problems: 61%**

**Belief that retention doesn't help student: 61%**

**Pressure from principal: 58%**

**No alternatives to retention: 52%**

**Pressure from parents: 52%**

**Limit on retentions: 50%**

**No rules/standards: 44%**

**Retention banned in some grades: 41%**

Six in ten (61% major/minor cause of automatic promotion) teacher members fear that students repeating the same grade might create social and disciplinary problems for a class because they are then older than the other students. As mentioned previously, middle school teachers face more disciplinary problems than do teachers at other levels, so it comes as no surprise that a considerable majority of them (73%) cite this as a cause for automatic promotion. As we might expect, this reservation about retention is less of a concern at the high school level (48%). Male secondary school teachers also are disproportionately more likely to view concerns about potential discipline problems as a reason for automatic promotion, with nearly seven in ten citing this as a cause, as opposed to only half of the female secondary school teachers surveyed.

Teachers are equally concerned (61% major/minor cause) that students are commonly promoted because many teachers believe that repeating a grade is not academically helpful for a student. Teachers in high schools are again less likely to subscribe to this belief, with only half of them citing this as a major or minor cause of automatic promotion; presumably this is because teachers at this level can fail a student in a class without this necessarily leading to retention.

The core problem lying behind these decisions to reluctantly promote unprepared students is that teachers operate within a system that lacks sufficient alternatives to retention. Too often, they face a dilemma with no satisfactory solution: automatically promote, and burden a colleague with an unqualified student, or retain the student in a setting that does neither the student nor next year's class any real good. Teachers justify sending unprepared students on to the next grade level as, in essence, choosing the lesser of two genuine evils.

Fully half (52% major/minor cause) of those surveyed cite the lack of alternative settings, such as special classes or tutoring programs, as a factor in automatic promotion. While grade level does not seem to differentiate between availability of alternatives to retention, district area does. This is a major problem for urban teachers—they rank it nearly as highly (64%) as the two factors discussed previously—but is not as much of one for suburban teachers (36%). Teachers in rural areas and small towns fall somewhere in between these two groups in citing this as a problem (46%). In addition, male secondary school teachers (57%) are more likely than are female secondary school teachers (44%) to cite lack of alternatives as a cause, as are teachers under age 35 (62%) compared to those age 50 and over (48%).

Another cause of students being sent to the next grade without mastering the previous year's academic material is external pressure to promote. Unlike on the issue of discipline, however, school administrators are at least as culpable as are parents in this area. Six in ten (58% major/minor cause) respondents say that teachers in their school are pressured by principals and other administrators not to retain students, while 52% say parental pressure is a problem. Administration pressure is especially prevalent at the primary level, with two-thirds of elementary teachers citing this as a cause for automatic promotion. Male secondary school teachers (60%) also tend to believe pressure from principals and other administrators is a likely cause for automatic promotion more often than do their female counterparts (42%). Interestingly, while teachers also experience some external pressure from parents and administrators when it comes to giving out grades, this happens far less often than does pressure to promote. It is mainly when a student faces possible retention, apparently, that serious external pressure to relent on academic standards is brought to bear on teachers.

Somewhat smaller though still substantial proportions of teacher members cite school promotion and retention guidelines as a source of automatic promotion. Four in nine (44% major/minor cause) say that their school has no clear rules or standards for re-

tention, so it is hard for teachers to justify not promoting a student (53% in urban schools). Other teachers say that there are rules, but the rules themselves are a problem: Half the teachers surveyed say that school rules do not allow them to retain more than a certain number of students, so some students who are not ready must be sent to the next grade, and 41% say that their school actually requires all students in certain grades to be promoted. Both of these are mainly problems in elementary and middle schools, with high school teachers citing them as lesser factors. Urban teachers also see these as more significant factors than do nonurban teachers.

**Homework and grading.** Responses to the survey's questions regarding academic workload and grading provide further evidence of insufficient standardization and slipping standards. About two in five respondents say that teachers in their school reduce the difficulty and amount of work they assign because students cannot or will not do it. Grade level affects whether or not teachers reduce homework assignments, with half of senior high school and 43% of middle school teachers saying this happens very or fairly often. Slightly smaller proportions of teachers at these grade levels say that colleagues in their own schools generally assign less homework than they believe is academically necessary and appropriate because they don't believe students today will do that amount of work (44% high school and 35% middle school teachers). Most teachers at all levels assign between two and five hours of homework per week, with an average of about three hours.

The survey also finds considerable variation in grading. A majority (63%) of teachers say that they have a lot of latitude in grading, with high school teachers especially reporting this to be true (74%). As a result, most teachers think that students in different classes who do the same quality of work often receive different grades. Most AFT teachers also agree that this use of different standards and grading systems in evaluating students results in confusion over what a grade really means. An overwhelming 85% majority agree that a grade should reflect real performance, and that students, teachers, and parents should all know what it means.

When asked how much weight they give to academic achievement, just 12% of teachers say that they award grades at the end of a marking period based solely upon achievement as opposed to effort, improvement, or other factors. Another three in ten say that 80% to 99% of a grade they assign reflects academic achievement, 41% cite a lower percentage, and 17% could not answer the question. Individual teachers also differ in their systems of grading, with



more than half (58%) using an absolute standard and 25% grading on a curve.

**T**HIS SURVEY was designed primarily to be a "census" of AFT teacher members, measuring their personal experiences with and underlying attitudes toward crucial educational problem areas. As such, it did not explore in any great depth support for policy options for dealing with these problems. Nevertheless, the research suggests two broad directions that schools must take to improve educational standards and achievement.

**Bring more standardization and continuity to education.** Teachers occupy an educational environment full of uncertainty and inconsistency. They cannot be certain what a new student has been taught or whether misbehavior will be punished. For schools to work the way they should, teachers believe this situation must change. The following are some of the key indications of teachers' desire for increased stability and predictability in their work environment.

- 53% of teacher members favor more standardization of what is taught at each grade level, so students would arrive at the start of the year with similar levels of preparation, even at the cost of teacher flexibility.
- 52% say that having a consistent grading system, based on achievement rather than a curve, would be very helpful in their school.
- 85% agree that a grade should reflect real achievement, and students, teachers, and parents should all know what a given grade means.
- 84% agree that consistent academic standards would reduce disruption in schools caused by educational fads.
- 96% feel that clear and consistently enforced discipline standards are a very or extremely important goal for schools today.



**Raising student achievement requires both carrots and sticks.** AFT teachers are broadly supportive of the union's focus on raising standards and increasing student accountability in the educational process. Teachers advocate a number of "tough love" measures to enhance achievement today.

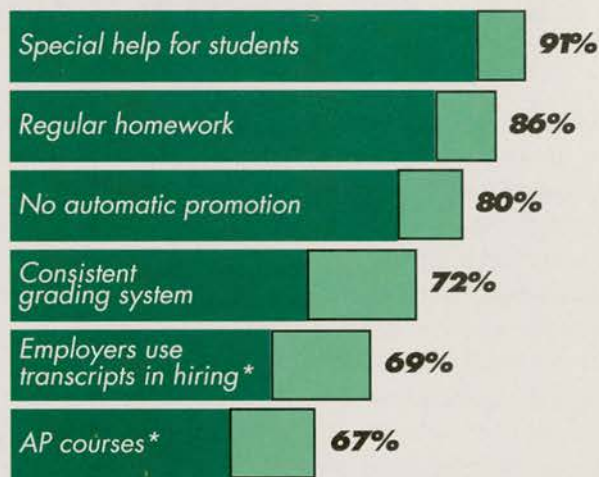
- 86% believe that assigning regular homework and holding students accountable for its completion would be helpful in improving academic standards and performance in their schools.
- 80% of teachers feel that making promotion dependent on meeting real standards and ending the practice of automatic promotion would enhance achievement.
- More than half of teachers believe that having

more employers use school transcripts in hiring would be very helpful in improving academic standards and performance.

More broadly, seven in ten teachers believe that student motivation and achievement would improve a great deal (48%) or a fair amount (23%) if there were *clearer consequences*—in terms of promotion, admission to college or trade school, and employment opportunities—for success or failure in meeting educational standards. The breadth of support for increasing the consequences for students is particularly striking, as large majorities of teachers at all grade levels, and in both urban and nonurban areas, support a move in this direction.

### Best Ways To Improve Academic Performance

(% saying each would be very  /fairly  helpful in their school)



\*Results only among senior high school teachers.

While getting tough is certainly a necessary step, teachers also clearly tell us that it is by no means a sufficient answer to today's educational challenges. Children will need a helping hand as well.

Fully 90% of AFT teacher members agree (72% strongly so) that the practice of automatic promotion means that students are not getting the help that they need in school. And the single reform that teachers say would be most important for improving standards and performance in their school (82% very helpful) is "providing special help for students who are not meeting academic standards in order to minimize the number of retentions." Support for this direction is widespread, as it ranks first among teachers at every grade level and in all district types. This serves as an important reminder that, while teachers want to uphold standards and demand accountability, their ultimate goal is not reprimanding failure but helping students to succeed. □

# A SYSTEM OF HIGH STANDARDS: *What We Mean and Why We Need It*



*The AFT has launched a national campaign on behalf of standards for student conduct and standards for student achievement. We believe these two education reforms are fundamental and that without them no other school reforms can work.*

*But what do we mean when we say we need standards for student achievement? Do we simply mean that teachers should demand more from their students? That students should exert themselves more? Is it simply our schools' failure to expect enough from our students that has left our students undereducated?*

*We believe that everyone—parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers—must expect the best of students and act accordingly. But we don't believe that the highest possible standards can be achieved and maintained in schools (or anywhere else) simply by individuals acting on their own to do their best and to bring out the best in students.*

**In all walks of life**, when quality really matters, we put systems into place—with rules, practices, incentives, penalties, and supports—that help all of us to maintain high standards. We do so because we understand that individuals do their best, are the most productive, and reach higher goals when they are working in a system that supports their best efforts.

Take, for example, an airline that desires a perfect safety record. The pilot plays a key role in this but he cannot achieve perfect air safety unless a whole safety system is in place: Experts must set forth

standards for what defines a safe plane. Mechanics must certify only those planes that meet the standards. Supervisors must agree that the standards must be met—even if it means the plane will be late or the flight canceled and that passengers will complain. Diagnostic systems must be in place so that mechanics can identify problems before they become crises. The resources must be in place to solve the problems. Without this whole supportive system, the airline will not realize excellent air safety, no matter how talented and conscientious the individuals on its staff.

In schools today, individual teachers strain tirelessly to help students reach their academic potential. But our schools have nothing to compare with the system of standards, monitoring and tough judgments by which pilots, mechanics, and flight supervisors do their work. In many cases, the "system"—the rules, the culture, the incentives—work against top student performance. For example:

- Teachers who insist that students master challenging work by taking difficult exams, completing tough projects, and doing lots of homework can find themselves under pressure to back off. In one extreme case, when Adele Jones, a Delaware teacher, failed a large number of the students in her algebra class, the school district tried to fire her. Nearly one third of AFT teachers report feeling pressure to give higher grades than students' work deserves. Nearly half (46%) say they have experienced pressure to pass along to the next







grade students who were not ready.

■ When every teacher sets his or her own standards, those standards appear idiosyncratic and are, therefore, negotiable to students. Moreover, students will often regard more demanding teachers as gratuitously mean. After all, the teachers don't have to demand so much, so why else would they? Students then try to negotiate these teachers' standards down—by failing to do the homework, for example. Teachers are left to expend valuable time and energy swimming against the cultural tide, with no institutional support, trying to cajole students to meet high standards.

■ Good grades were once the required currency for college admission, and a high school diploma was once a pretty good ticket to a decent job. But today, good grades aren't necessary to enter most colleges, and employers are reluctant to hire high school graduates for any but the most menial jobs.

What are the elements of a system that would enable educators to demand—and get—top academic performance from students? That would elicit the maximum effort from students so that they could reach their maximum academic potential? We believe there are four essential elements: rigorous academic standards, assessments to measure student progress toward the standards, incentives for students to do the hard work that learning requires, and opportunity for students to confront challenging material and re-

ceive extra help when they need it.

We present here these four elements, which are the bedrock of the world's most successful school systems and must constitute the foundation of a much-reformed, improved American education system. We then offer examples of how these elements might look when implemented and several steps that schools and school districts can take right now to shore up standards immediately as states enact the fuller systems.

## The four essential elements

### **1. Common, rigorous standards for academic achievement**

The first essential element in effective school systems is the existence of academic standards at the national or state level. These specify what students need to learn—and how well they need to learn it—in each subject at each grade level. Students should be taught to the same standards in the early grades, but at some point, probably in high school, students will enter different educational programs on the basis of their achievement (not aptitude) and future aspirations. The curriculum will be different in each program, but standards will be high and challenging in all of them. And students who want to apply to change educational

programs will have multiple opportunities to do so.

These common standards will enable teachers to provide students with consistent, coordinated instruction that builds on what students have learned in previous years. In contrast, teachers today face classrooms each fall filled with students who have mastered very different material and who have reached very different levels of achievement. Teachers must spend weeks and weeks determining what their students know and can do and weeks more bringing them to a common starting point.

Moreover, a single set of expectations for what students should learn also helps to reduce some of the pressures that work against academic rigor. Students won't be able to complain that their schoolmates get to study easier material or have to do less work.

Used as the basis for the system described below, common standards will nourish a culture of high expectations and empower teachers to maintain high standards. For common standards to support high achievement, they should:

- be specific about what students are expected to learn at each grade level, so that teachers will interpret them similarly. For example, a standard that calls for fourth-graders to "understand the processes of photosynthesis..." provides more direction than a standard that makes a vague call for students to "understand scientific processes."
- be set at the state level so that students transferring from district to district will arrive at their new schools prepared.
- be rigorous at all grade levels and in all educational programs in order to stretch students to reach their maximum potential.

## **2. State-administered assessments**

The second essential element of our system is exams, administered by the state, that measure student progress toward the standards and that affect students' eligibility for such privileges as entry to college or technical schools.

Because these exams, and the rewards they elicit, will be tied to the classroom curriculum, students will know that they must study hard—not only in the year they take the exam but also in the grades leading up to that point. For this reason, where such exams exist abroad, peer pressure works in favor of high achievement. Students favor studying hard, because it will pay off for them; they exert pressure against "class clowns" because they see them as interfering with their chances to succeed.

Significantly, with these external exams, it is not the teacher who has decided what and how much the student must learn; it is the state or national government. The teacher is there to help the students meet these standards, much as a coach is there to help the Olympic athlete.

## **3. Explicit rewards for achievement**

In all of the Asian and European school systems where student achievement is so high, secondary school students turn off the TV set and study diligently because they know that unless they pass their exams, they will not get into a college, technical institute or apprenticeship program. They may not even get a job because employers hire on the basis of school records. Students get more than one chance to pass the exams, but ultimately the standards must be met.

In the U.S., academic achievement offers far less pay-off. For most students, there is a college willing to take them, no matter what courses they took, no matter what their grades. Employers may care about whether a student has received a high school diploma or not, but they don't ask what grades students received or whether students earned those grades in the most basic courses or the most advanced.

Given the lack of reward for academic effort, it's hardly a wonder that students who study hard are derided by their peers for their unnecessary exertion and treated as social outcasts. Learning complicated material requires diligent studying and constant practice, which most students won't undertake unless there are clear, significant incentives for doing so. Incentives should include access to higher education, training, and jobs, but they should also include more immediate rewards, such as prestigious citations, special trips, and scholarships—and more immediate consequences, such as required summer and weekend catch-up classes (which would also signal students that they might as well learn the material the first time, since eventually they will have to learn it).

## **4. Opportunity for students to reach the standards**

When you establish clear goals for student achievement, and then attach rewards for students who meet those goals (and negative consequences for those who don't), you create powerful incentives for young people to work hard and do well in school. But still some students will struggle and fall behind, even some who work hard.

Most teachers spend time before or after school or at free moments during the day helping students



who are struggling with their school work. But they are typically all alone in their efforts to help those students succeed. Students who are trying to succeed need more structured, formal opportunities to receive timely, effective supplemental instruction.

Without standards in place, it's easy for students to be passed along from grade to grade, falling farther and farther behind and never receiving the help they need. Once standards are in place, the emphasis can be on early identification of learning problems. Teachers can assess whether students are reaching the set standard with standardized diagnostic tests or other tools. Resources—tutors, instructional materials that use different pedagogical techniques, additional time, guides that enable parents to help students at home—can then be made available in order to systematically provide the extra, effective instruction the students need. Once rewards and consequences are in place, students will be more motivated to take advantage of the resources. For example, schools could make available summer school programs where students would not just mark time but struggle to master the material in order to pass a required exam.

## What would this mean in practice?

What we've offered here is a set of elements essential to creating a system that can help students reach their academic potential. We haven't offered a blueprint for how the elements should be realized in practice. For example, at what age would students take the external exams, what rewards for high achievement would they earn, and how would they be provided the opportunity to catch up if they were falling behind? To give a sense of the variety of ways in which these elements can be implemented, we offer these four vignettes, from schools, school systems, and other countries.

■ **IN FRANCE**, virtually all students take the same challenging liberal arts curriculum through grade nine. (There is no ability grouping and no tracking for these students.) After grade 9, students can choose among a variety of specialized secondary school programs, some academic, some academic/vocational. The academic programs include rigorous academic courses and end with college-entry exams that must be passed in order to attend any college. The vocational programs include half time in a full range of academic

courses and half time in vocational courses; to graduate from secondary school, students must pass academic and vocational exams. The result is that all students must work at their academic studies; all students end up with earned certificates that are highly regarded by employers, technical schools, or universities. Although high school graduation requirements are so much higher than in the U.S., graduation rates are higher than here.

■ **IN JAPAN**, all elementary students take the same curriculum; there are no ability groups in reading or math, and students are not assigned to classes based on ability. Because the curriculum is very specific and it is clear what students are supposed to know and be able to do, when students fall behind, it is immediately apparent. Teachers' days are structured so that they have time during the day to individually tutor the students who need help. And, in many cases, parents will enroll their children in special afterschool programs where students can receive the instruction they need to catch up with their class.

■ **IN NEW YORK STATE**, all students have the option of taking "Regents" (college-preparatory-level) courses during their secondary years and then taking Regents exams before they graduate. Students who pass the exams will have this noted on their diplomas for all to see, and New York's state university system gives preference to students who score well on Regents exams. New York is the only state in which a large number of high school graduates participate in a curriculum-based examination system. The system works; notably, when you control for family income, parental education, race and gender, New York has the highest average SAT scores of any state.

■ **AT THE BARCLAY SCHOOL IN BALTIMORE**, Maryland, where virtually all of the students qualify for free lunch, teachers use a very specific, challenging curriculum. (It is the same curriculum used by the prestigious private Calvert School, whose students come from much wealthier families.) After four years of using this curriculum, reading scores, which had been under the thirtieth percentile, are now at or above the fiftieth. Research indicates that the basis for the terrific improvement is the very specific curriculum. As in Japan, the specific curriculum makes it possible to quickly identify students who need extra help. Plus, it enables teachers to devise, share, and institutionalize the most effective ways of



teaching each part of the curriculum.

# What to do now

**ENACTING A SYSTEM** based on these elements will require tremendous input from educators and the public and will require action by state legislatures, state school boards, school districts, state university systems, private colleges, and business. As the system is being put into place, what steps can be taken *right now* to shore up standards in our schools *today*? Are there initiatives that individual school faculties can undertake? Steps that we can encourage our school districts to take that don't require prior state action? Yes! We urge action in the following five arenas.

## 1. Consistent grading

**WHY:** Today, in most schools, a teacher's grade represents only one teacher's judgment of what an "A" a "B" or a "C" means; teachers differ about how much and how well students must do in order to earn a given grade, and they differ about such issues as how much weight "effort" should carry relative to achievement. So, when students or parents ask to have a grade changed, a teacher (or principal, or district office) has little defense because there is no commonly accepted grading standard to point to. Moreover, the grading practices of the "easy grader" down the hall can undermine other teachers' efforts to give high grades only for top work.

To add to the problem, grades may be based on a curve—determined by the relative performance of students within the class, not each student's actual mastery of the material. Students know that by doing well they will "wreck the curve" and cause everyone else (including their friends) to get low grades; peer pressure encourages students to withhold their best efforts. By contrast, when grades are based on objective criteria and absolute mastery, everyone has an incentive to excel.

**WHAT:** Once we have common standards established at the state level and exams that measure student progress toward them, there will be a common "anchor" for teacher grades. But now we can do the following to protect the integrity of teacher grading decisions and to make grades a powerful tool in promoting a culture of high standards and achievement:

- Teachers who teach the same subject and grade in a given school should arrange to consult regularly in order to standardize the criteria they use to grade student work (e.g., effort, improvement, writing quality, subject mastery...) and agree upon the quality of student work that will

merit a given grade.

- Through such discussions, school staffs could agree to base student grades on what students have actually learned, not on a curve. In some schools, this could require a modification of a districtwide policy.
- Where they don't already, school staffs could agree to report separate grades for academic achievement, and other achievements such as "effort," "conduct," and "improvement."

## 2. Earned promotions

**WHY:** Most teachers encounter intense pressure from parents and administrators not to fail students, whether or not they have mastered the material for a particular grade. Often teachers themselves believe it is unfair to hold kids back when other students in other classes or schools who have learned even less are passed on. And teachers recognize that simply repeating a grade is unlikely to improve the student's achievement.

But social promotion sends an awful message to students—that they can get by (and stay with their friends) without learning anything. Plus, it is unfair to the students in the next grade whose education is held back as teachers try to help the students who are unprepared for grade-level work.

**WHAT:** We recommend that the following steps be taken. Where possible, schools should adopt these practices; in some cases, it may require the support of the school district:

- Eliminate arbitrary mandates for promotion, such as capping the number of students who can be retained in a given grade or by only allowing students to be held back in certain grades and not others.
- Grant teachers the authority to promote and retain students based on grading criteria that reflect student mastery and are based on commonly adopted standards within the school. These decisions should not be subject to reversal by principals or other administrators.
- Provide intensive tutoring or special, high-quality instructional programs for students who are in danger of being retained or who have been retained.

## 3. Challenging courses

**WHY:** The evidence is clear that students learn more when they take more advanced courses. But too often, students are not required (or even encouraged) to take the more advanced courses that they could



handle, and too often the advanced courses aren't even offered, especially in rural and inner-city high schools. We recommend that schools and districts move toward the following:

#### **WHAT:**

- Secondary schools should offer advanced courses in each of the core academic subjects; these courses could be offered through the Advanced Placement program. In South Carolina, a new state law that requires every high school to offer at least one Advanced Placement course and that pays students' AP fees has meant the number of AP exams taken in the state's public schools has quadrupled in ten years—from about 3,000 to about 12,000.
- High school transcript practices should be reviewed to assure that students who take hard courses are not penalized. For example, GPAs should be calculated in a way that gives extra weight to advanced courses, and diplomas could carry a special endorsement if a certain number of advanced courses were taken.
- School staffs and parents could lobby the school board to raise high school graduation requirements. Recently, New York City began requiring all high school students to take three years of Regents (college-prep)-level courses in both math and science. As a result, 21,000 more ninth-graders took and passed Regents-level science courses last year.
- Elementary schools should review the curriculum that is offered to students in less-advanced reading and math groups. While students don't learn best when they are overwhelmed with overly difficult material, there is abundant evidence that students in the lowest reading and math groups often lack access to sufficiently challenging material.

#### **4. Explicit grade and course goals**

**WHY:** Parents, students, and teachers all need a clear picture of what a given course or grade level expects of students. Presently, what constitutes success or mastery is so variable as to be meaningless. Third-grade math in one school may be second-grade math in another and fifth-grade math in yet another. Parents have little to guide them on how to help their children or to confirm the successful completion of relevant homework. Students drift without a firm sense of what they need to learn at the beginning, middle, and end of a course.

#### **WHAT:**

- Schools should provide parents annually with a written statement describing what students are expected to master at each grade level in core subjects.
- At the secondary level, descriptions should explain each course, including its content and the skills required for successful completion.
- Specific times for reports, consultations and report cards should be provided to parents at the beginning of the school year, along with an explanation of exactly what the reports and meetings mean and how parents can use the results to motivate their children.

#### **5. Challenging homework**

**WHY:** Studies show, not surprisingly, that students who do homework learn more. Homework, in effect, expands the school day, allowing students more practice with the material while freeing class time for more direct instruction. It also helps build self-discipline and independent work habits. When the homework load is not coordinated among teachers, the result can be too much homework (particularly at the secondary level where a student has many teachers), leading to pressure for less. Or the result can be that teachers assign uneven amounts, often leading to pressure on the more demanding teachers to lighten their assignments in order that their students not be subjected to an "unfair" amount of work.

#### **WHAT:**

- Establish a common homework policy for the school. Elementary teachers who teach the same grade may agree to assign comparable amounts of homework. Secondary teachers may need to coordinate their assignments so that students get a healthy dose, but not an overwhelming amount, of work each night.
- Communicate the homework policy to parents. If parents know how much work their children should be bringing home, they will be better positioned to make sure it gets done.
- Homework should be well designed, offering both practice in what has already been taught and a chance for students to go beyond the classroom instruction. Assignments should not depend on resources that students may not have access to. □

*The above statement was adopted by the Executive Council of the American Federation of Teachers, February 15, 1996.*

# AFT CRITERIA FOR HIGH-QUALITY STANDARDS



*In the development of curricula and achievement standards—as is true with so many other important undertakings—the devil is in the details. If the standards are vague or fuzzy; if they are too skimpy . . . or too overwhelming; if their focus is not on academic content; if they are set too high or too low, they not only fail to serve their intended purpose, they can also turn people against the basic notion of establishing standards.*

*We have already learned a lot from the standards-setting efforts undertaken by various state, national, and local groups over the past several years and from our study of the much more established curricular and assessment materials that serve as the basis for the educational systems of many European and Asian countries. Based on these lessons, the AFT developed criteria for teachers, parents, and others to use to judge the usefulness and effectiveness of student achievement standards. Since we first published these criteria in the fall of 1994, they have been used by states and districts developing standards, they have been used in professional development workshops for teachers and other school staff, and they have been widely read by parents, policymakers, and others who are concerned about the quality of what's being put forward in the name of "standards." As work on raising standards and strengthening the curriculum continues in*

*states and communities across the country, we hope these criteria will help shape the conversations and the final products.*

*Of course, we should not expect that perfect standards will arise out of the first try. It took other countries a long time to arrive at useable descriptions of the essential knowledge and skills they want their students to learn. We are not likely to be any different. We should be prepared for a number of rounds, an evolution of revision and refinement—and a lot of hard work.*

*Some people are worried that the standards movement is just the latest educational fad: here today, gone tomorrow. If we settle for something thrown together hastily, the skeptics may be right. But done well, standards will be a powerful tool for improving education. It is in this spirit that we put forward these criteria.*

## **1. Standards must focus on academics**

This may seem obvious to many people, but it is the most important point we can make. The purpose of setting standards is to improve students' academic performance. This should be the central mission of all our educational arrangements. Forging agreement around the academic content of the curriculum and the expectations we have for our children is the essential first step. If we can agree on what all



students deserve to learn, we can focus our energies and resources on giving all kids the opportunities they need to read and write better; reach greater heights in math and science; and learn more about history, geography, literature, and the arts. These are the things that will make a difference in students' lives, and they are what parents care most about.

But there are some who would rather have standards focus on social and behavioral issues than on academics. Across the country, we've watched debates and legislative battles unfold around proposed education standards or "outcomes" that stray from or avoid academics. These efforts, frequently referred to as "outcomes-based education," or "OBE," are being challenged and defeated, and not only by religious fundamentalists but also by concerned parents, business people, educators, and other public school supporters who have raised serious questions about some of the standards that have been developed.

In several states, the intense negative reaction to non-academic standards resulted in the substantial revision or defeat of the entire standards reform package. Here are a few examples from Virginia—where in 1992 Governor Douglas Wilder abandoned the complete draft set of "Common Core of Learning" standards; and from Pennsylvania—where strong opposition prompted the state to significantly amend its

draft "Student Learning Outcomes":

All students understand and appreciate their worth as unique and capable individuals and exhibit self-esteem. (*Pennsylvania's Student Learning Outcomes, Draft 1991*)

All students demonstrate caregiving skills and evaluate, in all settings, appropriate child care practices necessary to nurture children based on child development theory. (*Pennsylvania's Student Learning Outcomes, Draft 1991*)

[A] student who is becoming a fulfilled individual uses the fundamental skills of thinking, problem solving, communicating, quantifying, and collaborating...to analyze personal strengths and limitations to improve behaviors, capabilities, and plans. (*Virginia's Common Core of Learning Draft 1992*)

In contrast, the following excerpt from the recently revised national history standards is clearly grounded in academic content and represents the type of information that standards ought to convey:

The student understands the causes of the American Revolution. Therefore, the student is able to:

- Explain the consequences of the Seven Years War and the overhaul of English imperial policy following



the Treaty of Paris in 1763.

- Compare the arguments advanced by defenders and opponents of the new imperial policy on the traditional rights of English people and the legitimacy of asking the colonies to pay a share of the costs of empire.
- Reconstruct the chronology of the critical events leading to the outbreak of armed conflict between the American colonies and England.
- Analyze political, ideological, religious, and economic origins of the Revolution.
- Reconstruct the arguments among patriots and loyalists about independence and draw conclusions about how the decision to declare independence was reached.

As noted earlier, the program most responsible for giving standards a bad name is called “outcomes-based education” or OBE. Although it makes sense to organize our education system around the results—or outcomes—we hope it will produce, OBE’s treatment of academic knowledge as a low priority doesn’t sit well with most teachers and parents. OBE proponents served as key consultants to several state education departments over the last several years, and in each case the so-called “reform” proposal that resulted was met with significant opposition, largely because of the non-academic and controversial nature of the standards. Now, in a number of states, those opposed to any kind of standards development are trying to pin the “OBE” label on whatever effort is under way in an attempt to taint it. In reaction, states have begun to avoid using terms like “outcomes” and “OBE” to describe what they’re doing. Terminology, however, is not at the heart of the matter. In the end, it’s the content of the standards that must be kept center stage.

Schools certainly have a role to play in helping students develop those traits essential to good behavior and strong character, such as compassion, honesty, self-discipline, and perseverance. And the standards-setting process can contribute to that mission by ensuring that all students have access to a solid academic curriculum, because moral education is a natural by-product of a good curriculum. As students weigh the dilemmas and compromises of history, and learn about its heroes and villains; as they re-visit the great debates that have stirred mankind over the centuries; and as they confront the ethical issues that lie at the heart of so much of our great literature, their moral understandings will be greatly enriched.

In addition, of course, schools can contribute to the moral education of the young in other ways—for example, through their discipline policies; through their decisions about what to award and recognize; and by the example they set as a community in which the virtues are both expected and honored. These are not matters, however, that lend themselves well

to the standards-setting mechanism. They are best taken up by teachers, parents, and the local or school community, coming together to find common ground in their hopes for their children.

## **2. Standards must be grounded in the core disciplines**

Some educators have thought it best to move away from traditional subject areas and create “interdisciplinary” expectations for students. “Human growth and development,” “environmental stewardship,” and “cultural and creative endeavors” are just some “subject areas” that have replaced math, science, history, and English. Proponents of this approach argue that solutions to “real world” problems and issues cannot be based on one or another discipline, so, therefore, neither should standards.

This argument belies the purpose of standards, which is to focus our educational systems on what is most essential for students to learn, not to prescribe how the material should be taught. At its best, interdisciplinary education can be an effective approach to teaching the knowledge and skills that arise from the disciplines. However, when standards-setters abandon the disciplines, content suffers. Standards become vaguely worded and loosely connected, making the job of curriculum designers, assessment developers, and teachers all but impossible.

In the hands of imaginative and well-educated teachers, interdisciplinary teaching can be engaging and effective. But its value depends on a firm grounding in the subjects themselves. Strong standards in each of the core disciplines will ensure that interdisciplinary approaches reflect the depth and integrity of the disciplines involved.

In order to better prepare students for the job market after they finish school, some states and industry groups are developing “career” or “skill” standards separate from the core academic standards. In so far as these efforts help make clear to students the academic knowledge and skills they will need to get good jobs, skill standards will be serving a very useful purpose. Students are always asking how what they are learning in school is relevant to their later lives. By showing students, through the standards and curriculum, how good writing skills or trigonometry are used in the workplace, schools may have an easier time motivating students to work hard, and businesses may have better-prepared youngsters applying for jobs.

There is a real danger, however, that skill standards can have a very different effect than the one just described. If these standards become purely vocational in nature, and if they fail to make a strong connection to the academic subjects, the result will be a greater separation between the vocational and academic tracks in American high schools. Whether students plan to go to college, vocational training, or directly into the workforce after high school, there is a common core of





academic knowledge and skill they will need to succeed. Skill standards either need to build in that academic core or they need to make clear references to a set of academic standards that does.

### **3. Standards must be specific enough to assure the development of a common core curriculum**

We have already established that good standards are based in the academic disciplines, but being academic and subject based is not enough. A good set of standards should also outline the essential knowledge and skills that all students should learn in each subject area.

Such standards would guarantee that all students, regardless of background or neighborhood, are exposed to a common core of learning. This means putting an end to the unequal, uninspiring curricula that many disadvantaged youngsters get locked into from an early age. A strong common core also would enable us to continue to forge a strong common culture, to preserve what unites us without diminishing the unique strength that flows from our diversity.

Requiring a common core would not, of course, limit students who choose to go beyond it to advanced-level high school courses in any of the academic subjects. Nor would it prevent a fruitful integration of the academic core with vocational or technical education at the upper-secondary level. But to the extent that a common core was established through most of the high school years—which is the practice abroad—we would ensure that all students are given a more equal chance to become well-educated citizens.

In addition, teachers would have a much clearer idea of what their students learned the year before, so they would not have to waste so much class time reteaching previously covered material. And it would make life much easier on students who move from one school to another and often find themselves either way ahead or way behind the rest of the class.

With a common core in hand, we could—as other industrialized countries have done—end the need for every teacher to re-invent the wheel. Like other professionals, we could begin to accrue a more focused body of knowledge, a portfolio of good practice, of materials and options that teachers and teacher educators could draw from, adapt, add to, polish, and refine. But this is only possible if there is broad agreement on what is most essential to learn.

If standards are to set forth the content of a common core, and if they are to be used by teachers, curriculum and assessment developers, textbook publishers, and others, they must be specific enough to guide these people in their activities. Unfortunately, many states' standards seem to be falling short in this regard, offering the barest guidance as to what

should be covered. Some of the standards we've seen fit entire subjects on a single page. Others don't make any distinction between what elementary and secondary students should learn. One state's social studies standards mentions that students should learn about the concept of "war and its many repercussions," but never specifies which wars are most important for them to learn about. Such a guideline could lead to textbooks that cover the U.S. Revolution and the Civil War, assessments that cover World War I and World War II, and professional development and teacher education that stress World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.

Though it has received a lot of attention for its reform efforts over the last several years, Kentucky is an example of a state whose standards were, until recently, too vague to guide local districts toward a core curriculum and matching, content-based assessments. Kentucky's original standards contained only five to ten statements of what students should learn in each subject area. Here, for example, is the complete list of Kentucky's original social studies standards:

2.14 Students understand the democratic principles of justice, equality, responsibility, and freedom and apply them to real-life situations.

2.15 Students can accurately describe various forms of government and analyze issues that relate to the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

2.16 Students observe, analyze, and interpret human behaviors, social groupings, and institutions to better understand people and the relationships among individuals and among groups.

2.17 Students interact effectively and work cooperatively with the many ethnic and cultural groups of our nation and world.

2.18 Students understand economic principles and are able to make economic decisions that have consequences in daily living.

2.19 Students recognize and understand the relationship between people and geography and apply their knowledge in real-life situations.

2.20 Students understand, analyze, and interpret historical events, conditions, trends and issues to develop historical perspective.

Six years into their state reform efforts, officials in Kentucky decided that it was necessary to provide teachers, parents, and others with more clarity in terms of the academic content students are expected to learn, so they are fleshing



out the original standards in greater detail.

In contrast, California has for years communicated its standards in terms of grade-by-grade curriculum frameworks, thus providing substantial, common, clear guidance to all the players in the educational system. Here, for example, is an excerpt from the California History/Social Science Framework describing what 11th graders should understand about the Great Depression:

Students should assess the likely causes of the Depression and examine its effects on ordinary people in different parts of the nation through use of historical materials. They should recognize the way in which natural drought combined with unwise agricultural practices to cause the Dust Bowl, a major factor in the economic and cultural chaos of the 1930s. They should see the linkage between severe economic distress and social turmoil. Photographs, films, newspaper accounts, interviews with persons who lived in the period, as well as paintings and novels (such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*) will help students understand this critical era.

The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal should be studied as an examination of the government's response to economic crisis. The efforts of the Roosevelt Administration to alleviate the crisis through the creation of social welfare programs, regulatory agencies, and economic planning bureaus should be carefully assessed.

Officials in California are trying to build on the information in the curriculum frameworks by developing complementary standards and assessments that all students will be expected to master.

How specific should standards be? There is no perfect formula. But it helps to keep in mind why we are setting standards in the first place and how they will be used. Here are some questions worth asking about the standards in your state: Are the standards organized by grade levels or age bands, or do they in some way clearly delineate the differences in expectations for students at different ages or levels? Are the standards clear and specific enough to guide the development of curriculum frameworks that would describe the core units to be covered in every grade? If a state were to adopt these standards but give districts the responsibility for fleshing them out into a curriculum, what are the chances that students across the state would be learning the same core curriculum? If a student moved from one district to another or from school to school within a district, would these standards ease the move to a new grade in a new school with-



out putting him or her too far ahead or behind the other students? If a textbook publisher and an assessment developer were to use the standards in their work, is it likely that the text and the test would be well aligned?

#### **4. Standards must be manageable given the constraints of time**

Neither standards nor the resulting common core curriculum should try to cover everything to be taught. A core curriculum should probably constitute somewhere between 60 percent to 80 percent of the academic curriculum; the exact amount is open for discussion. The rest can be filled in by local districts, schools, and teachers.

It's important not to draw the wrong conclusions here: There is nothing sacred about the ways school presently apportion their time. According to *Prisoners of Time*, the 1994 report by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning,

American schools spend about half as much time on academics as their counterparts overseas. The average U.S. high school graduate spends only 40 percent of his time studying core academic subjects in his school career. There is no reason why these figures should be so low, and standards are the first necessary step toward initiating some changes in school schedules.

Nevertheless, as states begin to adopt standards, there undoubtedly will be competing demands for time in the curriculum—both within and among the disciplines. Standards-setters will need to exhibit restraint in the face of these pressures. Their job is to determine what is essential for students to learn. A laundry list that satisfies everyone will be self-defeating, leaving teachers right back where they are now—facing the impossible task of trying to rush through overstuffed textbooks and ridiculously long sets of curriculum objectives.

#### **5. Standards must be rigorous and world class**

When President Clinton signed Goals 2000 into law, he was flanked by huge signs bearing the phrase “world class standards.” The national education goals call for American students to be first in the world in math and science by the turn of the century. And states and professional associations that are setting standards often repeat the mantra “world class,” “rigorous,” and “challenging” to describe what they are doing.

But what do these words really mean? When some people talk too easily about world class standards, they seem to forget there is a real world out there. If standards truly are rigorous and world class, they should stand up to some tough but sensible questions. Do they reflect various levels of knowledge and skills comparable to what students in high-achieving



countries are expected to master? Which countries did the standards-setters use as a basis for comparison, and what documents did they look at to determine their standards? Will the standards lead to a core curriculum for all students—those headed for college and those headed for work—as demanding as in France or Japan? Are the standards as rigorous as those reflected in the French *Brevet de College* and the German *Realschule* exams, a standard met by two-thirds of students in those countries? Will they result in assessments for the college-bound as rigorous as the German *Abitur*; the French *Baccalauréat* exams, the British A-levels, or the Japanese university entrance exams? Did the standards-setters refer to internationally benchmarked curricula and exams such as those of the International Baccalaureate program? What about the best programs and resources available in the U.S., such as the College Board's Advanced Placement exams and Achievement tests (now called the SAT II), or the curriculum frameworks used in California?

In our 1995 report on the quality of state standards (*Making Standards Matter*, July 1995), the AFT asked officials in all fifty states whether they looked at the expectations in other countries while developing their standards. Only seven states had done this in any measurable way, and even those states had only done so in one or two subjects.

Everyone involved in developing standards, whether at the national, state, or local level, must take this benchmarking issue seriously. Information on other countries is not easy to get a hold of, but it is absolutely essential that we do a better job of it if our standards are going to help students achieve their maximum potential. Nothing will be accomplished by setting standards that are too low. Without honest international benchmarking, we will be captives of our own parochial notions of what students can accomplish, and low standards may very well be the result.

## **6. Standards must include 'performance standards'**

In recent polls, most AFT teachers agreed that students across the board are capable of doing better work and mastering more demanding material than they currently are. Teachers also cited the lack of student motivation as one of the biggest problems they face in their classrooms. In any profession, specific standards are developed in order to measure competence and performance, and these standards give people something specific to aim for. Whether you look at the medical boards that prospective doctors must pass, the bar exams for lawyers, or the time trials for drivers to qualify for the Indianapolis 500—performance is never dealt with in the abstract. For example, Indy racers are not simply told that "very fast driving" will qualify them for the big race. They know exactly what times they need to beat, and they plan their strategies accordingly.

It should be the same for education standards. An influential report recently commissioned by the National Educa-

tion Goals Panel, *Promises To Keep: Creating High Standards for American Students*, asserted that a complete set of standards should describe both what students should know and be able to do and how well they must know and do it. The report separated these functions into two distinct categories—content standards and performance standards. Content standards should define the knowledge (the most important and enduring ideas, concepts, issues, dilemmas, and information) and skills (the ways of thinking, working, communicating, reasoning, and investigating) essential to each discipline. Performance standards should specify "how good is good enough." They should show how competent a student demonstration must be to indicate attainment of the content standards.

It is safe to say that none of the standards documents we've seen—whether from the national standards groups, states, or other professional associations—fully incorporates performance standards as defined in the Goals Panel report. States will find this a particular problem when they try to develop assessments, because performance standards are essential to gauging whether the content standards are met.

A few states may be on the right track. Colorado, for example, has created a good set of content standards, better than many of the other state standards we've seen so far. And its next step will be to develop "performance levels" and assessments for each content standard. So, not only will Colorado have a history standard that requires fourth graders to "understand the difference between a democracy and an autocracy," but the state will follow that with a performance standard that establishes how well students must understand that difference and how they can demonstrate that understanding. This will probably require showing examples of student work that meets the various performance levels Colorado sets, or possibly creating sample assessment questions or exercises and the rubrics that would be used to grade them. It will be interesting to watch this work develop.

## **7. Standards must define multiple levels of performance for students to strive for**

Standards are not merely meant to measure what students are learning but also to motivate them to excel. Youngsters should be able to look to academic standards as a goal, something to work toward, to strive for; something that will challenge them, no matter how far ahead or behind they may be. Standards that are too easy to reach won't require students to work hard. On the other hand, students will be discouraged from trying at all if the standards are so high that they seem out of reach. All students need to be able to look at a set of academic standards and say "these are challenging but I think I can reach them if I work hard and put my mind to it."

Considering the range of achievement among students, they won't all be inspired by the same level of performance. What may seem very challenging to some is bound to



look easy to others. Title I of the new *Improving America's Schools Act* recognizes this. It requires states and districts to define multiple degrees of mastery of the content standards (e.g., partially proficient, proficient, advanced) and to report achievement that way from elementary school onward. This will be helpful to students, parents, and teachers who will want to know—beyond just “pass or fail”—how well students are doing in relation to the content standards. It will also help schools and districts target resources to those students in most need of support and track their progress against a set of clear benchmarks.

What's not necessarily required in Title I but is very important for states and districts to do is to make clear to parents, teachers, students, and others what the different performance levels mean. What should an “advanced” high school student's writing look like? How does that compare to “proficient” and “partially proficient” writing? What kinds of math problems should students who are considered “proficient” be able to solve in elementary school, in middle school, in high school? States and districts have to begin putting concrete examples of student work out there in the public view if their standards are going to mean anything to anyone.

Defining multiple degrees of performance standards does *not* mean having low standards for some students and high standards for others. The minimum acceptable level of performance needs to be much more demanding than what many students are achieving today, and no child should be able to slip through the cracks. The goal is to significantly raise the floor while also raising the ceiling.

Another important way to make sure standards motivate all students is to encourage specialization at some point in high school. All students should be required to meet the same core content standards in elementary and middle school and through a certain point in high school. Some may take longer than others, and there should always be second and third chances, but they should all reach the core standards.

Once they've mastered the common core, students should have the opportunity to pursue different courses of study depending on their strengths and interests, and those courses should be directly linked to students' postsecondary and career aspirations. Students who want to go on to college should see very clearly what types of courses they will need to take in order to be well prepared, and there should be a clear set of standards for them to work toward before graduating. Those who want to pursue further technical training after high school but are not interested in a four year college should have a different set of courses and standards to aspire to. And those who intend to go directly into the job market should have at least mastered the core content standards before getting a diploma—a step, when met, that will significantly raise the



achievement levels and life chances of these youngsters.

The point here is that not all high school students are going to be challenged by and interested in the same courses and standards. Again, this is not a way of setting up low standards for some students and high standards for others. They should all be high. In fact, the core content standards should reflect a level of understanding and achievement that is much higher than what's considered minimum competency today. It is shameful to let students graduate from high school by passing tests based on 7th, 8th, or 9th grade knowledge and skills.

## **8. Standards must combine knowledge and skills, not pursue one at the expense of the other**

There is a terrible myth in education that has a tendency to confuse important decisions affecting curriculum and that is threatening to strangle the standards movement. The theory goes something like this: Knowledge is dynamic, transient, always changing, whereas the need to apply knowledge is constant. What is most important for students to learn are skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and higher-order thinking, so that they can react to any situation, gain and use whatever knowledge they need, and not waste their time learning facts and theories that may turn out to be irrelevant in their lives. Who can be sure of how much specific knowledge each person will really need in the “real world” anyway?

Of course this is overstated, but not by much. At the root of this myth is a false dichotomy between knowledge and skills. And what it is leading to are standards that neglect the subject matter (the facts, ideas, concepts, issues, and information) of the traditional academic disciplines that is needed to develop the skills in the first place. Consider the following very general “skills” standards:

Students should be able to use critical and creative thinking skills to respond to unanticipated situations and recurring problems. (*Connecticut's Common Core of Learning, 1987*)

Students should know reading strategies are tools for constructing meaning, thinking critically, and solving problems. (*Arkansas' Reading Curriculum Framework, 1995*)

Students will demonstrate the ability to examine problems and proposed solutions from multiple perspectives. (*Missouri's Standards, Draft 1995*)

These examples may seem harmless enough, but they leave unanswered just what it is students are to solve, de-



cide, or think about. What is the subject? Where is reality? The unyielding facts and ideas? And how are students to learn how to learn without learning something concrete first? Let's turn the issue around: Is it possible to name a problem to be solved, a decision to be made, or a thing to be thought about that is not tied to the subject matter?

And what kind of guidance do skills examples such as the ones cited above give to teachers and others in education? "Critical thinking" cannot be taught in the abstract. However, it can be developed, for example, by having students analyze the contradiction between the principle expressed in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and the existence of slavery at the time. But a skill that is cut free from content and context is meaningless—and impossible to teach or assess.

Good standards will ensure that students develop the intellectual powers of observation, communication, reasoning, reflection, judgment, perspective, and synthesis that are often lumped under vague phrases like "higher order" or "critical thinking." But they must pursue these skills through the content of the subject areas.

An overemphasis on generic skills and processes seems to be a particular trend in states that allow local control of the entire curriculum. In essence, this is a way for states to avoid making judgments about the core content of the curriculum. But as disclosed earlier, vague, content-free standards accomplish nothing. They do not ensure that all kids are given a challenging curriculum, nor can they lead to assessments that reveal the depth and breadth of student knowledge.

## **9. Standards must not dictate how the material should be taught**

Good standards are designed to guide, not to limit, instruction. They are intended to communicate to teachers and other school staff what is most important for students to learn, but not how the ideas or information should be taught. If, for example, a set standards includes teaching activities, they should be there for illustrative purposes only. It is important that standards are not allowed to infringe on teachers' professional responsibilities, their ability to choose their particular methods and to design their lessons and courses in ways that reflect the best available research and that are best suited to their students' needs and to their own strengths and teaching styles.

## **10. Standards must be written clearly enough for all stakeholders to understand**

Part of the challenge states face when developing standards is how to generate broad and public support. It is important, therefore, that standards not be written solely for an education audience. The standards must be written clearly

enough for parents, students, and interested community members to understand—indeed, to be inspired by. Otherwise, standards developers will risk alienating the very people whose trust and support they need.

We've already pointed out a number of ways that standards can go astray and cause friction. Non-academic or interdisciplinary standards aren't clear to the public and often engender distrust. Vague standards do not communicate anything and usually raise more questions than they answer. Standards that emphasize skills at the expense of content knowledge are treated with deserved skepticism by parents. The list goes on. Sometimes, something as simple as a word or phrase that has no meaning to parents can cause a problem.

Our best advice to writers of standards is to consider what the language of each standard will mean to everyone who will be reading them, and avoid jargon. Are the standards clear enough for teachers to understand what is required for them and their students? For parents to understand what is expected of their children and to keep an eye on their progress? Do the standards send a coherent message to employers and colleges as to what students will know and be able to do when they leave high school? What about the students themselves? Will they be able to read the standards and get a clear idea of what is expected of them?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," your work is not done. If a standard seems confusing to lay people, it needs to be re-thought and re-written. Examples of what to avoid:

All students understand human development theories across the lifespan and value individual uniqueness in the context of family life. (*Pennsylvania's Student Learning Outcomes, Draft 1991*)

[A high school graduate] understands and describes ways that a specified culture shapes patterns of interaction of individuals and groups. (*Minnesota's High School Standards, Draft 1994*)

Students will demonstrate the ability to develop and apply strategies based on one's own experience in preventing or solving problems. (*Missouri's Standards, Draft 1995*)

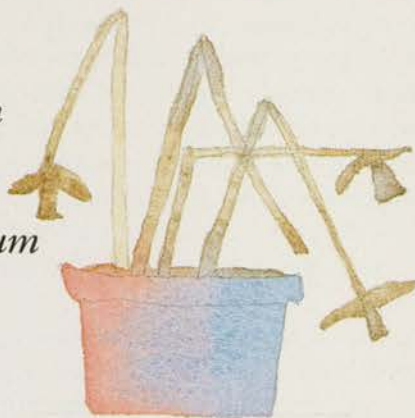
## **The threshold of a great opportunity**

Subject matter standards and a common core curriculum are new concepts in American education, and people—including many educators—are often skeptical of new ideas in the field. Considering the fads and failures of the past, this skepticism is certainly healthy. But the AFT and others believe that if we develop rigorous academic standards and use those to guide us in everything else we do in our schools, we have a real opportunity to make substantial improvements in the way we educate our children. Such an effort is certainly a more palatable and responsible strategy than turning the schools over to the whims of the market. □



# KIDS, SCHOOLS SUFFER FROM REVOLVING DOOR

*Mobility Problem  
Is Aggravated  
by the Lack of a  
Common Curriculum*



BY DEBRA WILLIAMS

AS ANY principal or teacher will tell you, there's a whole lot of moving going on in many Chicago public schools. Thousands of children change schools every year—often in the middle of the school year—putting themselves at greater risk of failure and detracting from their classmates' education.

Until recently, the problem was viewed much like the weather: Educators complained about it but felt they couldn't do anything about it.

But that's beginning to change. A number of schools, including those in the Orr School Network and Spry Elementary in Little Village, have taken steps to deter transfers or limit the damage. Also, the central administration is adopting a number of recommendations made in a new study that, for the first time, brought the problem into sharp focus and raised its profile.

The study by the Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago and the Chicago Panel on School Policy found that only two in five Chicago students stay in the same school from 1st through 6th grade, not counting scheduled transitions from, say, a K-5 school to a middle school.

Some of the students who switch schools transfer four, five, or six times by 6th grade, according to a separate student survey conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. (See chart on page 39.) That same survey indicates that a large number of transfers occur during the school year—48 percent of a sample of 6th graders said that the last time they switched schools, it was during the school year.

Viewed from the schools' perspective, the high rate of transfers means that a typical classroom gets an average of five new students each year, according to the

*This article is condensed from the April 1996 issue of CATALYST, a school reform newsletter published by the Community Renewal Society, Chicago, IL. Reprinted with permission. Map by Desktop Edit Shop, Skokie, IL.*

study by the Center for School Improvement and the Chicago Panel. And just 15 percent of elementary schools retain a solid core of students—85 percent of their total enrollment—from year to year.

"Mobility in Chicago is not an isolated problem; it's a citywide problem," says David Kerbow, the primary investigator for the study.

And while Chicago is beginning to act on this data, Rochester, N.Y., remains the leader in the mobility fight. Eight years ago, the Apartment Owners Association of Rochester launched programs that cut the school district's mobility rate by 38 percent.

## **Vicious cycle**

For many transfer students, mobility is a vicious cycle: They're dropped into lessons that their previous school didn't prepare them for; in another Consortium survey, teachers said that half of their new students did not have the background to join the class at the level being taught. Starting out behind in strange territory, many transfer students act out, making learning still harder.

"They don't get a chance to bond with their teacher or make friends before they are bounced to another school," says Arline Hersh, principal of Armstrong Elementary School, which averages ten new students a month. "They have to learn a different classroom culture each time. They have to learn their place in another pecking order."

Hersh recalls one student who had three violent episodes the first two weeks he was at Armstrong, which is in West Ridge near the city's northern limits. "He even threatened one child, who was afraid to say something. We called his previous school and found he was doing the same things there. This makes it difficult for the teacher and the other students."

Emil DeJulio, principal at Swift Elementary School in Edgewater, tells a similar story: "We had a new



student last year who was really nasty. She got into fights all the time. You couldn't even look at her, and she'd start in on you. She had been bounced around a lot and she was only in the 5th grade."

However, DeJulio says such children can be helped. "Our assistant principal, counselors, and her teacher really worked with her, and in three months her negative behavior had been reduced. If she stays with us, she'll have friends, relationships. She won't have to prove how tough she is or show off. If she doesn't stay with us, she'll have to start all over again."

In researching test scores, Kerbow found that by 4th grade, students who had switched schools were, on average, four months behind students who had stayed in the same school. And students who had moved four or more times were, by 6th grade, a full year behind.

## **Ripple effect**

And as Hersh points out, transfer students have a ripple effect on their classmates. Even if they're not disruptive, they can consume extra teacher time.

"Our [transfer] kids come in with very low academic skills," says Hersh, "and our teachers have to spend a lot of time with them to bring them up to par."

"Many times an influx of new students causes teachers to 'flatten' their curriculum," says Kerbow. "That means teachers overlay their material to accommodate the increased variation in their students' learning. This limits the amount of material students are exposed to, which affects stable students, too."

## **Publicity campaign**

The school board is gearing up for a publicity campaign to inform parents about the harmful effects of mobility and to make sure they understand the board's transfer and open enrollment policies. Both recommendations had been made by the Center for School Improvement and the Chicago Panel.

Under the transfer policy, children who move out of a school's attendance boundary during the year can stay at that school until the end of the year as long as the parent provides transportation.

"Right now it's up to the principal to let parents know they can keep their children in the school," says Maribeth Vander Weele, director of investigations and the facilitator for a board task force created in November to work on mobility. "Parents don't know what their rights are unless they are told, so we also plan on changing the transfer form, so that the transfer policy is right on it, letting parents know their rights."

Beverly Tunney, president of the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, says the policy "is not well known" among principals and that some are confused about what it means.

However, according to one North Side principal who asked not be identified, some principals know very well what it means but manipulate it to "counsel out" students they don't want.

Under the board's open enrollment policy, students may choose a school outside their immediate attendance area, and low-income students may qualify for board-funded transportation. However, the school they choose must be within five miles of their home and have enough space to serve children in its attendance area as well as outsiders, and enrolling the child must not adversely affect the school's racial balance.

In the meantime, Mary Sue Barrett, chief of staff to the board, also is working with the Chicagoland Apartment Owners Association to distribute notices warning tenants that mobility may be hazardous to their children's education.

"We'd like to develop a flyer that can be given out when a tenant gets a lease," says Barrett. "Our proposal is to do a real aggressive public education campaign, just like we did with our successful back-to-school campaign and are doing now with local school council elections."

## **Untimely leases**

Some school activists would like to see the association go further and promote a change in Chicago's leasing dates. Currently, many leases expire April 30 (six weeks before school ends) or Oct. 30 (several weeks after school starts). Fred Hess, executive director of the Chicago Panel, and others have called for a June 30 expiration date.

"That's when I see the biggest movement in my classroom—in October and in the spring, and unfortunately, that's right around testing time," says Paula Hudson, a teacher at Swift Elementary School in Edgewater.

Barrett says she asked the association about lease expirations and was told that they occur throughout the year, especially in low-and lower-middle-income areas.

"Usually small apartment owners have someone move out, take a month to fix the apartment up and then rent it out, so their lease dates keep changing," she reports. "Only the large apartment owners can get an apartment into shape in one day and rent it out the next. Since there are large fluctuations on leases, we said, 'Okay, then at least help us educate our parents.'"

In Rochester, N.Y., whose school enrollment is less than 10 percent of Chicago's, it was the apartment owners association that took action.

In 1988, association President David Shuler discovered that the local school near his apartment building had a mobility rate of 73 percent. When he asked the principal what affect that had on student achievement, she told him she didn't know because no one had ever studied it.

"I couldn't believe that no one had looked into this problem and there was no information on it," says Shuler. "I wanted to know how this touched children."

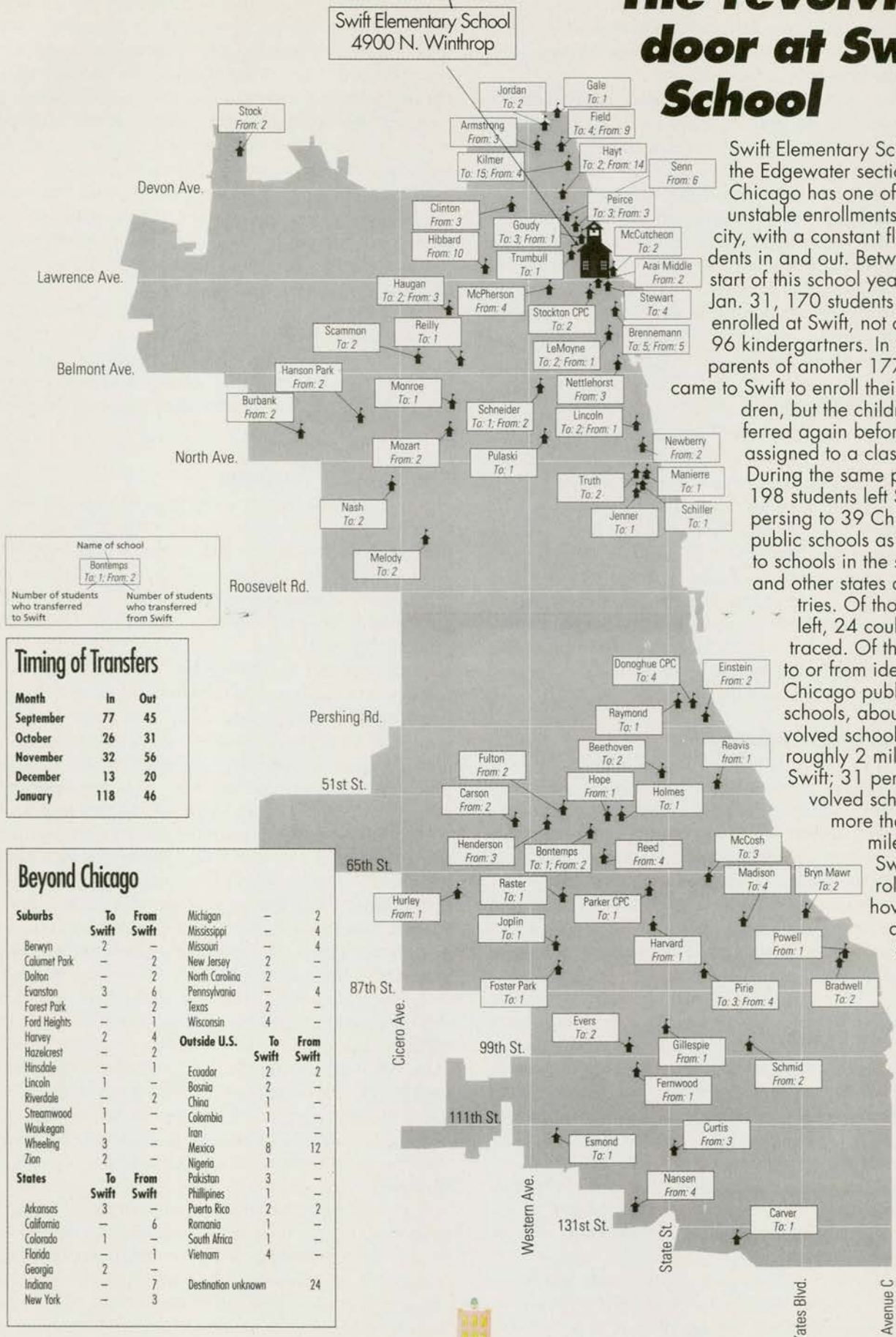
Shuler's association looked for research and came up empty-handed: so it did its own study.

"We found that it seriously affected students academically," says Shuler. So the association took ac-



# The revolving door at Swift School

Swift Elementary School in the Edgewater section of Chicago has one of the most unstable enrollments in the city, with a constant flow of students in and out. Between the start of this school year and Jan. 31, 170 students newly enrolled at Swift, not counting 96 kindergartners. In addition, parents of another 177 students came to Swift to enroll their children, but the children transferred again before being assigned to a classroom. During the same period, 198 students left Swift, dispersing to 39 Chicago public schools as well as to schools in the suburbs and other states and countries. Of those who left, 24 could not be traced. Of the moves to or from identifiable Chicago public schools, about half involved schools within roughly 2 miles of Swift; 31 percent involved schools more than 10 miles away. Swift's enrollment hovers around 800.



Name of school  
Bontemps  
To: 1, From: 2

Number of students who transferred to Swift

Number of students who transferred from Swift

### Timing of Transfers

Month	In	Out
September	77	45
October	26	31
November	32	56
December	13	20
January	118	46

### Beyond Chicago

Suburbs	To Swift	From Swift
Berwyn	2	-
Calumet Park	-	2
Dolton	-	2
Evanston	3	6
Forest Park	-	2
Ford Heights	-	1
Harvey	2	4
Hazelcrest	-	2
Hinsdale	-	1
Lincoln	1	-
Riverdale	-	2
Streamwood	1	-
Waukegan	1	-
Wheeling	3	-
Zion	2	-

States	To Swift	From Swift
Arkansas	3	-
California	-	6
Colorado	1	-
Florida	-	1
Georgia	2	-
Indiana	-	7
New York	-	3

Outside U.S.	To Swift	From Swift
Ecuador	2	2
Bosnia	2	-
China	1	-
Colombia	1	-
Iran	1	-
Mexico	8	12
Nigeria	1	-
Pakistan	3	-
Philippines	1	-
Puerto Rico	2	2
Romania	1	-
South Africa	1	-
Vietnam	4	-
Destination unknown	-	24

Source: Data compiled by Jennifer Randall from transfer lists supplied, without student names, by Swift School. Map by Desktop Edit Shop.





tion.

First, it sent letters to parents explaining the negative effects of mobility and offering to help them stay in their schools' attendance boundaries if they had to move. The association either would mediate disputes with landlords or help the parents find new apartments nearby.

The first round of letters brought more than 85 requests; the association helped resolve the housing problems of 40 families and could have helped more if it had had more staff, says Shuler.

The association also got the agency that mails welfare checks to enclose notices stressing the importance of stability in school, and it persuaded the agency to send rent checks for welfare recipients directly to landlords. This removed the temptation for recipients to pocket a month's rent and precipitously move out of their apartment.

Barrett says she is interested in taking a look at what Rochester has done. "We'd be very open to what has worked in other cities," she says. "And what they've done that is key is creating partnerships with government agencies and landlords."

### **Schools can act**

Even individual schools can have an impact. For example, Spry Elementary School conducted a media blitz to educate parents about mobility and to let them know the school's boundaries. Principal Mary Cavey credits the school's previous principal, Carlos Aczoitia, now head of School and Community Relations, with identifying the problem and beginning the campaign.

"One big problem is families returning to Mexico for a few months and coming back," says Cavey. "So the school counsels them on how harmful this is and suggests that they take vacations when school is out."

Spry's stability rate improved from 66 percent in 1991 to 77 percent in 1994.

Similarly, Cooper Elementary School in Pilsen is working to become a community center. "Ninety-eight percent of our parents are Hispanic, so we have programs that teach parents how to speak English, how to get their citizenship and how to get their GED in Spanish," explains principal Eduardo Cadavid. "We've had more than 100 parents request infor-

## **What students say**

### **How many places have you lived in the last 2 years?**

	<b>6th- graders</b>	<b>8th- graders</b>
One	59%	63%
Two	24%	22%
Three	9%	9%
Four	3%	3%
Five	2%	1%
Six, more	3%	2%

### **How many schools have you attended in the last 2 years?**

	<b>6th- graders</b>	<b>8th- graders</b>
One	61%	73%
Two	27%	18%
Three	7%	5%
Four	3%	2%
Five	1%	1%
Six, more	1%	1%

### **The last time you changed schools, was it over the summer or during the school year?**

	<b>6th- graders</b>	<b>8th- graders</b>
Summer	52%	44%
School year	48%	56%

Source: "Charting Reform: The Students Speak," Spring 1994, Consortium on Chicago School Research. The responses cited above are from 80 schools chosen because they are, as a whole, representative of the school system.

mation for all these courses."

The school also serves as a liaison with community agencies such as the Pilsen Health Center, he says.

"Parents who move to the Southwest Side ask if they can send their children back to us when they find that other schools don't offer the same programs," says Cadavid.

Between 1991 and 1994, Cooper's stability rate rose from 60 percent to 80 percent. And by February of this school year, only 20 of some 830 students had left, he reports.

Peirce Elementary School in Edgewater was so attractive to one parent that when she became homeless and moved to a shelter more than two miles away, she got bus tokens for her children to commute to Peirce, reports Principal Janice Rosales. The family now is searching for housing inside Peirce's attendance boundaries.

### **Easing the pain**

No matter how attractive schools make themselves, however, there will always be some mobility. With that in mind, clusters of schools that see the same children circulating among them are working to provide a safety net.

Schools in two groups that received grants under the

Chicago Annenberg Challenge—the Orr School Network and the Uptown Schools Network—are aligning their curricula.

"What that means is each school would teach a certain subject at a certain time," explains Donald Schmitt, principal of Ryerson Elementary, which is one of 13 schools in the Orr network. "If a child transferred, that child wouldn't miss out on a certain skill. There would be continuity. And the teacher would still be free to use his or her own style of teaching."

From kindergarten through 9th grade, the curriculum will be broken into week-long units of study that reflect the school system's learning outcomes, says DePaul University education professor Barbara Radner, the network's chief facilitator.

"I think this outline makes it easier for students, teachers, and parents," says Radner. "Everyone knows what's being taught when." □

# HIGH STANDARDS, AMERICAN STYLE

## *Broadening Access to AP Courses Is Something We Can Do Now*



**A**DVANCED PLACEMENT (AP) tests in the United States are one of the best home-grown examples of high standards. The tests are based on specific curricula, for which AP teachers are given specific training. AP courses and exams are optional, and students may receive college credit for doing well on them. Only small percentages of students participate, however. In 1995, 8 percent of 18-year-olds took AP exams, and 5 percent passed. Though the percentages are small, they represent an increase over previous years.

States vary in the degree to which they make AP courses available to their students. On average, 51 percent of schools across the country offer AP courses, but this ranges from a low of 5 percent in North Dakota to a high of 83 percent in New Jersey. Some states have taken specific steps to encourage AP participation. These include mandating that AP courses be made available to all students; paying the examination fees for all or for disadvantaged students; providing or paying for materials and professional development for AP teachers; and mandating that state colleges and universities give freshmen credit for scores of 3 or higher (on a scale of 1-5) on the AP exams.

South Carolina, Indiana, and Utah are examples of states where policies that promote AP participation have worked. In 1984, **South Carolina** passed educational improvement legislation that sought to expand the availability of AP courses. The law required all schools in the state to make AP classes available to students. If a school's finances did not permit this or if it had too few interested students, it could coordinate with another school in its district, use distance learning, or offer independent study for AP.

South Carolina also allocated funds to pay for

teacher training, textbooks, and other materials and for exam fees for students who could not afford them. The state also set AP credit policies for state colleges and universities. AP participation has expanded dramatically as a result. In 1983, 3 percent of students took an AP exam, but by 1995 the figure had risen to 11 percent. The number of schools offering AP exams increased from 37 percent in 1983 to 70 percent in 1995.

In 1991, **Indiana** passed legislation requiring that AP calculus and an AP science course be offered in every public school by 1994. The state has also paid AP exams fees for all students for tests in English, math, and science since 1991 and helps pay for AP training for teachers. The number of students taking AP exams has increased from 2 percent in 1990 to 8 percent in 1995. The number of schools offering AP courses jumped from 31 percent in 1990 to 55 percent in 1995.

The state with the highest proportion of students taking and passing AP exams is **Utah**. Part of the state's success can be attributed to a policy put in place in 1984 that gives schools monetary awards based on the number of students passing (score of 3 or higher) AP exams each year. Schools can use this money in a variety of ways. Most often, it is used to pay for training and classroom materials.

Our most urgent need is to raise standards for all American students and to put in place a system that will help more students meet higher standards. But, in the short run, Advanced Placement offers a ready-made approach to high standards in the U.S. and one that should be expanded.

	% of schools offering AP courses in 1995	% of age cohort Taking at least one AP exam in 1995	% of age cohort Passing at least one AP exam in 1995		% of schools offering AP courses in 1995	% of age cohort Taking at least one AP exam in 1995	% of age cohort Passing at least one AP exam in 1995
<b>Alabama</b>	45%	6%	3%	<b>Montana</b>	31%	5%	4%
<b>Alaska</b>	12%	7%	5%	<b>Nebraska</b>	22%	4%	3%
<b>Arizona</b>	51%	6%	4%	<b>Nevada</b>	53%	6%	4%
<b>Arkansas</b>	22%	3%	2%	<b>New Hampshire</b>	69%	11%	8%
<b>California</b>	66%	10%	7%	<b>New Jersey</b>	83%	12%	9%
<b>Colorado</b>	50%	9%	6%	<b>New Mexico</b>	40%	6%	4%
<b>Connecticut</b>	80%	12%	10%	<b>New York</b>	71%	13%	9%
<b>Delaware</b>	42%	9%	7%	<b>North Carolina</b>	64%	10%	6%
<b>Florida</b>	55%	10%	7%	<b>North Dakota</b>	5%	2%	2%
<b>Georgia</b>	59%	10%	6%	<b>Ohio</b>	56%	7%	5%
<b>Hawaii</b>	65%	10%	7%	<b>Oklahoma</b>	17%	4%	3%
<b>Idaho</b>	41%	4%	3%	<b>Oregon</b>	45%	5%	3%
<b>Illinois</b>	49%	8%	6%	<b>Pennsylvania</b>	56%	7%	5%
<b>Indiana</b>	55%	8%	3%	<b>Rhode Island</b>	73%	7%	5%
<b>Iowa</b>	30%	4%	3%	<b>South Carolina</b>	70%	11%	6%
<b>Kansas</b>	25%	4%	2%	<b>South Dakota</b>	19%	3%	2%
<b>Kentucky</b>	58%	5%	3%	<b>Tennessee</b>	47%	6%	4%
<b>Louisiana</b>	25%	2%	1%	<b>Texas</b>	45%	6%	4%
<b>Maine</b>	54%	9%	6%	<b>Utah</b>	70%	15%	12%
<b>Maryland</b>	69%	12%	9%	<b>Vermont</b>	66%	10%	7%
<b>Massachusetts</b>	78%	12%	9%	<b>Virginia</b>	68%	13%	9%
<b>Michigan</b>	50%	7%	5%	<b>Washington</b>	48%	5%	4%
<b>Minnesota</b>	42%	6%	4%	<b>West Virginia</b>	64%	6%	3%
<b>Mississippi</b>	33%	3%	2%	<b>Wisconsin</b>	52%	8%	5%
<b>Missouri</b>	26%	3%	2%	<b>Wyoming</b>	30%	5%	3%

Source: The Advanced Placement Program and the U.S. Bureau of the Census  
 (Note: AP data based on public and private schools)

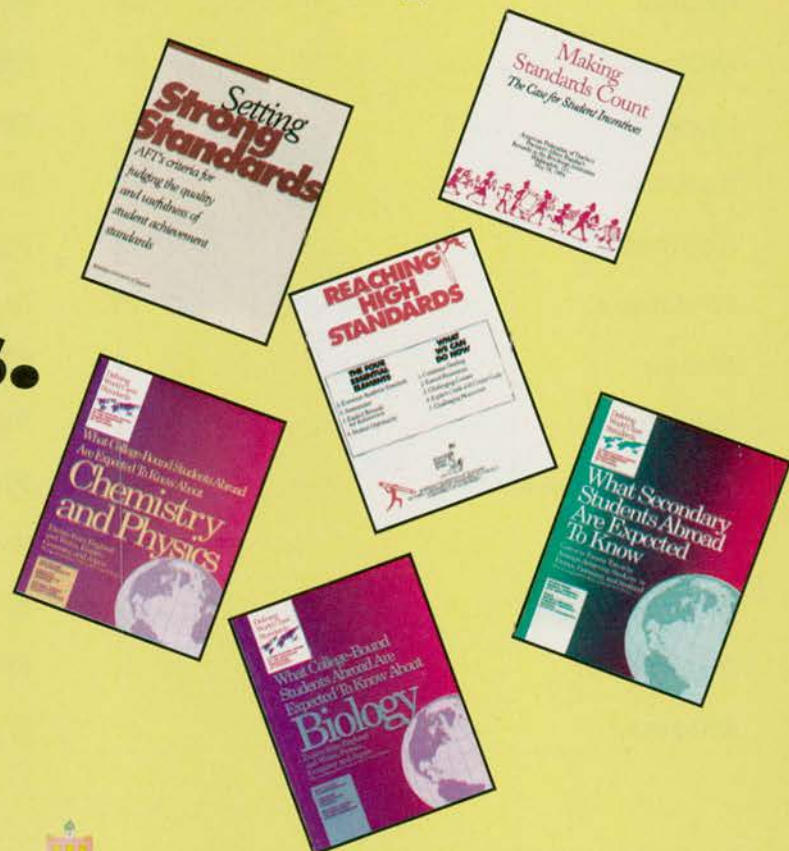


watched your panel discussion last night, and I thought—the moment of levity was when Al Shanker said, “When I was teaching school and I would give students homework, they asked, ‘Does it count?’” That’s the thing I remember about the panel last night. All of you remember, too ... “Does it count?” And the truth is that in the world we’re living in today, “does it count” has to mean something, particularly in places where there haven’t been any standards for a long time.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON,  
*Address to the National Education Summit  
March 27, 1996*

**What should good standards look like? How do we “make them count”? How do other countries do it?**

**Introducing the AFT’s Series on Standards, designed to tackle just these types of questions.**



**Reaching High Standards: What We Mean and Why We Need It**

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*Item no. 234. \$2 each.*

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To help bring clarity to the confused and often controversial issue of standards, the AFT has developed a set of criteria for educators to use in developing or reviewing student achievement standards. The booklet offers practitioners and policymakers a clear vision of what good standards should look like, illustrating its points with excerpts of actual standards.

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Which states are working toward developing higher standards? Which are setting standards that are clear and specific enough to be useful at the school level? Which have benchmarked their standards against the best that the rest of the world has to offer? How many are also developing assessments linked to their standards? How does your state measure up against what's happening around the country? This report, compiled from 1995 data, offers a state-by-state progress report in these key areas, and more.

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This series of book-length studies lends graphic meaning to the idea of "world-class" standards, by examining what other nations expect their students to know and be able to do in various subjects and at different grade levels.

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This book looks at the actual translated biology exams taken by college-bound students in England and Wales, France, Germany and Japan, as well as scoring guides, sample answers and the U.S. Advanced Placement exam. It also offers a brief overview of each nation's educational system, plus a comparative look at how these different systems align their curricula, their exams, and their incentives—and how we in the U.S. generally fail to do so.

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**Vol. II. What Secondary Students**

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This volume contains excerpts from exams taken and passed by most average-achieving students at the end of the 9th and 10th grade in: France (French, Math, and History/Geography); Germany (German, English, and Math); and Scotland (English, Math and Biology). It also includes a brief description of each country's school-to-work system, and, for comparison, the U.S. General Education Development (GED) practice test.

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This book contains the actual translated chemistry and physics exams taken by college-bound students in England and Wales, France, Germany and Japan, as well as scoring guides, sample answers and the U.S. Advanced Placement exams. It also offers a brief overview

of each nation's educational system, plus a comparative look at how these different systems align their curricula, their exams, and their incentives—and how we in the U.S. generally fail to do so.

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**Setting World-Class Standards Kits**

To help those who have begun the work of reviewing or developing academic standards, the AFT has put together a series of boxed resource materials in core subject areas. The kits include: the AFT criteria for high-quality standards; translated standards and exams from abroad; materials from the AP and International Baccalaureate programs; and examples of some of the best national, state and local materials.

*Kits are now available in: English/Language Arts (\$40 each), History, Civics and Geography (\$65 each), Mathematics (\$50 each) and Science/Biology (\$65 each). A supplementary science kit on high school Physics and Chemistry can be ordered with the main science kit (\$90 for both), or can be ordered separately (\$35).*

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# MORE THAN A VOICE: BARBARA JORDAN, THE TEACHER

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

THE CLASS was arguing about the process by which President Truman decided to drop the atom bomb on Japan. Some of the students insisted that the act itself was so immoral, so unethical, the process must have been flawed. Others said it is unfair to apply today's values to events and circumstances of a half-century ago. They noted that military officers, clergymen, physicians, and a variety of others had been invited to offer advice; wasn't that enough?

The professor slowly turned toward me. The class grew quiet; the small seminar room seemed to shrink. The voice that had intimidated the Texas senate, at least one President, and scores of graduate students was brought to bear. "Brett," Barbara Jordan intoned, "what do you think?"

The tributes to Jordan, who died last year, focused on her life as a politician. Most of them ended with her retirement from Congress in 1979, making only the briefest note of her career as a teacher at the University of Texas' LBJ School of Public Affairs—as though it were a mere epilogue to her public life. Perhaps this is to be expected. Many of her admirers, then as now, must have wondered why this most impressive of politicians gave up political power just when she'd accumulated enough to make her a national figure. The usual explanation is that her multiple sclerosis left her too weakened to continue in the political wars.

If those people had ever sat a few feet away from her in class, as I did in the fall of 1986, they would have been quickly disabused of the notion that Jordan was too tired to fight. Whatever her reasons for leaving public service—and she never spoke of them to the

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN POGUE





students in my class—the Barbara Jordan I knew was full of life. She loved to teach almost as much as her students loved to come to her class. And as I've reflected on Jordan's career, it has occurred to me that teaching, far from being an epilogue—or an anticlimax—was what she was doing from beginning to end.

Even in her most celebrated moments during the 1974 Watergate hearings, Jordan merely occupied a larger classroom, where she taught politicians, reporters, and citizens some basic lessons about the nation's founding principles. She also taught by example, showing African-Americans in Texas and elsewhere how to fight an oppressive system and, occasionally, get the better of it. And she had other students who didn't even realize they were being taught, people like my parents, who, despite their distaste for Democrats, blacks, and powerful women, smiled and nodded their heads as they watched Jordan's electrifying keynote address to the 1976 Democratic National Convention. Whites who would have openly admitted that they wouldn't want a black living next door admired Barbara Jordan.

In fact, when I told Dad that I had made it into her class, he said, "That's the smartest thing you've done since you went to that school." Getting in was tough. Everyone wanted to take a seminar with Barbara Jordan. She offered two—one in public policy development, which I took, and another in ethics. There were approximately 15 students in a seminar, and no student was permitted to take both seminars. LBJ school students were chosen by lottery. For the one outside student admitted each semester, like me, the writing samples, resumes, and personal statements made it almost like applying for a plum job. Some waited years to take one of Barbara Jordan's classes.

I'm sure there were students who signed up because they were excited by the idea of studying with a celebrity, and like many public figures who retire to academic pastures, Jordan could have merely rested on her reputation. But she worked hard at teaching and expected us to work hard too. I'd already survived a seminar with the toughest professor at the University of Texas Law School, but even so I found myself getting to the library early in the morning to make sure I had the reserve readings down cold. I didn't dare get caught unprepared or unable to defend my position. When she asked your opinion, as she did mine in the atomic bomb question, you'd better have one—and be able to back it up.

That's right, she asked our opinions: about atomic bombs, balanced budgets, equal opportunity, and other public issues she discussed in her ethics and policy classes. She was no academic tyrant out to embarrass her students or, worse yet, force her opinions on them. Rigorous, yes. Demanding, absolutely. (In fact, she seemed harder on women and black students, as though she were trying to toughen them.) But her goal seemed to be to inspire debate, not obedience or conformity. She encouraged us to develop informed opinions, argue and defend them well, and modify them, if that was called for. Jordan's own grasp of the issues and her high expectations made us ashamed to offer half-baked ideas.

To push students to take stands, she would assign



ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT BARKIN

wide-ranging readings on controversial subjects. Then, in class, she'd ask a student to summarize one of the arguments and ask whether he agreed with it. If so, why; if not, why not. This was an especially tough assignment for the wonks-in-training, who tended to assume that you made policy by crunching numbers. Or she'd get two students with opposing points of view to defend their positions using materials from the readings. When discussions got really heated, she'd lean back a bit and a grin would nudge the corner of her mouth.

That grin was always there, softening the powerful countenance, whether it showed or not. For Jordan's imposing presence masked a wry and impish humor that few of her audiences were privileged to glimpse. Her students sensed it, though.

We could see that there was more to BJ than her politics. Once, I and another student were driving her home from a civil rights symposium at UT. It was an early spring afternoon, and the wildflowers along the I-35 median and surrounding hillocks were in full bloom, a long bouquet of bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes. As we toiled down the highway, the talk naturally turned to politics and civil rights. Just as I was carefully preparing to make some point, The Voice boomed from the back seat. "As we discuss these weighty issues," she interrupted, "do not fail to appreciate the great beauty that surrounds us at this moment."

One of the most sought-after politicians in America, Jordan was well known for guarding her privacy. Yet at the end of each semester, Jordan threw a party for her students at her South Austin ranch. She always capped the evening by grabbing a guitar and belting out—boldly off key—Bessie Smith-style spirituals and blues like "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out." At UT women's basketball games, where she and





Ann Richards had special courtside seats, she was known to lean back and howl when a Lady Longhorn made a particularly impressive move.

Maybe that image-puncturing humor and sense of being totally at ease with herself, so rare in politicians, was what made her students feel so affectionate toward her. Not that we'd ever have dared to slap her on the back. But we could tell her jokes, and she'd laugh at them, especially if they were about political figures. With her distinctive voice, she would have been easy to parody behind her back. Yet no one I knew ever did.

Ah, The Voice. The magisterial style, that gave weight and conviction to every word. Sometimes in class, though, Jordan would lapse into a real southern drawl, g's dropping off the end of words, like gravy dripping off a biscuit, especially when she was talking about the practical side of politics. It was as if she had to return to her linguistic roots in order to discuss the horse-trading for which Texas politics is so notorious.

As former Lt. Governor Bill Hobby has noted, in a time of prattling politicians who orate for hours and say nothing, "she didn't speak unless she had something to say. When she had something to say, she said it without a wasted word." And with utter conviction, as though some scrivener angel were carving her words in stone. It's hard to imagine that voice stilled; when I first heard that she'd died, I couldn't believe it. She seemed an institution as weighty and permanent as the LBJ Library itself.

Yet remembering her merely for The Voice, as so many of her eulogizers did, obscures what the voice was saying. Others can speak eloquently, but it was the values behind the voice that lent her speech its authority. Even in our nuts-and-bolts policy development class, she always insisted on the place of values and ethics. These are considerations usually missing from

academic or press analyses, which view politics as a process with no greater moral consequence than a horse race or a fuel-injection system. But she balanced those lessons by giving us a glimpse of the realities of power politics that often stood in the way of ethical behavior.

What many people forget is that Jordan knew how to cut deals, and, like any good politico, she'd take half a loaf. When I asked her why she wasn't supporting Jesse Jackson in the 1988 presidential race, she replied, firmly as always, "We've lost too many times lately. I ... want ... to WIN." In fact, for all her trail blazing, Jordan was no holier-than-thou revolutionary. She meant exactly what she said at the Watergate hearings when she proclaimed her faith in the Constitution absolute. She believed in the system, maybe more than she should have. She always admired the master compromiser Lyndon Johnson, because he had orchestrated passage of the Voting Rights Act, which she regarded as the most important legislation of her lifetime. I remember her asking in class what the difference was between the Republican and Democratic parties. "The interest groups they represent," I ventured, already showing the cynicism that would lead me to journalism. She glared at me. "The difference between Democrats and the other party," she intoned, "is our values." She rumbled out the last word at low volume but with ominous intensity, like the first rolls of thunder that announce a Hill Country gully washer.

I didn't argue the point.

In the bottom of my dresser drawer there's a T-shirt, now too small, that I've carried with me on many moves. On the front is a picture of the scales of justice. Above the scales are the words: "I survived Barbara Jordan." She passed them out to us herself at a picnic celebrating the tenth anniversary of her seminars at the LBJ school. The truth is, it's Barbara Jordan who survives: in me and in every other student who learned from her. And, yes, her voice survives, the voice in our heads that still rings out when we confront or assess any ethical dilemma, whether in public life or in our own lives.

Barbara Jordan could inspire audiences of millions with her voice and her vision. But she also was one of those rare people who can elevate others one-on-one, by example, just by the way she carried herself, by her rigorous thinking, the way she spoke, the things she valued. For all her public triumphs, I can't help but think that those last years spent in a small seminar room, teaching twenty-somethings lessons about morality and politics, were even greater. And I think that our grief at her passing has as much to do with the disappearance of what she taught from public life as the disappearance of the teacher.

In an age of politicians who hate government and undermine laws, she taught the value of public institutions and the Constitution. In an era of political cynicism and apathy, she insisted on morality in politics. At a time when individualism seems to know no bounds, she told us about the importance of community. In an age of private greed, she taught public virtue. What saddens me most isn't that Barbara Jordan, who lived a rich and full life, is gone. It's that we still need her so much. □

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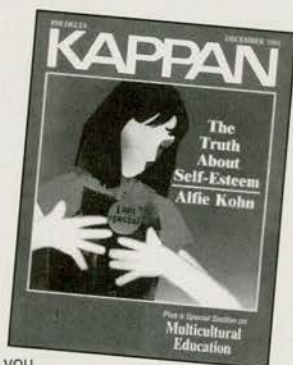
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## Letters

(Continued from page 2)

professionals who would be surprised at his indictments?). However, the people (the kids and the parents) who cause the problem of poor and declining educational standards should understand who the culprits are. John Bishop's article in the fall issue of *American Educator* clearly reveals directly if not simply this sad—even tragic—phenomena and with overpowering force of reason and fact.

The article or essay should be widely read if not made required reading in public high schools. Every American can identify him/herself in Bishop's American tragedy.

I hope someone will seriously consider my suggestion. I am certainly willing to back up my point by volunteering in any effort to accomplish this proposed goal, which I am convinced would be an eye-opener to even the worst "know-nothing" politician. Thank you.

—GEORGE GANZLE  
NEW YORK, NY



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# Some kids don't get to be kids.

More than one million children worldwide, some as young as four, work to make beautiful hand-crafted Oriental rugs for consumers in the United States.

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These children often work seven days a week in life-threatening conditions. They suffer from disease and malnutrition and many die before they reach adolescence. They don't go to school. They have no future.

You can help stop child slavery by supporting the RUGMARK campaign. The RUGMARK label on a hand-crafted Oriental rug certifies that the product was not made by child labor.

*For more information on the RUGMARK Campaign, contact:*

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