

The Definition of Standards

Standards are statements of what students should know and be able to do. Different types of standards address various aspects important to learning:

- Content standards cover what students are to learn in various subject areas, such as mathematics and science.
- Performance standards specify what levels of learning are expected.
- Opportunity-to-learn standards state the conditions and resources necessary to give all students an equal chance to meet performance standards.
- World-class standards indicate content and performances that are expected of students in other industrialized countries.

This term is also attached to the movement in the United States to bring U.S. students' academic achievement and knowledge on a par with students' accomplishments in the other industrialized countries.

Source: From *The Language of Learning: A Guide to Education Terms*, by J. L. McBrien & R. S. Brandt, p. 93, 1997, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

What are standards?

Robert Marzano: Well, in everyday usage, in everyday terms, a standard is a criterion we're shooting for around, usually some product—like we have standards for the purity of our food. We have standards for how bridges have to be built in terms of the strength, etc. Educators have now tried to kind of apply that same meaning to what they expect in terms of student learning. So when we say "standards" in education, what we generally mean is that level of knowledge or skill we expect students to reach in a specific subject matter. It's as simple as that. Unfortunately, it's not that easy to pull off in a school.

Why is there a need for these standards?

Robert Marzano: In a lot of school districts throughout the country, they really can't guarantee that certain topics will be covered in certain grade levels, even though there might be a curriculum guide that the district has. What happens in the classroom might not relate to that curriculum guide. So therefore there might not be, in practice, a standard as to what content is covered. Same thing with grading practices. Even though most parents and noneducators feel comfortable that an *A* means students know a subject well, if you look at the research really on what grades mean, you find out that an *A* means one thing in one class and a different thing in another class. So the standards movement is an attempt to kind of put some rigor that we have assumed was into education, in fact into education in terms of both what gets covered and what we expect students to learn and then how we evaluate them.

The standards movement, can you give us a brief history of it, where did it come from, where did it start?

Robert Marzano: Most people trace the beginning of the modern standards movement back to the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*; it was commissioned during the Reagan presidency. It made a big splash nationally, and fundamentally it said that American education was bankrupt. It wasn't doing nearly as good a job as people thought; in fact, it was doing a very poor job. People then start looking into what's wrong with public education. And when they looked into it, what they saw fundamentally is that we really don't have a lot of standards relative to the topics that are covered in school and how students are assessed and what we expect them to learn. So consequently, in our system, at least as reported by that study, one could say that we really didn't know what the end product was. We really didn't know what students had learned by the time they got out, and students could go through the system without learning very much at all. And people then nationally made the leap to well, then, let's set some rigorous standards here, so we have some guarantee when they walk out of school they know this, they can do this.

How do standards help you in setting your education goals?

George Davis, principal: It gives us a sense of direction, and with those standards, we know which direction we're headed and what we ought to be accomplishing.

Do standards help teachers to focus their instruction?

Kathleen Hoppe, principal: It clearly tells the teacher where the instruction should be headed. It creates an atmosphere in the classroom of conversation between the teachers and students on what the level of expectation is. And, as a supervisor, I think as I go into classrooms that it's helpful to know where the teacher's instruction should be focused.

How do you involve the community in the implementation of standards?

Elliot Asp, director of assessment: In Douglas County it was a truly a community effort. There were teachers, parents, community members, business leaders, representatives from higher education who really came together to develop these standards. They looked at models from other states and from our own state or from national curriculum organizations.

Jane Ellison, director of elementary education: Each content area that we developed standards in had a committee of about 15 people. And what they did was to develop, over a period of time, a first draft of the standards.

Asp: It went so far as to take these standards and send them to every household in Douglas County and then ask for reactions in a variety of public meetings to try to make sure that people understood what standards was all about.

Ellison: People were real pleased when they looked at the first draft because, for the first time, we were laying out what kids were supposed to know when they graduated from high school.

Accountability for Learning: How Teachers and School Leaders Can Take Charge

by Douglas B. Reeves