



Executive Summary

Standards, testing, and accountability are the watchwords of any public figure who speaks responsibly about education today. But, as *Making Standards Matter 2001*, the American Federation of Teachers' sixth report on state efforts to institute a standards-based education system, indicates, the standards reform movement could be in trouble without mid-course corrections. In particular, states must do more in regard to developing curriculum to support their standards, using high-quality tests, aligning the tests they administer to state standards, and providing additional funds to assist students who are failing to meet the standards.

The report is especially timely given the current policy debates on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Indeed, it is possible that the new federal legislation may exacerbate some of the problems concerning testing and accountability revealed in this report if states do not make the needed corrections. As *Making Standards Matter* notes, it takes more than standards and testing to create an effective standards-based education system. Such a system must also include curricula aligned to the standards, professional development for teachers, help for children struggling to meet the standards, and policies that make meeting the standards count. And, states need to develop all of these components in an ordered and systematic fashion.

Imposing consequences without also having an aligned curriculum, teacher preparation, and adequate resources is a sure recipe for disaster. Administering tests disconnected from a state's standards and curriculum can only lead to student failure and widespread discontent, potentially undermining support for public education.

What We Found

THERE IS GOOD NEWS...

Making Standards Matter 2001 reveals that 29 states and the District of Columbia, up from just 13 states six years ago, have clear and specific standards in the core subject areas of English, mathematics, social studies, and science at three educational levels—elementary, middle, and high school. Thirty-eight states have begun to align their tests with their standards, and nine meet the AFT's criteria for aligned tests in the four core subjects at each educational level. And states are making standards matter by using test results for school and student accountability. Seventeen states have promotion policies based in part on meeting the standards, up from only three just five years ago; and 27 states, up from nine in 1995, have high school exit exams aligned to their standards.

Overall, *Making Standards Matter 2001* shows that standards-based reform has taken many forms and has

been implemented in diverse ways across the country. More states are:

- Giving greater emphasis to academics;
- Paying attention to the educational needs of students at risk of failing to meet the standards;
- Undertaking formal studies to align their standards and assessments, and to benchmark their standards to external models of excellence;
- Providing more incentives to encourage students to reach higher standards; and
- Making more instructional material accessible to teachers on the Internet.

...AND THERE IS BAD NEWS

Our report indicates that:

- Progress on standards-based reform falls short. Unaligned tests are driving the reform:
 - Almost a third of the states' tests are based on weak standards;
 - Forty-four percent of those tests are not aligned to the standards;
 - Fewer than one-third of the tests are supported by adequate curriculum; and
 - One-third of the tests used in decisions regarding promotion or graduation are not aligned to the standards.
- Work on curriculum, an essential tool for teachers if they are to be successful in helping all students meet the standards, is woefully inadequate. No state has a fully developed model curriculum—learning continuums, instructional resources, instructional strategies, performance indicators, lesson plans—in the four subject areas. Only nine states—Alabama, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and Virginia—have 50 percent or more of the components of a fully developed curriculum in place. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia have less than 50 percent of the curriculum components fully developed; and 27 of those states have 25 percent or less of a fully developed curriculum in place.
- Monies to assist districts in the development of intervention programs to help students at risk of failing to meet the standards are declining, and in almost half the cases where states make high-stakes decisions regarding promotion or graduation, they do not mandate *and* fund intervention programs for students struggling to meet the standards.

Some Concerns for the Future of Standards-Based Reform

In order to make higher standards work, states must pay more attention to proper implementation, particularly to testing policies. All too often, high-stakes decisions are being made before state educational systems have developed aligned assessments and curriculum to support instruction in the standards.

The AFT is concerned that standards-based education is threatened by a “testing backlash” that has erupted in some states where parents perceive the tests as excessive and/or unfair. Polls and newspaper articles show that teachers, parents, and other education stakeholders generally support standards-based reform, but they also indicate that these groups have reservations about how it is being implemented, particularly in regard to testing (Public Agenda, 2000). The public is worried about:

- *The amount of testing*—they fear it is eating into valuable instructional time;
- *The use of tests*—particularly making high-stakes decisions on the basis of a single test;
- *The accuracy of the results*—scoring errors resulting in mislabeling of students have been front page news in papers across the country; and
- *The quality of the tests*—some states have set unreasonable expectations resulting in the vast majority of their schools and students failing, while others have set the performance benchmarks for success at an embarrassingly low level.

Recommendations

To maintain the momentum on state efforts to develop standards-based education systems, and to address some of the public's concerns about high-stakes assessments and accountability systems, in particular, the AFT makes the following recommendations.

To improve standards, states should:

- Explain the standards they set and the performance levels they require to meet them. States should compare their standards, assessments, and results with those of countries where student achievement is high.

- Provide examples of standards and of student work at various grades and performance levels so that teachers, students, parents, and the public have a shared understanding of what is expected.

States should devote attention to developing exemplary curriculum to support standards. They should:

- Involve teachers in the development of grade-by-grade curriculum aligned to the standards in the core subjects.
- Specify the learning continuum in the core subjects to show the progression and development of critical knowledge and skills from grade to grade.
- Identify instructional resources—reading materials, textbooks, software, and so forth—that are aligned to the standards.
- Provide information on instructional strategies or techniques to help teach the standards.
- Provide performance indicators to clarify the quality of student work required for mastery of the content standards.
- Develop lesson plan data banks that include exemplary lessons and student work related to instruction in the standards.

States should examine their policies and practices in regard to assessment. They should:

- Phase in the “stakes” related to tests to ensure that districts have adequate time to implement curricula, professional development, and intervention systems.
- Work to improve test instruments to ensure that the results reflect students’ skills and knowledge at the appropriate grade and performance level.
- Give students multiple opportunities to pass high-stakes assessments.
- Look for additional evidence from other indicators of achievement including performance assessments and other standardized tests when making important decisions about students. States should not put all the weight on a single test.
- Acknowledge and reward student achievement gains, not just absolute levels of academic attainment.
- Develop mechanisms for external review of state tests to ensure that they are of high quality and are used for the purposes for which they were designed.

In regard to intervention, states should:

- Provide high-quality, early intervention to students identified as at risk of failing to meet the standards.
- Provide adequate resources to ensure that students have access to any extra assistance they need. This might require smaller classes, alternative settings for disruptive students, extra time with a well-trained instructor, and access to specialists and special services.

States should develop a blueprint to ensure that they develop a standards-based system that is comprehensive and coherent. States should:

- Examine the elements of the system—the standards, the curricula, the tests, the professional development for teachers, the supports and incentives for students—as a whole to determine where there are gaps, where the pieces do not fit together, and where more development must be undertaken to assure that the system is educationally sound.
- Pay more attention to proper implementation. Tests should reflect the state’s curriculum. Sufficient resources must be available to get the job done. Teachers must understand what the standards are and how best to help all students meet them. Teachers also must be provided standards-based professional development that emphasizes deep content knowledge, clear instructional strategies, and the assessment tools necessary for determining student progress toward meeting the standards.

In sum, if states are to achieve the goal of educating all students to a high standard, they must develop a coherent standards-based system of education. In particular, the standards must be strong because they are the bedrock of the system, and the assessments must be aligned to the standards and be credible in terms of the knowledge and skills students are expected to master.

Tests cannot and should not drive the system, instead they should assist in determining whether the system is working effectively. In a standards-based system, the primary purpose of assessment is not to sort “winners” from “losers.” It is to ensure that all students have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed at the next level of schooling and to trigger assistance to those students who would otherwise fall through the cracks. The tests must identify students who are having a hard time meeting the standards, and the states must assist districts to ensure that schools have the necessary resources and that struggling students get the help they need—and get it early.

When essential elements of a standards-based system are missing or underdeveloped—as they are in many states where testing runs ahead of strong standards, or where tests are not aligned to the standards—failure rates may be excessive and test scores inaccurate, and students and parents may become frustrated and angry. The AFT findings about current state testing and accountability efforts give us pause in light of the likely new federal requirements that will increase state testing demands, as well as the need for additional funds to assist students having trouble meeting the standards. Those requirements may result in *more*, not *better*, testing and may thereby exacerbate the problems that the public and educators have identified with current state testing efforts.

Congress must ensure that the funds are available for the development and administration of the new tests and that a mechanism is in place to make sure that the new tests that are used are of high quality. To do otherwise is to undermine the standards reform effort. States should not have to choose between improving their current testing procedures for elementary, middle, and high school students and finding funds for testing all children in grades 3 through 8. Neither should states have to choose between developing more tests and developing curricula to support their standards. If the problems identified in this report persist or increase as a result of new mandates for testing students, the promise of standards-based reform will remain unmet.