



A Union of Professionals

A Q&A on high standards

Here are typical questions regarding efforts to raise academic standards.

Q: Why do we need academic standards?

A: There are a few fundamental problems in our schools that standards could help us resolve:

Academic mission The primary mission of schools should be to teach students how to read literature, write persuasively, solve tough mathematical problems, understand and appreciate history, and apply scientific principles in their everyday lives. Yet it doesn't always work that way. Today teachers are expected to be parents, police officers, nurses and social workers before they can even begin to focus on academics. We need clear, rigorous standards for what we want students to learn in each subject so that academic learning becomes our first priority.

Social promotion There are far too many youngsters graduating from our schools who don't have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in colleges or careers. Businesses want more from high school graduates, and colleges are forced to put many of the students they accept in remedial courses to teach them what they already should have learned in high school. In fact, the problem begins much earlier. Too many students are promoted from grade to grade without mastering the basic knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the next grade, and the problem compounds as they move through the system. Instead of promoting low-achieving students to the next grade, we need to provide them with substantial remedial help so that their promotion is earned. Teachers and school staff recognize that this is a problem, and so do parents. In many instances, teachers feel pressured to pass students who they don't think are ready for the next grade, but without clear standards, teachers have no yardstick and no leverage.

Equity Our public school system is based on a commitment to equality and opportunity for all children, but many students are missing out on one of the most crucial opportunities for learning--access to a challenging curriculum. Some youngsters are placed in uninspiring, unchallenging classes at an early age, and they are never given the chance to study literature, algebra or physics. Although this is a problem in all schools and for students of all ethnicities and backgrounds, it disproportionately affects low-income and minority students. We need challenging academic standards at the state level to help ensure that all children receive a high-quality curriculum and are challenged and supported so that they can achieve their maximum potential.

Student mobility We live in a very mobile society. Every time a family moves across town or across the state, their children end up attending new schools. On average, one in five students moves to a new school each year, and in urban areas, the rates are much higher. What this means for teachers is that they have to spend a good part of their time at the beginning of the year figuring out how much their new students know and reviewing material they already should have learned. All of this time could be saved if there were clear statewide standards in place and teachers knew that all of their incoming students had met the standards.

Q: What will happen to students who don't meet the standards?

A: Setting standards is about motivating students and rewarding achievement, not punishing them. Once we put challenging standards in place, it is the responsibility of the state, districts, schools, teachers and everyone else with a stake in the system to see to it that all students meet the expectations. We have to be very diligent about assessing where students are in relation to the standards and providing serious intervention programs for those in danger of failing. This is a state and local responsibility. Students who aren't meeting the standards should have access to after-school tutoring, Saturday schools and other special programs, and they should receive these services and supports until they can meet the standards. The most harmful thing we can do to youngsters is pass them from grade to grade and give them a diploma if they haven't learned what they should have learned.

Q: Isn't it unfair to expect all students to meet the same standards when we know that not all children start school with the same advantages and not all of them have the same supports at home?

A: What would be most unfair would be to expect less of disadvantaged students than we do of the rest. But in fact this is what we do today without standards in place. We often assume that because some students come from broken families or live in poor neighborhoods, they can't learn challenging subject matter. We do these children no favors by giving them watered-down curricula and expecting less of them. If we expect more and if we provide the kinds of supports and interventions mentioned earlier, disadvantaged students will achieve high standards. It's our responsibility to see that they do.

Q: Shouldn't standards-setting be the responsibility of local school districts and schools?

A: Local districts and schools should have high expectations for their students, but only the state can ensure that those expectations are high enough in all districts. State standards are needed precisely because some districts aren't providing all their students with a challenging curriculum and aren't holding them to high enough standards. Also, without state standards, there will be no way to ensure coherence from district to district and school to school, and mobile students will continue to face different standards and curricula when they enter new schools.