

PART IV
Standards

Standards

Theodore R.Sizer

Standards” has become the trumpet call for American school reform during the last two decades. The word is unassailable: Who can be against standards—that is, high standards? And who can credibly argue that the majority of American schools are functioning at a high standard and thereby graduating students who meet a high educational standard?

The rub comes with what precisely is meant by standards. Who exactly has the authority in a confident democracy to set and monitor them in a way that is respectful of and not intrusive to serious teaching? The rub becomes especially abrasive when the word is used by state (and now federal) government as a weapon and as a

condescending pejorative: “You have low standards and, because we no longer trust you, we must move in on you and raise them.” Our two mid-1990s, early-2000s schools worked and continue to work within such a condemnatory political climate.

The currently titled “standards movement” has two, often unconnected, strands. The first has to do with subject matter. What facts, skills, and attitudes, for example, represent “high-standard senior high school United States history”? What are the areas, skills, and operations that should constitute eighth grade mathematics? What are the essential “reading skills” for fourth graders? As in most states, Massachusetts leaders appointed committees to answer these questions, and a string of “curriculum frameworks” emerged. Predictably, these frameworks were a varied lot, some persuasive and imaginative, some wooden, some demonstrably wrong headed, some suspiciously ideological. For understandable political reasons (all sorts of interest groups want their piece of the action), most frameworks cover more ground than most experienced teachers think wise. Coverage inevitably trumps depth, and, with it for many students (many teachers believe), deep and sustainable understanding.

The second strand has to do with assessment. Describing the domains to be studied was one thing; ascertaining that such study was—student by student—accomplished was another, and far more difficult, matter.

Not surprisingly, testing has become the lightning rod of the standards movement. Many citizens and teachers in most states have come to believe, as we do, that on the

whole the tests are ill designed, misleadingly scored, and a diversion from serious learning.

Standardized tests necessarily tend to break up knowledge and understandings into small pieces (“items,” they are often called) or simplistic patterns (“the five-paragraph essay,” scored on the basis of a rigid formula). Tests stiffly assess the here and now, the recent “coverage” of “material.” Education, however, is ultimately about habits, what our young people think and do beyond school, when no one is looking. What those young citizens learn in school is a means to that end, not an end in itself. A score on a well-designed standardized test can tell us something about a student but hardly everything, and rarely about habits (save the persistence required to endure long, quiet hours in a test room).

Neither of our schools ignored standards or the expectation of frequent and demanding assessment. But from our beginnings we posited what we feel is a deeper, more authentic, and more sustainable system of multiple, indeed daily, assessments using the students’ work (ultimately assembled in portfolios). These actual physical collections of work display progress (or the lack of it) over time as well as various kinds of exercises, from public presentations to standardized tests, including the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The standards at which these collected data aim are carefully and publicly described and expressed. At both schools, for example, they appear as charts on classroom walls and within personal learning plans that are discussed regularly with the student, several of his teachers,

and his or her parents or guardian. Both schools urge—indeed, require—family engagement with the specific academic work of its child: Every student (not only those with “special needs”) has a personal learning plan. Both schools assume that a child learns best when teachers and family members are as one on the specific tasks and hurdles facing that child. It is out of such a comprehensive focus that intellectual and social habits are most likely to emerge.

While the detailed standards outlined at both schools are rarely at irreconcilable odds with those imposed by the state, they go further and deeper, and the students (particularly the older ones) understand the reasons for them and the level of performance required. In this way, standards are part and parcel of every day’s work, not something foreign, cramped by the technology of a single assessing device, and imposed by distant authorities *ex cathedra*.

The gap between state regulation and the committed practice of our schools has caused awkwardness. We public school principals are at once officers of the state and shepherds of our particular schools. The demands of the first sometimes clash with our duties as the second. All of us, especially Deborah, have written about this matter in other books, challenging the status quo and highlighting the inconsistency between our informed beliefs and what we as public servants insist upon. Some of the letters that follow reflect both the ambivalence that we feel and our need as school leaders to inform our families of the issues involved.

However, we are happy to report that imbedded in Massachusetts charter school regulation is an alternative to the crude testing and ranking represented by the MCAS standardized testing: the “inspection.” During our year as Parker’s acting co-principals, state inspectors spent most of a week at the school, considering evidence that we were true to our charter, including its academic and personal standards. The inspectors looked at all sorts of student work, visited classes, and studied independent evidence, including scores arising from MCAS and Stanford 9 tests. They saw not just a narrow, indisputably distorted snapshot of our school but a fair slice of its work in progress. That the state countenances and depends on such inspection suggests that a better way of oversight in the name of “standards for all schools” is not politically out of reach.