

## Are We Making a List or Delivering on a Promise? The Unintended Consequences of Believing All Standards Are Equal

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*Adapted from Texas Elementary Principals & Supervisors Association's TEPSA News, November/December 2014, Vol. 71, No. 6, [www.tepsa.org](http://www.tepsa.org)*

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"If everything is important then nothing is important."

—Patrick Lencioni

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When school administrators express the belief that every standard is equally important (thus, teachers must teach every standard), they create unanticipated consequences for their schools.

Educators hope a benefit of adopting consistent state, national, or provincial standards is better alignment and a more coherent curriculum. Educators expect a common set of standards to generate greater consistency around what teachers teach from grade to grade and school to school. Unfortunately, rigid adherence to the belief that every standard is equally important and teachers must teach every standard is actually creating opportunities for more—not less—variance in a classroom curriculum.

Teachers recognize not all standards are equally important, and they routinely make decisions about what to teach and what not to teach. However, since most school districts do not sanction or support the practice of prioritizing standards, teachers are left to figure things out on their own and approach this task without the benefit of consistent criteria. According to educational consultant and author Larry Ainsworth (2013):

Left to their own professional opinions when faced with the task of narrowing a voluminous number of student learning outcomes [standards], educators naturally "pick and choose" those they know and like best, the ones for which they have materials and lesson plans or activities, and those most likely to appear on state tests. (p. 16)

The practice of prioritizing or identifying the most important standards based on unique and individually created criteria leads to inconsistent teacher choices, undermines the consistency of what students experience in the classroom, and creates exactly the opposite effect of what educators hope for when they adopt various state and national standards.

The reality is that while all the standards are important, some are more important than others. Teachers can begin to make an important shift by acknowledging what they already intuitively know and support the collective efforts of collaborative teams to identify the most important, high-priority standards in systemic and systematic ways. (See Module 5.3, page 94, for a description and activity for how to prioritize the standards using R.E.A.L. criteria.)

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"Learning has little or nothing to do with what a teacher covers. Learning has everything to do with what students can accomplish."

—Harry Wong and Rosemary T. Wong

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Any reasonable definition of *teaching* incorporates the notion that students learn. The purpose of teaching the standards is to ensure students learn the knowledge, skills, and

dispositions the standards describe. So by definition, *teaching* the standards is different from *covering* the standards.

## Quantity Versus Quality

Despite successful efforts to refine and improve standards, most teachers continue to believe there are still too many standards to teach. An unbending belief that every standard is equally important, and teachers must teach them all, forces teachers to abandon the deep, meaningful mastery of the most important standards in exchange for the broad, superficial coverage of all the standards.

In some districts, administrators enacted policies and procedures that require teachers to document when and where they address each and every standard. This policy sends the wrong message and places the emphasis on quantity rather than quality. (A far better approach would be to identify and track mastery of the high-priority standards.) While many teachers will do their best to cover all the standards, most will not be able to teach all the standards to mastery.

Because people support what they help create, the question to answer is, “Have you been involved in deciding which standards you should teach and students should learn, or have administrators handed you a list of standards already designated and decided?” Even the exceptional teacher who covers all the standards will find it difficult to adequately assess them all and will be even more challenged to remediate them all. When administrators insist teachers teach every standard, regardless of a standard’s relative importance to the student or other standards, they promote compliance to district policies instead of a commitment to student learning.

## Teaching Versus Covering

Collaborative teams must exercise sound professional judgment and focus on teaching—as opposed to covering—the most important standards. Educators must reject the notion that covering the standards is an acceptable alternative to teaching the standards.

Another consequence of believing that every standard is equally important and must be taught is school leaders often require teachers teach all the standards without the opportunity to thoroughly understand the standards. If standards truly define what teachers should teach and students should learn, teachers should engage in a process of prioritizing and then unwrapping the most important standards. According to assessment expert and author Nicole Dimich (personal communication, January 20, 2020), “The purpose of unwrapping standards is not to create another standards document; instead, it is to get at the heart, at the very essence of what we expect in student learning.” By understanding the essence of each standard, teachers can create engaging and effective classroom lessons.

Author and researcher Douglas Reeves (personal communication, January 28, 2020) suggests the only time the argument that every standard is equally important makes sense is when every student is working at or above grade level, and therein lies the problem. It would be rare indeed to find a class, school, or district where every student was working at or above grade level. Teachers know they must constantly adjust and prioritize. They recognize it makes no sense to teach a standard when students lack the necessary prerequisite skills. The best teachers formatively assess their students, identify their instructional level, plan lessons that address the missing prerequisite skills, and remediate any gaps in student learning before moving on to teaching the grade-level standards.

## A Collaborative Process

The most successful teams engage in a collaborative process to promote deep understanding of the rigor, content, and connection of one standard to another. Arguing that every standard is equally important and must be taught only discourages teachers from taking the time to understand the standards so crucial to student success.

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“You are not making a list; you are making a promise. This is the information we promise our students will learn.”

—Tim Brown

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Whether state and national standards result in higher levels of student learning will depend, in large part, on the beliefs administrators, coaches, and teacher leaders hold regarding the implementation of the standards. Will standards be used to guide instruction, or will they be measures of accountability with consequences for individual teachers, students, and schools?

Educational consultant and former principal Tim Brown (personal communication, July 30, 2018) asks educators to reflect on what they believe about state or national standards. On one hand, if teachers look at standards as the content school leaders require them to cover during a particular class, course, or grade level, they will likely generate a list of standards to post on the walls of their classrooms. On the other hand, if teachers look at standards as a promise they make, they will more likely make the commitment to ensure students master the standards.

As to whether educators are making a list or delivering on a promise—the answer will go a long way to resolving some of the unintended consequences the belief that every standard is equally important and must be taught created.

## References

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