

Prioritizing the Standards Using R.E.A.L. Criteria

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Adapted from Texas Elementary Principals & Supervisors Association's TEPSA News, January/February 2014, Vol. 71, No. 1, www.tepsa.org

"In the absence of an agreed-upon set of criteria for prioritizing the standards . . . , educators will, out of necessity, make up their own."

—Larry Ainsworth

Regardless of their state, province, or district, teachers routinely ask themselves the same questions: "Are some standards more important than others? Which standards will students need in the next class, course, or grade level? Will all the standards be tested?"

Consider this scenario. During a team meeting, the team leader gives teachers a sample unit plan and asks them to identify what is important for students to learn before an upcoming assessment. Teachers embrace the task, but as they work to identify the requisite standards for the upcoming unit, it becomes obvious that each individual teacher is using his or her own unique criteria to prioritize what is essential for students to learn. The result is several different and competing sets of standards based on the teachers' contrasting views. Agreement on the unit's essential outcomes remains an elusive goal.

Educational consultant and author Larry Ainsworth (2013) argues this experience is not unique to a single district, school, or team. He suggests:

Left to their own professional opinions when faced with the task of narrowing a voluminous number of student learning outcomes, 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)

Reaching consensus on a unit's essential outcomes is important, but many teachers wonder where to begin the task of prioritizing an overwhelming number of standards. Without consensus around what students should know and be able to do (PLC critical question 1) and the development of valid and reliable assessments (PLC critical question 2), development of a systematic and schoolwide pyramid of interventions (critical questions 3 and 4) becomes more difficult.

Using R.E.A.L. Criteria to Prioritize Standards

In response to this dilemma, Ted Horrell and his colleagues in Shelby County, Tennessee, translated criteria Ainsworth (2013) developed into an easy-to-remember acronym. Using the R.E.A.L. criteria (readiness, endurance, assessed, and leverage), teachers collaborate as to whether they should consider a particular standard a priority. An example for each of the four categories follows.

Readiness

The *R* stands for *readiness*. This standard provides students with essential knowledge and skills necessary for success in the next class, course, or grade level. Here is an example of a readiness standard for algebra 1: *Manipulate formulas and solve literal equations.*

Student proficiency in this standard is necessary for success in subsequent mathematics classes, including geometry and algebra 2. Students who cannot demonstrate these skills are ready to advance to the next level of instruction.

Endurance

The *E* represents *endurance*. This standard provides students with knowledge and skills useful beyond a single test or unit of study. Here is an example of an endurance standard for English 9–10: *Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.*

Students will require this standard, in particular, the skill of providing an objective summary of written passages, for future high school and college courses. It is also likely to be an essential skill in many professions and in everyday life. The standard has a high degree of endurance.

Assessed

The *A* stands for *assessed*. Upcoming state and national exams will assess this standard. Here is an example of a standard reflecting the assessed criteria for algebra 1: *Order and classify rational numbers.*

Although ordering numbers is a vital part of the mathematics curriculum that most students master at an early age, the skill of classifying rational numbers is not an essential building block for understanding future concepts, nor does it have much practical application outside the mathematics curriculum. However, there are questions on the ACT and PSAT that require students to use this specific skill—a fact teams should consider when prioritizing this standard.

Leverage

The *L* refers to *leverage*. This standard provides students with the knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines. Here is an example of a standard reflecting the leverage criteria for physical science: *Choose, construct, and analyze appropriate graphical representations for a data set.*

Though it is part of the physical science curriculum, this standard has significant leverage. Teachers expect students to apply these skills in future science classes, as well as in other content areas such as social studies, career and technical education, and mathematics.

Should Teachers Prioritize the Standards?

Educators on both sides make passionate arguments for and against the idea of prioritizing standards. Whether educators acknowledge it or not, the truth is teachers are prioritizing standards all the time. Collaboratively prioritizing the standards creates greater clarity around what teachers should teach and students should learn. Many teachers find the process of prioritizing standards allows them to see how one standard overlaps with other standards. Furthermore, prioritizing the standards sharpens the focus on what students should learn, which promotes development of better assessments and helps identify which students need more time and support. This kind of knowledge fosters more efficient planning and more efficient sharing of resources.

Prioritizing the standards also encourages teachers to embrace more effective instructional practices by reducing the pressure to simply cover the material. According to Ainsworth (2004), the consensus among educators “is that in-depth instruction of ‘essential’ concepts and skills is more effective than superficially ‘covering’ every concept in the textbook” (p. 7).

Perhaps the biggest argument in favor of prioritizing standards is the positive effect the process has on sharpening teachers’ pedagogy and deepening their content knowledge. Teams that prioritize the standards recognize that in many ways, the process is as important as the product. Carefully analyzing the standards, debating the merits of individual standards, and coming to consensus on the most essential standards help everyone gain a more thorough understanding of what teachers should teach and students should learn.

If Everything Is Important, Then Nothing Is Important

So the question is not whether teachers should prioritize standards, but rather how will teachers prioritize the standards? Will teachers work in isolation to form a unique set of criteria individually, or will they prioritize the standards based on a common and agreed-on set of criteria their collaborative team develops? The goal is to create clear, consistent, and coherent commitments among the faculty around what *all* students must know and be able to do. This is accomplished by examining the standards, one at a time, through the lens of the R.E.A.L. criteria. Only after examining the standards together can teams be confident that the standards they choose to focus on represent what is most important for all students to know and be able to do.

The answer is to embrace collective responsibility and decide together what is most important for students to know and be able to do.

References

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