

.....

## **Developing and Implementing Academic Standards**

### *A Template for Legislative Reform*

Lance T. Izumi

The following is a “Fact Sheet” summary of *Developing and Implementing Academic Standards*, the second in the three-part policy series *Templates for Legislative and Policy Reform*. The other two templates address the issues of school choice and charter schools. The series recommends best practices and legislative language, and highlights problem areas that arise when policy deviates from those best practices. Lance Izumi is the director of the Pacific Research Institute’s Center for School Reform.

*Developing and Implementing Academic Standards* is a groundbreaking document focusing on five important standards-related issues. First, it defines and outlines the critical components of a successful academic standards system using examples of good and bad standards to illustrate key points. In addition, it offers analyses, discussion, and recommendations in four other crucial areas: tests aligned to the standards; categorization of student achievement through performance standards; implementation and accountability systems to guarantee that the standards become a reality in the classroom; and communications strategies to disseminate information about the standards to parents, teachers, and local school officials. Unless each of these components is both present and of high quality, a system of education standards will most likely fail to improve achievement.

Academic content standards set out the essential subject knowledge and skills students must master at defined intervals in their school careers. During the 1990s, a consensus has developed on the qualities that should be embodied in any good set of standards. According to a wide range of experts, a good set of academic content standards, in whatever subject, should be

1. Rigorous;
2. Intelligible;
3. Measurable;

4. Specific;
5. Comprehensive;
6. Academic;
7. Balanced;
8. Manageable; and
9. Cumulative.

Examples of academic content standards meeting these requirements include California's math and reading standards and Japan's math standards.

Crafting the content standards is just one part of a comprehensive system. Without an assessment device, there can be no way of knowing if the content standards are being met in the classroom. Further, if the assessment device does not accurately measure the knowledge content, then it will be impossible to determine if the standards are being met. An assessment device tests students' subject knowledge and skills and the results are reported to officials and the public. In deciding upon the type of assessment device to use, policymakers should bear in mind issues such as

1. Depth vs. breadth;
2. Time and cost of scoring;
3. Ability to generalize;
4. Factual knowledge vs. higher order thinking skills;
5. Memorability;
6. Equivalency; and
7. Validity.

Performance standards designate the achievement levels on the state test (e.g., "advanced," "proficient," "basic," and "below basic") and what the cut-off scores for the achievement levels will be on the test. It is important that the cut-off scores not be pegged artificially low so that, for example, more students score at the "advanced" level than is warranted by the students' actual knowledge. In crafting performance standards, the following steps should be observed:

1. Set the number of performance standards.
2. Name the performance levels.
3. Provide content and quality of performance at each level.

4. Develop and administer test items.
5. Decide cut scores.
6. Provide student work samples.

A high-stakes implementation and accountability system must be put in place so that local school districts have an incentive to make sure the standards actually make it into the classroom. Such a system cannot consist of more money thrown at districts which underperform. Rather, schools and districts where students fail to meet the standards should be targeted for reforms guaranteed to shake the status quo. Policymakers should therefore consider these implementation and accountability strategies:

1. Performance contracting with outside firms to provide educational services;
2. Merit pay for teachers linked to student achievement on standards-aligned tests;
3. Teacher selection and renewal based on performance;
4. Targeted school-choice demonstration programs in districts where students fail to meet the standards;
5. Improving teacher training programs by increasing content-area requirements; and,
6. Improving professional development for existing teachers by emphasizing standards-aligned content-area knowledge.

Finally, a communications plan must be formulated that informs parents, teachers, local school officials, the media, and the general public about details of the standards, assessments, performance standards, and accountability mechanisms.