

CAN WISCONSIN RAISE THE BAR? STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION REFORM IN WISCONSIN

MARK C. SCHUG
RICHARD D. WESTERN

In Wisconsin and throughout the United States, standards-based reform activity dominated K-12 education in the latter half of the 1990s. The movement reflected a consensus view that improving learning among K-12 pupils would require adoption of state-level curricular standards and state-level examinations linked to those standards.

As of January 2000, every state except Iowa had adopted standards in at least some subject areas, and 44 states had adopted standards in English, mathematics, science, and social studies. Forty-eight states now administer statewide testing programs, and 41 of the 48 link the tests to the curricular standards they have adopted. In leadership circles generally, support for standards-based reform remains strong, as evidenced by endorsements that continue to issue from governors, CEOs, influential educators, and Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.

But many educators and other citizens have opposed the standards-based movement from the outset, arguing that standards and tests imposed by state law burden local school districts and degrade teaching and learning. Much of the opposition stems from fear that



standards-based examinations will show many students to be learning little in school. Early rounds of testing in other states suggest that this fear is well founded. One might suppose in these cases that critics would fault the instructional programs producing the unsatisfactory results. Especially among parents and educators accustomed to seeing local students do well

according to other measures, however, the tendency has been to blame the new standards-based examinations.

Opposition has been heightened by recent evidence about technical problems related to standards-based testing programs and by results from several states showing that many students are learning little in school. These problems have caused legislators around the country to soften standards-based programs in various ways. At the same time, critics viewing the standards and standards-based examina-

Mark C. Schug is a professor in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Richard Western is a retired professor from the same department. This article is a condensation of Standards-Based Education Reform in Wisconsin: What It Will Take To Make It Work, published by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, March 2000.

tion from a different perspective fault many of them for being vague and trivial. As the standards-based examinations come into more frequent use in decisions about grade-level promotion and graduation, the concerns will intensify.

Wisconsin's standards-based reform initiative has been marked by some of the conflicts and uncertainties that now overshadow the movement nationally. It encountered resistance at the outset, and many of the early critics remain deeply skeptical today, asserting various criticisms of Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) examinations. Some resistance also has been forthcoming from students and parents, particularly in regard to "high stakes" uses of WSAS testing, and parental lobby groups have succeeded in derailing early plans for a high stakes high school graduation test. Legislative retrenchment of this sort may undercut the incentives (for teachers to focus on standards-based content, for students to work hard to learn) the initiative was intended to create.

The standards-based approach to education reform differs from other approaches in that it focuses directly on two elements of schooling (curriculum — what is taught; and assessment — how we judge what is taught and learned) that determine in large measure what is demanded in schools and therefore what students can be expected to learn.

If we look at assessment as a means of fostering improvement in teaching and learning, different issues arise. When the task of assessing learning falls to individual teachers who plan their instruction in an academic vacuum, the dynamics that drive curricular differentiation once again come into play. Absent any independent specification of what is to be taught and learned, a teacher might decide, for example, to assess students routinely by means of daily worksheets and weekly tests focused in a low-inference manner on whatever textbook readings he or she has seen fit to assign. Far from being put off by such a regimen,

moreover, students may assent to it readily — in fact they may push for it quite deliberately — in the ongoing, informal negotiations by means of which they and their teachers come to terms about the academic norms that will govern their work. In such a regimen, after all, students and teachers can find something to like. The low-level routine reduces risk and uncertainty for students, and those who are at least minimally compliant will ordinarily be able to avoid failure in the climate of expectations it helps to establish. At the same time, the routine provides teachers with management tools — a gradebook, for example, chock full of grades for each student, ready for display to any parents or administrators who might inquire about a report card grade — plus a scheme for imposing structure on classroom time.

At the institutional level, the assessment instruments that have until recently been taken for granted within K-12 education — the familiar standardized achievement and college admission tests — also serve poorly if the goal is to provide focus and direction for study in the K-12 schools. These instruments do not make clear to students and teachers what sort of learning is to be expected in a given course of study, nor do they examine students on content taught in particular courses. They are not designed to do that. They are designed, in fact, to be divorced from school curricula, so that students cannot study for them and teachers cannot teach to them. In providing aggregate reports of achievement by classes or schools, they serve a purpose of institutional monitoring; but they do not serve instructional purposes.

The alternative would be to turn toward an assessment system featuring periodic, externally administered examinations for which schools deliberately prepare their students through courses of study informed by the curricular standards that also inform the examinations. School systems in France, the Netherlands, and England use assessment systems of this sort, and in those countries the systems do influence teaching practice and provide a powerful incentive for learning.

We have not been without examples of such assessment in the United States, but our examples, until recently, have been associated only with our most able and our least able students, not our student population generally. One of these is the Advanced Placement Program, which functions in a manner similar to the assessment systems operating in some European countries. It specifies, for the various subject areas, well publicized courses of study as well as examinations (also well publicized) tailored to those courses of study. The examinations are externally administered, so that they cannot be put to tactical uses in classroom negotiation. Teachers teach to these examinations and students study for them, yet the examinations appear to most observers to be thoughtful and challenging — anything but the trivial pursuit exercises deplored by people who object reflexively to the very idea of assessing learning by tests — so that “teaching to the test” implies thoughtful, challenging instruction about worthwhile content.

Minimum competency tests, designed ordinarily for use with low achieving student populations, provide a second example. They also have influenced the content of the teaching that goes along with minimum-competency programs. Due process requirements, in fact, forbid districts from using minimum competency tests unless they can show that the students in question have had an opportunity to learn the content on which they are tested. By focusing only on minimal levels of performance, however — by providing a sort of standards floor — the minimum competency programs do not provide a model for comprehensive efforts to upgrade standards.

The standards-based reform idea looks genuinely new because it features a conception

of curriculum and assessment that differs markedly from the conceptions presupposed in the traditions noted above. Instead of school programs differentiated according to theories about social efficiency and implemented by teachers acting as individual agents, constrained only by their own preferences and their (negotiated) understanding of their pupils' needs and interests, it calls for an explicit determination of what should be taught and learned, expressed as a set of curricular standards. Instead of institutional assessment programs detached from courses of study, it calls for curricular examinations aligned with the standards that shape courses of study, so that teachers can prepare students for the examinations and students can study for them.

Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards

For each of four subject matter areas (English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies), Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards provide what are called content standards and performance standards for use with pupils at three grade levels (grades 4, 8,

and 10). The content standards take the form of broad statements about what a student should know or be able to do within a sub-category of each main subject matter area.

Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards have been evaluated by various authorities. An evaluation conducted in 1999 by the American Federation of Teachers determined that Wisconsin's standards were “clear and specific” at the three grade levels in English and mathematics, but not in science or social studies. Overall, the AFT gave the Wisconsin standards a letter-grade of C. More recently, an evaluation conducted by the Fordham Foundation (updating an earlier evaluation in

...so that “teaching to the test” implies thoughtful, challenging instruction about worthwhile content.

1998) generally praised Wisconsin's standards in English, found the standards in mathematics and science to be mediocre, and found the standards in history and geography to be poor (earning letter-grades of F). Overall, the Fordham Foundation gave the Wisconsin standards a grade of C-, up slightly from the D+ grade it bestowed in 1998. Representatives from the UW System also have examined the standards in connection with a project undertaken to address issues of continuity between what is expected of students in Wisconsin's high schools and what students must know to succeed in higher education.

Wisconsin's Standards-Based Examinations

Wisconsin's standards-based examinations, used in the WSAS, are called the Terra Nova tests. The Terra Nova tests are written for each of the three grade levels (4, 8, and 10), with portions of each grade-level test given over to each of the four subject matter areas. The tests are aligned to the Model Academic Standards. This means that teachers who focus their instruction on the standards can have some confidence that in doing so they are preparing their students to perform well on the tests. But alignment here turns out to be a matter of degree. First, not everything implied by the standards gets tested by the Terra Nova tests. Second, not all the "test-eligible" content (i.e., the standards-based content that can be tested in the Terra Nova tests) gets tested in each test.

The Future of Standards-Based Reforms in Wisconsin

Wisconsin teachers and school administrators have made an impressive beginning in their early efforts to implement the standards-based initiative. Interview data we collected from a survey of 50 Wisconsin school districts suggest that most curriculum directors view the standards-based initiative favorably. While acknowledging that certain technical problems and problems of teacher resistance do continue to complicate the implementation task, most curriculum directors report that the initiative has prompted teachers to engage in worthwhile tasks of curriculum analysis and revision,

focusing attention sharply on substantive efforts to improve teaching and learning.

The standards-based movement seems therefore to have reached a crossroads. It has shown strong potential for improving student learning by providing new focus and direction for the work educators do, but it also has unnerved many educators, parents, and other citizens. In light of this tension, about half of the curriculum directors we interviewed doubted whether the initiative could be sustained.

About that question, much will depend on whether those responsible for it can retain the features that give it a distinctive edge while at the same time working to improve the program and develop support for it. The effort will require, at the very least, midstream attention to the shortcomings and implementation problems that have already begun to surface. It may also require attention of a more general sort to the policy environment within which standards-based education reform ultimately will stand or fall in Wisconsin. With these points of reference in mind, we offer the following recommendations.

- 1. The Governor should authorize the Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards to coordinate and oversee ongoing efforts to develop and improve the standards-based initiative.**

The Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards should commission a comprehensive review of the standards and the WSAS examinations, in order to determine whether revisions are warranted.

Working in concert with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Cooperative Education Service Agency (CESA) offices, the Governor's Council on Model Academic standards should coordinate and oversee an effort to describe and disseminate model state curricula, synthesized from best practices reported by successful school districts, in order to strengthen the program of implementation assistance now provided to districts by the DPI and the CESAs.

Working in concert with the DPI, the Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards should coordinate and oversee an effort to develop and implement a statewide system of "value-added" assessment, to be incorporated in the WSAS, so that schools and school districts may assess their effectiveness by reference to their own starting points.

Value-added is an accountability tool for gauging how much students gain in academic achievement for a given year — i.e., how much "value" is added by each additional year of schooling. It employs a method of data analysis that summarizes annual gains, as measured, for example, by the tests Wisconsin already uses at grades 4, 8, and 10. Applied to the aggregate scores of students taught in a given district, school, or classroom, value-added assessment becomes an indicator of district, school, or teacher effectiveness.

2. To provide a governance structure within which education policy initiatives have an improved chance of surviving on their merits, Wisconsin should (a) take constitutional steps to abolish the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and (b) establish a semi-autonomous Board of State Governors for K-12 education.

It would not take a massive uprising to undo legislation crucial to standards-based reform. As legislative retrenching on Wisconsin's high school graduation test has

shown, small interest groups can be effective in policy disputes when they seek concrete, immediate benefits, at costs that seem low, while those who oppose them must argue on behalf of remote benefits at costs that seem high. Could the public's long-term interest in education policy that generates stiff opposition in the short run be buffered in any way from direct political assaults?

We propose that the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction be constitutionally abolished. The unique structure of the Office has contributed to the Department's drift toward a "captured agency" status. The producers of public education in the state have been able to gain control of their state regulatory agency in regard to many matters bearing on the public interest.

In addition we propose the establishment of a semi-autonomous Board of State Governors for K-12 Education. The Board would consist of nine members appointed by the Governor and approved by the state Senate. The Governor would appoint one Board member as President who would serve as head of the current Department of Public Instruction.

We believe that a Board structured in this way could buffer a sphere of education policy, providing, for any given policy, adequate time for start-up and developmental activity, so that the initiative might stand or fall on its merits as viewed from a public perspective.