Standards-Based Movement: Implications for Reading Teacher Development

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With the monstrous groans, sharp cracks, and the irresistible forward momentum of an avalanche, the Standards Movement thunders across the face of American education, forever altering the face of the institutions it touches, including teacher development. Dissatisfied with poor student achievement and inadequate readiness for the workplace, the U.S. Department of Labor launched calls for educational reform that evolved into the development of numerous National Standards that serve as benchmarks for achievement and assessment. The Standards Movement is one of a number of educational reform initiatives, which were intended to modernize classroom instruction in ways that would improve student achievement (Center for Educational Reform, 1995). What makes this one unique was the origin—the U.S. Department of Labor.

We minimize this cataclysmic, 20-year movement at our peril. Educators have been able to ignore governmental reform mandates because there was little follow-through or consequence for non-compliance, given the historical precedent of local authority over schools (Walker, 1990). Complacent, educators have watched instructional fads come and go over the years, with little more impact than minimal changes in course requirements and objectives (Cohen & Spillane, 1993). Coincidently, or maybe not, student performance has steadily declined over the last twenty years. A number of groups have demanded change, but there were a number of obstacles from union resistance to lack of a united focus. The Standards Movement capitalized on the weakest links, i.e., those groups who had no voice. The movement began with student mandates and then moved to certification mandates for beginning teachers. Building momentum,
this reform movement has evolved to holding schools accountable for specific levels of performance, “standards.” The accountability expected by the business community who initiated these reforms (U.S. Department of Labor) has broken decades-long stagnation and K-12 schools now frantically scramble to meet these objectives. Colleges of Education and programs that train reading educators also should take notice as these reforms have already begun to encroach on their domains.

The intent of this paper is to review significant phases of the Standards Reform Movement, explore the immediate effects on teacher development initiatives, and consider the consequences to programs that develop literacy professionals.

Standards Reform Movement – Historical Retrospective

Initial Steps: Late 1970s Accountability

The first harbingers of this movement toward accountability may have begun in 1976, when three states (Florida, California, and Colorado) initiated high school minimum competency tests. Since then, accountability, standards, and assessment have dominated the focus of education, with the bar rising every year.

Next Steps: Causes and Systemic-Reform Mandates of the 1980s

The poor performance of U.S. students on international tests and research reports, e.g., A Nation at Risk (1983) prompted late 1980s shifts in state (Nation’s Governors’ Meeting - Goals 2000 initiative) and district mandates. State legislature mandates, such as Florida’s Blueprint 2000, were launched which specified the numbers of academic courses and dictating their content and quality (Elley, 1992; Kirst, 1993; Porter, Kirst, Osthoff, Smithson, & Schneider, 1993). This standards-based, systemic reform’s essential elements included standards, curricular alignment, testing verification of performance, and professional development revisions.
There are two highly significant factors in this current movement: the across-the-board, nonpartisan, uniform political support it enjoys, and the influential role of the business sector. The latter surfaces in the U.S. Department of Labor report, Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) Report: What Work Requires of Schools (1991), which polled national businesses for essential workplace skills. Three areas were targets for reform (a) basic skills, (b) problem-solving skills, and (c) interpersonal skills. Unlike U.S. Department of Education reforms, this business involvement suggested that there was a strong likelihood that schools would be held accountable and that reforms would be long term.

1990s State Reform Policies

By 1995, 49 states had versions of standards-based, systemic reform that initiated changes in state policies, many of which mirrored the marketplace, supply-and-demand influence of business (Gandolf, 1996). These included charter schools (20 states), school choice, vouchers (two states legislated them and five others experienced narrow-margins defeats), deregulation (waivers), outcome-based programs (OBE - Outcome Based Education), and central office downsizing. In an effort to allow for liberal interpretation, policymakers broadly defined standards, which allowed districts to make independent decisions about what to apply. Massell, Kirst, and Hoppe (1994) found that districts requested more specificity, especially those held accountable for student performance on state standards-based tests. Their research reveals that increased involvement of the state in education has amplified the development of local policies (Fuhrman and Elmore, 1990) in which high performing districts served as models for designing state-level policies. Thus, these state policy actions initiated and focused local initiatives. More
educators expressed support for standards-based reform than at the end of the 80’s decade (Fuhrman & Massell, 1992).

**Effects on Teacher Development**

While most states now have some sort of statewide testing program that ensures accountability, the uses of the results vary considerably. However, how student scores are used tends to fall into two categories: diagnostic-intervention or reveal-demerit.

Highest overall performance improvements occur in states that have chosen a diagnostic use of standards-based tests. In these states, student performances are analyzed to identify individual or program strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses are analyzed for the purpose of improving curriculum and instruction. Educators are apprised of the areas of curricular weakness and are provided appropriate training and assistance to make the necessary instructional interventions or adaptations that result in improved student performance on future tests. As might be expected, these states have tended to show significant gains in student performance.

Other states use such statewide test results to evaluate programs as a means of holding schools and districts accountable for student performance, often publishing the test results in local newspapers with accompanying grades of “D” or “F.” These kind of test results often are reported during the summer, when there is no way a teacher could use the results to adjust instruction. Florida is one such state that has adopted the “reveal and penalize” use of statewide assessment, while at the same time facing a period of severe teacher shortage. In the academic year 2000-2001, Broward County alone needed over 100 teachers. Data from informal polls (conducted by the author) of students enrolled in graduate classes and at state conferences suggest that teachers were leaving the field in droves, as many as 30% of a school’s staff, by one
The interviewed teachers complained of the demoralization of working in a pejoratively labeled school and the stress of administrator demands for isolated test preparation at the expense of instructional time. This finding is confirmed by reports from our university undergraduates who report that they cannot find elementary classrooms where science or social studies lessons are being taught. Some educators have anonymously reported incidents of cheating, e.g., principals announcing prior to the test that teachers are to “Do whatever it takes to bring our scores up. Whatever!” which results in teachers giving students answers or changing student responses on actual tests. It is almost impossible to express the frustration of educators who read headlines of “FCAT SCORES UP!” emblazoned in the media and listen to the Governor and the Secretary of Education brag about how Florida’s Standards-Based Assessment System is working, while knowing the contrasting realities that exist in the field. Rage follows when the same Governor announces a month later that the bar will be raised, passing scores will be more stringent the following year since student performances have improved so much.

These developments promise enormous changes in teacher development. Given the current tendency to hand accountability over to the schools, reform initiatives transform teacher and administrator responsibilities and have significant implications for those involved in educator training, licensing, certification, and ongoing development. Massell and Fuhrman
(1994) report that initial standards movement efforts focused on instruction and classroom improvement. Now, since the data have been gathered already, efforts need to shift to deliberate and systematic capacity building (Massell, 1994a; 1994b).

Teacher certification reforms began in earnest in the 1980s, with the advent of minimal basic skills and subject matter tests. Many states also developed peer support and review of beginning teachers. By 1995, at about the same time that states were concluding minimum basic skills tests of students, there was a public outcry to “teach-to-the-basics.” This was inconsistent with the high-level functioning, required of the standards-based reform initiative. It became evident that the minimalist nature of certification tests presented a similar significant mismatch when certifying teachers who need the complex combination of knowledge and skills required of educators, especially in an era of standards-based reform (Corcoran, 1995). Florida and Texas were the first of a string of states who adopted a performance-based assessment for initial certification and professional development initiatives. It is significant to note that reform progress was more easily mandated for entry-level educators.

Massell, et al. (1994) report significant obstacles to making changes in the classrooms of some seasoned teachers. Certainly the unions have opposed recertification policy changes, insisting that permanent certificates be renewed with only minimal requirements for re-training. However, any training offered might never reach classroom practice because it can be subverted by the classic obstacle of the teacher who resists current instructional changes. Opposition to reform exists because of a lack of unawareness for need or potential effectiveness. It’s all a matter of attitude: if you believe it will work or if you believe it won’t, either way, you’re right because teachers make their own classroom realities. To overcome the misguided roadblock of
unions who protect the resistant attitude of the staid and protect-the-status-quo educators, some states are moving toward launching regional certification renewal using independent professional educator licensing boards.

In teacher development, there is a significant need for reform that supports the complexity of skills required of today’s educators. Traditional training involving lecture delivery, for example, is being replaced with job embedded training involving demonstrations and observations with students. Clearly, thoughtful, standards-aligned, long-term professional development is needed to significantly influence practice (Porter, 1993; Little, 1993). Unfortunately, the time of greatest need for professional development has coincided with a time of significant budget shortfall. A number of the states have reduced budgets for such training opportunities (Massell and Fuhrman, 1994). States initiated a creative variety of standards-related teacher development reforms (see Table 1).
Table 1. Standards-Based Teacher Development Reforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School-Based Initiatives</th>
<th>College/University Initiatives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workshops</strong></td>
<td><strong>Programs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• one-day workshops (now standards-aligned, targeted, professional development training that is consistent with the curricular reforms, often delivered by specially trained teachers.)</td>
<td>• customized graduate courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Alignment with National Teacher Board Standards/Objectives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Program Alignment with National Standards (NCATE, IRA, NCTE)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Standards-embedded or –driven Action Research</td>
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<td>• summer institutes aligned to standards</td>
<td><strong>School Links</strong></td>
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<td>• teacher instructional centers</td>
<td>• Professional Development Schools with change agency focus</td>
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<td>• turnkey training (teacher pairs receive training and come back to train the school staff)</td>
<td>• Job- and Student-embedded courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>• grant funded initiatives (grants or cooperatives with businesses, e.g., TechPrep, or state funded initiatives, e.g. Florida’s SB 1956 STAR: Secondary Strategies Accelerate Reading)</td>
<td><strong>Service</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Websites for Standards-based resources</td>
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<td><strong>Curriculum Development</strong></td>
<td><strong>Self Study</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• teachers on special assignment to develop curriculum or training (significant positive effects have been reported)</td>
<td>• study and professional development sabbaticals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• participation at professional conferences teacher instructional centers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• National Board for Professional Teaching Standards master teaching certificates incentives</td>
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<td>• school-developed professional development plans</td>
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As educators seek answers within school systems, these challenges have become a time of growth and opportunity for businesses and professional organizations who have readily stepped into the void, sometimes supplanting traditional teacher development offerings (e.g., inservice workshops, advance degree programs) and recertification offerings of traditional universities and school systems. Professional organizations have created networks (e.g., National Science Foundation’s SSI: Statewide Systemic Initiative; Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools; Schlechty’s Center for Leadership in School Reform’s WOW: Working on Work; National Council of Teachers of English’s Reading Initiative) that allow for collaborative, reflective change agency. Just as national charter school business initiatives have stepped forward in the wake of charter schools, a significant number of staff training companies have been developed (e.g., Accelerated Schools Program or Equity 2000). Initially these educator training initiatives provided in service training only, but more recently they have been aligning themselves with universities to provide Master’s degrees, within which the courses offered are tailored to local standards-based realities. Some of these are now offered online, so that professional and personal scheduling realities can be offset.

**Challenge to University Teacher Development Programs**

The Standards Movement presents both opportunity and danger to university teacher preparation programs, at pre- and in-service levels. The same standards trends that have been sweeping the K-12 public schools are now affecting Higher Education. We can ignore the imperative and be reactive, or we can study the K-12 trends and proactively guide the manner in which the Standards Movement will impact teacher development programs in literacy.
Testing/Accountability

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2000) just issued a state-level report card evaluating university performance for undergraduate education in the areas of participation, affordability, completion rate, and economic benefits. The NCPPHE Measuring Up 2000 – The State by State Report Card for Higher Education asserts that many states perform well in several areas, but no state received straight A’s in its delivery of higher education. We can expect similar evaluation measures to evolve from literacy professional organizations. The International Reading Association, for example, is currently exploring the possibility of requiring specific, evaluative course rubrics from which they can gather data to evaluate reading programs, which is consistent with the first step of the K-12 Standards Movement.

Table 2.


Characteristics of Measure Up 2000 Initiative

1. Identify Indicators

Measuring Up is built on a foundation of 30 quantitative indicators. Each performance category (preparation, participation, affordability, completion, and benefits) has several indicators. All of these indicators are important in assessing performance in the category; are collected regularly by reliable, public sources that follow accepted practices for data collection; are comparable across the 50 states; and measure performance results.

2. Weight indicators

Each indicator is assigned a mathematical weight based on its importance to the performance category, as informed by research and policy experience. For each category the sum of all weights is 100%

3. Identify top states for each indicator

State results on each indicator are converted to a scale of 0 to 100, using the top five states as the benchmark. This conversion “called indexing” is a statistical method that allows for accurate
comparisons of different measures. In Measuring Up 2000, the median of the top five states (or the third best state) scores 100. This establishes a high, but achievable standard of performance on each indicator.

4. **Identify best state for each category**

State scores for each category are calculated from the state’s index scores on the indicators and the indicators’ weights. In each category, the sum of all the index scores on the indicators times the weights of the indicators is the raw category score for the state. These raw category scores are then converted to a scale of 0 to 100 based on the performance of the top state in the category.

5. **Assign grades**

Grades are assigned based on the category index scores, using a grading scale common in many high school and college classes: A=\(<92; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76; C=70-72; D+=67-69; D=63-66; D-=60-62; F\(<60.

**Standards Alignment**

In the present accountability/reform climate, a static, insular teacher development program won’t survive. A number of states are now requiring standards alignment for program approval, e.g., Florida state statute requires all Colleges of Education be accredited by NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education), which is predicated on alignment of programs with all subject-specific national standards. Florida also has funded the University of Central Florida to facilitate a curriculum alignment program (FLARE: Family Literacy and Reading Excellence), which includes a component that comes perilously close to creating standardized course syllabi for all reading courses. These syllabi include specific performance rubrics for specific strategies from which data must be collected and compiled; specific textbooks and materials are recommended for each course. There is enormous threat to academic freedom in such a statewide syllabi initiative. With static syllabi, it is difficult for an individual professor to fold in current research or choose non-traditional approaches. The rubrics,
determined by someone other than the instructor, constrain both method and delivery. All of this could make for stilted teaching. As an organization, American Reading Forum needs to be on guard against the consequences of such initiatives, however well meaning.

The irony is, at the same time as the state stiffened program requirements for universities, Florida also approved alternative certification channels, which maintain far less rigor and oversight and are not subjected to the same certifications to which the state university programs must adhere. The state also does not require the same certifications, entry and exit requirements, or standards alignments of its non-public institutions, but is dismayed that the College of Education enrollments are depressed and its state Colleges of Education are not producing enough graduates to meet the current and persistent teacher shortage. It would seem traditional programs are, once again, between the classical rock and the hard place.

Change is inevitable. Massive forward momentum rules the day with these educational reforms. Colleges and universities must heed the warning or be rendered obsolete in the next decade. When the whole of a school day is focused on accountability, when they live and die by making the grade and are fervently seeking strategies by which they can do this, the university must offer connections between its training programs and classroom reality.

Preservice programs must prepare educators who can deal with accountability and reform challenges. They must be knowledgeable about the standards movement, the history of it, the reasons behind it, and the necessity for it. Teachers need to know the standards and be firmly grounded in how to teach in ways that facilitate student learning that is aligned with those standards. They must understand when students are unable to meet standards, and what interventions would bridge this gap. This form of targeted teaching is moderately consistent with
the philosophy of most reading educators, so it will not be as much of a challenge as it might be for educators in other fields, who do not ascribe to evaluation and intervention. However, the students, as unseasoned and malleable as undergraduates are, the level of complexity that will be required of them as they enter the field, the absolute necessity of grooming them to be disposed to maintain a lifelong tradition for professional development, and their experiential unfamiliarity with targeted assessment-intervention instruction poses an enormous challenge to teacher literacy development. Such training may need to be school or classroom embedded, involve demonstration lessons, include pre and post standards-based assessment and interventions to convince students that such unfamiliar ways of approaching literacy are not only effective but necessary.

Graduate programs must provide effective change agency and help teachers mold themselves into thoughtful, results-oriented practitioners. It is imperative the graduate programs offer reinforcement to the incentives of national certification, perhaps folding preparation for such certificates into the program itself. Programs built on grounded philosophical standards-based frameworks must supplant isolated strings of classes. Seasoned teachers who seek graduate work at universities tend to be more serious about their studies and open to alternative approaches, but the same experiential classroom embedded, evaluation-intervention, standards-based, results-driven model used for the undergraduates can induce our graduate students to become agents for positive change. This is especially possible when graduate teacher training is embedded in Professional Development Academies (Kossack & Fine, 1998). Graduate courses, offered at a school sites, allow for planned demonstration and guided observation of targeted teaching episodes between students and teachers. While providing modeling and hands on
opportunities, these activities can increase student performance at the school sites. In addition, the teachers take these “lessons learned” back to their home schools where more children are impacted positively (Kossack, 2001). Such change agency courses will demonstrate to the schools that quality teaching, not test preparation via isolated commercial programs, can and will improve student performance, but we must give this fact a strong research voice.

If undergraduates were linked to graduate students, undergraduate field experience would be compatible; graduate students would deepen their mastery of craft and technique by demonstrating it and sharing it with the undergraduates, and the undergraduates would be exposed to professionals disposed to career-long learning and self-improvement.

Teacher training programs can create website clearinghouses, working with students to develop quality standards-based curriculum products, which can be placed on a website for easy use by other educators. In this way, technology can be folded into teacher development programs as a tool. Students will have a reason for accessing and assessing standards: matching curriculum to evaluated student needs. And, their products will be useful to practitioners. Thus, the learning itself becomes a useful product for the field. The Florida Sunshine State Standards WebLinks Database, a series of Internet products from the University of Central Florida’s Instructional Technology Resource Center, provides lessons and units keyed to the state objectives. These examples, illustrate ways literacy programs provide such technological support, enhance their perception as proactive supporters of state reform efforts, and serve as an essential resources for same (http://www.itrc.ucf.edu/techsss/). University of West Florida’s STEPS: Support for Teachers Enhancing Performance in Schools (http://www.scholar.coe.uwf.edu/pacee/steps/welcome.cfm) is another such electronic support
system designed to facilitate teachers in the development of lessons, units, and standards-aligned curricula.

Literacy programs should be attuned to reflective practice and self-assessment. There is a need for teacher preparation programs that focus more on current knowledge and how to access it (e.g., websites of collated and implication-annotated research like CIERA, active participation in professional organizations). These programs should guide teachers in lifelong professional growth and empower them to do the kinds of action research and problem solving that would enable them to improve their teaching.

Why can’t our teacher development programs be creative initiators of change? Why shouldn’t our training be held to similar accountability measures? Why can’t at risk students be folded into teacher preparation courses, with pre and posttest evaluations gauging the effect of our students’ teaching on the performance of students? Such concrete evaluation serves several purposes: (a) it authenticates training programs, (b) it provides contexts for guided practice and feedback, (c) it assists at-risk student development in the schools, and (d) it molds preservice teachers into the types of professionals who self-measure as a routine part of doing duty.

As a profession, we would do well to review the progress of the K-12 Standards Movement, reflect on the implications it will no doubt have on our teacher development programs, and offer proactive leadership through the voices of our professional organizations, in ways that allow us to direct how our programs will evolve. In this way, we can choose to be professionally proactive rather than reactive. As the reform movement calls for accountability, authentic embedded practice, and similar self-monitoring adjustments, teacher preparation entities should heed the momentum and prepare for change.


