



Using Standards and Assessments to Promote Excellence and Equity Among Diverse Students

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Over the past decade, educators and policy-makers have increased the call for high academic standards and for assessments designed to gauge whether students achieve those standards. In response, national commissions, task forces, and policy groups have launched numerous efforts to develop ambitious goals for student learning and new ways of testing whether these goals are met.

Many, however, have expressed reservations. Who will set these standards and design the assess-

ments? Will they be the same for all learners? Will they be equally valid for diverse groups of learners and at different levels of achievement? How will we assure equity for diverse students? (See, for example, Eisner 1993, Garcia 1993, and Viadero 1993.) Although we generally support many of the efforts to improve student learning through high standards and valid assessments, we share these concerns about equity.

No one seriously questions the need to promote excellence in U.S. schools. The real questions concern the meaning we attach to this idea: Excellence for whom? And how can we assure equal access for diverse groups of students? If we improve overall—or average—achievement without improving it at *all* levels (i.e., among lower- as well as higher-achieving students), then we will surely have failed to achieve one of the most important goals of the current reform movements.

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We have attempted to deal with these issues within the context of a project designed to improve academic achievement in an urban, largely Latino school in southern California. Our focus is not assessment per se but rather improving student learning and achievement. Although high standards and valid assessments are pertinent to this effort, they should be regarded as part of the concerted schoolwide effort to improve student learning. It is in the "context of use" that we think high standards and valid assessments will be most likely to produce results across the entire achievement spectrum.

Goals and Assessments

Five years ago, collaborating with the school principal and several teachers, we began a multiyear project to improve academic achievement among all students at a low-income, low-achieving elementary school in southern California. We have been guided by a theoretical model that posits four essential elements for the change process (Sullivan 1990):

- **Goals** that are set and shared.
- **Indicators** that measure success.
- **Assistance** by capable professionals.
- **Leadership** that supports and pressures.

A fundamental premise was that these four elements together could be used to improve achievement at local school sites (Goldenberg and Sullivan 1994).

A key part of our work involved developing academic goals for all students (i.e., grade-level expectations developed with the entire faculty) and specific assessments to gauge whether students have accomplished these goals. We are interested in two aspects of student achievement: (1) Is student achievement improving overall? and (2) Is student achievement improving at all levels—that is, among lower- as well as higher-achieving students at the school?

Assessments in Language Arts

We have seen broad-based improvements in student achievement, based on standardized tests of Spanish reading and state-mandated tests of English reading and writing (Goldenberg and Sullivan 1994). Our annual performance-based assessments also point to gains in the language arts. (We have so far concentrated on goals and assessments in language arts, with mathematics as our next targeted area.)

As agreed upon by the staff, a random sample of students (about 20 percent at each grade level) takes part in the language arts assessment at the end of each year. The results described here are based on assessments conducted in the first two years of our spring assessment administration. The assessment

included 2nd through 5th graders who had to complete a series of tasks:

1. **Reading Inventory.** Students list books and stories they have selected and read on their own over the past year.

2. **Self-Selected Story.** Students choose a story they have read, summarize it, and then explain what they think is the most important part or theme.

3. **Assigned Story.** Students (grades 3–5 only) read a portion of a grade-level-appropriate story, summarize what they have read, and then write an ending for the story.

4. **Assigned Article.** Students (read a grade-level-appropriate informational text, synthesize what they learned, and then respond to an inference question specific to the text.

5. **Dictation.** Students take dictation for a grade-level-appropriate text.

In addition, we also score student papers (using the "self-selected story" task) for effective use of writing conventions such as spelling, punctuation, and appropriate language.

Staff from our project school and other schools in the area score the student products in an organized scoring session held on the first two days of summer vacation. They read papers without any identifying information about the student authors. Because teachers also score papers of students from different schools that have participated in our data-gathering efforts, the teachers have no way of knowing whether students are from their own or other schools.

Improvements Across Achievement Levels

The spring assessments revealed gains in various areas across the grade levels. The strongest set of improvements emerged in grade 5, where statistically significant increases occurred in all areas for which we have valid comparisons for the two years—the number of books and stories reported on the Reading Inventory, summary and analysis of Self-Selected Story, Dictation, and use of written conventions.¹ (We do not report year-to-year comparisons for Assigned Story and for Assigned Article because baseline data for 5th graders on those two tasks were collected beginning in the second year.)

We then analyzed the 5th grade results on students' prior levels of achievement. Did the improvements we saw between 1992 and 1993 hold for both relatively high and low achievers? We defined "lower-achieving" students as those who scored below the school median on the fall administration of CTBS-U (California Test of Basic Skills), which in year

¹All data reported here have been subjected to statistical tests with $p \leq .05$ as our level of significance.

1 was the 23rd percentile and in year 2 was the 29th; "higher-achieving" students scored above the median.

Both student groups improved significantly. Each group demonstrated significant gains from one year to the next on all areas of the assessment for which we have comparisons. Examples follow:

- Both higher- and lower-level achieving students listed more books. Higher-achieving students, who listed an average of 9 books in year 1, increased to an average of 16 in year 2. Lower-achieving students increased from 6 to 10.

- Both student groups revealed a higher level of understanding and wrote more clearly about a book or story they had read. The mean score for higher achievers improved from 2.67 to 3.44 (on a scale of 1-6); for lower achievers, means increased from 2.33 to 3.00.

- In both groups, increases were noted in the percentage of students who achieved the grade-level benchmark—a score point of 4. According to our scoring rubrics, a 4 means the student produced (1) a complete, understandable, and focused summary and (2) a clear articulation and explanation of a potential theme for the story. In year 1, only 11 percent of the higher achievers and none of the lower achievers received a 4. The following year, those percentages increased to 44 percent and 33 percent, respectively.

The picture was much the same for written conventions and dictation: Regardless of their prior levels of assessed achievement, 5th graders in year 2 performed at significantly higher levels than 5th graders the year before.

Although these improvements are encouraging, too many students are still not achieving at what we consider to be a desirable level of performance for their grade level, whether we judge performance in terms of standardized tests or our own locally developed assessments. Nonetheless, these data make us hopeful that we are headed in the right direction, in terms of both excellence *and* equity.

Standards, Assessments, and Contexts of Use

We would argue that neither beneficial nor detrimental effects can be attributed to higher standards or more challenging assessments in and of themselves. Nor do we believe that standards and assessments inherently put low-achieving or diverse groups of students at further disadvantage. Rather, the critical factor is the context in which standards and assessments are used. If a context that promotes cohesive efforts to improve achievement for all students is absent, standards and assessments can *heighten* inequities and put students at risk, as many critics have warned.

The results we have reported emerged from a school context where the driving force is improving achievement for all students. Higher standards and more challenging assessments play a critical role, but they are not the only players. If they were, we would probably not see the achievement changes we are beginning to observe.

Several features of the school context help explain our results. First, staff, collaborating with researchers, developed both the grade-level goals and the assessments locally. Although other relevant work helped, the goals and assessments were not simply imported from other schools or policymaking agencies. Thus, the goals and assessments are locally meaningful and indicate levels of student performance that staff members generally accept.

Second, part of the impetus for developing goals and moving towards higher standards came from staff concerns about unacceptably low levels of achievement at the school (Goldenberg and Sullivan 1994). Our long-term efforts to improve student achievement were thus intrinsically meaningful and relevant to many teachers' day-to-day concerns.

Third, the goals and assessments continue to evolve in how they are understood, interpreted, and acted upon by the staff. Although the goals were finalized two years ago, and the assessments have been administered twice, debates and dialogues about them continue. Are the goals and assessments consistent with those that might be employed in other communities and with other populations of students? Are they leaving our lower-achieving students behind? How do we use the information these assessments provide to continue working towards higher levels of achievement?

Fourth, and as a result of the continued evolution of the goals and assessments and the questions they generate, an increasingly rich social, intellectual, and professional dynamic exists. With staff agreement, the principal has organized a number of opportunities for staff to discuss, make decisions, and learn new things. A standing group of grade-level representatives developed the goals. A subsequent group is developing classroom-appropriate assessments to be used on an ongoing basis and consistent with those used in the annual spring assessment. Each teacher participates in a weekly work group to share and discuss curricular and instructional strategies. (There are six such work groups: math problem solving, cooperative learning, instructional conversation, language arts, kindergarten teachers, and new teachers.)

Finally, staff members continue to feel both pressure and support to improve student achievement. The principal and the staff instructional specialist meet quarterly with teachers at each grade level to discuss student progress on the goals. The principal

provides opportunities for the teachers to shape school efforts through such means as the goal-setting committee, assessment committee, grade-level meetings, and work groups. Pressure and support also come implicitly from the staff themselves, who hear how others are doing in their quarterly meetings, confer during work group sessions, conduct a random sample assessment at the end of each year, and score and then analyze the annual assessment results.

These features create a context where the emphasis is on improving student achievement at all levels. Standards and assessments help provide focus and ongoing information about how staff efforts are faring. They have become one of several tools that teachers use to help enhance educational opportuni-

ties for all students. In such a setting, equity will not take a back seat to excellence.

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