

Center for Gifted Education
College of William and Mary

Standards of Learning and Gifted Education: Goodness of Fit

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The importance of the standards movement in education cannot be underestimated. It represents the first time that policy makers from all sectors of public life have agreed upon a set of principles for the future direction of education in this country. Consequently, the only educational agenda that matters is the one related to enhancing teaching and learning for all students in our public and private schools. For demographic, economic, and workforce issues, the standards movement has gained a strong foothold in the national consciousness, and education is forced to respond to the call for higher student achievement through implementing national/state standards (O'Day & Smith, 1993).

Why the need for standards? Fundamentally, there are several reasons for education to seek such curriculum coherence. One of these reasons has to do with assessing quality in curriculum. How do we know that students are learning what they need to for high level functioning in the 21st century? Over ten years of work went into the development of the standards by national groups who were broadly representative of the professions and the educational community at several levels. This input was further shaped by public comment on multiple drafts. Such thoughtful consideration for what America's students should be learning has not occurred since the 1960's and perhaps even was overdue in some respects.

A second reason that standards are important is to ensure educational quality across school districts and schools within districts. Every student has a right to have a challenging curriculum and to receive pedagogical supports to master it effectively. The new standards call for systemic implementation that leaves no one behind.

Another reason that standards matter is more philosophical. We all need guideposts to mark our way. The standards provide just such focus for meaningful work in education to occur. They are designed from the top down, meaning that the model of the adult professional competencies is embedded in them and allows us to work on optimizing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of our best learners through a focus on behaving like a mathematician, a scientist, a writer and a geographer. All other industrialized countries adhere to a standard curriculum template within which teachers focus on instructional delivery techniques that work. Only in the United States do we ask teachers to develop, deliver, differentiate, and assess curriculum - - all while managing inclusion classrooms. Sharper focus would necessarily improve teaching and deepen the learning for students.

Gifted education clearly is not exempt from this emphasis on standards-based reform. We must view the standards movement as an opportunity to upgrade what we do as well and go through the standards to do it, not around them. There are some potential problems with the

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standards and gifted education, however. None of the problems are unremediable but each is difficult in its own way to handle.

One problem is the perception that the standards are low level. I hear gifted educators complaining that to work on the standards narrows that focus for gifted learners in our schools to factual material being regurgitated. To counter this concern, I would note that the standards are very broad, some are deep, and there is much latitude for creative teachers to implement the standards at appropriately high levels to satisfy the needs of gifted students under their tutelage. While gifted students can show mastery of many of the standards at an earlier stage of development than currently designated, testing-out mechanisms need to be in place to accommodate this recognized reality (United States Department of Education, 1994). Moreover, teachers need to reorganize strands across grade levels to also streamline the curriculum.

A second perceived problem is that the standards are content-based and therefore not appropriate for the gifted. Nothing could be further from the truth. Quality gifted programming has always been content-based. The hallmark high school programs of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate are deeply grounded in the study of the disciplines. Historically, elementary models of gifted education have been similarly organized. Over the history of this field, educators have considered a strong content base as essential, not incidental, to strong curriculum and programming. To the extent that a program relies on thinking skill development and is project-driven with no considerations to content is the extent to which that program is weak and unsupported by available research evidence. Many such programs nationally already have died out from their own lack of effectiveness.

A third perceived problem with the standards arises from how they are assessed. In Virginia, there is reason for some concern. Even though the standards represent high level learning outcomes as replicated from the national standards project work, the assessments are narrower in orientation and more low level, consequently more based in factual material. Recent critiques of the Virginia assessment tests have noted their lack of scope, their level of task demand, and their lack of consonance with the standards in intent (Brandt, 2000; Webb, 1999). Even so, the gifted community has an opportunity to assess these learners at higher levels through alternative assessment approaches that meet a standard of coherence. Specific performance-based instruments for assessment of student progress have been found highly suitable for use in gifted programs (Adams & Callahan, 1995; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, Hughes, & Boyce, 1996).

What then are some strategies that teachers might employ to implement the standards more efficiently with gifted students? They constitute the following:

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1. Organize them according to higher order skills and teach across subject areas (e.g., reasoning, communication, research, technology)
2. Use the essence of the standards as a rubric for assessing learning (e.g., writing, research).
3. Recognize that many of the standards focus on higher level thought (e.g., history strand in social studies, research strand in language arts, scientific investigation, reasoning, and logic strand in science, probability and statistics strands in math).
4. Select core models to use in implementing key process skills embedded in standards (e.g.,
 - historical analysis web
 - lit web
 - hamburger model
 - experimental design)
5. Address the skills in the standards repeatedly (by using models over and over again).
6. Select materials that address the intent of the standards, not just the content.
7. Use performance-based assessment as an instructional tool to gauge student mastery levels. Re-teach or extend as needed.
8. When gifted students exceed standards at given stages of development, accelerate them to the next level within or across subjects; within or across levels. Use learning centers and relevant materials to enhance extended learning opportunities such as Techniques of Problem Solving (TOPS).
9. Read and interpret standards across grade levels. Be familiar with the standards 1-3 grades above yours and develop advanced task demands for the gifted from them.
10. Always consider ways to integrate learning across standards such as integrating science, math, technology and language arts into a given project.

Only through a thoughtful implementation of a standards-based curriculum, adapted and modified for gifted learners, will teachers of the gifted be able to defend their practice. Gifted education is a part of general education reform, not an endeavor separate from it.

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