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Fulfilling the Promise of the Standards Movement

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In the latter part of the 20th century, public education in America underwent a revolutionary shift. The 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, widely credited with launching the modern standards movement, led to a spate of statewide initiatives intended to define what students should know and be able to do. Now, five years into the 21st century, the term “standards” is well-ensconced in the education lexicon. However, debate has continued over whether standards have fulfilled their promise — whether they do, in fact, support a system of education that leaves no child behind.

In 2001, in an effort to find the answer to that question, McREL created a multimedia, multi-site, “National Dialogue” to create and support community conversations on standards-based reform efforts. This policy brief details the outcomes of the National Dialogue over the course of the past four years and provides insight into how federal, state, and local policymakers and education leaders might capitalize on McREL’s findings as they work to ensure that all children meet high expectations for learning. The brief also discusses the next phase of this work, which will focus on the future of standards-based education a decade from now.

McREL’s National Dialogue: An Overview

In developing the National Dialogue project, and in convening the dialogues themselves, McREL’s intent was to provide participants with opportunities to share their underlying assumptions and beliefs, as well as emerging research about how to effectively implement standards-based reform so that all students achieve high standards (see sidebar for project goals). McREL

National Dialogue Project Goals

- *Engage a wide range of participants in collaborative inquiry and develop solutions that represent their best thinking;*
- *Foster an exchange of information and ideas among educators and stakeholders from across the nation on issues related to standards-based education; and*
- *Help all stakeholders reach a shared understanding of how best to implement standards-based reforms.*

convened the initiating event for the project in Kansas City, MO, in April 2001. This meeting generated interest in creating dialogues on standards-based reforms in other locales. Over the next three years, similar dialogues and focus groups occurred in urban, suburban, and rural communities all around the country.

Framing the Discussions

To engage community members in the dialogues, McREL, in partnership with Public Agenda, created a set of “conversation starter” materials. These materials were designed to help communities engage in thoughtful deliberation on an issue of key concern for districts and schools in light of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 — how to help all students achieve high academic standards. These materials presented three approaches toward increasing student achievement for participants to consider in their discussions about standards:

Approach One: Help Students Achieve High Standards through Accountability

People who support this approach might make the following argument:

For too long, we expected too little from our schools and our students — and got exactly what we expected. To change this situation, we need to define what students should know, test whether they have learned what they should know, and report the results. Doing so allows successful schools to receive the recognition they deserve and to act as models, while schools that fall short can be helped — and when necessary, pressured — to improve. And it keeps students who are not learning from falling through the cracks. In short, only by shining the bright light of accountability on the entire system will all schools be spurred to improve results for all students.

Approach Two: Help Students Achieve High Standards by Providing Needed Resources and Support

People who support this approach might make the following argument:

Standards-based reforms should not only hold high expectations, but also should provide high levels of support for all students, teachers, and education leaders to ensure that all students have the opportunities they need to succeed. However, in too many places, standards-based reforms are being sabotaged by what has been called the “evil twin” of standards — the use of high-stakes tests to shame and blame schools into improving without giving them the resources they need to improve. People who support this choice say that if we are really serious about setting high standards for all kids, we need to put our money where our mouths are.

Approach Three: Help Students Achieve High Standards by Maintaining Flexibility and Local Control

People who support this approach might make the following argument:

Though standards are important guideposts for what kids should learn, we should avoid taking a one-size-fits-all approach to education and remember that schools are about more than just core or basic academics. People who support this approach say that all kids, parents, and communities are different. Therefore, we need to ensure that in putting standards in place, we don't "standardize" schools so that they all wind up looking alike. People who support this approach say that parents want their schools to be accountable, yet not necessarily to lawmakers or school board members, but rather to them.

After viewing a supporting video, participants gathered into small groups to deliberate each of these approaches. Led by a trained facilitator, they were asked to describe which choice most closely mirrored their own view, and then to weigh the pros and cons of each choice. Following a discussion of the choice framework, each small group responded to the following questions:

1. In our conversation about standards-based education, have we discovered any common ground?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement — the things we have to keep talking about to work out our differences and move ahead?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?
4. How can schools, parents, and the larger community do a better job of working together to make sure standards work as well as possible for all our students and that we are doing all we can to help them succeed?

Dialogue Outcomes

A consistent theme that emerged from the dialogues was the need for balance in the current education reform movement. Participants pointed to strengths and weaknesses in each of the three proposed choices but, overall, repeatedly found common ground in the notion that leaving no child behind will, at a minimum, require pursuing a combination of all three options.

In order to be truly successful in bringing students to high standards, participants agreed it would take much more than merely holding a school accountable for results and punishing failures; the community must share responsibility for results and ante up the resources needed to get them.

Participants increasingly rejected the “one-size-fits-all” notion implied by the NCLB legislation and made clear the view that there is likely no silver bullet to closing the achievement gap.

McREL’s experience with the National Dialogue project and the analysis of the data collected resulted in a number of conclusions and recommendations for education leaders and policymakers, including state and local school board members, as they work to engage the full support of the public in improving our nation’s schools. These recommendations center around two topics — assessment and accountability and public engagement.

Assessment and Accountability

Current forms of accountability that focus on reporting test scores in individual content areas for groups of students at particular grade levels do not appear to have the same meaning and value for the public as they do for policymakers. Participants in the dialogues repeatedly rejected the notion that such test scores offer anything more than the broadest view of student performance. Though measuring and reporting student progress was seen as important, high-stakes testing of cohorts of students, with results reported annually, was viewed as little more than a starting point for determining how well a school is meeting its objectives. Such a testing and reporting scheme does not answer the questions parents truly care about when it comes to their own children’s performance or the performance of the schools their children attend.

Yet, the public agrees that schools should be held accountable for meeting established student performance goals, based on a set of standards developed with input from the community. The question is not, should they be held accountable, but rather, how should they be held accountable, for what, and to whom? It would seem, based on McREL’s experience with the National Dialogue, that the public has a very different agenda for school reform than do most education policymakers.

Indeed, a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll¹ shows standards to be very low on the public’s list of priority concerns about schools. Issues such as lack of funding, discipline, drug use, and overcrowding are ranked significantly higher as priorities than are standards or teacher quality. Dialogue participants, particularly those in rural communities, expressed concerns that the focus on reading and mathematics was causing schools to neglect such things as teaching students to be “good citizens... patriotic...civic-minded.... and (to be) trustworthy, honest, and (have) integrity.” Other groups mentioned critical thinking skills as an important part of a quality education; still others mentioned music, art, and simply learning to get along with others as opportunities that schools should provide.

Parent participants expressed considerably more tolerance for variations in outcomes for their own children than current accountability policies would allow. Parents seemed comfortable with

¹Rose, L. C. & Gallup, A. M. (2003, September). The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(1), 41–56.

the notion that some children perform better academically than others. Rather than ensure that every child score as well as every other child on a test, parents want to ensure that schools support the development of every child's unique talents and skills.

Parents also express concern about limiting options for noncollege-bound students and for those whose talents are less academic.

If policymakers want public education to be truly accountable to the public, they need to reframe accountability policies in ways that are meaningful to the public.

Current accountability schemes may have been oversold, promising much more to the public than they were meant to deliver. If policymakers want public education to be truly accountable, they need to reframe accountability requirements in ways that are meaningful to the public. As more and more schools are labeled "in need of improvement" under No Child Left Behind, the label itself will become meaningless to parents who are likely to continue making decisions about which schools their children attend on a different set of concerns that includes much more than academic performance, such as safety, discipline, and proximity to home. The desire for the education system to focus on more than test scores is best summed up by one participant's reflections:

We shared our observations of inconsistencies between schools, and acknowledged that beyond the standards, we must foster enjoyment of learning, social skills, and many concepts within the realm of human interaction. These are NOT given the time or the value we should be giving them, considering our goals for a society of involved, functional citizens and healthy families.

The public is looking for reassurance that schools are doing the job they expect them to do, but annual standardized test scores do not give them that reassurance. They want multiple measures of performance and multiple ways for students to demonstrate their competencies. Policymakers should support research and development in the area of assessment in order to satisfy the need for a comprehensive, multifaceted assessment of student skills and knowledge that can still be used for accountability purposes. In the meantime, the public is likely to continue to resist attaching too much importance to the publicly-reported test scores.

Public Engagement

Ironically, the current accountability environment, though intended, in part, to increase public awareness and involvement in education, may, in fact, distance the public from the public education system.

The system of standards, assessment, and accountability is highly technical. The general public cannot be expected to understand the psychometrics associated with testing; nor are they likely to

know the difference between “norm-referenced” and “criterion-referenced” tests. They should not be expected to judge the relative quality of any particular assessment. Moreover, although states and districts have generally implemented a process that includes public input when developing standards, concepts such as “proficiency” and “benchmarks” can be confusing to parents who grew up in the era of the bell curve. The technical nature of accountability and testing and discussions about it tend to intimidate and disenfranchise, further disengaging the public from the process.

Increased parent involvement continues to top the list of priorities for school improvement, but as teachers focus more on reading and mathematics instruction in preparation for high-stakes tests, the time to create structured opportunities for parent involvement may be diminished. Parents may have fewer opportunities to become engaged in their children’s schools.

Although we heard in the dialogues that accountability should be shared among parents, students, teachers, administrators, and the community at large, it was clear that participants did not know how to become involved in a meaningful way. There is frequently an abundance of goodwill in communities toward neighborhood schools. There are people, with and without children in the schools, who are concerned and willing to help, but they simply don’t know how to access the system, and the system does not know how to reach out to them. Schools may appear to be a closed system, run according to an immutable format, often driven as much by the bus schedule as by actual educational or community needs. Only the most assertive, confident parent with plenty of time on his or her hands is likely to be able to participate in any meaningful way.

Participants in the dialogues were uniformly appreciative of the opportunity to discuss these issues with others and expressed the hope that those making education policy would hear their concerns and respond. Thus, it seems that education leaders need to find time to effectively reach out to the public. They need to engage the public in their school reform efforts, and respond to the concerns expressed, or run the risk of having their accountability policies become irrelevant to the very people the policies are intended to reassure. For example, policymakers need to make clear that measuring achievement is not, in itself, intended to improve achievement, but rather to focus attention on those students who need the most help.

In summary, McREL’s experience with the dialogues suggests that the standards movement has reached a new stage in its evolution. The public no longer questions the wisdom of standards, assessments, and accountability per se. But it is not only academic success that is on the minds of the public, and especially parents. Dialogue participants expressed deep concern about students’ civic-mindedness, sense of caring for others, flexibility and adaptability, work ethic, and creativity, as much as or, in some cases, more than, test scores. If the policy community does not want education to be reduced to only “the three Rs,” it must work with the public to reform the system in ways that will allow individual students to develop their own potential while holding the adults in charge accountable for creating the opportunities for them to do so.

Moving Forward

This new stage in the standards movement was revealed over the course of the dialogue project as participants increasingly raised questions about the fundamental purpose of our educational system, particularly in light of preparing students to cope with the uncertainties of the future. Participants expressed concern about the rapid pace of change and the burgeoning knowledge and skills students will need to acquire to thrive in the 21st century. Discussion arose about the very nature of schooling — will it remain essentially as it is today, in buildings with children grouped into grades according to age, with one teacher to guide them? Or will the system become something few have imagined, much less discussed — one without the schools of today but perhaps with individualized learning plans for each student and a wide variety of ways (virtual and face-to-face) to reach goals and demonstrate proficiency?

As we enter the 21st century, advances in technology, demographic changes, economic shifts, political pressures at home and abroad, and changing social values may converge to cause significant changes in our world and in our schools. With this in mind, McREL is shifting its National Dialogue work to a new frontier in 2005–2006 — one that focuses on describing the face of standards-based education in the year 2015.

As part of this work, McREL is exploring the future of education from a variety of perspectives and considering possible implications and options for schools, districts, states, and other support entities. We are using a methodology familiar to many in the business world: “scenario-building.” Scenario-building is a helpful tool for leaders — not to predict the future, but to anticipate possible futures and to develop structured responses to them. Scenarios highlight large-scale forces that could “nudge” the future in one direction or another, and they encourage leaders to look beyond the immediate crisis and to consider how to make decisions today that position them and their organizations to be most effective in the future.

As policymakers and education leaders move forward with new legislation and other initiatives, it is imperative that they keep in mind that the schools of tomorrow may look very different from the schools of today. In future policy briefs, McREL will consider just what these schools might look like, and offer suggestions for policymakers as they look to the future.

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