

Speaking of standards...

by Bambi Betts

For over a decade, educational dialogue has been refocused on the notion of standards. Refocused - not focused for the first time. It is not a new concept that schools ought to define clearly for students and teachers what students should know and be able to do. The labels have changed, but the idea is relatively ancient. What is reasonably new is the idea that schools are actually accountable for the achievement of these standards by all students. And this makes sense.

What is incredulous is that educators' definition of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their schooling has remained fairly intact over the last century. Does this suggest that what's worth learning today is more or less the same set of things as what was worth learning in 1900?

With the onset of the information age, it is somewhat difficult to accept that what's worth learning hasn't really changed all that much. So perhaps the dialogue should be less about whether to have standards, and more about WHAT standards, with greater attention to the demands of the information age than the age of the information. After all, the standards students achieve should have much more to do with being successful outside of school than within it.

Where, for example, is the standard for problem "finding" in either our past or present curricula? This is a critical personal and professional skill, both long and short term, which remains an unaddressed skill. Our current standards often read like a recipe for being successful in the next stage of school, not the next stage of "life."

The second piece of the dialogue on standards has centered around how to collect evidence of student achievement of these standards. Here, educators and politicians alike have shown deep flaws in reasoning. Somewhere between setting standards and designing assessment tools we have failed to ask the question, "What would form the "best" evidence that students had achieved these standards?" We have been content to accept the limitations of time and money as reasonable explanations for why it is better to accept tenuous evidence rather than best evidence.

And now there is serious confusion in the dialogue. Because we hold students to standards does not automatically imply that we must collect evidence of those standards through typical "standardized" tests. Surely the nature of the standards should dictate the nature of the assessment.

If the standard is safe driving, the assessment is obvious; put the student in a car and see if he can drive safely. Don't give him a multiple-choice test about safe driving. If the standard is asking essential questions, then design a task in which asking the right questions is fundamental to the outcome.

We are making monumental decisions about both individual students as well as the next generation of global citizens when we fail to collect the right evidence about learning standards, and subsequently make the right adjustment to the teaching learning process based on that evidence.

Finally, the dialogue has not moved us far from our built-in infrastructures which are proving to be our own worst enemy in the standards dialogue. The lock-step nature of the system we all still support is at odds with establishing meaningful standards. We are trying to reestablish our "core business" without examining the fundamental infrastructure that was built to ensure student achievement of standards from an entirely different era and of a significantly different nature.

International schools enjoy most of the conditions for getting this dialogue right. What guidance, then, for principals blazing their way through the haze and maze of the standards dialogue? Pay attention to 3 essential questions:

1. What is really worth learning today?
2. What kind of assessment tools will provide us the very best evidence that students are achieving these things that are worth learning?
3. What organizational structures will best support student achievement of these?

And have the courage to follow through. There is always more than one right way; we rarely find even one of them if we fail to have the courage to ask the question.