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Standards-Based Education Reform and English Language Learners

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Standards and assessment have been pivotal themes in recent reform efforts, and cut across much of the federal legislation passed by Congress in the last decade to improve the education of all students. Six broad education reform goals to improve education and raise student achievement by the year 2000 were passed into law by Congress in 1994 in the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Along with the passage of *Goals 2000*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act, required states to adopt challenging academic content and performance standards, and assessments aligned with these (Riddle, 1999). *Goals 2000* and the ESEA both aimed at "all students" and specifically included "students or children with limited English proficiency." They have worked together to set many of the principles of standards-based reform, including the expectation that *all* students will attain high standards of academic excellence.

What Do Standards Mean for ELLs?

The standards in standards-based reform identify what students should know and be able to do as they progress through school. They are meant to be anchors, aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Within the standards movement is a strong emphasis on educational equity. Not only are standards intended to make expectations clear and measurable, they also set high expectations for all students — including ELLs. As school systems adopt standards with more rigorous expectations for the performance of ELLs than ever before, greater attention is being paid to ensuring student attainment of those standards.

For students who are English language learners, the attainment of these rigorous academic standards is fully reliant on the presence in our schools of high-quality programming, teachers, and all of the other resources necessary to meet their learning needs. The purpose of one type of standards, *opportunity-to-learn standards*, is to guarantee "the level and availability of programs, staff, and other resources sufficient to meet challenging content and performance standards" (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995, p. 5). Opportunity-to-learn standards for ELLs would offer a framework that articulates what this entails, and could be used as a lever to ensure equity. However, these standards have not been created or adopted yet.

At present, all states have adopted content standards and about half have performance standards (Blank, Manise, & Brathwaite, 1999). While a few states have also created standards and curriculum frameworks for ELLs, others are only developing them now — and still others have not yet begun. The standards that have been developed for ELLs vary greatly by state and school district, both in the language of the actual standards and also in the ways the needs of this population of students are addressed.

Examples of Standards for ELLs

In 1997, the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) organization produced *ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students*. The development of these standards was “motivated by a desire to ensure educational equity and opportunity for ELL students” (Cummins, 2000, p.154). These standards set learning goals for ELLs that center on personal, social, and academic uses of English. As described in the examples that follow, most states and districts have shaped their standards for ELLs primarily or at least partially on the TESOL standards.

Chicago Public Schools

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has created a set of English as a second language (ESL) standards closely aligned to TESOL’s ESL standards. In their standards document, CPS states its vision as follows:

Students will learn to understand, speak, read, and write English fluently, competently and proficiently in order to succeed academically and participate actively in the United States social, economic, and political environment (Chicago Public Schools, 1999).

Along with this general mission statement, CPS lists three goals that identify the elements of the English language they feel students must possess in order to succeed:

1. Use English to achieve in all academic areas and settings,
2. Use English for all social and personal purposes, and
3. Tailor the English language for various and specific purposes and uses (Chicago Public Schools, 1999).

Each goal is supported and further defined by several standards focused on English language acquisition. The standards for goal one identify the elements of English that CPS policymakers feel its students must possess to succeed in school, and specify the use of English in learning across the curriculum. The second goal expects that students will also use English outside of school, with the underlying standards emphasizing the use of English in communication. The final goal and corresponding standards delineate appropriateness; they cultivate in students an understanding of the cultural subtleties of English — for example, in choice of language variety and use of non-verbal communication.

Like Chicago, a number of districts (e.g., Redwood City, CA and Oklahoma City, OK) and States (e.g., New Jersey and Florida) have adopted standards that are closely aligned to TESOL’s ESL Standards.

New Mexico and Texas

The standards for English language learners created by the states of New Mexico and Texas offer a different approach. While incorporating the TESOL standards, they are not based primarily on them. And, they also address home language development. In New Mexico, standards for ELLs are primarily aligned to standards for native English speakers. As they write:

At the time of the development of the NM standards, the NM [State Department of Education] bilingual education unit was careful not to give the message that ESL students were held to different standards than any other student. The message is clear: ALL students should be held to high standards. (New Mexico State Department of Education, 2000)

New Mexico identifies language arts as an umbrella category under which lie English language arts (ELA) for native English speakers, ESL, and language arts for native speakers of other languages (e.g., Spanish language arts [SLA] for native Spanish speakers in bilingual education programs).

Aligned to New Mexico's language arts standards are strategies that each school district has created for ESL and for the different home languages being taught (M. López, personal communication, April 28, 2000). The New Mexico State Department of Education makes it the responsibility of school districts to develop the means by which ELLs will attain the standards that have been set. For example, while ELA and ESL share a common core of standards, differing instructional guides are provided for each. In this way, the New Mexico standards guide ESL teachers in their students' language learning process while simultaneously ensuring that instruction in the ESL class is aligned to instruction in the ELA class. Furthermore, the development of students' home languages is supported.

The Texas Education Agency has taken a similar approach to that of New Mexico, but has also created and adopted specific standards for Spanish language arts. Their approach is described in the following explanation of how to implement their English Language Arts Essential Knowledge and Skills:

Students of limited English proficiency (LEP) enrolled in Spanish Language Arts and/or English as a Second Language will be expected to learn these same knowledge and skills through their native language, and students in English as a Second Language will apply these skills at their proficiency level in English (Texas Education Agency, 1998b, p. 3).

Each English language arts standard for elementary and middle grades students corresponds to a Spanish language arts standard. In addition, the Texas standards document encourages home language instruction for native speakers of other languages. In both Texas and New Mexico, ELLs are expected to attain the identical standards to those set for native-English speakers; however, they may do so while using their native language.

Issues in Standards Implementation

One of the primary findings from the implementation of standards across the United States thus far has been that the creation of standards alone is necessary, but not sufficient to affect changes in teaching and learning. Rather, attention must also be paid to the complex process of standards implementation. One of the limits of standards is that they do not tell teachers how to help their students attain them. As Kate Nolan explained in her discussion of standards-based education reform at the conference of the Education Commission of the States:

Policies will not create change in the classroom unless educators and policymakers have a visceral understanding of what a standards-driven

classroom looks like (O'Brian, 1998).

Standards do not offer guidance on the process of their implementation; therefore, teachers themselves must translate the language of the standards into instructional practice. This requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of standards and standards-driven teaching and learning. However, most teachers do not feel well prepared to use standards in the classroom. The National Assessment of Title I found, for example:

In 1998, only 37 percent of teachers in [Title I] schools reported that they felt very well prepared to implement state or district curriculum and performance standards. This sense of preparedness is a key factor in predicting student outcomes, according to the [Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance (LESCP)] study of 71 high-poverty Title I schools. The LESCP found that teachers' reported preparedness in both subject matter and instructional strategies had a positive relationship with student growth. The LESCP also found that district reform policy had an influence on teachers' familiarity with standards-based reform and their implementation of such reform in their classroom. Teachers in higher-reform districts were more likely than their peers in lower-reform districts to be familiar with content and performance standards and assessments and their curriculum was more likely to reflect the standards. (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary Planning and Evaluation Service, 1999, p.14)

These issues also apply to Title VII teachers and other teachers of English language learners. In the School District of Philadelphia, for example, academic content standards were adopted in 1996; four years later they are still working to connect standards for ELLs to classroom practice.

The effective implementation of standards requires extensive professional development for teachers. The quotation above from the National Assessment of Title I indicates that professional development and preparation for using standards positively impacts teachers' ability to implement standards-based curriculum and, subsequently, improve student performance. While a great deal of additional research and further supports for practitioners are needed, a number of national initiatives already exist to help teachers implement standards in their classrooms. TESOL, for example, has recently created a training manual to help educators implement TESOL's ESL standards. As part of this project, members of TESOL's Standards Committee are currently working with several school districts to offer technical support in their implementation of standards. Through their *Standards, Assessment, and Instruction* initiative, the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University also works with states and local districts serving ELLs as they strive to implement standards and meet the education needs of their diverse student populations.

High-quality professional development aids in the process of standards implementation. However, greater attention needs to be paid to turning standards documents into changes in practice. Although several initiatives like the ones described above exist nationally, very little emphasis has been placed upon the critical need for sustained professional development to assist with the implementation of standards:

In 1998, public school teachers, regardless of the poverty level of their school, spent a limited amount of time on professional development,

although they did focus on topics that supported standards-based reform. Most teachers are not participating in intensive or sustained training — two essential characteristics of effective professional development. Given the relationship found between teacher preparedness and student achievement, this is a troubling finding... Over two-thirds (70%) of teachers in high-poverty schools reported receiving less than 9 hours per year of professional development related to content and performance standards. (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary Planning and Evaluation Service, 1999, p. 15)

Rather than focusing on professional development to foster the use of standards in instruction, the current focus of the national conversation about standards is on accountability. Standards are linked to high-stakes assessment that holds students and their teachers accountable for student performance. Districts and states are moving to high-stakes assessment before putting the necessary structures in place to ensure that all students can actually meet the standards that have been set for them; opportunity-to-learn standards are not the current focus. Standards hold the potential to guide and dramatically improve the instruction and assessment of students who are English language learners but, in order for these reform efforts to be effective, it is critical that every aspect of the process of standards implementation be considered.

Resource Guide

Documents Referenced

August, D., & Hakuta, K. (Eds.). (1997). *Educating language-minority children*. Committee on Developing a Research Agenda on the Education of Limited-English-Proficient and Bilingual Students by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

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O'Brian, J. (1998). *So you have standards...now what?* Summary of the ECS National Forum, The Education Commission of the States. [Online] Available: <http://www.ecs.org>.

Riddle, W. (1999, October). *Education for the disadvantaged: ESEA Title I reauthorization issues.* Congressional Research Service Issue Brief. Washington, DC: The Library of Congress.

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U.S. Department of Education. (1994). *The improving America's schools act of 1994: Summary sheets.* Washington, DC: Author.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary Planning and Evaluation Service. (1999). *Promising results, continuing challenges: The final report of the national assessment of Title I.* Washington, DC: Author.

Online Resources for Information about Standards-Based Reform and ELLs

Center for Applied Linguistics
<http://www.cal.org/eslstandards/>

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory At Brown University (LAB) <http://www.lab.brown.edu/public/InitsStandards.taf?function=search>

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages <http://ecap-iel.crc.uiuc.edu/cgi-bin/clasSearch/viewitem.cgi?id=2791>

U.S. Department of Education
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/IASA/newsletters/standards/>

Online Resources for Information about Standards Implementation

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
<http://www.aisr.brown.edu/accountability/lswA/index.html>

Council for Basic Education
<http://www.c-b-e.org/psi/psiintro.htm>

Education Trust
<http://www.edtrust.org/main/sip.asp>

Learning Research and Development Center
<http://www.lrdc.pitt.edu/about.htm>

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel)
<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/index.asp>

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory At Brown University (LAB)/Center for Applied Linguistics
<http://www.cal.org/brownlab/ellstds.htm>

Philadelphia Education Fund
<http://www.philaedfund.org/slcweb/index.htm>

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