
Walking Our Talk About Standards

Ms. Easton argues that, if schools truly were based on standards, they would look much different than they do now. She describes the standards-based system of an experimental school in Colorado.

BY LOIS BROWN EASTON

ARE WE really serious about standards? Do we really want to hold students accountable for achieving standards? Do we want to hold ourselves accountable for student achievement of standards? What does the term *standards-based* really mean as it describes curriculum, instruction, assessment, and other pursuits in our classrooms?

Although districts and schools say they are standards-based, most still promote and graduate students according to the concept of “passing.” In elementary and middle schools, passing usually means getting a grade of D or better in the various subjects required at a grade level. Students who do not pass a sufficient number of subjects are sometimes retained in grade (despite what we know about the strong relationship between retention and dropping out).

In high schools, when — finally — achievement “counts” for graduation, students must earn a requisite number of credits to graduate. They do this by taking classes, required and elective, and achieving a D or better in each class. When they have accumulated enough credits (22 to 24 in most states), they can graduate, usually in four years.

From kindergarten through grade 12, the foundation of this practice is a combination of time and mini-

LOIS BROWN EASTON recently retired as director of professional development at Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center, Estes Park, Colo. Her second book about Eagle Rock, Engaging the Disengaged: What Schools Can Do to Help Struggling Students Succeed, will be published by Corwin Press this year.



imum quality, what is known as “seat time.” Students must be enrolled for a certain number of days (180, for example) and achieve a rating of at least 60% out of 100% for the quality of their work. In this way, they pass enough subjects to be promoted from one grade to the next or accrue enough credits to graduate from high school. This practice (usually based on state policy) means that students may do just enough to get by.

What if we really meant it about standards? What would a true standards-based system look like? What changes would we be willing to make to support student achievement of standards?

A REAL STANDARDS-BASED SYSTEM

At a purposefully experimental high school, Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center in Estes Park, Colorado, students graduate when they can document mastery of our requirements, which are related to the Colorado State Model Content Standards. They are *related to*, rather than *based on*, the Colorado

standards because Eagle Rock started with its own standards and then made sure the Colorado standards were incorporated into them.

In designing our program, we were so serious about having students master our standards that we decided not to use classes as our unit of credit, as is done in most high schools. Our unit of credit is the standard itself. Classes are just vehicles for learning and demonstrating mastery of a variety of standards. Classes do not count (as subjects would not count if we were an elementary

plans and teach freshman English as they have since they started teaching.

Students document mastery in a variety of ways. Among the tools they have for proving proficiency are these:

- Various types of portfolios: mastery, developmental, working, portfolios of possibilities, reading portfolios;
- Oral delivery: presentations, dramatizations, skits, monologues, scenarios, interviews, panel presentations;

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school). This concept enables us to invent highly engaging classes for students, such as “Blood and Guts” or “Civilizations” or “Memoirs.” Classes do not appear on our transcripts — just the standards that students are expected to master and an indication that they have mastered them. Learning Experience Record Sheets in each student’s portfolio provide the proof of mastery.

We also are able to construct interdisciplinary classes since students can work toward mastery of standards in any number of disciplines in the same class. Take the class called “The Renaissance,” for example. Students worked on learning and demonstrating mastery of our standards in world history, writing, and the arts through this one exciting class.

Letter grades don’t exist at Eagle Rock. Students work until they have demonstrated mastery (which we call “proficiency”). If they do not achieve mastery through one class, they take another, very different class that offers them similar credit opportunities. The next class may be just right for them — appealing to their interests and favoring their learning styles. Thus there is no failure at Eagle Rock; students who do not achieve mastery on their first attempt haven’t failed to achieve mastery, they just haven’t achieved it yet. The operative word is “yet.”

Instructors are in curriculum heaven. They can invent classes that appeal to their own and their students’ interests and passions. Students can even help to design (and sometimes teach) classes that excite them. Instructors are very unlikely to pull out last year’s file of lesson

• Written delivery: research papers, reports, compositions, poems, dramatizations, action plans, written statements, précis;

• Combined oral and written delivery: projects, demonstrations, videotapes, multimedia presentations, critiques/defenses, project designs, reviews of performance, self-assessments, reflections, communication in a foreign language;

• Other: finished art pieces (visual, dramatic, musical); sketchbooks; journals; test results; others’ assessments of performance, work habits, or attitudes; letters from adults or peers verifying learning; use of a planner or organizational device; sign-off sheets; calendar records; physical demonstrations of skills; performance scores over time.

What makes mastery a viable concept is the use of rubrics. Rubrics establish criteria for high-quality performance as well as a scale (of 1 to 6 points, for example) with descriptions of quality at each point for each criterion. Students work well if they have a rubric before they begin work and even better if they help to create the rubric they will use. When students co-create rubrics with their instructors, they engage in a worthwhile discussion of just what quality looks like.

What makes rubrics work is regular collaborative calibration of measures of student work. When staff members get together to look at student work and the rubrics used to evaluate that work, they standardize their notions of quality.

In addition to demonstrating mastery of our stan-

dards through classes, students prepare and make public presentations, called Presentations of Learning (POLs), at the end of each trimester and when they graduate. These exhibitions are not about earning credit. They are about learning. Students present to a panel of people from outside Eagle Rock and to their peers and school staff. They make a case that they have learned, reflect on their learning, connect current learning to past learning, and project future learning goals. They analyze themselves as learners. POLs are a very public demonstration of what mastery means. POLs hold accountable not only students but the school as a whole.

When students have documented mastery of most of the requirements for graduation from Eagle Rock, they petition to graduate and prepare to give their graduation Presentations of Learning.

MOVING TO TRUE STANDARDS-BASED LEARNING

In order to create a true standards-based system, schools (and the districts and states that dictate policy related to what schools do) first have to decrease their reliance on testing as evidence of mastery. Tests are a proxy for the real thing — an actual demonstration of what students know and can do. Despite all the pressure we want to place on students (and the teachers and principals in their schools), most tests require students merely to choose answers, perhaps demonstrating true understanding or abilities, perhaps not. Only free-response items, particularly those that require more extensive writing or, in mathematics, “showing work,” come close to assessment of the real thing. The only problem with free-response items, such as writing assessments, is that they are usually one-time shots, taking as proof of writing ability what students can do in one sitting, rather than letting students revise and edit their work on subsequent days.

Instead of testing, we need to have schools come up with ways students can document mastery. Testing can be one component of documentation of mastery, of course, but schools should also use other forms of assessment, as we do at Eagle Rock.

In order to require documentation of mastery, schools need to be supported in rethinking issues of size and time. Schools must get small enough or reorganize as small schools-within-a-school so that students *can* document mastery. Eagle Rock is, by design, small — at most, 96 students. Eagle Rock runs four half-hour POLs simultaneously four times each morning and four times

each afternoon, for a total of 32 POLs a day. When the school is at capacity (96 students), it takes three days to do the POLs. Graduation POLs are done singly on Thursday and Friday so that everyone can attend. Graduation POLs are one hour long, and the school usually graduates one to six students each trimester.

Because they are required each trimester, POLs eat up as many as nine instructional days a year. Far from being a waste of learning time, however, POLs are probably our most intense times of learning for both students and staff. Students pause in the harried day-to-day schedule to make sense of what they have learned; instructors pause to consider what students actually know and can do and relate this information to the learning experiences they created during the trimester. The feedback Eagle Rock instructors get from POLs helps them continuously assess the effectiveness of their instruction. POLs are a powerful form of professional learning.

Schools (with the support and encouragement of state-level and district-level policy makers) need to rethink time. Where is it written that K-8 students should master eight or nine subjects in a nine-month period? Where is it written that a high school career should be accomplished in four years? The nine-month school year, the expectation of equal yearly progress in all subjects, and the four-year high school are artificial constructions, having nothing whatsoever to do with learning.

At the very least, schools should organize around grade-level clusters, grouping students, for example, in K-3, 4-8, and 9-12 clusters, with mastery for most expected by the end of the cluster. The most daring schools might do away entirely with grade levels and group students according to their progress in mastering certain standards.

ing, there will be numerous ways to document mastery, learning groups will be smaller, the time for learning will be variable, students will be grouped in clusters rather than in discrete grade levels featuring subjects or classes that need to be passed all at once, and accountability will be rooted in the school's community. States and districts need periodic pictures of how schools are doing

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Their differences also suggest that students should be offered a variety of ways to learn and a variety of ways to document their learning.

Uniformity in terms of time and grouping of students denies one quite obvious phenomenon: students are different. In some way, all students are gifted. In some way, all students are learning disabled. Going for mastery of standards demands that the conditions of learning — particularly time and grouping — recognize these learning differences.

Students' differing learning needs dictate more than differentiated instruction. Their differences also suggest that students should be offered a variety of ways to learn and a variety of ways to document their learning.

Finally, schools must go public both in the creation of their standards and in their accountability for student mastery of standards. Schools should make sure that their standards are the ones the school community (including parents, business owners, and others) really wants. A school's standards should incorporate the state standards in some way but should not be *based* on the state standards. Eagle Rock has standards for personal as well as academic growth because its community recognized that its students needed to work in the affective domain as much as or more than in the cognitive domain.

OBJECTIONS

"But," some readers might say, "this is so hard to do. This means completely rethinking schools. This means renewal. Redesign." Yes. If all students are to meet standards, schools need to change some of the conditions we've thought of as absolute: testing as the primary form of assessment, size of learning groups, time for learning, the way we group students, and the primary level of accountability. Under the new conditions of school-

— and these pictures are most easily obtained through testing — but state and district testing should be through sampling, not only in different subjects but at different ages each year.

"But," you might say, "what about getting into colleges and universities? Don't they need grades and grade-point averages and class rank?" University and college admissions offices are somewhat distrustful of grades — an A at one school may mean something very different from an A at another school. College admissions tests have some predictive value. However, if colleges and universities knew exactly what students knew and were able to do, rather than having to depend on grades and test scores, they might have more confidence in their selection decisions.

GRADUATING THROUGH SEAT TIME

Today, most schools run dual — and contradictory — systems. They say they are standards-based but promote and graduate students on the basis of seat time and passing grades. Students who get passing grades for being in class a requisite number of days but don't demonstrate achievement of standards continue to move from grade to grade and graduate from high school. Students who can demonstrate achievement of standards but don't attend school regularly or earn passing grades are not promoted or graduated.

Graduating through seat time is not good enough for American students. We need to change the fundamental conditions of schooling in order to support the integrity of a system that purports to be driven by standards. To do anything less would be failing our students and ourselves.

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