Responding to Standards

By Isa Kaftal Zimmerman, MASCD President

While the emphasis may seem fresh and current, even raw, to us right now in Massachusetts, the debate is an old one. If we are all citizens of a single state, should there be a common core of knowledge and skills we all share? If that is the case, should we require all students to be taught, and then tested for, that core? And if the answer is yes to both, isn’t our public school system the place to guarantee the opportunity to learn that commonality?

It seems to me that the debate about standards needs to be placed in the context of community and unity. There ought to be some understandings we all have about the meaning of history and citizenship, about reading, writing and calculating, about respect and cooperation, that we can rely on as a given in our society. This does not mean that we want uniformity or conformity; it means we can speak with each other with trust that we come from the same kind of knowledge and skill base.

But then we need to deal with the gulf between the concept and the implementation. Standards and testing are not all bad if the test actually reflects what we agree should be and is being taught. And while we at MASCD have taken the position (MASCD Speaks, May 7, 2001) that “the measure of student performance and achievement is best accomplished through the use of multiple indicators…” and not MCAS as a “sole determinant,” we support continuing to refine both the frameworks and varied measurement devices. It is also important to consider that everyone needs standards: schools, teachers, students, parents, legislators…. No one needs to be told that one reason this debate is so raw now, is that it is both political and economic, not just theoretical.

There are many voices in this discussion as there should be: we hear from some teachers that they are getting the necessary support so they can shape their curriculum to more accurately reflect the standards, and that they would not have gotten such support if there were no standards and tests; we hear that students are, in many cases, taking the tests more seriously and performing at higher levels than in the past. We also hear the opposite: teachers who indicate their practice is being constrained by these demands, that creativity is leaving the classroom; students and parents who feel too much learning time is being wasted on testing.

So often the pendulum needs to swing very far in both directions before a satisfactory resolution is reached. Are there changes in teaching and learning in MA which compromise excellent education, costs which outweigh the benefits? Or are there emerging best practices for meeting the standards? How do we support the success of ALL students? Perhaps this time around in the debate we can arrive at some common answers, answers we all can accept for the goals of unity and community.
How Have Standards Impacted Students and Teachers?

For Better or for Worse:

Teachers Talk about the Impact of Standards in the Classroom

By Susan Carlson

With several years of mandated standards-based instruction under their belts, how are teachers feeling about the impact of standards on their practice? How are the curriculum frameworks and the MCAS testing influencing their day-to-day teaching? What kinds of supports are in place, or need to be in place, to promote the success of all students?

Six Massachusetts teachers, from diverse teaching environments and grade levels, agreed to participate in a telephone interview with the author. Many thanks to the following teachers who gave their time and thoughts on these important questions: Mary Antón-Oldenburg, a first and second grade teacher in an urban/suburban school and literacy consultant, Nancy Barile, a high school English teacher in an urban setting, Susan Coppelman, recently retired after twelve years of teaching middle school grades in public, private and charter schools, Meg Mozdiez, a third grade teacher in a suburban system, Deborah Romeo, a National Board Certified eighth grade English and social studies teacher in an urban district, and Chris Saheed, a high school English teacher who has recently become a school administrator in an urban district.

Through their responses, we get a sense of the very personal reactions, concerns, worries, and hopes of teachers as they work with children and the standards on a daily basis. The teachers speak for themselves, not on behalf of their respective school districts. Unquestionably, the standards have made an impact on classroom teaching. This article highlights the voices of teachers as they provide insights into the experiences of those educators on the front line of standards-based reform.

“Focus”

In these interviews, teachers describe appreciating the state standards as guidelines that help re-focus their teaching on what matters most in the curriculum. At the same time, teachers say that the standards exert a new kind of pressure for students to achieve mastery of content and skills, perhaps to the exclusion of other meaningful educational experiences.

CS: I think the standards have caused people to really rethink the underlying purpose of their teaching. The frameworks initiative has forced us, in a positive way, to more clearly articulate a curriculum. If we’re doing this right, then we’re pushing ourselves to identify the types of assessments that we think will best help us to know whether or not kids are learning.

DR: I don’t think the standards inhibit my teaching; I think they focus it. I have given up things that I used to teach, but I feel like I’ve made that decision because it’s the right decision, not because I had to do it because of the coverage issue. It’s more of looking reflectively at what I teach and how I do it, and thinking, is this the best way of doing it?

MM: I’ve always had very high expectations for kids, but I think there also has to be a balance of activities that make them enjoy coming to school. Some kids need that hands-on element, some can be paper and pencil, and some are more able to gain knowledge through conversation. The large amount of material in the frameworks makes it difficult to have time to implement multiple teaching strategies to meet a variety of learning styles. Many of us feel like there’s this giant checklist on the ceiling and it’s like OK, we did that one, and that one.... The standards are sometimes forcing a shift in focus from process to end product, but both are important.
MAO: I’ve been helping administrators and fourth grade teachers investigate the MCAS long composition. In the process we’ve come to recognize what they are really hoping for in terms of an exemplary long composition, what it takes to do a proficient composition. You begin to recognize that if students are going to be able to write a coherent, well organized, five or six paragraph essay that stays on the topic with good vocabulary development by fourth grade, they’re clearly going to have to be able to write three paragraphs by third grade. This has a trickle down effect. Students will need to be able to write a decent paragraph by second grade, and so on. I think this focuses attention on writing in a very different way than perhaps has been the way teachers in the primary grades have typically approached things.

“A Rigorous Curriculum”
When asked about the greatest benefit of statewide standards, there is considerable unanimity among these teachers. The standards require consistency in the rigor of curriculum and promote higher expectations of all students. Teachers voice support for judging student work against a more objective standard emphasizing individual progress rather than the arbitrary judging of one student’s work against another’s.

DR: Standards give us all a common ground that we can talk about, so student learning can be compared to objective standards rather than students being compared to one another. I think that’s a huge benefit.

NB: The standards provide good instructional guidelines and consistent instruction for all students. They assure that all kids, not just the best and the brightest, have a rigorous curriculum. You know that everybody’s going to read Hamlet, not just the honors kids. It’s high expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies that come to play.

CS: Standards hold potential to move teachers toward more process- and performance-based instruction when people are willing to collaborate around what the assessments are going to look like… and when there’s agreement about what work is just good enough as opposed to gradations of better and worse. It’s those kinds of very clear expectations, that’s where I see the potential and the silver lining of this. In the end, it’s best for all kids.

“Content Bound”
There is general agreement among these teachers that there is value in the standards for raising performance expectations and providing greater consistency in instruction. However, our respondents express divergent viewpoints regarding whether the curriculum frameworks and MCAS have a negative impact on creative teaching practices or the ability to explore a topic with sufficient depth.

SC: Some of the work the MCAS has kids doing felt pretty inauthentic. We would get these practice exams…. It was stuff I used to do when I was a kid. It isn’t that those are bad things, but it was a real about-face in a lot of ways from what we were doing. The kinds of wonderful, creative, and really involved stuff that I could do with kids felt pretty curtailed.

CS: I don’t think teaching has to be less creative because of the standards. I think with respect to many of the standards that involve process or skills or learning how to learn – what does it mean to be a historian, or what does a historian need to do to know his or her discipline – to me, those kinds of standards lend themselves to all kinds of creative techniques. I would say the history frameworks probably feel the most constricted because of being so content bound in the way they are framed.

NB: Sometimes I’m having a really good class discussion that gets off track, but yet seems to me like a valuable learning experience for my students. For example, last year we were having a good debate about changing the end of Hamlet. The students just took off with it…. It was just this great debate and the kids wanted to film a different ending to Hamlet. What a great project that would have been, and it would have fit in with the standards, but it would have taken way too much time away from the MCAS test happening in two weeks…. That part of it bothers me.

“Equal Opportunities”
The MCAS is seen by teachers as much more problematic than the curriculum frameworks themselves. While the frameworks provide guidelines and consistency for eventually achieving excellence for all students, the MCAS, as it currently exists, poses unique challenges to both teachers and students. In particular, certain groups of students seem less likely to have a chance to succeed with the high-stakes tests.

MM: At the elementary level, students are still on varied developmental paths. Testing provides a snapshot of how a student is progressing to the standards at that moment. Testing can only be part of the picture. I worry that politicians, administrators, and parents place too much emphasis on this information. As a teacher, I have a broader look at all the work a student is accomplishing and I can see potential even when certain skills are not yet achieved. In third grade, the standards may be that all third graders will write a cohesive organized paragraph.
Students can parrot the formula of a topic sentence, four details and a closing sentence. They’ve learned that by rote. However, most students can’t write a paragraph without several drafts and conferences with the teacher. There are some students who are still working on writing complete sentences, but their inability to write a paragraph now does not preclude them from being excellent writers later. In third grade, we shouldn’t be insisting on a perfect final product yet. Results of testing students at early ages can unfairly put them in an academic category that does not reflect their potential.

DR: When we have a high stakes testing environment like we do, I think there has to be a lot of care in how a high stakes test is written in terms of the clarity and structure of language that’s used in the test itself. For second-language learners, when all of the tests are paper/pencil tests, they all become language tests on top of whatever else they are. About 70% of the students in my classrooms are second language learners.

MAO: I think there are always drawbacks when you try to impose a one-size-fits-everybody assessment. I wouldn’t call myself anti-standards at all, but I think that using the MCAS as a graduation requirement is a pretty heavy stick against an individual. My concern is that we’re looking at children with a variety of needs and experiences, a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds that may or may not be something that MCAS taps appropriately. For example, there was an MCAS question with a diagram of a bicycle. One of the vocabulary questions asked students to look at the diagram and define the word ‘spoke’. While you could look at the bicycle and you might be able to figure that out, the notion at fourth grade of multiple meanings, if you’re a child with a second language, is complex. I’m not saying that it’s not appropriate as a goal - that we want all of our children to be able to do that - but on the other hand, there’s a difference between setting standards and working towards meeting standards.

CS: Some of the drawbacks are well known – that it’s very hard for one assessment to fit all students. Clearly, the state will need to develop alternative assessments, ultimately. This is what education reform said it was going to do from the start and we have a way to go. Certainly, assessing student competencies through portfolios is a much more difficult and cumbersome task than even a beyond-the-bubble test such as MCAS. It’s going to take a while for us to figure out what some of the alternative performance-based tests are going to look like.

“Pressure & Motivation”

Teachers reflect on how students are feeling the impact of standards-based teaching and the MCAS. Not surprisingly, the level of stress felt by students depends on age and their likelihood to pass the MCAS in high school. Teachers also remark that students feel the stress felt by teachers themselves in trying to accomplish many new objectives, meet established timetables, and provide adequate test preparation.

SC: The standards impacted my teaching practice in a big way. It isn’t that they asked me to do things or teach in a way that I wasn’t or in a way that I hadn’t already done. It’s just that what happened was the pressure - the pressure to make kids produce, the pressure that you feel all around schools from the superintendent to the principals and parents, the pressure and the feeling of having to get it all done at a certain point in time, just for the exams, took so much joy out of it for me. That’s the bad part….Whatever sort of side roads I might have otherwise taken - side roads that would have been fulfilling and wonderful and equally educational for the kids, I really began to curtail. I felt myself doing the kind of teaching in the end that I didn’t want to do which is sort of opening the little bird mouths and shoveling the stuff down.

MM: Third grade is where formal testing starts in our district. Parents and students are very aware of that and there is a concern all year whether students will be well prepared. I think at the beginning of the year I may have had some kids who were more anxious, and that’s probably because I was more anxious. I definitely felt the number of new things – whether it was the new science unit or new materials and assessment in math – was overwhelming. We were given a timetable on exactly when to teach the unit, the date to start, when to stop. That makes you anxious. We’re supposed to be finished with our multiplication unit this week and the teachers at my grade level said we’re not there yet – maybe two weeks. We checked in with the math specialist and she said to do it within two weeks. The way we used to teach that unit, we would have spent more time in the beginning of the year on basic skills, and then multiplication and division would have taken us probably until Christmas. We used to do a lot of different activities to get kids to understand it. Now it feels we’re not looking for mastery necessarily. Because we’re covering a large amount of material within the math curriculum, mastery of the skills and content (Continued on page 18)
Are Our Views of “Best Practice” Changing?

The Magic? It’s in the Work!

By Elizabeth Keroack, Ed.D.

Elementary teachers in the state of Massachusetts have always worked hard—one hundred years ago they had responsibility for teaching all things to all students; today, with the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, they still instruct content, skills and strategies in at least five major disciplines to a group of students whose needs and interests are no less diverse than those of students of the 1800’s.

It is no wonder, then, that elementary teachers in the Stoneham Public Schools expressed concern last winter about how to assist students in performing at high levels on the most recent criterion-referenced measure adopted by the state. As Assistant Superintendent of the district at the time, I worked with the Instructional Leadership Team to suggest a series of workshops for teachers of grades 3 and 4. These workshops, facilitated by elementary principal Maureen Burke, focused on a discussion of the ways in which teachers could help K-5 students meet the challenge of today’s learning standards, especially as they are assessed by MCAS.

During the four two-hour sessions, teachers worked on analyzing and studying student scores, examining the types of questions on the test, and evaluating and sharing various types of testing tips and strategies for inclusion into the curriculum. The group also discussed the importance of keeping the focus of the elementary classroom on teaching and learning, not simply testing.

At one point in the workshops, participants expressed a desire to meet with elementary teachers from districts that had experienced demonstrable MCAS growth. Mrs. Burke identified those districts and schools both geographically close and demographically similar to Stoneham who had had such success, and calls were then made to elicit teams of administrators and teachers willing to make up an afternoon panel to discuss “Best Practices in Improving Student Performance at the Elementary Level.” Participating districts were the Andover Public Schools, the Burlington Public Schools, the Danvers Public Schools and the Arlington Public Schools, the latter of which could not attend but sent an informative packet for participants.

The panel presentation and discussion, which lasted for almost two hours on the afternoon of May 1, 2001, demonstrated that there is no magic formula for improving student performance but there is much agreement as to what constitutes practices that work at the elementary level. What differs is the way in which each school district and school itself make these practices their own, weaving them into the culture in ways that work.

Let me bullet just a few of the presentation highlights from the “best practices” each school presented for discussion. Ask yourself how many of these apply to your district in one form or another.

Andover, South Elementary School Team led by Principal Eileen Woods

• has a team approach to MCAS analysis, inclusive of one grade level teacher per grade, the principal, the asst. principal, and a SPED representative. The team took two full days for MCAS analysis related to teaching and learning decisions.

• has a school in which all faculty and support staff have embraced ownership of the goal of improving student performance

• has added a resources sub-group to the analysis group to determine what materials, time, etc. are needed to make action plan suggestions workable

• responds as a group to MCAS demands with thematic, integrated approaches and established benchmarks per grade level and subject

• uses technology specialists to incorporate technology into all subjects and resulting products, like science lab reports on a template or research reports on a famous scientist

• uses the Padaea seminar model to build high level thinking skills about language and literature

• looks at long composition data to determine how it intersects with the existing writing program
• uses LINKS templates as helpful graphic organizers
• presents successful study models and strategies to students
• uses the state MCAS scoring rubric for report card grades
• posts rubrics in classrooms and laminates them for student writing portfolios
• gives a mid-year reading/writing assessment which teachers grade and then use as exemplars with overheads for class instruction
• provides weekly team meetings for grade 4 teachers with reading teachers and SPED staff in order to track student progress and target students for small group support
• provides voluntary MCAS practice sessions on some selected afternoons and Saturdays
• gives parent workshops every spring with packets of information and has parents attempt to score selected questions (Parents Guide to MCAS, Grade 4)

Burlington, Francis Wyman Elementary School
Team led by Principal Paul Cabral

• provides teacher support through collegiality and the recognition that there is indeed “life after MCAS,” which in turn builds a willingness in faculty to meet the performance challenge
• has a full-time math teacher as instructional specialist plus one full-time writing specialist and a science center in the district

• uses Howard Gardner’s theories to develop themes that show students that it is “how you are smart not how smart you are” that’s important
• focuses on joy of reading and provides lots of books in the classroom to build reading fluency
• assesses reading at every level with age appropriate tools
• provides a literacy specialist as a co-teacher for grades 3 and 4 remediation to show students how a model of assistance works
• starts with interesting materials to engage students in building learning strategies (Mosaic of Thought, Strategies That Work)
• implements a Day Book for writing, especially for student responses to reading
• uses Junior Great Books with shared inquiry techniques and multiple readings of same text
• has five extra staff development days to focus their work

Danvers, Riverside Elementary School
Team led by Principal Rose Marie DiResta

• uses themes for the year to create unification of curriculum in this multi-age school where grade level assignment is by choice
• meets twice a month as a faculty to act as critical friends, putting students at the center of discussion by looking at student work
• has common grade level planning time, includes multi-grade teachers
• at the time of student promotion, has three to four days of substitutes so that teachers can assemble and talk about students, their styles and strengths and placements so that no child is anonymous
• provides an uninterrupted literacy block of 120 minutes in grades K-3 (90 minutes in grades 4 and 5)
• identifies each writing strand and its results across grade levels
• uses LINKS materials
• takes a hard look at literacy, having worked to create a bookroom of over 250 book titles K-5 for guided reading and Junior Great Books

Stoneham, All Elementary Schools
Team led by Principal Maureen Burke of the Colonial Park Elementary School

• has created a five-year curriculum cycle to delineate how resources are to be used to align local curricula to state frameworks
• has implemented Math/Science Nights to engage students and their parents in a joint inquiry process
• use AIMS, Blast-off and Options materials to supplement curriculum
• has on-site LINKS trainers with one-half of faculty already trained
• marries the Collins writing approach to LINKS materials whenever possible
• sends a letter to parents describing what kind of homework to expect and how to help students successfully complete the assignments
has provided a rewrite of all MCAS scoring guides in a user-friendly manner for students and parents

has included in each elementary science kit related MCAS materials and questions

has developed a voluntary math club after school

gives to students ten published reflective questions about the preparation and implementation strategies that they used on that MCAS day (designed to help students debrief the MCAS experience at the end of each day it is administered)

has developed a toolkit of reference materials—including vocabulary charts, content lists, and kinds of graphs—from prior MCAS tests

When the Stoneham principals later debriefed the panel experience with each other and their faculty members, several observations were consistent. First, we were all pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm of other schools for the networking process and extremely encouraged at the nature of the strategies shared, many of which focused on small changes made to teacher practice that act as a positive catalyst for improvement. Then we noted that schools successful at raising student performance levels act as a cohesive team to which everyone contributes as an “owner” of that challenge. Lastly, successful schools choose not to view the MCAS initiative as an albatross but rather as an opportunity to reflect on best practices to improve teaching and learning and celebrate what works.

Yes, for these panel participants and all educators like them, high stakes accountability—even at the elementary level—poses legitimate concerns for self-esteem (both students’ and teachers’), school climate, and professional “license” as it makes public that which occurs in the classroom. Yet the criticism that such accountability eliminates the magic that is instructional creativity, need not be legitimate if school leaders, like the ones on the panel, recognize that a deliberate focus on learning standards and benchmarks—the backwards planning model—is the healthiest, most balanced way to promote effective learning, both for ourselves and the students in our charge.

Dr. Elizabeth Keroack is the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment in the Malden Public Schools. She serves on the Executive Board of Directors of MASCD. She may be reached at ekeroack@malden.mec.edu

Following the Journey: National Board Certification

MASCD will be chronicling two journeys through National Board Certification throughout each of this year’s issues of Perspectives: one written by an urban high school teacher in the Boston area, Michelle; the other written by an elementary teacher in the outer suburbs of Boston.

Recently, our elementary suburban candidate withdrew from the certification process because of critical family health issues. Her colleague, Susan, a sixth grade teacher from the same school, has volunteered to continue the journal for publication in this column.

By way of introduction, Susan holds a B.S. in biology and chemistry from Boston State College and an MST from Antioch New England with a focus on elementary and environmental education. She has been employed as a science specialist in several Boston area schools and is currently in her fifth year of teaching in a Boston suburb. She is 50 years old and is pursuing National Board Certification so she can move up on her district’s salary scale, which will offer the equivalent of 15 credits for the certification work, and an additional 15 credits when she formally receives her certification.

This is the second part of the series (see Part I in the September 2001 Perspectives). It is our hope that their journal entries will provide a glimpse into the trials and rewards of this particular avenue for professional and leadership development.

Resources Cited in this Article:

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MASSCD JANUARY 2002
Michelle's Journey

August 27, 2001 - 10:03pm
I received my box today. Opening the box was the last symbol of committing to the National Board process. There’s no going back.

September 3, 2001 - 10:12am
I am following the recommendations for completing the portfolio. I am studying the Science Standards and the Getting Started section of the materials. After I finish reading the entry directions, I will be ready to make a monthly timeline of goals. I have my personal date book and school planner so I can combine all of my responsibilities onto one calendar.

My parents lent me their older camcorder. A colleague whose wife completed National Board Certification (NBC) last year offered a microphone she used. The local drugstore had a sale on videotapes so I stocked up. I have the tools, but I am concerned about capturing my students on film in a way that reflects what is going on. I will plan time for practicing with the camera.

September 10, 2001 - 10:27pm
Tonight I met with my writing group. We have been meeting for over seven years to read and critique our poetry. On the ride home I thought about some of the important things in my life that I am giving up or postponing. All of my writing this year will focus on educational issues. Poetry will have to wait….

September 11, 2001
Last night I went to bed feeling wistful about my lack of time for writing poetry. I also remember explaining to my friend why NBC is so important. Today, the only things that are important to me are people and God.

September 27, 2001 - 9:46pm
I haven’t accomplished much in the past two weeks. Like most people, I found myself riveted to the news each day. I finally had to limit my viewing because I was getting too depressed.

I created a plan of action for the science segment of my Adolescent and Young Adult Portfolio. I will work on Entries 1 (Teaching a Major Idea Over Time), 2 (Active Inquiry), and 4 (Documented Accomplishments) simultaneously. The NBC process doesn’t lend itself to completing an entry and putting it aside to begin the next. I must develop the entries in layers that will hopefully come together before the deadline.

October 2, 2001 - 8:53pm
I submitted a letter to my superintendent requesting that the district reimburse the $300 application fee that remains after the $2000 DOE grant and allow me three professional days to use at my discretion. I also began practicing with the video camera. I passed out the student release forms with the other papers that require parent signatures, so I have permission to film the kids. My students were either silly, embarrassed, mumbling, or paralyzed with fear. I learned that the camera’s microphone won’t be sufficient to pick up the voices around the room.

Although I have a microphone, my camera doesn’t have an input for one. A colleague arranged for me to borrow the school’s camera and tripod. I was grateful for his help.

October 5, 2001 - 10:11pm
I started Entry 4 by listing all my professional activities as leader/collaborator, learner, and teacher who interacts with families and community. Candidates are allotted twenty pages of documentation, twelve pages of description and analysis, and two pages of reflective summary. Although it sounds like many pages, it is difficult to condense your career onto 8.5” x 11” paper with one-inch margins around double-spaced text using a font no smaller than 12 point. I find myself consulting a thesaurus to select synonyms with fewer letters.

I received an invitation to a support group for NBC candidates on October 11th. Unfortunately, the closest support group is meeting at a location that is an hour away. I would feel more supported if I didn’t have to travel two hours to attend a meeting for an hour and a half.

October 11, 2001 - 10:35pm
The Superintendent visited my classroom to tell me that he had approved my request for three professional development days and the $300 application fee. His personal gesture made me feel appreciated.

My upbeat feeling quickly turned to frustration at the first meeting of the NBC support group. The participants had diverse backgrounds and were at various stages in the process. I worked hard to prepare a writing sample for feedback, but instead spent the two hours listening to the facilitators reiterate information I had read many times. They also hadn’t received current information about the new certification requirements, so they couldn’t be specific.

October 25, 2001 - 9:22pm
The Principal asked me to attend a national conference on teacher induction and mentoring in New Orleans in December. I went to the National Science Teachers Conven-
tion in March and didn’t expect to be able to travel again this year. I am concerned as well. My schedule is becoming a nightmare. I’m organizing a workshop, I’m a member of a committee to create the school mission and philosophy statements, I’m PTA Treasurer, I’m mentoring a new teacher, keeping my website current, developing a new curriculum, writing for this publication, while trying to find time to teach 248 students (and I know all of their names!) I told him I’d love to go.

The second support group meeting was tonight. Several members of the group offered thoughtful reflections on my videotape. Although I don’t plan to use that video, I learned so much about myself as a teacher and my students. The facilitators showed the tapes they sent with their portfolios. I left with the understanding that my tapes don’t have to be Spielberg productions. I am glad that my tapes don’t have to be lios. I left with the understanding that my students. The facilitators showed much about myself as a teacher and plan to use that video, I learned so much.

November 13, 2001 - 1:32am
Negative anthrax tests meant school was back in session today. I am suffering from insomnia, a problem that I have never had until this fall. I find myself reviewing or revising my plans and focusing on my responsibilities instead of allowing myself to relax and drift to sleep.

Susan’s Journey
December 4, 2001
The realization that it is December already, and into the second half of the time allotted for the certification process, has given rise to nightly attacks of angst. I wake up around four or five in the morning, my brain runs immediately to “the box” and I panic. When I am working on the project, I feel relatively calm and confident. I push away the doubts and focus on the content of the writing. But in the angst hours I am sure there is no justification for my expectations of success. I will be the first candidate ever to fail every part of the process, my district will realize my incompetence, I will be fired, lose my home, spiral into decay, and end up panhandling in the subway! Then the sun comes up, I take out the laptop, start writing, and feel better, certain I can do this on the first try. Reality probably lies somewhere between the two extremes.

The biggest stumbling block at present seems to be the videotaping. I thought I had assembled a workable set up, only to discover after the second session that the camera has developed a twitch of some sort and the tape jumps so that it is almost impossible to concentrate on the content. I may need to locate yet another camera. The assembly of a collection of working equipment has been a huge frustration. This is the third video camera I’ve tried. Luckily, I had access to a good quality tripod and a fellow certification candidate found two PZM microphones. But the school cameras seem to be useless. One never worked at all, a second had no microphone jack, and now the other has developed this spasm the day before I was to tape a lesson!

There is a curious dynamic to this process. I find I go from confidence to despair, from valuing the process to total disdain for it, from feeling on target to totally lost, regularly. On reflection, I realize that the darker moments are usually associated with either technical glitches in taping, managing the demands of the taping process within a crowded classroom, or with group discussions of the process. Alone and focused I feel OK with it all; when I listen to the thoughts and plans of others, I begin to doubt my own.

The best part of it all so far has been the forced practice of self-assessment, something which I do informally all the time. But the requirements of the process lead one to write it all out carefully and then revisit, rewrite, rethink, something which the immediacy of the demands of a classroom do not encourage. Writing requires discipline of thought and expression which clears away the extraneous and allows me to see pieces of my performance, both positive and negative, hidden by the clutter of the day-to-day.

The videos, while frustrating to create, are fascinating to watch, once you get over the shock of seeing yourself as others see you. It has been illuminating, rewarding, and horrifying to watch myself teaching. The personal style I see on tape is not the one I thought I was projecting. One long term goal out of all this might be to assemble, as cheaply as possible, a full video tape set-up to use on a regular basis for self-analysis. The idea of using videotapes for my own professional growth, and for the students to analyze their learning styles would never have occurred to me had I not been engaged in this process.

MASCD members who are interested in working for the Association in a volunteer capacity are invited to attend the February 1, 2002 Board of Directors meeting at the Westin Waltham from 3-6 pm. Please contact Mary Forte Hayes at 781-237-7881 if interested.
Can We Help All Children Succeed?

Preserving Process Learning in the Era of High Stakes Testing:
Research-based Strategies for Teaching Test-Taking

By Lynn Meltzer, Ph.D., Bethany Roditi, Ph.D., & Judith Stein, Ph.D.

John, a 7th grader who has always excelled in math, suddenly fails because he cannot provide clear written explanations for the approach he has used successfully to solve math problems.

Tina, an 8th grader who struggles endlessly to master the elusive details of grammar and spelling, waits in dread for the results of the MCAS which will seal her fate regardless of her As and Bs in math and science classes.

Mike, a 10th grader, demoralized by his failure on the MCAS despite his strong classroom performance, considers dropping out of school rather than face the stigma of not graduating.

Test results are the gateway to school success, graduation, college entry, and job advancement. Poor test performance can bar bright students like John, Tina, and Mike from many important opportunities that would otherwise enable them to realize their potential. The recent introduction of the MCAS exam as a requirement for school graduation has increased the likelihood that students like these who demonstrate a strong content knowledge yet lack effective test-taking strategies, will be at greater risk for failing in school. When test performance can mean the difference between a B and a D, or between advancing to high school or repeating a grade, the critical need for “test-wiseness” strategies for all students is self-evident. Instruction in test-taking strategies is becoming increasingly important. As a result, there is increased pressure on teachers to ensure that students with diverse profiles learn how to express their ideas coherently and persuasively and to perform optimally in test situations.

What difficulties do many students encounter during tests? Test-taking difficulties represent a major hurdle for students with a broad range of learning profiles from late elementary school into college. These difficulties are often identified only after discrepancies are discovered between students’ high grades for coursework and their low scores on standardized tests. In an attempt to understand why some students have focused primarily on the impact of time limits on performance. While it has been assumed that extended time on the SAT would address students’ difficulties, many students have actually continued to perform poorly. It is only recently that these test-taking deficiencies have been attributed to students’ lack of test-wiseness strategies and their limited understanding of how to use the time to improve their performance.

“Test-wiseness” generally refers to a student’s ability to utilize the characteristics of the test and the test-taking situation as well as to work efficiently, avoid making careless errors, and know when and how to guess appropriately. Many students lack these important test-taking strategies. In addition, many students lack efficient strategies for test preparation such as memorizing and organizing information, analyzing test questions, and checking their responses. These test-wiseness strategies are particularly important for multiple-choice tests because these tests incorporate items that require students to detect salience, isolate critical information, ignore less relevant details, analyze complex language, understand confusing vocabulary, and record answers on a separate form. While some students’ difficulties are sufficiently apparent that they are identified by school systems and receive
accommodations such as extended time, many students manifest more subtle symptoms. For all these students, test scores frequently do not reflect their strong conceptual reasoning or their knowledge of the material.

What strategies are necessary for improving test success?
Students often need explicit, intensive strategy instruction in studying and taking tests. Specifically, they need to learn strategies for reading test materials strategically, analyzing questions in a flexible manner, and identifying salient information while ignoring irrelevant details. Self-regulatory strategies such as checking, planning, monitoring, and revising are also critical. Moreover, many students need to be taught explicitly how to determine which strategy is appropriate for solving which test items, a critical aspect of test success. While these strategies are important for all students, they are essential for students with learning and attention difficulties who often display weaknesses in many of the cognitive processes that underlie effective and efficient learning and test taking.

Instruction in test taking has generally focused on teaching individual students sophisticated strategies that can be utilized in the test situation to improve performance. Many of these strategies help students remember the critical steps in taking tests, namely, reading instructions carefully, using time wisely, identifying cues for guessing more accurately, and ensuring all items are answered. Research has shown that these instructional programs are effective in helping students with and without learning disabilities improve their test scores (on average 10-13%). Nevertheless, many of these programs only address a few of the skills that underlie successful test taking and have not been integrated into the curriculum for use by classroom teachers.

In order to extend the scope of strategy instruction, researchers and educators at the Institute for Learning and Development and ResearchILD have implemented an ongoing research program, the TESTS project, with the purpose of designing a range of study and test-taking strategies within the context of a broad theoretical paradigm (Meltzer, Roditi, Haynes, Biddle, Paster, & Taber, 1996). The major objective of our TESTS research program has been to develop a paradigm that encompasses a holistic approach to learning that can be taught in the context of classroom work and incorporates effective strategies directed at improving “test-wiseness.” Our model embraces a constructivist approach in which students are given the opportunity to discover which strategies work for them after they are shown a variety of models and are given practice applying the strategies to grade-appropriate content. Students are encouraged to develop their own personalized strategies using the principles they are taught.

The TESTS program is anchored in a theoretical paradigm that emphasizes five major cognitive processes that provide the foundation for learning, studying, and test-taking, namely:
• Memorizing
• Organizing
• Prioritizing
• Shifting approaches
• Checking and self-monitoring

Strategies in each of these cognitive areas are designed to help students improve their efficiency and accuracy during the three stages of learning, studying, and test-taking (Figure 1):
• Before the test - Learning how to learn
• During the test - Showing what they know
• After the test - Checking, understanding errors, and self-advocating

As an example, one group of strategies is designed to help students organize and memorize information so that they can readily recall major themes and concepts, focus on critical details, and ignore irrelevant material. Students select the strategies that best suit their learning styles and develop personalized strategies based on their unique learning strengths. For example, one student may select the Triple Note Tote strategy to organize and remember information because this allows him/her to use a three-column system in which the concept or question is recorded in the first column, the definition or critical details are recorded in the second column, and a mnemonic strategy is recorded in the last column. Another student may prefer to use Strategy Cards to organize and remember information by recording the concept or question, along with a mnemonic for the answer, on one side of an index card and the definition or answer on the other side.

Using strategies like these, students learn how to organize, prioritize, integrate, and retrieve information and they simultaneously learn the required content. They also learn when to use which strategies in which contexts. In other words, they...
acquire strategies which help them to develop a context for remembering information on a long-term basis and for approaching learning situations more efficiently. Similarly, strategies for shifting approaches help students shift flexibly from main ideas to details when reading complex text, studying difficult scientific concepts, or solving multi-step math problems. Our strategy-based instructional program has culminated in the development of Brain Cogs, an interactive, media-based approach that helps students to develop life-long strategies for learning, studying, and successful test-taking and has been developed in partnership with FableVision (www.braincogs.com). Students are taught to develop and apply strategies for mastering content consistent with upper elementary and middle school curriculum.

What are the implications for the classroom?
Classroom teachers frequently report that they do not have the essential preparation time for helping students become more efficient and effective learners. Teachers also feel pressured by the time-constraints resulting from the push towards higher standards and broader content. As a result, they often express concern that little time is available to teach their students concepts, to understand their students’ unique learning styles, and to match instructional programs and presentations with students’ diverse learning profiles.

Programs that offer direct strategy instruction can play a critical role in helping all students learn and perform more successfully. Teaching paradigms that integrate a holistic approach to learning within the context of classroom work can help students with a diverse range of learning needs to show what they know in test situations and to develop effective skills for successful lifelong learning. Classroom-based strategy instruction that teaches students to value the learning process can also help prevent feelings of failure and helplessness that are often tied to test situations. Einstein expressed these sentiments when he said,

“One had to cram all this stuff into one’s mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problem distasteful to me for an entire year.”

For more information, refer to:

Lynn Meltzer, Ph.D. is the Director of Assessment and Research at the Institute for Learning and Development & Research ILD in Lexington, MA. Her publications include articles, chapters, and books relating to problem-solving and learning strategies in students with diverse learning profiles. She is the President of the International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities and the founder of the national Learning Differences conference at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Bethany Roditi, Ph.D. is the Director of Education at the Institute for Learning and Development & Research ILD, Lexington, MA. She provides assessment, educational therapy, and consultation to children. Her research, publications, teacher-training, and school outreach have focused on assessment, strategy instruction, and prevention, particularly in the area of mathematics.

Judith A. Stein, Ph.D. is the Coordinator of Coaching and Counseling Services at the Institute for Learning and Development and Research ILD. She is a clinical psychologist whose work and research have focused on areas of attention, motivation, and anxiety and their impact on self-esteem and academic success.
It is my understanding that the concept of “children of color” in the United States refers not so much to pigmentation that imparts color to the skin, but to race as a social construct. Probably, the definition and designation of cultural uniqueness for a people is a combination of both internal and external sources. Our identity as a person and our cultural uniqueness as a group are negotiated outcomes of who I say I am or who we say we are, on the one hand, and who others say I am or who others say we are, on the other hand. Thus, the identity of any individual and the cultural uniqueness of a group are a function of continuous negotiation between internal and external belief systems. Each group from its own perspective has unique and different cultural heritages, although people external to these groups tend to lump them together as minorities or as people of color. To explore ways of making the standards-based school reform movement work for people of color, we must explore ways of making it work for African-Americans and their special cultural circumstances, for Hispanic-Americans and their special cultural circumstances, for Asian-Americans and their special cultural circumstances and for a number of other unnamed groups and their special cultural circumstances, including white Americans.

**Whose Standards? For Which Intelligences?**

In his book, *Frames of Mind* (1985), Howard Gardner makes the case for the existence of multiple intelligences, among which are linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and personal intelligences, including intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. Gardner concludes that, “an analysis of cognition must include all human problem-solving and product-fashioning skills and not just those that happen to lend themselves to testing via a standard format” (Gardner 1985:xii). If we need standards, there should be different standards for different intelligences. Moreover, if by chance some cultural groups tend to emphasize one set of intelligences over other sets, then there should be group-specific tests as the only fair and appropriate way to establish and test for standards. Some kinds of skills African-Americans may understand better than Whites. Others kinds of skills Whites may understand better than Hispanics. Still other kinds of skills Hispanics may understand better than Asian-Americans. And so it goes on and on for all sorts of individuals and groups. As stated by Howard Gardner, there is no such thing as a smart person who is outstanding in performance of all skills. This statement applies to all cultural groups.

I embraced this conclusion after reading an article published by Susan Stodolsky and Gerald Lesser back in 1967 in the Harvard Educational Review. These scholars found “diverse patterns of mental ability” among students in the United States who represent different ethnic groups. Based on this finding, they took issue with the contention that equal opportunity should produce equal test-score averages among different racial and ethnic populations. Stodolsky and Lesser recognized the diverse mental abilities that may occur with different frequencies among various cultural groups as a benefit and not a liability in a pluralistic society. Thus, the question – how to make the standards-based school reform movement work for children of color? – surely is a question that should be asked for white Americans, too, since children of color and Whites may be good at doing different things.

**Standards for Which Population?**

Educators like Jerome Murphy have asked “whether there's a distinction between standards and standardization” (Harvard Magazine, Nov-Dec 1999:69). My answer to this question is yes. However, it seems to me that in elementary and secondary education in this nation we have applied standards to the wrong population – to the students instead...
of to educational practitioners such as teachers, administrators, and to schools. Moreover, we wrongfully have tried to standardize schools and their curricula. I need not remind you that elementary and secondary schools seem “hell bent” on standardizing everything, including the length of classes, the length of the school day, the length of the school year, the kinds of tests that all children should take, text books, traditional so-called mainstream information that all children should learn, a shared schemata of national culture rather than local culture, and the maintenance of linguistic uniformity within the nation as opposed to linguistic diversity. This attempt has eliminated much of the flexibility that schools need to meet the requirements of a diversified student body.

From time to time, I find analogies useful, although they always have their limitations. I see a close relationship between what school reform ought to be today and reforms that were made in health care some years ago. Back in 1910, Abraham Flexner, an American educator who was a secondary school teacher and principal, joined the research staff of Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and wrote a report that contributed to much-needed reforms in American medical schools. This report identified standards for medical school and for the medical school curriculum; no standards for medical patients were set forth. This is an important distinction.

In recent years, “the hospital has become the main workplace for the care of...sick patient[s] [especially those with acute illnesses.]” Also, it has become...a context for training doctors and nurses, and for medical research.” In addition, hospitals have learned how to organize themselves “to ensure sufficient services to different kinds of patients who require services” (Mechanic 1968:338-339).

What I infer from this brief history of medical education is that standards were created for medical schools and for medical practitioners and not for medical patients. That the first recorded operation by a surgeon with rubber gloves covering his hands occurred in 1911 is an important sanitary standard worthy of mentioning (Clendening 1933). This was a standard for the practitioner; but it benefited the patient as well as the doctor.

**Standards for Schools, Not for Students**

In elementary and secondary education today, we seem to be preoccupied with applying standards to students rather than to their teacher-caregivers and to schools and educational agencies. Of course, there is no need to develop standards for schools and their curricula, if, according to the findings of one group of education researchers, there is “no evidence that differences between schools contribute...significantly to cognitive inequality” (Jencks et al 1972:254). With this assertion I disagree.

There is much evidence that school context makes a difference (Stern 1970). Jencks has retracted his 1972 statement “that reducing cognitive inequality would not do much to reduce economic inequality” (Jencks and Phillips 1998:4). Now is the time for him to retract the earlier statement that schools do not contribute to cognitive inequality.

In 1966, James Coleman and his research colleagues said, “variations in school quality are not highly related to variations in achievement of pupils” and that the larger part of school-to-school variation in achievement appears to be not a consequence of effects of school variations at all, but of variations in family backgrounds of entering students” (Coleman et al 1966:296-297). Marching to the Coleman drumbeat, our contemporary education reformers have decided to set standards for students rather than for schools.

It would have been foolish and silly if the Flexner Report had recommended health care agencies and medical schools set standards for patients rather than for institutions and caregivers, and if they had recommended these agencies and schools refuse care to patients because of the severity of their illness. It is silly and foolish today for state and local education agencies to set standards for students and not for schools, teachers, and administrators and to turn away low scoring students from our best schools.

In the health care system, the patient is not punished for being close to death on arrival at the hospital. Actually, it is the sickest patient who has the highest claim on the services of a hospital and its professional practitioners. Moreover, hospitals have continued to maintain emergency rooms for patients with all sorts of conditions who need urgent care. All patients merit personal attention regardless of their resources and their cultural uniqueness and so do all students regardless of their circumstances. Schools, like hospitals, must organize themselves to accommodate a variety of people.
Finally, hospitals do not offer standardized care. Therapy tends to vary according to the requirements of each patient and so should teaching methods vary according to the learning ability of each student.

**Flaws in the Standards-Based Movement**
The standards-based school reform movement is seriously flawed because it advocates exclusiveness but not also inclusiveness; it promotes excellence and is often silent about equity; it favors top-down bureaucratic decision-making and ignores the benefit of bottom-up grassroots participation; it prefers homogeneous rather than diversified, desegregated heterogeneous learning environments; it recommends strategies to prevent learning failures in the future but tends to ignore remedial strategies for learning failures in the past; it rewards fast learners and punishes slow learners.

I do not recognize inclusiveness, equity, grassroots participation, diversity, remedy, and punishment as more or less effective in education than exclusiveness, excellence, bureaucratic decision making, prevention, and reward. Neither of the opposites in these couplets of behavior is better than the other. In effective school reform, these action strategies should be implemented simultaneously for the benefit of students of the majority and the minority.

**How Do We Make It Work?**
Using Charleston, South Carolina data where I was retained as a consultant to design a school student assignment plan, I discovered that the gap between achievement scores of Black and White students were larger in racially-homogeneous schools and socioeconomically-homogeneous student groups. Coleman found that “[Black] children in integrated schools come to gain a greater sense of their efficacy to control their destiny” (Coleman 1968:25). Louise Kriesberg explains this phenomenon: “When the power differences are not extreme, the outcome is more likely to be a compromise than an imposition” (Kriesberg 1982:240). These findings indicate that diversity seems to be an educational benefit that can enhance the performance of all children, a fact that the current school reform movement seems to have ignored.

Attaining unity out of diversity is something of value and so is recognition of differences among students who are similar. This can be done only if school reformers give increased attention to turning learning environments into genuine learning communities, peopled by many different kinds of students. We can make the standards-based school reform movement work effectively for children of color by making it work effectively for all children, including those who are Black, Brown, and White. We do this by developing person-specific or population-specific teaching methods and techniques that are appropriate to the learning needs of each individual and each group. And we do this by identifying no single cultural group and its learning needs as the macro-social mainstream of society and its educational system, but by identifying all groups and their learning needs as micro-social, interdependent units of society and its educational system that together, in an additive way, become the mainstream.

When this is understood, one turns to the people, all of the people, who must together negotiate what is and what is not important to learn, what will and will not benefit both the individual and the society. When characteristics of the learning environments, the curriculum, and standards for schools and caregivers are negotiated outcomes, with all sorts and conditions of people participating in the deliberations, this, to me, is the essence of effective education reform that will enhance people of color as well as any other cultural groups, and also will advance society.

Charles V. Willie, Ph.D. is the Charles William Eliot Professor of Education Emeritus, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
A Sampling of Resources for Standards-Based Reform

CLASP  http://www.massnetworks.org/clasp/about.html
The Curriculum Library Alignment and Sharing Project is a consortium of districts across Massachusetts that work together to develop and share curriculum aligned to the Frameworks. Through relational database software and a statewide conference system, CLASP brings together the people, and the information those people need and create, to most effectively help students to demonstrate achievement of learning standards.

TCI http://www.massnetworks.org/tci/index.html
The Technology & Curriculum Integration Leadership Program is a year-long series of events designed to help Massachusetts educators play leadership roles in their district’s efforts to use instructional technology to meet the expectations of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Teams from districts across the state come together to both learn from each other and create statewide momentum for change that is larger than their individual efforts.

“Standards-Based Reform: What Does It Mean for the Middle Grades?”  by Anne Wheelock
http://www.middleweb.com/Whlckstand.html
This paper describes the status of the standards movement in relation to the middle grades and in terms of the policy context of the 1990s. It also outlines the potential of standards-guided reform at the middle level.

“Successful School Reform Efforts Share Common Features”
Harvard Education Letter, Research Online, September/October 2001

The Results Fieldbook: Practical Strategies from Dramatically Improved Schools, by Mike Schmoker
http://www.ascd.org

Will Standards Save Public Education?  by Deborah Meier
New Democracy Forum Series, Beacon Press  Tel: 617-742-2110

Inclusion in MASCD Resource listings does not reflect endorsement; MASCD adheres to a policy on collaborations and partnerships. Relevant resources are shared through Perspectives to facilitate further inquiry and learning.

New Board Members

The MASCD Board of Directors welcomed a number of new members during this past year. Here are several new members you’ll want to know!

Connie Louie serves as the MA Department of Education liaison to MASCD. She is the Instructional Technology Director for the DOE. During the past five years she has administered over $70 million in technology grants to schools. She shares with MASCD best practices on technology integration.

Jeffrey Lord serves as Assistant Principal at the E.N. Rogers Middle School in Lowell, which offers rich diversity within an historic mill city. Prior to this, Jeff held a variety of teaching and administrative roles in Waltham and Shrewsbury. The most honored of these was the opportunity to serve as principal in an elementary school named after his grandfather. Jeff is MASCD Membership Chair.

Linda Olsen is the Coordinator of the Lesley-Brookline Internship Program, a graduate program leading to a Masters Degree in Education and Standard Certification in Special Needs and Elementary Education. Linda has trained over 50 dual-certified teachers now employed in the Boston area. She chairs the MASCD Student Chapters Committee. She enjoys bringing people together who have similar goals.

Chuck Danielson teaches English at Shrewsbury High School, where he also supervises the Pre-Practicum and Practicum Program for student teachers, and is co-chair for the school’s Mission and Student Expectations Committee for NEASC certification. Chuck is an adjunct professor at Anna Maria College in Paxton. He is also a musician and sings in choral groups. ★
MASCD Programs & Updates

After September 11: Rethinking "America in the World"
MASCD-Primary Source Conference
April 6, 2002
for K-12 teachers and curriculum directors
Brandeis University

Understanding By Design: The Leadership Challenge*
June 27-28, 2002
for persons responsible for implementing
Understanding By Design in their schools or districts
Presented by John Brown, Prince George's County MD
Public Schools; ASCD Faculty
Seacrest Resort, North Falmouth

Differentiated Instruction Course*
July 15-19 & October 5, 2002
for educators seeking an in-depth graduate course -
4 credits optional
presented by Jerry Goldberg, Teachers21
H.H. Richardson School, Easton

Introduction to Standards-Based
Instruction and Assessment
Two-day Beginning Teacher Institute hosted
by districts across MA
Districts wishing to host should schedule their institute
ASAP; individuals may enroll once program dates are set

Texts and Techniques to Promote Understanding and
High Achievement in English and Social Studies
MASCD - College Board Conference
November 1, 2002
for middle/high school teachers & curriculum coordinators
presented by AP trainers, consultants, and authors

Schools That Succeed, Students Who Learn
Assessment & Accountability -
Instructional Strategies - Innovative School Models
Sixth Annual Northeast ASCD Affiliate Conference
December 6-7, 2002
preconference workshops December 5, 2002
for educators at all levels
presenters include Carol Ann Tomlinson, Victoria Bernhardt,
Andy Platt, Caroline Tripp, Deborah Meier, Wayne Sweeney,
Thomas Guskey
Boston Park Plaza Hotel

*flyers enclosed. Program information is available on the
web, www.mascd.org

Another Successful
Northeast ASCD Affiliate Conference!
Schools that Succeed, Students Who Learn
Boston Park Plaza, November 29, 30, December 1, 2001

Doug Reeves
An Alternative Model for Meaningful and Fair Educational Accountability

Richard Strong
The Differentiated Classroom

Caroline Tripp and Andy Platt:
Taking Charge of Our Own Profession: Confronting Mediocre Teaching
(Standards in the Classroom, Continued from page 4) becomes difficult for some students. While they will have the opportunity to spiral back to those same skills in the coming years, they are nonetheless tested for mastery on those skills and content in third grade. In all the subjects, we’re just feeling like we can’t really dig in.

**NB: I see a higher level of stress but then again on the plus side, I see a lot of motivation. I see kids working a little harder than they normally would have if they didn’t have the test hanging over their heads. They’re stressed – what if I don’t pass the MCAS? Am I going to get into a college if I don’t pass? When the first wave of kids who didn’t pass the test retake it, then some of that stress will be relieved and they’ll know that they ultimately pass the test if they work hard and do some remedial work.**

“**Support for Struggling Students**”

There appear to be significant differences in how school districts have responded to the call to enable all students to meet standards as measured by the MCAS. According to teacher responses, some systems have an extensive array of student support services, whereas other systems haven’t really changed the level of support provided to students or teachers since the institution of the high-stakes testing.

**CS:** It’s so new to us. We basically have a remediation program right now that consists of very small student tutorials that are available after school and it’s offered by current teachers as well as tutors from the local area. It has been difficult to get students to attend in the first place because some of them are already feeling hopeless or marginalized, but we did make a really strong appeal to students and their parents about the seriousness of this. In my own school, the turnout has been pretty good. I’m really encouraged that some of these students are saying that they’re really learning more in that setting. Test taking instruction may be more explicit. Maybe they’re able to learn some of the concepts and content when it’s presented to them in a smaller tutorial environment where they can ask the kind of questions and get direct support that may be difficult to get in a regular class.

**NB:** We started providing support from the very beginning. We have a Saturday School. We have an after-school program. We have a summer MCAS academy to provide extra help as well as enrichment. We really pioneered some of those things early on. We went back and looked at the kids who attended Saturday School and I think 96% of them passed the MCAS. Our kids are very serious and it seems like they wanted to do every-thing they could to pass the test, to give them the edge.

**MM:** I don’t think I spend as much time thinking about how I’m going to reach every child. It’s more like - can I get the skills covered? There’ll be certain kids who get it and certain kids who don’t. There’s little difference in available resources to help struggling elementary students since MCAS came about. That’s part of the teacher frustration. We’re being asked to do more, but we need smaller classes, or more teacher assistant time so they can take half the class or a different group. Elementary teachers are expected to be experts in all disciplines. It’s hard to keep all the balls in the air.

**SC:** The bottom line for me, in terms of helping all kids learn, is really small classes. In private schools and charter schools where the classes were never bigger than sixteen, the amount of learning that goes on – it’s so different. If they had one place to pour lots of money into education, as far as I’m concerned, it would be in reducing class size.

“**Wildly Overworked**”

Teachers were asked about the types of professional development opportunities that were available in their schools to assist them in the understanding and implementation of the curriculum frameworks. The ways in which teachers have been asked to attend to another new set of demands greatly impacts their receptivity to standards-based instruction.

**DR:** The district did a lot of work aligning curriculum with the state frameworks, so that was going on at the same time as a three-year research project. Within this project, we also learned how to be in a study group, learned some tools for analyzing standards, and student work analysis, and how to have discussions around the professional literature. The way that we’ve worked through the frameworks in study groups is through using a template that gives you a process. You look at a standard and take it apart in terms of what concepts and skills your kids need to know in order to do this; then from there, talk about the learning and teaching activities that would support the evolution of those concepts and skills; then think about the kids and talk about what resources and materials you would really need. It’s a thorough process to really understand what kids will have to do.

**SC:** Teachers are wildly overworked. I see all kinds of teachers staying after school with kids, doing things that we all want to do to help every child in our class. I can’t begin to tell how many meetings I had to attend. I was a curriculum team leader in math at my school so there were those meetings in terms of observing the standards,
reviewing the exams, figuring out how to bring my faculty along. I felt terrible having to ask them to come after school to go over this, that, or the other thing. People really resented it after awhile. Good teachers are going to look at this stuff anyway. I sometimes felt I was being forced to have meetings just to get the resistant teachers there. People keep throwing more stuff at teachers; it never occurs to anybody to pay them more.

**MM:** Our in-service time is not long enough to explore all the new expectations. We were given a 3-inch binder on the Language Arts frameworks, and we met by grade level. We were told to turn to three different sections, read that framework and say how we could teach it.... People were so overwhelmed. They hadn't really had a chance to look at it, and observe which skills we already were teaching or which skills constituted new expectations. We had a meet-the-teacher night, then we had a parent explanation night, then we went into five weeks of conferences...you still are going to be planning and correcting papers. There aren't enough hours in the day. But, there has to be time for teachers to share ideas and understand what the frameworks really mean....

"**Vision**"

Teachers comment that we are in the midst of a change process. It doesn't feel entirely comfortable in all respects, but the promise of higher expectations for students yielding greater student achievement makes the effort worthwhile. There are still many questions and issues to consider. Teachers further share their ideas regarding how to improve the plan for standards-based instruction and assessment.

**SC:** If you had the curriculum frameworks, but didn't have the MCAS, would teachers do it? I don't know how to separate them exactly.

**DR:** I think one of the things that has to happen is greater communication about teaching and learning. We're really looking at what kids produce in classes – we've definitely started on that route but we still have more progress to make in terms of seeing one another teach, seeing good demonstrations of different types of things going on in classrooms.

**NB:** I'd like to see portfolios play a more important role because that's what the MCAS was supposed to be – it was supposed to be a system, not just one test, and I'd hate to think that one test would keep somebody from getting a degree. Lots of times there are kids who have different learning styles, and need to be assessed differently, and the portfolio seems to me the way to go.

**MAO:** We're in the middle of a process. The children who will have gone all the way through school once the standards are in place will be in a very different place than children who are now tenth graders who have had varying degrees of exposure to the standards. Hopefully there will be a way to support those students for whom this has been made high stakes. We want every child to achieve at the very highest level. We know we can improve education. We're not there yet. It isn't that it's horrible. It isn't that it's wonderful. If we keep our focus on improving education, then it's great. It's great to have feedback on how kids are doing. It's great for us to be able to think about what we want our children to accomplish - to focus our teaching on that target and to go for the gold - those are wonderful things. It's just that there's a human cost somewhere in between.

Our Best Source of Information & Insight

Teacher comments on the impact of standards raise a new layer of questions. Is it possible that in the quest to “cover” material in a standards-based curriculum, some students will be less able to meet standards because they need more time for mastery? How do we reconcile our belief in student-centered instruction with the push to meet only pre-established teaching objectives? With the emphasis on teaching such an array of content and skills, do educators have less time to work on establishing caring communities in their classrooms? Will emphasis on the arts and physical/health education take a back seat to those subject areas that are tested on the MCAS? What would it take to create a truly inclusive ‘assessment system’ which measures the abilities of all students? How do teachers sustain the love of teaching if they feel pressured, overworked, and a lack of support in the face of continually refining and adapting their practice?

As evident from these interviews, teachers have an astounding ability to constantly process and absorb new teaching requirements. They are, perhaps, our best source of information and insight on the benefits and drawbacks of any effort to reform education. It is essential that we listen to the voices of teachers as we approach next steps in this process of improving the quality of education in Massachusetts.

**Susan M. Carlson** is a member of the MASCD Publications Committee. She is a former special education teacher, service learning grant coordinator, and Director of Student Support Services in several MA school systems. She is now preparing for an elementary principalship. She can be reached at carlson1@pop.MA.ultranet.com.
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