

Teacher Magazine

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A Decade of Standards

This week, Education Week, Teacher Magazine's sister publication, released Quality Counts 2006, the 10th edition of its annual report on the condition of education across the states.

Taking an appropriately retrospective approach, this year's report examines the overall impact of the states' efforts to carry out standards-based education over the past decade. In a recent interview, we asked Lynn Olson, executive project editor of Quality Counts, and Christopher B. Swanson, director of the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, about some of the report's findings in relation to teachers.

Q: *How do you think the teaching profession has changed in the past 10 years as a result of the push for standards-based education?*

Lynn Olson: I think people now realize that the quality of teaching is key to helping students achieve high standards, although there's a continued debate about how best to measure "teacher quality." One thing we've noticed is the increasing focus on whether teachers have the subject-matter knowledge to teach the content that students are supposed to learn. For example, 42 states and the District of Columbia now require high school teachers to pass subject-matter tests to earn their initial licenses, up from 29 states in 2000. And 33 states require high school teachers to have majored in the subject they plan to teach, compared to 23 states in the 2000 edition of *Quality Counts*.

Chris Swanson: And by contrast, the numbers of states requiring aspiring teachers to meet other types of requirements for their initial licensure—for example, passing tests of basic skills or pedagogical knowledge—has remained essentially flat since 2000.

That suggests that state efforts to improve teacher quality have been particularly concentrated on the issue of subject-matter knowledge in recent years, perhaps resulting in less attention to other areas. The federal No Child Left Behind Act's requirements for "highly qualified" teachers also tend to place particular emphasis on mastery of subject matter when defining what teacher "quality" means. You could say NCLB was picking up on an existing trend among the states.

Another offshoot of the standards-based education push is that there's been a growing interest in measuring teachers' performance in the classroom, although how to do that remains extremely controversial.

Q: *Quality Counts finds that the states' embrace of standards-based education has corresponded with much improved math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress but that reading scores have been basically flat. How do you explain the difference?*

Chris Swanson: There are two possible explanations that experts often point to when explaining differences between math and reading. One relates to differences in the nature of the learning process and context for these two subjects. The other highlights the different trajectories of standards-based-reform efforts in these areas.

First, many experts note that math tends to be learned more exclusively in school, whereas the acquisition of literacy skills may be more heavily influenced by the environment outside the classroom. For example, the kinds of reading skills that translate into higher test scores may be influenced by the vocabulary parents use with their children, how many books are in the home, and whether children are read to on a regular basis. By contrast, there may be fewer opportunities for a student to pick up advanced math skills at home in their day-to-day lives. So, in effect, standards-based policies in schools can have more of an impact on students' math skills than on their reading proficiency.

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Lynn Olson

Having said that, we may also be seeing the results of differences in the way that standards-based reform evolved in these two areas. Early efforts to improve mathematics education using a standards-based model date back to the voluntary national standards released by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989. These highly influential standards have guided many states in their own approach to adopting standards in mathematics. At about the same time, the federal government also started investing heavily in mathematics education through programs like the National Science Foundation's systemic initiative in math and science. This further bolstered the growing movement for standards in math. By comparison, the movement for standards-based education in English/language arts has been much less coherent. Acrimonious debates have arisen around a number of politically contentious issues, such as how to define the "canon" in literature or how to represent multicultural perspectives. These kinds of hurdles have hampered the development of a strong movement for standards-based education in the language arts.

Q: *One of the most surprising findings in Quality Counts 2006 is that state efforts to improve teacher quality have had a negative relationship with student achievement. Can you explain that finding and what it might mean for teachers?*

Chris Swanson: We should first point out that these findings are suggestive rather than conclusive. Making firm links between state policy and changes in student achievement is a challenging enterprise in a lot of ways. That said, the analysis featured in

Quality Counts goes to considerable lengths in its methodology so that we can have confidence that these findings point to an issue that deserves a closer look.

In terms of the finding on the effects of teacher-quality policies, it could be an issue of policymakers and education leaders needing to develop a more nuanced understanding of what actually contributes to teachers' effectiveness. We know, generally, that teacher quality matters for student achievement. But there is less agreement on how best to measure teacher quality. What makes for a highly effective, high-quality teacher? It could be background in the subject matter being taught, as measured by a degree in field. It could be finely honed pedagogical skills, or years of experience, or a commitment to ensuring that every child achieves to his or her full potential. Probably, it's a combination of all of these factors and more. So when we look at the state-level relationship between changes in student achievement and the teacher-quality policies we now have—such as whether teachers have passed certain tests or majored in their subjects—it could be that these policies are just not enough to identify the most effective teachers. Likewise, strategies for improving teacher quality that have been tried and followed for the longest period of time—such as the policies on teacher-education qualifications and licensure requirements that the *Quality Counts* analysis examines—may tell only part of the story on teacher quality.

It's also true that a huge proportion of teachers haven't even been affected by many of the teacher-quality initiatives in existence. Considerable state effort in the past decade has been devoted to strengthening teacher licensing standards and taking other measures to improve the quality of the incoming teaching force. But because these policies are not geared toward veteran teachers, they may not have as much of an impact on the overall quality of the teaching profession.

Q: *Many teachers have expressed concerns that increased*

standardization and testing in schools threatens their independence and creativity. Do you think that's true?

Lynn Olson: I think there's a difference between standards and standardization. Clear and parsimonious standards can help communicate to students, parents, and teachers what's to be learned and how well. Similarly, we need a variety of assessment measures to communicate to students, parents, and teachers how children are doing and whether they're progressing toward meeting the standards. The concern arises when we substitute more narrowly focused test-based accountability for standards-based education, so that teachers feel they are spending too much time on test-preparation activities rather than on deeper learning.

Q: How can teachers thrive within the standards-based education framework?

Lynn Olson: By focusing on the core knowledge and skills embodied in the standards rather than on narrow test-preparation activities. Teachers often tell me that the standards have forced them to really think about what they want students to know and be able to do, and to work backwards from there, rather than just teaching their favorite lessons or pet topics. One problem is that many state standards are still too vague or too voluminous to be of much help to teachers. But when teachers collaborate to really examine the quality of student work, and what students are or are not learning, and readjust their teaching accordingly, then I think we're seeing standards-based education the way it should be.

Q: What trends in education do you expect to emerge in the next ten years? What should teachers expect?

Lynn Olson: I think we'll see a continued emphasis on using data from a variety of sources—not just state tests—to help inform and adjust instruction on a minute-to-minute basis. That means they'll be much more focus on the types of assessments that can inform teaching and learning, not just testing for

accountability purposes. That also means that teachers will need to become increasingly skilled at using the data that feeds into instruction. The focus on teacher quality will not go away—as evidenced by the recent interest in pay-for-performance and value-added methods for measuring whether teachers are contributing to student learning. We’re also clearly seeing a continued debate about what constitutes “public education”—witness the rapid growth of charter schools—and whether we can achieve big leaps in performance within the existing system. But, perhaps most important, I think people are starting to talk about how to move beyond the current phase of standards-based education to focus more strongly on what actually happens inside classrooms and how to support it. And that means talking about how to engage and motivate students and make them responsible for their own learning, topics that really have not received much focus to date. Finally, I think there’s a growing interest in connecting K-12 education reform with what students need to be successful after high school, whether that’s work, further education, or citizenship.

—Anthony Rebor

*Read the complete Education Week report, **Quality Counts at 10: A Decade of Standards-Based Education**. Includes state report cards.*

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