

Standards-Based Reform and Rural School Improvement: Finding the Middle Ground

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Two movements in school improvement are compared and contrasted: standards-based reform and rural school improvement efforts that emphasize locally-responsive, place-based curricula. While the two movements differ in philosophical orientation, they share the following goals: increasing equity in schools, making curricula and pedagogy intellectually rigorous, and creating content and opportunity-to-learn standards. They differ in that the standards-based movement advocates the development of state and national standards tied to a testing and accountability program, while rural school improvement advocates believe that all standards should be developed locally and that student assessment should be designed to provide instructional feedback to teachers. The author proposes that advocates of the two approaches to school improvement work together to create a school reform movement that will lead to better schools and communities than either movement can create on its own.

Since the 1980s, there has developed in the U.S. a push for national and/or state academic standards defining what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate from high school. The movement evolved out of a call for education reform sparked by the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education). When initial reform efforts following its publication were viewed as too prescriptive and focused on the quantity of curricular and instructional delivery (such as increasing the time students spent studying specific subjects), the focus shifted to the quality of the core academic content being taught in public schools (Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997). The publication of national mathematics standards in 1989 (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics), as well as the endorsement of national educational goals by the nation's governors and President Bush that same year, launched a push for academic standards that led to the development of national standards documents in at least 12 subject areas (Baker & Linn, 1997; Marzano, Kendall, & Cicchinelli, 1999). The result is that standards-based reform has become an integral feature of states' plans for school improvement (Massell et al.).

The call for national and state academic standards concerns many who study or work in rural schools in the U.S. Already dismayed by the standardized and generic nature of schooling wrought by over a century of state and national reform (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999), a small but determined group of rural education researchers and advo-

cates have argued for curricula and pedagogy centered on understanding and sustaining local communities (Haas & Lambert, 1995; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Howley, 1997; Sher, 1995; Theobald, 1997).

This article compares and contrasts the tenets and strategies of standards-based reform with those of rural school improvement efforts that emphasize locally-responsive, place-based curricula and pedagogy, then proposes a middle ground between the two approaches.

Leading Organizations, Thinkers

The standards-based reform movement has been promoted and influenced by several individuals and organizations since the early 1990s. The National Center on Education and the Economy, under leadership of Marc Tucker and Lauren Resnick, has promoted, developed, and marketed reform programs centered on content and performance standards for students (O'Neil, 1993). Leading the charge for the standards-based movement in the policy research arena are researchers and academics affiliated with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), which "unites researchers from five of the nation's leading research institutions to improve elementary and secondary education through research on policy, finance, school reform, and school governance" (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2000). The five institutions are the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. CPRE is directed by Susan H. Fuhrman, dean of the graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. CPRE researchers who have studied and advocated for standards-based reform include David Cohen,

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Until 1995, rural school improvement efforts were advocated by individual researchers and academics scattered across the United States. This group included Alan DeYoung, Toni Haas, Craig Howley, Paul Nachtigal, Jonathan Sher, and Paul Theobald. In 1995, many of these leaders developed and submitted a proposal to philanthropist Walter Annenberg, who then funded a 5-year effort to improve rural schools (Sher, 1995). The Annenberg Rural Challenge was formed and has led the charge for rural school improvement since that time. The organization is now known as the Rural School and Community Trust, a "virtual" organization with a small national staff led by President Rachel B. Tompkins. The mission of the Trust is "to enlarge student learning and improve community life by strengthening relationships between rural schools and communities and engaging students in community-based public work" (Rural School and Community Trust, 2000).

Philosophical Orientations and Goals

The two groups—advocates of standards-based reform as well as advocates of rural school improvement—uniformly decry the mediocrity that has resulted from the standardized, factory approach to schooling that evolved during the industrial age and has persisted to the present (Kannapel, 1991; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Sher, 1995). The groups differ, however, in their fundamental orientations and commitments (Howley, 1997; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The standards-based movement is focused on developing uniform state or national standards to prepare students for national citizenry, often framed in terms of preparing students to compete in a national and global economy (Tucker, 1992). While some rural education scholars believe that standards-based reform is focused singularly on economic competitiveness (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998), Smith, Fuhrman, & O'Day (1994) assert that uniform standards would not only increase U.S. economic competitiveness, but would prepare students to participate in a democracy, encourage states to raise expectations for students, improve the quality of education, and create greater equality of educational opportunity. Many advocates of standards-based reform believe that state and national standards should leave room for locally-responsive curricula (Smith et al.; Smith & O'Day, 1991; Tucker, 1992), but they are sketchy on details of how this would work, and equally sketchy on the role parents and community members should play in school reform.

In contrast to the national focus of the standards-based movement, those who advocate for rural school improvement believe that curriculum and pedagogy should be grounded in the community context so that students learn how to become productive citizens of their local commu-

nity as well as the larger society (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). Like proponents of standards-based reform, rural school advocates seek to improve student learning but they also seek to strengthen relationships between rural schools and communities and engage students in community-based public work (Rural School and Community Trust, 2000). At the heart of this movement is a desire to sustain and energize local communities through educating children about local ecology, political and governmental systems, economy, knowledge, and culture (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998).

While the standards-based movement's emphasis on preparing students for global competitiveness and national citizenry differs in orientation from the rural school improvement focus on preparing students for citizenry centered around local communities, the two movements share two important goals: promoting greater educational equity and increasing the intellectual rigor of classroom curricula and pedagogy.

Equity. Joseph Murphy (1993) identifies educational equity as a fundamental principle of the standards-based movement through its stance that all children can learn, that schools are responsible for ensuring that this learning occurs, and that they should do so through adapting instructional approaches within the regular curriculum rather than isolating disadvantaged students in remedial programs. Smith and O'Day (1991) assert that unifying goals for all schools must embody democratic values critical to the society: respect for all people, tolerance, equality of opportunity, respect for the individual, participation in the democratic process, and service to the society. Massell et al. (1997) state that "by focusing on raising academic expectations for all students, standards-based reforms interweave equity with academic excellence policies" (p. 49).

For a number of years, advocates for rural school improvement focused less on equity for individual students and more on keeping rural communities viable through their schools. Equity, if it was dealt with at all, was framed primarily in terms of the lack of equity of resources between rural and urban/suburban school districts (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). By 1999, however, the Rural Challenge policy statement on standards had taken a strong stance on educational equity, stating that content standards should be high enough to be challenging to all students, and that "Neither local control nor high standards is an acceptable excuse for using public schools to enforce social injustices, to teach discrimination, or to counsel hatred" (Rural Challenge, 1999a, p. 60). The policy statement also asserts that locally-generated standards should embody an educational mission to help all children develop their intellectual capacity.

Intellectual rigor. Central to the mission of standards-based reform is the goal of increasing the intellectual rigor of curricula and pedagogy on the rationale that classroom

activity has traditionally been dull, perfunctory, and disconnected from real life. Proponents of standards-based reform argue that teacher-directed, fact-based instruction must be replaced with a new model of “teaching for understanding” in which students engage in active problem solving in order to develop conceptual understanding of subject matter (Elmore, 1990; Fuhrman, Elmore, & Massell, 1993; Smith & O’Day, 1991).

Similarly, rural school improvement advocates believe that curricula and instruction should be intellectually rigorous, although they believe that the context for curriculum and instruction is as important as content. The Rural Challenge policy statement asserts that “Teachers need to teach from the experience of the community to intellectually rigorous standards” (Rural Challenge, 1999a, p. 60). Howley and Howley (1995, p. 129) believe that rural schooling should “animate the intellect” in ways that help children become more thoughtful members of the local community as well the larger society.

Control of Standards, Curricula, and Pedagogy

Proponents of standards-based reform believe that standards and curriculum frameworks should be defined by the state, while local school personnel should be responsible for defining the curriculum and selecting strategies to help students meet the standards (Fuhrman et al., 1993; Smith & O’Day, 1991). Smith and O’Day offer the following analogy:

One way to picture this relationship is through the analogy of a voyage. The state, through the curriculum frameworks and in consultation with teachers and district personnel, provides a description of the ultimate destination of the journey. Teachers and other school people then have the primary responsibility to chart the course, assemble the necessary provisions and crew, and pilot the ship. (1991, p. 254)

Smith and O’Day suggest no role for parents and the community in standards-setting or major decision making, stating only that schools should develop mechanisms for parent involvement. Other standards-based reformers give more attention to this issue, however. Massell (1994) notes that determining who participates in the agenda-setting process is a key decision that can affect the balance between two competing goals: (a) generating standards that have broad public and professional consensus; and (b) generating cutting-edge standards that can move public education beyond the status quo. Similarly, Fuhrman et al. (1993, p. 14) state that “Employers, college officials, and parents must come to understand and value challenging notions of learning if they are to reinforce school reform”—thus im-

plying a need to convince parents and the public to buy into standards-based reform. These same authors also state, “One way to educate the public and professionals, to enlist their important insights and expertise, and to grant them ownership of the reform enterprise is to involve them in the development of standards for students” (p. 14). Generally, standards-based reformers recognize that public support is needed to sustain reform, but indicate a preference for an approach that gains parent and public support for state-generated standards through public relations and parent involvement strategies.

Rural education advocates are much less equivocal about who should be involved in setting educational standards. Initially, some rural advocates questioned the very notion of standard-setting, suggesting that educational outcomes should not be predetermined but should arise from individual situations (Haas & Lambert, 1995). Since 1998, however, there have been numerous exchanges and writings among the rural audience about the feasibility of combining standards-based reform with locally-responsive curricula (AEL, Inc., 2000; Haas, 1999; Jennings, 2000; Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard & Reeves, 1999; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Rural Challenge, 1999a, 1999b). In 1999, the Rural Challenge issued a policy statement advocating standards that originate in local communities and that are widely shared and understood by all community members. The policy statement goes on to assert that the challenge for the standards movement is not to coax adoption of high standards, but to generate them from within local communities (Rural Challenge, 1999a).

Strategies for School Improvement

There are areas of congruence and conflict between the views of standards-based reformers and rural school improvement advocates regarding appropriate strategies for school improvement. The greatest congruence lies in the area of pedagogy and, to a lesser degree, the kind of standards that are needed. The greatest source of conflict is in the area of assessment and accountability. In addition, professional development for teachers to teach under each of these approaches to school improvement is better articulated by standards-based reformers than by rural school improvement advocates. Each of these topics is considered below.

Kinds of standards needed. Both standards-based reformers and rural-school improvement advocates believe that standards are needed in the area of curriculum content (Rural Challenge, 1999a; Smith et al., 1994). Rural advocates as well as some (but by no means all) standards-based reformers also identify a need for “opportunity to learn” or learning conditions standards (Rural Challenge, 1999a; Smith et al.). Where the two groups differ, however, is that rural school improvement advocates call for including con-

text standards in the standards-setting process. Context standards call for using the community and native environment as the context for teaching to the content standards (Rural Challenge, 1999a). Standards-based reformers, on the other hand, do not prescribe the context in which content standards will be taught.

Classroom pedagogy. Both groups support local autonomy in making decisions about classroom pedagogy, but advocate instructional strategies that involve students actively in solving real-life problems (Elmore, 1990; Rural Challenge, 1999a; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Some researchers have pointed out that many community-based projects model the kinds of instruction called for by advocates of standards-based reform (Jennings, 2000; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

Assessment and accountability. Perhaps the greatest point of conflict between the two approaches to school improvement is in the area of assessment and accountability. Standards-based reformers call for holding schools accountable for state standards through statewide performance-based assessment (Smith et al., 1994; Smith & O'Day, 1991). At the same time, some standards-based advocates acknowledge that tying teacher accountability to a state test can inhibit local creativity and initiative (Smith et al.). Indeed, studies of state standards-based reform efforts have shown that tested content sometimes crowds out local curricula (Jennings, 2000; Kannapel, Aagaard, Coe, & Reeves, 2000).

Two recent virtual discussions on standards-based reform in rural schools (AEL, Inc., 2000; Rural Challenge, 1999b) revealed that one of the greatest concerns of rural school advocates is the emphasis in standards-based reform on high-stakes testing, which has the potential to dictate what is taught in schools and drive out locally-developed curricula. The Rural Challenge (1999a) policy statement on standards expresses support for assessments linked to standards that are used to measure students' progress and to give guidance to their teachers, and also notes that student assessments can help measure the effectiveness of a school and its reform efforts. However, because rural school improvement advocates believe that standards should be developed locally, the inference is that assessment and accountability systems should also be locally determined—although the policy statement does not address this issue outright.

Teacher professional development. Professional development for teachers to teach to high academic standards, and to adapt instruction to reach all students, is identified as an integral part of standards-based reform (Massell, 1998; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Specifically, standards-based reformers call for such strategies as establishing regional service centers within states to provide easier access to professional development and technical assistance, creat-

ing teacher networks, providing technical assistance in schools and classrooms, and providing teachers with specific curriculum guidance and models that are tied to state standards (Massell, 1998).

In contrast, rural school improvement advocates have not articulated a strategy for preparing teachers to teach to high academic standards within the local community context. Some rural writers and researchers, however, have identified resources and strategies that teachers might employ if they choose to teach in this way (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Theobald, 1997).

The Middle Ground

This comparison of standards-based reform and rural school improvement has delineated several ways in which the two movements differ, but has also shown how they are compatible. The standards-based movement is focused on setting state and national standards that all students must meet, suggesting a common curricular focus that would equip students to participate in national society. These standards would necessarily be developed through representation that cuts across local communities and constituencies. Most advocates of standards-based reform advocate broad state and national standards that leave some room for local discretion.

Rural school improvement, on the other hand, is focused on teaching children knowledge and skills within the context of their local communities so that they will be prepared to participate effectively locally as well as at the state and national level. Standards would be developed within local communities, resulting in different standards in different places. Explicit in this approach is the desire to sustain rural communities and lifeways.

Both movements strongly support educational equity and intellectual rigor in curriculum and instruction, suggesting that there is middle ground between the two movements. In one of the few research projects that considered this question, Jennings (2000) documented that in rural Maine schools where place-based curricula had historically played only a marginal role, state standards pushed locally-responsive curricula even deeper into the background. In schools where place-based curricula were already well-established, however, state standards sometimes contributed to or enhanced this focus. For instance, a rural school on the Canadian border that had already established a bilingual program became a model for the state when state standards endorsed foreign language in elementary schools. Similarly, when geology faculty at a local college obtained a grant to study groundwater, they designed middle school activities to study local groundwater that fit with state middle school standards on hydrology. As a result, many middle school teachers participated in the project.

Directions for the Future

This article has identified some key areas of conflict and congruence between standards-based reform and rural school improvement. Currently, the standards-based movement is dominating educational reform activity in urban, suburban, and rural schools across the nation through state legislation that is strongly influenced by the thinking of standards-based reformers. The main impact of the movement for rural school improvement has been through the more isolated, grant-based projects of the Rural School and Community Trust.

Very little conversation has occurred between advocates of the two reform approaches, although recent articles in this journal, as well as a symposium at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, have attempted to initiate such a conversation (Jennings, 2000; Kannapel et al., 1999; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Porter & Jennings, 2000).

Linking standards-based reform with rural school improvement efforts could produce the following goals and strategies for school reform: equity of educational opportunity and achievement, intellectually challenging curricula and pedagogy, uniform content standards with flexibility built in for locally responsive curricula, uniform opportunity-to-learn standards, and a robust system of teacher professional development that would include assistance in developing: (a) place-based curriculum units that teach to the content standards, and (b) performance-based assessments that track individual student progress toward standards.

Further research such as that conducted by Jennings (2000) would be useful in helping develop such a reform vision. Such research might identify schools with place-based curricula and examine ways in which these curricula link with state and national standards, as well as ways in which the two are in conflict. In addition, policy researchers studying the implementation of standards-based reform might search out examples of place-based curricula and pedagogy that are congruent with state and national standards. The research should identify barriers and facilitators to the linkage of standards-based reform and place-based curricula, including professional development and technical assistance that help teachers link the two.

With data from such studies in hand, standards-based reformers and rural school improvement advocates could begin to work together to resolve some of the thorny issues that currently separate the two movements, including:

- (a) Assessment and accountability: If standards are developed locally (as envisioned by rural school improvement advocates), how will schools be helped to develop local assessments tied to those standards, and what pur-

pose would the assessments serve? How would schools be held accountable? And if state assessments tied to accountability mechanisms are imposed (as advocated by standards-based reformers), how can those assessments be made responsive to locally developed curricula?

- (b) Teacher professional development: What kind of assistance and time do teachers need to develop experiential curriculum units tied to state standards but centered around the community, and who will provide this assistance?
- (c) Parent and community involvement: How can parents and community members be involved in creating standards that are uniformly high for all students, but that respond to local needs?

It is the belief of this author that the combined efforts of standards-based reformers and rural school improvement advocates can lead to better schools and communities than either movement can accomplish on its own. The goal of teaching students to live well and responsibly in their local communities (be they rural or urban) might temper the singularly academic focus of the standards-based movement and serve as a reminder that schools are and have always been about more than academics. Similarly, the uniformity and equity that is central to standards-based reform might serve as a check against local cultural practices that empower certain groups at the expense of others.

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