EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS ARCHIVES

A peer-reviewed scholarly journal
Editor: Gene V Glass
College of Education
Arizona State University

Volume 11 Number 44 **November 18, 2003** **ISSN 1068-2341**

Teachers Voices Interpreting Standards: Compromising Teachers Autonomy or Raising Expectations and Performances?

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Citation: Rigsby, L. C., & DeMulder, E. K. (2003, November 18). Teachers Voices Interpreting Standards: Compromising Teachers Autonomy or Raising Expectations and Performances?. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 11*(44). Retrieved [Date] from http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n44/.

Abstract

The State of Virginia has adopted state-mandated testing that aims to raise the standards of performance for children in our schools in a manner that assigns accountability to schools and to teachers. In this paper we argue that the conditions under which the standards were created and the testing implemented undermine the professionalism of teachers. We believe this result has the further consequence of compromising the critical thinking and learning processes of children. We argue this has happened because teachers' views and experiences have driven neither the setting of standards nor the assessment of their achievement.

We use data from essays by teachers in an innovative masters program to compare teachers' experiences involving the Virginia Standards of Learning with ideal standards for professional development adopted by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. We argue that there are serious negative consequences of the failure to include dialogue with K-12 teachers in setting standards and especially in the creation of assessments to measure performances relative to the standards. We believe the most successful, honest, and morally defensible processes must be built on the experience and wisdom of classroom teachers.

Introduction

The State of Virginia, along with 48 other states in the US, has adopted state-mandated testing that aims to raise the standards of performance for children in our schools in a manner that assigns accountability to schools and to teachers (Martin, 1999). These changes have occurred at the same time that there are increasing national pressures for teachers to develop as professionals, increasing both their pedagogical competence and subject matter competence (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards). These contradictory pressures on teachers have generated a voluminous policy literature on the benefits and costs of an accountability system that is governed by standards and tests. General treatments of the issues are available in books by Hirsch (1996), Cookson (1998), Kohn (1999, 2000), McNeil (2000), Meier (2000), Popham (2001), and Sacks (1999). These policy treatments have not always fully articulated the models of teaching and learning they assume. Empirical studies of how classrooms and classroom practice are affected by the imposition of state-wide standards and tests have begun to appear. A number of empirical studies of teachers attitudes and beliefs about testing (Cimbricz, 2002), about changes in teachers perceptions of testing (Grant, 2000) and other topics (Brown 1993; Gallucci 2003; Haney 2000; Jones et al. 1999; Kebow and DeBard 2000; Mitchell 1997; Smith 1991) have been reported. Cimbricz, (2002. p. 11) concludes " . . . studies that provide a richer, more in-depth understanding of the relationship between state-mandated testing and teaching in actual school settings . . . are greatly needed."

In this paper we focus in depth on the impact of standards and testing on the teaching force of a number of Northern Virginia school divisions. Our intention is to share the voices and analyses of teachers as they make sense of how the standards have affected their practice. Analyzing what teachers wrote about their experiences with the standards and tests leads us to the conclusion that the conditions under which the Virginia Standards of Learning were created and the testing implemented undermine the professionalism of teachers. We fear this result has the further consequence of compromising the critical thinking and learning processes of children. We believe this has happened because teachers intuitive understandings of teaching and learning have been ignored in the setting of standards and the planning of assessments. We use data from writing by teachers to compare their classroom experiences involving the Virginia Standards of Learning with ideal standards for professional

development. We argue that there are serious negative consequences of the failure to include dialogue with Pre-K-12 teachers in the setting of standards and especially in the creation of assessments to measure performances relative to the standards. We believe the most successful, honest, and morally defensible accountability processes must be built on the experience and wisdom of classroom teachers. Given the political nature of the decisions to adopt standardized tests at the state level (Berliner & Biddle 1996), no state has adopted standards and assessments that fit the model we advocate. A growing literature, of which this paper is an example, illustrates the impact of these decisions on classroom practice and children's learning.

Methods

Data for this paper come from an on-line discussion carried out by teachers in a masters program (see Appendix). On-line discussions are a routine aspect of the pedagogy of the program. The course and the discussion took place in the spring and early summer of 1998, just after these teachers or their school colleagues had administered the first round of testing associated with the Virginia Standards of Learning. The discussion narratives were their reports and analyses of these experiences. Teachers in the cohort who contributed to these discussions came from five Northern Virginia school districts, representing twenty-nine schools in all. They came to the program in teams from these schools. Teams varied from two to five teachers. Teachers had from one to twenty-five years of classroom experience. The distribution of experience clustered around five to seven years. Teachers varied in age from twenty-two to mid-fifties. In the cohort of 77 teachers who finished the program (of 85 who began the program in the summer of 1977), thirty-nine were elementary teachers, twenty-four were middle school teachers, and fourteen were high school teachers.

The course in which teachers were enrolled at the time of the discussion focused on the language and cultural basis of classroom practice. Topics include such foci as: identity and subjectivity, multiple perspectives, and multi-cultural experience. The discussion narratives are like conversations among the teachers. We had the advantage of being ethnographers "listening" to these written conversations. In this sense, the conversations are more thought-out than teachers lounge conversations. The teachers had read and discussed Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words*, Sylvia Ashton Warner's *Teacher*, Lawrence Levine's *The Opening of the American Mind*, and E.D. Hirsch's *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. In addition to the discussion narratives, we draw on papers written as the final assignment of the course to summarize and comment on the Web-based discussion.

Our expectations were that teachers write in the forum at least once per week over a three month period about issues that connected in any way with the topics of the course. We had no expectations about the particular content of the discussions. Our intention was that the conversations be governed by the concerns the teachers brought from their classrooms. Faculty read the postings but did not participate in the exchanges. It was in reading the postings that we learned of the concerns teachers had about the new Virginia Standards of Learning (curriculum standards) and the tests that came with them.

Our attention was drawn to the issue of the impact of standards and testing on classroom practice as we encountered teachers writing about their experience. One very dominant thread in the discussions was teachers' reactions to the new curriculum standards and to the test that was given for the first time. We also were encountering the standards and test for the first time. We were driven to try to make sense of what the teachers were saying and why their comments were so overwhelmingly critical.

The nature of these data do not allow us to generalize to the experience of all teachers or all contexts. This is a self-consciously "local" study that seeks to make sense of the experience of these teachers as they began to teach under the regime of state-mandated curriculum standards and testing procedures. That the experience of these teachers fits the experience of teachers in other locales is confirmed by other studies that will be cited in the discussion that follows.

The Context of Professional Development of Teachers

The implications for teachers and teaching of the contradictory pressures from the standards and tests are profound. Wood has argued " . . . at the heart of any plans for professional development and institutional growth are, of course, the twin issues of **assessment and accountability"** (Wood, 2000). She goes on to point out that programs developed in response to the work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (http://www.NBPTS.org) disrupt more conventional notions of these terms (Wood, 2000). Professional development programs that have teachers shouldering a portion of the assessment burden through collaborative, reflective, and evaluative processes of inquiry and intervention can transform the culture of schools. Wood argues that plans for teachers' professional development that require teachers to take more responsibility for assessment of their own practice and continuous self-improvement have the potential to revolutionize educational practice. They create opportunities for teachers to develop the capacity to make strong professional judgments based on self-reflection, critical dialogue, and credible use of evidence. Most assessment plans, and particularly, we argue, the typical state-mandated "core knowledge examinations" simply by-pass teachers professional judgments altogether. Smith and Knight (1997) describe the professional dependency such practices promote:

> Reliance on packaged programs developed by experts outside the local school is a typical way of addressing problems in schools and school districts. This apparent infatuation with implementing the "newest solution of choice" mirrors the expectation of large numbers of teachers that they and their colleagues need to rely on the prescriptions of putative outside experts rather than on their own professional judgments. The teachers we work with reject this idea (p. 45).

The professional development programs based on principles consistent with the work of NBPTS advocate an approach to accountability that is equated with the capacity of teachers to be responsive to the needs of real children. Schools, of

course, exist in a complex set of nested, constantly changing contexts--geographical, cultural, political, economic, technological. Being accountable simply cannot hinge on the mastery of some set of generic techniques. For teachers to be truly accountable, that is to be responsive to children, they must know how to think, reflect, inquire, research, problem-solve, and evaluate, the very processes these programs recommend (Wood, 2000).

The NBPTS standards address the joint aims of professionalizing the teaching force of the United States and of raising standards for student performance. Many educational commentators see these as being tightly connected objectives (Hirsch 1996; Kohn 1999; Meier 2000; NBPTS). Educators differ among themselves in how they imagine these objectives can be achieved and how the objectives relate to accountability. The National Board has posed a set of standards for accountability that would give precedence to teachers practice as the essential criterion for accountability. In contrast, educators like Hirsch argue for an externally controlled set of standards and tests to govern accountability. Tucker (2002) identifies the latter model as the "Political Accountability Model." He argues that the "quality of standards and assessments used" was not the focus of the interests of the political leaders behind this model. Their interests were only in the incentives (increases or decreases in funding levels) offered to produce higher test scores.

NBPTS has developed a framework “to establish high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, to develop and operate a national, voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet these standards, and to advance related education reforms for the purpose of improving student learning in American schools.” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards) This effort has developed in response to the call by the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986) for the establishment of national standards for certification of teachers. Unlike other standards-setting entities, the NBPTS is governed by a board composed largely of classroom teachers. Their certification program is "developed by teachers, with teachers, for teachers."

The NBPTS are organized around five core propositions that define competencies and commitments of professional teachers:

1. Teachers are committed to Students and Their Learning
2. Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Students
3. Teachers Are Responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning
4. Teachers Think Systematically About Their Practice and Learn From Experience
5. Teachers Are Members of Learning Communities

These propositions provide an interpretation of what it means to be an autonomous professional (Sockett, 1993). Teachers meeting these high standards define their success in terms of understanding and meeting the learning needs of the children in their classrooms.

In order to understand what was happening in the classrooms of the Northern

Virginia teachers, we needed a standard of comparison against which to contrast reports of their experience. The NBPTS propositions provide such a framework for comparison. We are not arguing that the teachers have adopted these standards. Rather they have adopted various standards, some much like those of the NBPTS, some much less progressive than those of the NBPTS. An important issue is that both the NBPTS and the supporters of state standards and testing want to accomplish the goals of raising student achievement and of professionalizing the practice of teachers. Our analysis will help us shed some light on the relative success of standards and tests in achieving these goals in Northern Virginia classrooms.

Analysis

Generally teachers viewed raising standards for student achievement favorably. Further, many of them held favorable views of employing a common core curriculum to enhance the likelihood that children coming into their classroom would have been exposed to specific elements of curriculum. Teachers holding the latter views were more likely to be middle school and high school teachers than elementary teachers. In fact, elementary teachers were largely opposed to a rigidly drawn core curriculum. Many teachers found the testing associated with the standards to represent real threats to their autonomy and to be based on assumptions that contradict their own conceptions of how children learn. In order to put their reports and analyses in context, we organize selected but typical responses of these teachers around a discussion of the propositions of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. Using the Propositions as an organizing frame allows us to contrast the different models of teacher work and accountability.

1. Teachers are committed to Students and Their Learning

[Teachers] treat students equitably, recognizing the individual differences that distinguish their students one from the other and taking account of these differences in their practice. They adjust their practice as appropriate, based on observation and knowledge of their students' interests, abilities, skills, knowledge, family circumstances and peer relationships. (NBPTS: Report: Policy)

In contrast to the NBPTS focus on individual strengths and needs, teachers report that they are forced through the pressure of the standards testing to ignore individual differences and simply plow through the curriculum items. For example, a number of special education teachers commented on the impossibility of both following a common curriculum and simultaneously meeting individual needs of their children with learning disabilities. They feel the focus on Standards of Learning and the conditions of testing have little relevance to the learning of these students. Both law and their sense of good educational practice demand that children with learning disabilities be served in regular classrooms with accommodations. On the other hand, the demands of the Standards of Learning contradict these accommodations and individualized instruction. One special education teacher wrote:

> As a[n elementary] special education teacher, the so-called“standards” that are set for my students are developed by the parent and me. At the beginning of the year, we write an I.E.P. [Individual Education Plan] with goals and objectives that focus only on their child. For the whole year, I work toward mastering these goals and discuss the outcome with the parents to see where their child is. On top of this, each of my students must also meet the standards set by the county. I have just finished administering the S.O.L. test and found it to be very difficult for my students. We (special education teachers) have been told by the county, which . . .[has] . . .been told by the state, that we must stop exempting special education students from the standardized tests. We have been told to accommodate the testing situation. Well, I gave the test with plenty of modifications but if the student is unable to process the vowel sounds and decoding skills and is still reading at the first grade level, how in the world do I accommodate for that disability?

It is important to emphasize that the IEPs for children with learning disabilities are based on detailed analysis of what the child knows and can do, with an eye to determining what the child needs to accomplish next. Such practice clearly meets the standards of teaching described in NBPTS's first proposition.

It is not just children with learning disabilities for whom the curriculum and the associated tests are problematic, according to teachers. An elementary teacher in a multi-grade classroom made this observation about variations in individual needs and strengths:

> . . . I'm not against raising the standards of learning. The only thing that bothers me is that children are asked to perform up to SOL standards at a given grade and age. I firmly believe that curriculum standards or SOLs should not be age and grade dictated. Many students come to my second and third grade class and cannot read. Well, you cant very well learn the states and capitals if you cant read. Children will succeed and learn core knowledge if we let them work at their own pace to acquire knowledge. . . .

Variations in cultural background also require that teachers make individual accommodations. This elementary teacher emphasizes the cultural differences among her students and the necessity of adjusting instruction to meet these varying needs:

> . . .my classroom contains children from different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, and academic abilities. I do follow the [county] Program of Study and try my best to meet each child's needs and abilities. If Sally can't remember her street address, I do not want to move on to teach her the seven continents. I feel it is vital for children to master one task or skill before moving on to another, this way I can avoid confusion and build self-esteem. I hear of teachers simply "exposing" children to the many, many standards put upon us by the state. Instead of helping students

> master some of these standards, they are pushing to expose them to every item for fear of accountability. Are the SOLs going to sacrifice the quality of instruction our children are receiving? I believe that is a threat.

These teachers describe a number of real life situations that they encounter in their classrooms. To ignore the implications of these and other situations for children's readiness to learn as foundations on which to build new knowledge is to violate professional standards that teachers hold to be central to children's learning. Virginias Board of Education may argue that the views of these teachers are exactly the problem with American education. They may believe that teachers who worry about "self-esteem" or who attempt to teach children of different ages and grades in the same classroom or who are inclined to adjust their expectations for children who are labeled "learning disabled" are not upholding the high standards demanded by our technological society. We argue, to the contrary, that these are teachers who are torn by conflicting demands that they recognize and respond to individual needs and build on individual strengths versus that they should ignore individual differences and teach the same curriculum with the same performance expectations to every child in the same limited and constrained time span.

The conflict is expressed eloquently by this elementary teacher struggling to reconcile the contradictions between her generally favorable disposition toward a core curriculum and her detailed understanding of how children learn:

> Hirsch's idea of a core curriculum is an interesting one. I do think that a general set of goals and objectives for education is a good idea. However, how could we possibly as such a large and diverse nation, ever come to a consensus on such standards? . . . . I believe that Hirsch makes MANY assumptions about children and how they learn, specifically that all children learn in the same way and that they ought to be taught as such. Any learning that does not take place, he seems to say, is because we did not teach the subject firmly enough or the child was not paying attention. He does not take into account variables in children's lives such as background, culture, or the fact that they are unique human beings. . .

Further, school administrators themselves feel under the gun about the standards and are making decisions about school administration that further distort professional standards for teaching and learning. One graduate of the masters program commented about her principal,

> She is so hung up on SOL's that I'm not sure she knows if she's coming or going. You can hardly have any kind of conversation with her that doesn't end with something regarding the SOL's. . . . It's rather ridiculous when you really think about these 5 and 6 year olds being expected to know the 7 continents, 4 oceans, simple functions of the government and etc. when they don't even understand the distance between . . . [town A] and [town B]! They think [county seat] is a state, and I haven't figured out what they think . . County is, but it isn't what you and I think!! [Our principal] . . . has mentioned

> cutting lunch from 30 to 25 minutes next year because she has determined on her lunch duty day, children finish eating in about 15 minutes--therefore, we could add 5 minutes of instructional time by cutting back. Also, [we are to have] no recess on PE days. She really hopes to cover extra ground there! It's all a bit discouraging--you don't have to look beyond your own table at faculty meetings to see the low morale this is causing. I'm sure the "state" could care less about teacher's feelings and thoughts on the issue. (Personal correspondence)

Other researchers have reported similar conclusions. Brown (1993) reported that more than half the teachers in his qualitative study "indicated that the tests did not reflect their priorities for content" (p. 22). Smith (1991) concludes that a focus on testing leads to " . . .a reduction of teachers' ability to adapt, create, or diverge" (p. 10). Mabry, et al. (2003) report that teachers in their Washington state study found their state test to be inappropriate for children who were language minority, had special needs, were low SES, or had diverse learning styles.

What these experiences demonstrate clearly is that the externally imposed standards, and, particularly the externally imposed assessments, undermine the professional performance of teachers. The use of rigid standards to determine curriculum and assessments strip teachers and principals of their capacity to act compassionately and with reflective care to respond to the individual needs and strengths of their students. While Virginias State Board of Education and the business community may support such mechanized treatment of children, we anticipate that few of Virginias parents will agree with a policy that causes teachers and administrators to ignore the individual strengths and needs of their children.

2. Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Students

> Accomplished teachers command specialized knowledge of how to convey and reveal subject matter to students. They are aware of the preconceptions and background knowledge that students typically bring to each subject and of strategies and instructional materials that can be of assistance. They understand where difficulties are likely to arise and modify their practice accordingly. Their instructional repertoire allows them to create multiple paths to the subjects they teach, and they are adept at teaching students how to pose and solve their own problems. (NBPTS: Report: Policy)

At issue for this proposition is who shall determine what is to be taught and how it shall be taught? Embedded in the NBPTS proposition is the assumption that each teaching/learning situation combines knowledge of curriculum, knowledge of pedagogy, and specific knowledge of the strengths and needs of the learners. Curriculum standards and testing have been developed in a way (e.g., voluminous content and the assumption that all learners will learn in the same way and at the same pace) that contradicts the NBPTS assumptions.

Teachers in our discussion were not against having curriculum standards. Nor were they opposed to adopting "higher expectations" for student performances. They seem to understand the theoretical and empirical backing for the claim that higher expectations elicit higher performances from children. Many teachers object to the **external** imposition of standards and assessment strategies. The teacher quoted below describes an alternative model to externally imposed standards and assessments found in Virginia:

> A couple of years ago, my principal initiated a movement in our school to improve the quality and quantity of basic writing skills. She did this due to poor writing skills on the Literacy Passport Test (LPT) and her strong belief in writing as a survival skill in the real world. As part of the initiative, we met across grade levels to discuss the criteria for a quality paper in grades kindergarten through fifth grades. This was helpful for all of us because we examined writings above and below our grade levels. Some teachers discovered they needed to raise their expectations and we further realized what skills were in need of a more intense focus. After meeting several times and sharing writing portfolios and developing rubrics together, we decided to implement a formal writing prompt every quarter. The individual grade levels decided what prompt and type of writing they would evaluate. In addition, teachers scored their own papers from their class and then sent them to another grade level to score. We are currently establishing anchor papers for each grade. Through dialogue with one another and the students, as well as a clear focus throughout the school, our LPT writing scores have improved dramatically. More importantly, I have seen an immense improvement in the quality of writing that I receive from lower grades. Each year I am able to do less review and more actual teaching of writing. As teachers, we have improved our methods due to our meetings discussing strategies. More of the teachers have become more comfortable teaching writing and are teaching it well. Our administrator is pleased as are we because we have seen improvements. I agree that core knowledge should not be implemented from the outside. Effective schools research reveals that the most beneficial changes are done internally. This was the case for my school.

Even the high school teachers, who are generally much more supportive of the Standards of Learning than elementary teachers, see conflicts between what they believe are professional teaching practices and the conditions of teaching that have been imposed by the Virginia Board of Education. A high school biology teacher comments below that the main focus of teachers since the SOLs were developed has been on guessing about the content of the test:

> The issue of standards in the classroom, or developing a Core Knowledge Curriculum, has been a source of agitation for me and my fellow Science teachers at . . . County High School. We have had numerous meetings to discuss what sort of questions might be included on the SOL test. Some teachers have modified what they

> teach and how they teach it in anticipation of those tests. They did not do this because they believed it to be instructionally sound, they did it because they knew it was their heads on the chopping block if their students did not score well. In the past, our school system has been unusually progressive in their stance on curriculum development and assessment. We have been allowed the freedom to develop and implement our course material as we (who are professionals) see fit. We have been trusted to evaluate whether or not our students have learned the material. Those days are over for good; or at least until the next state-supported political agenda says otherwise.
>
> Our Science Department has seen the need [before the SOLs were adopted] to coordinate the curriculum across the same subject area, i.e. all Biology teachers cover topics A, B, C, and D so that the students in our school get a similar education. We also saw the need to create some standards that stretch across grade levels. It was discovered that some teachers covered certain topics and others did not. Although they considered the argument that teachers teach best what they know best, our Instructional Advisors (administrators) decided that standardization was the way to go. Then came the hard part. What do you teach? When? In how much detail? It was very difficult to get consensus. Even though a coordinated curriculum was published, it was not necessarily followed by all teachers. So the process is not easy, but is it valuable? I think it is. I have seen an improvement in the basic skills of the students that I receive from earlier grades. This came about because of a purposeful effort of our staff to implement our version of a Core Knowledge Curriculum. I don't think standards are valuable if they are imposed from the outside, however. The value comes from the deep reflection on what you do in your classroom, what serves the student best, and how you can coordinate with the other professionals in your system to make a system-wide improvement.

These teachers are arguing an important perspective here. They believe and provide evidence in some cases, that teachers can derive realistic, fair, and useful standards by working together, across grades and social contexts, to share their classroom experience, to try strategies in their classrooms, to assess and revise strategies, and to begin the cycle again. A consequence of such activity is that teachers develop curricula and pedagogies to which they have strong personal commitments because **THEY** have developed them. These curricula have been subjected to "public debate" in and between classrooms, schools, and in some cases, school districts. Such public discourse over curricula and pedagogies, in and across grade levels, is the optimal way to create professional standards for schools (Kohn 2000). Further, teachers' deliberations build on their lived experiences in their classrooms. Their curricula reflect the needs, interests, and strengths of the students they have, not the needs, interests, and strengths of children in a vastly different social context. Teachers engaged in such processes of curriculum development in a context of critical debate among professionals are, ipso facto, engaged in processes of continual personal and professional development. They are meeting the

standards for continuous improvement. Given the generally isolating conditions of work in public schools, public examination of curricula and pedagogy may be as important to changing the culture of schools and improving students learning as anything else that goes on in schools.

We have to acknowledge school districts and states need to coordinate curriculum across grade levels and school contexts. That need is in some ways at odds with the very real benefits of having teachers develop curriculum and pedagogy around their own strengths and the needs and strengths of the students they teach. Current testing procedures emphasize the coordination and standardization of curriculum at the expense of teachers' judgment and creativity.

It is interesting to note that several of the reviewers of this paper objected to the assumption that most teachers are capable of the kind of data-driven practice that allows teachers to assess the needs and strengths of their students. The assumption, embedded in the Beliefs and Practices that guide the program from which these data are derived, (**http://www.gmu.edu/departments/iet/belief95.html**), is a guiding principle of our pedagogy. While we could argue about whether the assumption is "true," its truth is less important than its use as a guiding principle. We conduct the program as if it were true and find that most teachers incorporate its truth as a personal practice. Teachers conduct two classroom research projects over the two years that foster their developing the skills and knowledge to use data from classroom research to guide practice. If it is not literally true that every teacher is ready and able to adopt a data-driven practice, most do adopt data-driven practice within the constraints of the program courses and procedures. We can be sure that if we were to assume that teachers are incapable of conducting data-driven classrooms, few would do so on their own. The constraints of time, energy, and limited research skills work against such practice as do the demands of state-imposed curriculum standards and tests. (See more about the masters program in the Appendix.)

Teachers like other workers are affected by the context of their work. Where they are treated as professionals, they are much more likely to respond in a professional manner (Deal and Peterson 1998). Teachers frequently react negatively to a context that deskills and mechanizes their work, as we believe the Virginia Standards of Learning does for the work of teachers in Virginia.

Smith (1991) reinforces these conclusions in her study of two elementary schools in Arizona. She writes: "Because multiple-choice testing leads to multiple-choice teaching, the methods that teachers have in their arsenal become reduced, and teaching work is deskilled" (p. 10). Jones et al. (1999) report an even more disturbing impact of testing on teaching: "Many teachers are also concerned about raising scores on a measure that they themselves do not view as particularly valid. They simply go through the motions, receiving little or no feedback on how they may improve their instruction. Furthermore, most teachers do not find external tests useful and have no confidence in their abilities to reform educational practice." This relates to a point made by Kohn (2000). He points out that if teachers teach to the test, they will inevitably be able to raise test scores. If there is no public discussion over whether the test

assesses qualities we are explicitly committed to having our children learn, teachers will end up making the testing regimen look good. This is because it will appear that student achievement is rising even if students are not learning what teachers and parents wish they were learning.

3. Teachers are responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning

> Accomplished teachers command a range of generic instructional techniques, know when each is appropriate, and can implement them as needed. They are aware of ineffectual or damaging practice as they are devoted to elegant practice.
>
> They know how to engage groups of students to ensure a disciplined learning environment, and how to organize instruction to allow the schools goals for students to be met. They are adept at setting norms for social interaction among students and between students and teachers. They understand how to motivate students to learn and how to maintain their interest even in the face of temporary failure.
>
> National Board Certified teachers can assess the progress of individual students as well as that of the class as a whole. They employ multiple methods for measuring student growth and understanding and can clearly explain student performance to parents. (NBPTS Report: Policy)

We take teacher developed assessment as essential to high stakes decisions because such assessments will very likely draw on a variety of skills, learning styles, and modes of demonstrating what children have learned. Assessment must be tied to instructional aims and to pedagogies actually employed in the classroom. To impose a standardized test that takes children as undifferentiated learners who can all be fairly assessed by the same instrument at one time runs against teachers and developmental theorists conceptions of how children learn and of children's abilities to demonstrate learning. Teachers question whether one standardized test administered at a single point in time, and drawing on a single mode of demonstrating learning could ever produce a fair assessment for all children. A special education teacher describes her experience regarding the children for whom she has instructional responsibility:

> I teach special education and feel that my students make tremendous progress each year. Unfortunately for them, they do not make the kind of progress that is measured on the tests. My children (as do all children) make progress in their interpersonal skills, their anger management, their study skills, and their academics. They meet or exceed their IEPs each year, but are made to feel like failures when they take these tests. Yes, I can exempt my students, but it was made clear to me that this was really not an option for ED students. Also, exempting special education students can have a later effect on their ability to earn a regular diploma.

> . . . We only ask regular education students to make one year's progress, why do we expect special education students to do more? The same argument can be used for any child that is below grade level. No matter how much progress they make, until they catch all the way up they will always feel like a failure on those tests.

The Virginia Board of Education has adopted the premise that only those who can function well on the particular tests they have arranged should be certified for graduation in the public schools of Virginia. They assume that teachers and children's efforts are all that matter in learning the facts. The third NBPTS proposition assumes that professional teachers will assess practices and assessment instruments (including those such as the SOLs). Further the proposition assumes that when practices and assessment instruments are judged by teachers to be ineffective or damaging, they will not be used. Yet, teachers have no choice with Virginias SOLs. Teachers are forced to use them regardless of their professional judgments. In this way the SOLs undermine teachers abilities to act as professionals.

An elementary teacher gave the following account of how she has developed her own standards over five years of teaching. She uses her standards to gauge the progress of children and to guide further instruction. Her assessments provide evidence for her own decision making and for sharing her assessments of individual children with their parents.

> When I read [another teachers] narrative on standards, I found myself agreeing with so many of her statements. I also teach second grade and set personal standards for my students. Like [her], I expect certain standards of work from my students. If his or her work doesn't meet my standards I return it to the student and expect work that is improved. From five years experience teaching second grade I find that I have developed a set of average standards that I expect from every student in my class. From this simple list of standards in reading, writing sentences, math skills and oral language I can gauge a students progress. I can then pinpoint exactly what I want that student to work on and can reiterate that to the parents at conference time. These are my personal standards and have nothing to do with testing but with my expectations. I try to keep these standards high so that my classroom has high requirements.

The kind of subtle adjustments and responses professionals must feel free to make in order to meet the individual needs of children are described in this reflection by a first grade teacher. She explicitly challenges the assumption that a core curriculum will typically be of benefit to children who move from school to school:

> . . . . the standards of learning would help students who are moved from school to school only if they were on a time line. They would help students new to the school if the same thing were being taught at the same time all over the country. However the diverse population that I teach is directly proportional to how fast we cover a

> topic. Everyone is not at the same place and I provide extensions or other work for the students who are faster and stronger students while I help those who need extra help. So there is no guarantee that I would be finished a topic the same time as even a teacher in another school in [my county].

Supporters of the SOLs would want to ask these teachers: Are your standards comparable across teachers? Do you hold each child to the same standards? Teachers following the principles of professional behavior developed by the National Board will answer these questions with a resounding No. The differences in perspectives between the National Board and the Virginia Board of Education reveal a vast chasm in understandings of how children learn and of what conditions are necessary for effective learning. We argue, along with these teachers, that children exhibit great variety in learning. They have different strengths and needs. To treat them exactly the same is to cheat some children of their birth right for learning. The differences in perspective between supporters and critics of Virginias Standards of Learning on how standards should be applied should receive open and frank discussion.

A number of other local studies have reported important curricular effects of the imposition of state standards and testing. Jones, et al. (1999) report from their study of 16 elementary schools in North Carolina that ". . . teachers tell us that science and social studies are minimally taught. . . ." They report further a substantial reduction in instructional time as teachers spend more time on test-taking skills and practice tests. Mitchell (1997) likewise reports that principals in her study reported that ". . . preparation for traditional accountability tests takes time away from innovative instruction and meaningful learning." Kubow and DeBard (2000) concluded that testing constricted the curriculum and creative teaching. The powerful critique of testing in local studies is not being heard or heeded by policy makers and political leaders.

4. Teachers Think Systematically About Their Practice and Learn From Experience

> National Board Certified teachers are models of educated persons, exemplifying the virtues they seek to inspire in students--curiosity, tolerance, honesty, fairness, respect for diversity and appreciation of cultural differences--and the capacities that are prerequisites for intellectual growth: the ability to reason and take multiple perspectives, to be creative and take risks, and to adopt an experimental and problem-solving orientation.
>
> Accomplished teachers draw on their knowledge of human development, subject matter and instruction, and their understanding of their students to make principled judgments about sound practice. Their decisions are not only grounded in the literature, but also in their experience. They engage in lifelong learning which they seek to encourage in their students.
>
> Striving to strengthen their teaching, National Board Certified teachers critically examine their practice, seek to expand their

> repertoire, deepen their knowledge, sharpen their judgment and adapt their teaching to new findings, ideas and theories. (NBPTS: REPORT: Policy)

Here the focus is on developing reflective practice and a commitment to continuous learning. The standard implores professional teachers to observe in their classrooms, think about how they have approached different elements of the curriculum, assess how the curriculum has worked for different students, make critical judgments and evaluations about what has worked well and what has worked poorly, make changes, and start the process all over again. Good teachers continually assess, evaluate, plan, and modify elements of pedagogy in the context of the strengths and needs of particular children. They recognize that changing students and changing circumstances mean that the job of planning the curriculum and pedagogy is never finished. Reflection on their practice is **the** crucial element in developing on continuous improvement.

The imposition of curriculum and assessment from outside schools substitutes for reflective practice. If teachers develop the curriculum and have to worry about articulation across and within grade levels, they have to think through their own (possibly conflicting) aims. They have to work through compromises with colleagues over differing perspectives and experiences. They have to think through a variety of pedagogies to meet the differing needs and strengths of students. If teachers formulate the assessments that will be used, they have to plan the intellectual journey from aims through curriculum to assessments. They have to imagine the range of ways children with different learning styles and experiences may demonstrate their learning. In contrast, the very presentation of standards and assessments by the State Board of Education makes its staff and consultants the "Experts." Classroom teachers are cast as technicians who use the manual to see how to implement curriculum and assessment. Our point is that structures can promote or undermine reflective practice. The Virginia Department of Education has chosen a structure that undermines reflective practice of teachers and has maximized the likelihood that teachers will be unthinking technicians whose only reflection is about "how I teach the material that I think will be on the test."

Facing an externally imposed curriculum and assessment regimen, teachers scramble to guess what the standard makers are going to do next. This teacher critiques the assumptions about children’s learning that are embedded in Virginias SOLs and points to the skills and culture embedded in the taking of such tests at all:

> The core knowledge curricula proposed by E.D. Hirsch and others make many assumptions about the information that children need in order to be successful in today’s society. Not the least of these assumptions is that all children need to be taught the same facts. The nature of our education system is such that we are attempting to artificially civilize the whole spectrum of the population, including those who enter school with major disparities, to a common level. It is a race to the top of a hill that was chosen by the powers that be to be the goal of all children. The problem is that there are unforeseen handicaps in the race. Some children start further up the hill than

> others. Some children have to carry heavy baggage. Some children have been coached in racing tactics. Some children were unable to read the racing instructions. Yet all children are assumed to be equally able to race. The rules state that it is open to all comers, in fact it is mandatory that everyone participate.
>
> If we as educators assume that all children have an equal chance of success at school then we are ignoring the inequalities and lack of franchise that some students experience from social forces outside the school grounds. Why run hard in a race that seems pointless? Why learn facts that have no personal meaning or social context? A curriculum must be meaningful and comprehensible to as many sectors of society as possible and not merely reflect lip service to minority cultures and interests. If we realize that the standards of learning are largely set by, administered by, and taught by members of the white middle classes then we cannot be surprised that it is the children of those classes who succeed in school. Many of the ideas and behaviors they are expected to learn at school are already in place. These are the heavy favorites to win the race because it is their culture that sets the rules. These are the “savage inequalities” in our education system that form the basis of the works by Heath and Ashton-Warner and the title of the study by Jonathan Kozol.

This high school mathematics teacher argues for a stronger role for teachers in the development of standards, which she supports. Her fear is that the standards will become inflexible and inaccessible to teacher critique and feedback:

> Personally, I feel that standards are a necessary part of the educational process. All teachers have some type of standards for their students: whether those agreed upon by the state board of Education, or school-wide standards, or simply the teachers own idea of the important material to be covered and methods of evaluating proficiency. Every time a grade is assigned, the teacher is evaluating the degree to which a student has met the standards that have been set in the classroom. As a teacher of high school mathematics and as a parent, I see a definite need for state, if not national, standards to mandate and coordinate content. I believe that these standards must be developed by those who are directly in education: teachers, administrators, parents, and where possible, the students themselves. The standards should be set as high as possible, but reasonable for the age level of the students. Room must be left for individual teaching and learning styles, with accommodations possible for those with special needs. . . . I also feel that the standards of learning need to be re-evaluated periodically to determine whether they continue to be reasonable and appropriate expectations. A maximum amount of teacher input, rather than government control, is essential in making this determination. (Teachers paper summarizing and commenting on the forum)

This teacher's views on the standards are typical for secondary mathematics and science teachers. Her experience is that a noticeable number of students come to her classes without the prerequisite knowledge and skills for the work to be done in that class. Whether this is because the materials were not taught (her assumption) or were not learned is unclear. In any case, she believes that standards that are flexible enough to adjust to teaching and learning styles are of benefit to her practice.

That successful teachers must reflect on and continually reassess classroom practice is the point made in this teachers comment:

> The individual needs of the learner should be our number one priority. Although we need to set high standards for each of our students, they should not be the same for everyone. Our standards should differ based on the individual needs of the child. Each student needs to be challenged at his/her instructional level. Rather than trying to bring all of our children up to the same level of competency, we need to look at what is best for each child in order to make them successful. We know that success builds on success. In order for our students to experience success, we have to tailor our instruction and expectations to each child's needs and abilities. It we do not do so, we will be setting many of our children up for failure. Outlining one standard to meet the diverse needs of our students is unthinkable.
>
> The goal of education should be to find out the skills and knowledge each of our students possess and then continually build on them. We should be assessing each child individually and then teach to challenge their developmental levels and push for growth. Of course, we have to keep in mind our local objectives and the state SOLs when we are creating standards for individual students. I believe that we, as teachers, do everything we can do and are skillful at achieving this goal. Unfortunately, I think that a large percentage of the population has a very different goal in mind for education. Therefore, what they . . . [equate with] . . . success is very different. The problems that arise for this lack of a common goal is apparent in the fact that the state is using SOL tests to determine whether or not a child's education has been successful. A child's success is equated with whether or not they have mastered the skills and knowledge necessary to pass the SOLs test. The fact that a child has shown major academic growth throughout a school year is not valued . . . [by those in charge of assessments for the SOLs]. (From a teachers paper written about the electronic discussion)

The teacher commenting below had a much more problematic experience with the curriculum and the standardized test. Her ability to engage in the reflective development of curriculum and assessment were interfered with by the SOL regimen:

> . . . I feel as though the state put the cart before the horse in regards

> to the assessment of the standards. This year, as a fifth grade teacher, I was involved in the administering of the SOL tests. Due to changes in the curriculum in science, my students were going to be tested on some material in which they had not been instructed. In an attempt to prepare our students, my teammates and I taught a unit on weather, which was not part of our curriculum, as well as the four required units mandated by the county. In addition to this, the county provided us with eight other units that would be covered on the science test. These eight units were full of vocabulary words and minute details of information ranging from atoms and molecules to reproduction in plant life. I presented the information to my students in a way in which I was not comfortable: read, recite, review, MEMORIZE. I knew the majority of my students would retain little, if any, of it. However, I got caught up in the fervor of testing mania, and just like every other teacher wanted to give my students every possible chance to do well on the test.
>
> The morning of the second sub-test I looked at what was on the science test and I fell apart. Many of the terms that I had helped my students memorize were nowhere to be found, but there were many other items on the test that I had not emphasized as much. I was angry that I had succumbed to the testing mania and felt guilty that I had subjected my students to a type of teaching that I knew to be ineffective, but did it anyway because I was caught up in the panic. What was the point of what I had done? Maybe some of them guessed correctly, maybe a few of them actually remembered something that we had drilled on, but had they learned it? Had I helped them make connections to their lives? Would they now be able to apply this knowledge, if they actually remembered any of it, to real life situations? I doubt it. . . .I know I did not ruin the students, but what I regret is that I did not teach them as they deserve to be taught. I believe it is so much more important to teach the process and problem solving rather than just the facts. That is what should have been done to make these science topics meaningful to my students. (From a paper written to summarize and comment on the discussion.)

We believe the foregoing comments from teachers demonstrate that inflexible, test-driven, standards will fail to address the learning needs and strengths of many children. Further, the more culturally diverse the population of children, the greater is the likelihood that any standardized, decontextualized assessment instrument will misjudge what the children have learned and what they are capable of learning under optimal conditions.

The quote below, from the first year research project of one of the teachers in our school-based masters program, illustrates the great dilemma faced by creative teachers. The dilemma is how can teachers meet three divergent objectives: teach the Standards so that content is tied to a broader context of learning, use pedagogy that responds to the diverse learning styles of children, and engage students in the learning process to maximize their learning. This middle school mathematics teacher describes the process of designing

curriculum to meet the needs of her students, provides data on the consequences of using the pedagogy, illustrates what happened when pressure from the SOLs caused her to revert to old practices, and interprets what happened as she returned to her well designed curriculum.

> As the year progressed and the Standards of Learning tests approached, I was very focused on the materials left to teach. I felt hurried and reluctant to design new activities, try new approaches, or go out on a limb with a different activity. The crunch was on and I kept thinking to myself, "I have to cover these skills. I have to get through this unit." As I have used fewer activities, the students backed off their engagement in class. I discovered the busier I became with after school activities, coaching, and committee meetings, the more I tended to go through the motions without much reflection as to what I was doing in class. When I reverted back to the same old grind and the same old routine, my students also reverted back to the same lack of engagement as the previous years. After this stark realization, I rejuvenated some prior class activities and instigated a new team competition. The results were astounding! Likewise, when I rejuvenated student journals, not only did I rededicate myself, but I jump started the students also. As a result of this research, I planned better activities with more student options and activities.
>
> By the end of the school term, the student attitudes had changed. I found that the students likes and dislikes pertaining to math activities changed as the year progressed. Many students that stated that they liked worksheets at the beginning of the year had not checked that on their survey near the end of the year. No longer were the students content to be passive learners, they had come to expect to be involved in class and engaged!
>
> In addition, my attitude had changed as well. Reflection became an important tool for me. I learned that I could not let up for even one minute, or my students would let up as well. The student attitude of engagement was achieved through varying instructional techniques and class activities. Constantly designing and implementing a variety of activities in my math classes, I elicited student engagement and ultimately student success in math class. (From a first year research report)

This teacher sets a high standard, indeed, for her colleagues. Working reflectively, she has managed to provide a larger learning context for the SOL-guided learning of her students using a variety of strategies that empower different learning styles and engage the students in their learning.

5. Teachers Are Members of Learning Communities

> National Board Certified teachers contribute to the effectiveness of the school by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development.

> They can evaluate school progress and the allocation of school resources in light of their understanding of state and local educational objectives. They are knowledgeable about specialized school and community resources that can be engaged for their students' benefit, and are skilled at employing such resources as needed.
>
> Accomplished teachers find ways to work collaboratively and creatively with parents, engaging them productively in the work of the school. (NBPTS: REPORT: Policy)

A number of the forgoing quotes highlight the benefits for the community of teachers in a school or in a school division of working together to formulate curriculum standards. As teachers work together, they share and critique ideas, share classroom experiences, challenge assumptions about pedagogy, and work toward common understandings of children's learning. The outcomes of such community efforts are strategies teachers believe in and are committed to because they have developed the strategies. Even if the strategies are new to them, they understand where the strategies come from and how they were developed. In contrast, Virginias SOLs come from untrusted, unknown sources. They violate assumptions teachers make about the learning of children. Virginias SOLs disrupt and undermine community because they introduce uncertainty and threat. The teacher quoted below comments on the value of working within the community of teachers:

> Creating a common language among teachers has been a goal at my school for years it seems, but the time to seriously talk is rarely available. I do believe that when we are speaking the same language from grade level to grade level for reading, writing, math, etc., the children will benefit tremendously. I personally feel that working these issues out together as a staff of teachers will be far more beneficial than having a bunch of politicians decide for us what and how to teach! That seems so obvious doesn't it?! Why on earth would they think they could create a set of standards of learning for the children of Virginia when they are not trained in education? Hmm... I guess that says a lot about their opinion of our profession.

The state Department of Education has imposed a common understanding of childrens learning that contradicts the experiences of many classroom teachers. On the other hand, given the way schools have been run, it is very difficult for teachers to bring their knowledge and experience to bear on the setting of standards and the determination of strategies of assessment. Isolation in the classroom is a major problem faced by teachers. We believe this has been one of the key causes of the poor student performances to which the SOLs are a response. Throughout this paper we have used teachers voices to demonstrate what can be done in schools--teachers working together to develop curriculum and pedagogy that are effective and build on the strengths of the children in their classroom. Unfortunately, many schools lack the leadership and resources to convene study groups of teachers to work on curriculum and pedagogy. As this teacher points out:

> I believe the above comments . . .[in this forum] . . . show one of the reasons we have encountered problems. We don't know enough about each other. We become focused only on our students and our subject/grade level. We need to encourage and support one another and learn from each other. I applaud those teachers and education systems that have come together to develop a comprehensive curriculum for their grade level or subject. However, as many have pointed out, there must be room for individual creativity and teaching style and we now have to be sure that our programs will address the SOLs. Lack of communication and collaboration is one of those issues that continually crops up in our profession. However, I believe were turning the corner in that area as evidenced by this masters program and the comments in this forum. I'm beginning to understand the difficulties faced by middle and high school teachers and perhaps they are getting an idea of the problems faced by an elementary teacher. The core curriculum concept is just another difficulty we have to face TOGETHER.

Teachers are not only isolated from each other. They are also cut off from the larger community, both by their lack of public voice and by the fact that the larger community does not look to and value teachers classroom experience. One teacher wrote:

> There are many different issues that arise in my mind when I see the word standards. I see that there are individual needs that are brushed aside to fit children into a specific mold. I am frustrated that there is so much curriculum to teach that I don't get to spend quality time on any particular subject. I also resent the time that it takes to test each student each year. However, I must realize that I, as an educator, am partially responsible for letting these standards imposed by someone else invade my practice.
>
> For years there have been reports published that put American school children below other countries on tests. While I could take issue with the tests or talk about the fact that we do a much better job of educating all children than those tests give us credit for, I won't. The message that teachers should get from these statistics is that we need to do a better job, not of educating children, but of educating the community. I think that, in most cases, we assess the needs of individuals in our classes and set standards which as professionals we think are reasonable. We need to find a way to show that each day we make professional decisions about the children in our classroom. That there are standards that are created for each child. The community needs to see the progress that each individual makes, not the failure of an entire system.

Without agreeing with the validity of the international comparison, we can see that this teacher speaks to the need to use data from children in her classroom to show what work has been done and what results have been produced by the children. Teachers who have experienced the kinds of professional

development that supports the NBPTS principles are able to use data from their classrooms to show others how their pedagogy developed (what learning problems they have addressed), what forms pedagogy has taken, and how it has effected the work of children in their classrooms.

Are standards and a common curriculum inevitably bad? Teachers agree that standards reflecting the voices of classroom teachers can be beneficial. This teacher writes about how the imposition of standards both left her feeling frustrated about her teaching of science but benefited the learning community of her fifth grade team. We should stress that teachers working together to plan curriculum is a very positive outcome. On the other hand, such work can be promoted in more respectful and supportive ways, as other teachers comments have shown.

> . . . Science, the core subject that sometimes took a back seat to other areas, came to the forefront. I received a science booklet consisting of an enormous . . . [number] . . . of vocabulary words my students would have to know. The quarterly science kits we received from the county were irrelevant according to this booklet. I changed my way of thinking about science very quickly. Many mornings and afternoons were spent with science projects and quizzes in order for my students to learn all I could teach them for the tests. I found myself meeting objectives and the needs of my students.
>
> As stressed as I became, I must admit that there was a very positive effect on me and my fifth grade team of teachers. For several months our weekly team meetings had a focus. Our dialogue during those meetings had more purpose. We planned more together, we knew the instruction that was going on in each others classes. We even shared methods of teaching in all areas. The SOLs gave us a focus that drew us together. At our meetings, that were now held twice a week, we did not welcome visitors who would interrupt us because we had a purpose. The SOLs forced us to open the lines of communication with each other, which I believe had a positive effect on the students.

Teachers who have had the benefit of working within a community of teachers to evaluate and plan together attest to the value and power of such collaborations. The power of these collaborative efforts has been well documented in the quotes from teachers throughout the paper.

Conclusions

What are we to make of these experiences of teachers? We believe the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the SOLs, as implemented and assessed, undermine teacher professionalism. See also complementary discussions by Kohn (2000), Meier (2000), and Darling-Hammond (1997). This does not say that standards are inherently bad for our educational system. Where teachers have talked about the development of curriculum and standards as activity among colleagues, they have expressed great enthusiasm about the end result and about the processes of building a learning community

among participating teachers. Further, these teachers expressed enthusiasm for the curriculum they had developed. In contrast, a number of teachers have shared horror stories about the curriculum provided by the state and especially with the assessment tied to that curriculum. While teachers acknowledge some benefits from working with other teachers to interpret the state curriculum, much of the experience was negative: teachers report frustration over having to forsake what they know to be the most effective teaching methods to cover atomized facts, presented without context or rationale.

Teachers strongly object to the assumptions about learning that are built into the SOL tests. Particularly teachers emphasize the benefits of individualizing instruction and assessments to meet the specific needs of individual children. The professional standards developed by the National Board stress that teachers should recognize “individual differences that distinguish their students one from the other and taking account of these differences in their practice.” As implemented, Virginias assessment demands that students be treated the same. The needs and strengths of individual students are ignored and assumed irrelevant.

In their writing on the implementation of SOLs and assessments, teachers have commented on the dilemma created for teachers who have taken pride and pleasure in working with the children who are the most disadvantaged in skills and relevant school knowledge. Take, for example, teachers who have chosen to work with children for whom English is not the first language spoken at home. To choose to work with such children, or those from the most troubled homes, has offered special challenge and rewards for many teachers. These are the children who are likely, under the right circumstances of nurturing and support, to make the most progress in the curriculum over the course of a year. A first grade teacher quoted earlier wrote of the substantial growth exhibited by such a child over the first grade year. However, this child was still performing well below grade level at the end of the year. What incentive does any teacher have to devote any time to such a child under the conditions where standardized test results will be used to evaluate teachers and children?

No teacher in this discussion wrote in opposition to the notion of raising standards for children’s performance. Neither did any teacher write against the implementation of a core knowledge curriculum per se. Teachers acknowledged the benefits of such a curriculum for guiding the articulation of teaching and learning across grades. Particularly high school and middle school teachers argued in favor of a common curriculum in elementary schools to assure that children coming to the more specialized teaching/learning context at those levels would be prepared for the specialized curriculum. This assumes, of course, that the variations in knowledge and skills that students bring to these levels are a function of what was taught or not taught in earlier grades. Elementary teachers, on the other hand have written about the great variations in students social and cultural backgrounds as the source of the differences in student learning. A number of teachers wrote in opposition to the particular core knowledge curriculum developed by Virginias State Board of Education. Further, they claim that for some grade levels and subjects, the test is too narrow. Most of the tests do not assess critical thinking or ability to apply knowledge to real life situations. Teachers also argued that there are serious misalignments

between the curriculum and tests. They pointed out that the tests created to assess learning do not help the teacher determine specific needs for further instruction.

Along with our teachers, we believe it is possible to make the standards more relevant to the lives of students and teachers if the State Board of Education seeks and listens to feedback from teachers about what works well and poorly in the curriculum and in the assessment. The NBPTS model of professional development offers solid theoretical grounds for developing and implementing standards that will be responsive to the needs of real children and the complexities of real classrooms. Darling-Hammond makes a similar point:

> To be effective, teachers must meet students *where they are,* not where an idealized curriculum guide imagines they should be. This is particularly important in a nation with high rates of immigration and mobility, where students continually enter and exit classrooms as their families move among various states and countries and thus different school districts. If teachers are to succeed, they must have the flexibility to teach what students need to know based on what they have learned before. Teachers must also be free to use material that allows them to connect what must be taught with what students can understand. Curriculum guidance that overly prescribes content and methods prevents teachers from constructing the necessary bridges between students' experiences and learning goals. (p. 232)

One issue not raised in the foregoing discussion explicitly that has been raised in subsequent discussions with teachers is the effect on teacher moral of having their status reduced to technicians working with a teaching plan drawn up by a State Board of Education whose members have little experience in teaching and learning. One of the authors was told by two different teachers in one school that they were thinking of leaving teaching altogether because of what they saw as the assault on their integrity and knowledge about teaching and learning. A kindergarten teacher said “I am being forced to teach kindergartners in ways that go against everything I know and believe about how children that age learn. I’m thinking about getting a master’s in counseling or getting out of education altogether.” Her colleague said “This is so discouraging. They are telling us what to teach, and when and how long to teach it. What is left for the teacher?”

These are dedicated teachers who put everything they have into being creative, responsive teachers. They have options to move to other lines of employment where pay and working conditions will be better than they are in Virginia’s schools under the threat of Standards of Learning and Standards of Accreditation (the plan to use test results from the SOL tests to accredit public schools in Virginia). Many other teachers talk in similar terms. Everything we know about job satisfaction and responsibility says that depriving intelligent and creative workers of opportunities to develop as autonomous and responsible professionals serves to undermine their moral and performance. Is anybody at the State Board of Education listening?

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Appendix

The Intellectual Context of These Discussions Among Teachers

Faculty at George Mason University have developed a school-based Masters program based on the ideas consistent with the NBPTS propositions. Developed to promote norms of continual improvement over a career of teaching (Sockett 1993; Sockett et al. 2001; Duke, 1993; Smyle, 1996), the master's program combines reflective practice (Schon, 1987; Yancey, 1998), work in school teams (Smith, 1994; Hafernik, Messerschmitt & Vandrick, 1997), commitment to innovation and development in curriculum and pedagogy (Rhine, 1998), and school-based inquiry (Smith and Knight, 1997). The program also features unconventional scheduling of classes to mesh with teacher's work and family lives and a commitment to integrate technology into the curriculum. With over 1000 graduates teaching in Northern Virginia school divisions, the master's program provides opportunities for teachers to learn and to construct their own understandings of children's learning through classroom research and reflection. The program is structured to support teachers as they go through the experiences of personal and professional transformation. Preliminary evidence supports the claim that these structured learning opportunities enhance the development of practicing professionals who are able to function in classrooms in ways that are consistent with the National Board standards (DeMulder and Rigsby 2003; Sockett et al., 2001; Wood 1998).

In contrast to more traditional programs of "in-service" learning where "outside experts" come into the school setting to conduct workshops on some new technique, the masters program encourages teachers to explore together the issues that are most troubling or puzzling from their classrooms or schools. Teams of teachers work together to refine their understanding of these issues as they seek solutions. They search for, devise, and implement problem-solving actions. They study the impact of these actions in their classrooms. Teachers

are empowered to become experts in their own right. Classroom-based research fosters the professional development of teachers in the following ways. As teachers conduct detailed studies of children's learning in their own classrooms, they come to focus on and recognize the strengths and needs of the individual children. Teachers who then draw on literature and their own experience to meet the learning needs of children have a stronger commitment to the pedagogies they devise. When they assess their pedagogies with assessment strategies they have had a hand in developing, they are likely to gain a better understanding of why and how children have learned or failed to learn. They have the tools to find or devise new strategies as the strengths or learning needs of their students change. Thus, the professional development strategies we have embedded in our program promise to create conditions of self-renewal and continuous learning. (See DeMulder and Rigsby 2003 and Sockett et al. 2001 for documentation of program processes and effects.)

The teachers whose voices are amplified here are enrolled in the masters program briefly described above. Our masters program recruits school-based teams of two to six PreK-12 teachers, who join and go through the program together. The typical entering masters class has about 70 students, all of whom must be licensed teachers currently working in schools. To be work and family friendly, classes are spread over three summers and the intervening academic years. Classroom instruction occurs in two 2-week summer sessions, a third summer session of one week , and four class days per academic semester. All class days are eight hour sessions.

As part of their studies, in the first year teachers conduct an individual classroom-based, qualitative, research project, typically based on assessing the strengths and needs of the children in their classroom. As they formulate curricular innovations to address unmet needs, teachers assess their relative success in meeting the needs. Teams meet once a week, usually in the school, to share classroom experiences, discuss readings, exchange drafts of upcoming papers, and engage in critical dialogue over interpretations of these materials. Faculty mentors participate in these meetings two to three times each semester. First year classes concentrate on the moral base of teacher professionalism, issues related to language and culture, qualitative research methodology and technology. Courses are complemented by Web-based discussions in which teachers grapple with ideas, share their own experiences, and comment on the experiences of others. Some of these discussions are structured to focus on readings and issues raised in the readings. Other discussions are designed to encourage teachers to share classroom practice or research issues. In effect, work in team meetings and the Web-based conferences extend the program "classroom" to other times and spaces where teachers work.

In the second year, teachers on teams collaborate on a research project resulting in written and oral presentations that are equivalent to a group masters thesis. Their classroom work includes further work on language and culture issues, epistemology, and qualitative research methods. Faculty mentors work with teams more intensively as research projects develop and data collection and analyses proceed.

Finally, in the third summer session, teams present their research in a professional conference to the rest of the class, guests from their schools, and to the entering class. The presentations reflect the creativity and imagination of an energized group of teachers, most of whom claim to have experienced transformative change. The final writing project from program participants, also due in the third summer session, is an interpretative narrative exploring whether and how they have changed during the program. The individual narratives are accompanied by a portfolio documenting teachers experiences over the previous two years (DeMulder and Rigsby 2003; Sockett et al. 2001).

Unlike most other masters programs, our program aims to keep teachers in the classroom. It seeks to renew and invigorate teachers. The team work addresses teacher isolation and facilitates critical dialogue centered on classroom practice. Team work in the program promotes team work in schools beyond the program. With this program we seek to open new avenues for learning and social support that will serve teachers long after they have completed the requirements. We seek to foster the development of reflective practice, classroom based research, the capacity to engage in critical dialogue with colleagues and with the professional literature. These are the qualities defined by the NBPTS as the characteristics of autonomous professionals.

The World Wide Web address for the *Education Policy Analysis Archives* is
epaa.asu.edu

Editor: Gene V Glass, Arizona State University

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EPAA is published by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University