

Welcome to Standardville

Alan C. Jones

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Mr. Jones, a secondary school principal, feels it is time for a practitioner to provide the “real” reasons that standards will not work in this country. He lists a dozen such reasons and suggests some ways to get started on genuine school reform.

Intuitively I have known that the term *educational standards* is an oxymoron. My feelings are based on years of sitting in classrooms with teachers who brought unique insights and styles into the classroom and with teachers who merely prepared us for taking tests. One type of teacher inspired me; the other, in the words of John Dewey, induced passivity.

Until now, I did not feel compelled to share my feelings about standards. Deep down I felt that this new reform idea, “too, shall pass.” Then I went to see the movie *Pleasantville*. The film recounts the experiences of two teenagers who find themselves trapped in a fictional Fifties town called *Pleasantville*—a community that prides itself on conformity and whose landscape is restricted to black and white. Throughout the movie a series of questions kept running through my mind: What if my community were Standardville? What would a school look like in Standardville? Could a faceless state bureaucracy impose its will by paper standards? Would an army of state officials descend on schools to ferret out educators who tried to add

any color to an already gray landscape of lectures, worksheets, and test preparation programs?

Fortunately, I know the answers to all these questions. No single reform or state agency has ever had the ability to disturb the routines and structures of public schools. Why will the standards movement ultimately fail to affect the way schools do business in our country? The simple answer is that the United States is not Pleasantville. The more complex answer lies in the practical realities of schooling, which defy grand designs for change. Although many academics have already provided their lists of reasons for opposing standards, I felt it was time for a practitioner to provide the “real” reasons that standards will not work in this country.

1. *Schools are systems.* State legislatures and state boards of education keep assuming that schools are *not* systems. These well-intentioned policy makers pass mandates that focus on what teachers and students do from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. They forget about the issues a child faces before and after school. They do not understand how a school staff and a community manage to resolve conflicts over heartfelt issues. Teachers and administrators know very well that, for any reform to succeed in schools, all components of the “school system” must be addressed at once. Bureaucrats will continue to be frustrated with any efforts at reform that do not include the “village” and the system.

2. *We don’t understand the standards.* I will not spend much space on this reason. The most recent issues of any education journal document the problems educators and scholars are having with the interpretation of their state’s standards. Suffice it to say, when schoolpeople do not understand a reform, it’s dead on arrival.

3. *Where are the standards?* I know that every state superintendent of schools has implemented an elaborate process for the development and ratification of standards for his or her state. And I can guess that, in most states (if they are like Illinois), teachers and administrators have been permitted only a token presence in the development of the standards. I can also guess that administrators have responded in one of two ways when the standards have arrived at their doors: 1) they have placed the standards in the learning resource center, or 2) they have sent teachers the following memo: “Attached are the new state standards.” At this point in time, the standards are far away from the classroom.

4. *We already have standards.* Teachers already have standards. They are called textbooks. For most teachers, the state standards will be viewed as an unnecessary duplication of what they already use.

5. *There isn't enough time.* For all the standards to be taught, much less learned, all students in this country would have to enroll in four years of English, four years of social studies, four years of mathematics, four years of science, four years of physical education and health, and four years of fine arts. I predict that, within the next few years, all the disciplines that were left out of the original standards movement will jump in with their own required standards. I also predict that state legislators will respond to the pressure of these interest groups as they did with all the others—“What’s the harm in another four years of something?” If you have been keeping count, students who desire to meet all state standards will be enrolled in “core” academic courses for seven periods a day. Schools in Standardsville will begin early and end late, they will have no electives, and gifted students will have no lunch. I can’t wait for my first meeting with the football coach and the band director.

6. *Teachers don't agree with the standards.* I always wonder if state legislators have ever attended a social studies department meeting. If they did, they would spend hours listening to teachers argue about the number of weeks allocated to studying the Civil War or whether to waste time studying whatever another teacher feels is important. Recently, I attended a math department meeting during which a huge argument broke out over factoring. Factoring—can you imagine that? Although I view these discussions as healthy, the standards movement does not. Teachers will not be given the freedom to select or modify the standards for their disciplines. We already know what happened to the teacher-proof curricula of the Sixties and Seventies. Here we go again.

7. *Teachers have too many kids.* Although overall class sizes have declined in the last five years, the reductions have not compensated for the increase in the diversity of students entering most classrooms in America. Teachers just have too many students, too many demands on their time, and too few hours to focus on world-class standards.

8. *The standards aren't even on my list.* When I get in my car in the morning, I am thinking about students who could bring a gun to school. I am thinking about students who could be selling drugs to other students. I am thinking about what to do with the student who might be harassed because of a change in sexual preference. I am thinking about the teacher who is battling cancer. State standards aren’t even on the list. Based on my reading of the latest statistics on the health of children in the United States, I suspect that most principals enter their cars every morning with a similar list of priorities.

9. *The kids don't speak English.* Jerome Bruner made the observation that in highly symbolic cultures there will always be some group that will have the power to make decisions on what symbols are valued in the culture. It is clear from reading the standards what groups have made the decisions on what symbols will be valued in our schools. Unfortunately, these groups do not represent or understand the diverse backgrounds of the students who are now entering our schools. This reality poses a serious challenge to teachers who must teach representations of symbol systems that make no sense to the majority of students seated in their classes. Teachers are survivors. They will close their classroom doors and do whatever it takes to make things work. There is no bigger obstacle to making things work than subject-matter content that does not make sense to their students.

10. *What's a big idea?* One redeeming quality of the standards is their attempt to develop units of instruction around big ideas, major themes, and important questions. This approach is part of the reason that many of the standards appear to be vague. To implement such an approach to curriculum organization, teachers must have a deep understanding of their disciplines. Unfortunately, the research would indicate that most teachers lack the content background to organize units of instruction based on the “big picture.” Remember what occurred with “modern math” in the Sixties. However, this is where standards or curriculum frameworks could serve as an important foundation for beginning discussions about how to bring meaning to the maze of facts and skills that students are expected to navigate on a daily basis. These discussions will never take place because of the next reason.

11. *Embarrass them in public—they remember it longer.* A former boss gave me this management hint. I will not divulge the source of the quote. Most states, however, have adopted this management strategy as a means of gaining compliance with their mandates. “Publish test scores in the newspapers—they will remember it longer.” Educators respond to this attempt at public embarrassment in a predictable fashion: they play defense. The last behavior we need to see from teachers who are facing tremendous challenges in their classrooms is *defense*.

12. *The workers need prodding.* I am sure that a state superintendent or legislator will be upset with this article. I can predict the response: “Just another example of a school bureaucrat who does not want to be held accountable for his performance.” This strong belief—held by state legislators, state superintendents, and the business community—is, in the words of W. Edwards Deming, “a path to ruination.” The originator of Total Quality Management saw more clearly than his contemporaries in business—even some of those who bow to his shrine—the damage done by imposing grading systems in schools, merit systems, incentive pay, and numerical goals without a method. In Deming’s words, these approaches “rob people and the nation of innovation.” What is needed instead is “management that will restore the power of the individual.”

The teachers and administrators I have worked with for 30 years are “willing workers.” They are trying to do the best job they can. Could all of us in education be doing a better job? Absolutely. Do we get better by regulation, inspection, standardization, and public embarrassment? Absolutely not.

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If standards are not the answer, then what is? Speaking from the trenches, I feel like a Christmas tree being decorated by one group after another with one idea after another. At this point in the reform cycle, the branches are hanging pretty low, and the lights have gone out. We need, first, to take the tree out of the house and start over again. Where do we begin?

We must begin with the experiences children are having in schools. Forget about test scores; forget about the economy; forget about Japan. What do students think about their experiences? Do they feel safe? Do they like their teachers? Do they talk at the dinner table about the in-

teresting day they had at school? Before dismissing these comments as naive, remember that there are schools that students genuinely like to attend. These schools are typically small, they employ teachers who are comfortable with loosely structured environments, and they permit students to follow their interests for most or part of their day. These schools certainly do not resemble what I call the “aircraft-carrier high schools”—cost-efficient behemoths that possess many levels, many departments, and many ranks, but no heart.

We must begin by creating an environment of trust between educators and public policy makers. Unfortunately, a variety of political and economic agendas have polarized the conversation about what makes a school good. We cannot hope to transform the experiences children are having in schools when teachers and administrators are spending valuable energy defending themselves against the latest reform cycle. The quickest way to build trust among educators is to permit their voices to be heard and to let them be involved in the decisions about the schools they teach in.

We must begin to pay more attention to theory instead of to what we think would work. So much of the reform agenda is based on wrong understandings about human behavior and learning. State policy makers continue to pass mandates that ignore the latest theories about human motivation, how the brain functions, how children learn, how adults learn, and how organizations become learning communities. As Deming put it, “Experience teaches nothing without theory.”

Finally, we must begin to remove the obstacles that prevent teachers and administrators from doing their jobs well. These obstacles range from state mandates that generate mountains of paperwork to a lack of basic resources—access to a telephone, a computer, a room in which to talk alone with a colleague. Creating learning experiences that are meaningful and engaging requires an enormous amount of thought and energy. Right now, teachers are spending too much time and energy taking attendance and worrying about when the copy machine will be repaired.

Tomorrow I will return to school and continue the complex work of bringing some color to the learning experiences of the students of our community. I am thankful that the community I work in is not Standardsville. My hope is that state policy makers will begin spending more time on helping schools develop more color in their programs than on preserving a landscape of black and white.