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Seeking Stability For Standards-Based Education

States have invested enormous energy and political capital over the past decade in raising academic standards in American schools. A majority of parents and teachers believe those efforts are headed in the right direction.

Quality Counts 2001 suggests those efforts also are beginning to pay off where it counts: in the classroom. Test scores are rising in some states, many teachers report the expectations in their schools are climbing, and educators are slowly changing the curriculum to reflect state standards.

But the fifth annual 50-state report by *Education Week* concludes that states must strike a better balance among standards, assessments, and the tools students and schools need to succeed. Without it, not only could standards-based improvement efforts stumble, but public support for public education also could totter. What's more, tens of thousands of students could fail to meet the goals their states have set for them, limiting the potential of today's children, with implications well into the future.

Without a better balance among standards, tests, and support, the movement could fail.

Specifically, *Quality Counts* found, state tests are overshadowing the standards they were designed to measure and could be encouraging undesirable practices in schools. Some tests do not adequately reflect the standards or provide a rich enough picture of student learning. And many states may be rushing to hold students and schools accountable for results without providing the essential support.

Quality Counts 2001 provides a classroom-eye view of how the standards movement is playing out. This special report is based on a new, nationally representative survey of 1,019 public school teachers conducted especially for *Education Week*. (Download the [survey report](#), along with the [questionnaire](#) and the [full set of cross tabulations](#). All three files require [Adobe's Acrobat Reader](#). For more information, read "[Poll: Teachers Support Standards—With Hesitation.](#)") It also includes the most comprehensive survey to date of what the 50 states are doing to set academic standards, create testing and accountability systems linked to those standards, and provide support for students and educators to reach the higher expectations.

Today, 49 states have academic standards in at least some subjects; 50 test how well their students are learning; and 27 hold schools accountable for results, either by rating the performance of all schools or identifying low-performing ones.

Many of the teachers surveyed for *Quality Counts 2001* reported that student and teacher behavior was changing, to some degree, because of state standards. When asked to compare the current picture with the situation three years earlier:

- Almost eight in 10 teachers said the curriculum was "somewhat" or "a lot" more demanding of students.
- More than six in 10 said the expectations for what students would learn were "somewhat" or "a lot" higher.
- Nearly seven in 10 said teachers in their schools were collaborating more.
- More than six in 10 said students were writing more; nearly half reported students were reading more.

Of those who said the curriculum was more demanding, more than six in 10 attributed the change to statewide academic standards. Slightly more than half said their students were working harder because of them. Elementary teachers were far more likely to report changes in curriculum and expectations than middle or high school teachers. Teachers in states that require students to pass exit tests to graduate also reported more changes than those in states without such exams.

Of teachers surveyed who said the curriculum was more demanding, more than six in 10 attributed the change to statewide academic standards.

States may be placing too much weight, however, on tests and their use in accountability systems to drive changes in teaching and learning. Responses to the teacher survey suggest state tests may be looming too large in classrooms and encouraging undesirable practices.

- Nearly seven in 10 teachers said instruction stresses state tests "far" or

"somewhat" too much.

- Sixty-six percent said state tests were forcing them to concentrate too much on what's tested to the detriment of other important topics.
- About 29 percent reported using either state practice tests or commercial test-preparation materials a "great deal" to ready students for state exams, while one-third did not use them at all.
- Nearly half reported spending "a great deal" of time preparing their students in test-taking skills.

Of the 27 states that now rate schools based on their performance, 11 do so based entirely on test scores. Eighteen states require students to pass state tests to receive a high school diploma, and six more plan to do so. Three states require children to pass state tests to be promoted in certain grades, a number that will rise to seven by 2003.

States also need to strike a better balance within their testing systems, so they more fully reflect the standards and provide a richer portrayal of student work, information gathered for *Quality Counts 2001* suggests.

- Forty states report having tests aligned with their standards in English at the elementary, middle, and high school levels; 34 report having such tests in mathematics. But *Quality Counts* summarizes previously unpublished analyses by Achieve, a Cambridge, Mass.-based nonprofit group, that indicate the match between state standards and tests is not close enough. In particular, state tests tend to measure some standards but not others and to emphasize the less demanding knowledge and skills in state standards.

Seven in 10 teachers said there is not enough time to cover everything in their state standards.

- States need to give students more varied ways to show what they know and can do. Forty-nine states include multiple-choice questions on their exams, 38 include short-answer items, and 46 ask students to compose essays as part of writing tests. But only seven require students to write essays or engage in performance tasks in subjects other than English. Two states use portfolios, compilations of students' classroom work.

Quality Counts' teacher survey also suggests that state standards are too voluminous. Seven in 10 teachers said there is not enough time to cover everything in their state standards, a problem that is worse for elementary and middle school teachers.

Finally, the reporting for *Quality Counts*

suggests, states must balance policies to reward and punish performance with the resources needed for students and schools to meet higher expectations—especially when the futures of individual children are at stake.

- Of the 18 states that require students to pass tests to earn a diploma, 15 mandate that students receive additional help if they fail the tests, but only nine pay for such assistance.
- Of the three states that require students in some grades to pass a test to be promoted to the next level, only two help subsidize remedial instruction for youngsters who fail the exams.
- Fewer than half the teachers surveyed said they had "plenty" of access to curriculum guides or textbooks and other materials that match state standards.
- Fewer than half also reported having "plenty" of access to training in the use of state standards or assessments. A majority reported having had five hours or less of training in such topics in the past year.

Teachers who said they had received more training were more likely than others to report using lesson plans linked to state standards, modifying their curricula to align with state standards, and using test results to diagnose individual students' needs.

Support to help reach standards is particularly crucial in schools serving large numbers of poor and minority students.

- Although 42 states help finance professional development for teachers, only 24 earmark such money for every school or district.
- And while 38 states require teachers to participate in professional development to renew their teaching licenses, only seven of them require that some of the training be in the teachers' subjects or "endorsement" areas.

Support to help reach standards is particularly crucial in schools serving large numbers of poor and minority students.

This year's edition of *Quality Counts* also charts the progress of other facets of education improvement in the 50 states. In addition to looking at [student achievement](#), it grades the states in four areas: [standards and accountability](#), efforts to [improve teacher quality](#), [school climate](#), and [resources](#). This year, states averaged a C- across those categories.

Quality Counts 2001 is divided into three sections. "[Balancing Act](#)" examines the report's theme for this year. "[Standards-Related Policies](#)" tracks specific indicators related to the theme. "[The State of the States](#)" includes more than 75 indicators of the health of each state's public education system. State-by-state updates summarize state policy changes in education over the past year.

—The Editors

Quality Counts *is produced with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts.*

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