High Standards: A Challenge Not Only for Students

Standards made us, as a profession, step up to the plate, analyze what we're doing, and share that information with our customers, which is very, very different than before standards.

— Superintendent of a middle-class suburban district

Academic standards that established the skills and knowledge California’s 6.3 million public school students are expected to master at each grade level have been a fact of life in the state for a decade. Although the implementation of these standards, from 1995 through 1998, took place as part of a broader national focus on academic accountability, California’s adoption is unique in several ways. One is its scale: California has more public school students than any other state. Another is the fact that its standards are among the highest in the nation: All California schools are expected to progress toward and eventually attain an Academic Performance Index (API) score of 800—roughly equal to having 70 percent of each school’s students perform above the national median.

In School Resources and Academic Standards in California: Lessons from the Schoolhouse, PPIC researchers Heather Rose, Jon Sonstelie, and Ray Reinhard examine a representative group of individual schools and school districts in the state to understand how those working in the schools on a daily basis are managing the challenge of meeting the new standards. Through in-depth interviews with school district superintendents and a survey of teachers, they found general support—mixed with relief, anxiety, and, in some cases, grudging assent—for this new way of California school life. A financial analysis they also conducted tends to confirm past findings that although the goals California has set for student achievement are high, the resources being provided to meet those goals are not. The analysis also indicates that although schools who serve low socioeconomic groups are receiving additional funds to compensate them, those schools’ API scores remain farthest from the state’s 800-API goal.

In this third report, the authors focus on a group of 49 selected schools from around the state, of various sizes, socioeconomic status, and grade levels. They visited the schools over several months in 2003 and 2004, conducting interviews, researching financial data, and administering surveys, all with the goal of understanding how schools are implementing standards and how they are managing the necessary resources.

Superintendents Support Standards

A fundamental tension in the new standards-based era infuses all discussion of its implementation: Standards are imposed from Sacramento on a uniform, statewide basis, but California’s public schools are not uniform. Rather, each is very much a local, even neighborhood, institution. School districts have locally elected boards, local chapters of employee unions, and students and parents whose concerns are most closely focused on local problems and issues, even as they struggle to meet the new academic standards imposed by the state. Working between these two competing interests are school district superintendents, accountable both to their local boards and to Sacramento.

The authors found that superintendents strongly support the new standards-based regimen, chiefly because it gives them more direct authority over what actually goes on in their classrooms. Many superintendents share a vision of how those standards should be implemented: first, through adoption of the best textbooks and teaching schedules, then...
through use of the best tools to evaluate students, and, last, through adoption of the most effective intervention strategies to help with students who are not meeting standards. Although some superintendents criticized the inconsistent way the state has imposed rules and mandates for implementation of standards—for example, by delaying the initiation of the high-school exit exam—all supported standards generally.

**Teacher Concerns**

The authors found in their survey of more than 2,000 teachers that they also generally supported standards, but they were also more ambivalent than superintendents. Twelve percent considered them too ambitious and therefore unachievable, while 39 percent characterized them as “lofty” and therefore very difficult to achieve. Elementary school teachers appeared to be more optimistic than their colleagues in middle and high schools.

Teachers also voiced concern about the gap between the ideal of high state standards and the reality of low, present-day achievement levels at many schools. A significant percentage of teachers pointed to lack of student motivation, lack of parental support, inadequate English-language skills, and irregular student attendance as serious impediments to student achievement. These barriers to learning, and therefore to attainment of academic standards, intensified at schools with students from lower socioeconomic levels, even though many of these schools are allocated additional funding.

Teachers also were asked their opinions of the physical condition of the schools where they taught. The authors found that teachers seem generally satisfied, although there was concern expressed about excessive noise levels and unstable classroom temperatures at some schools.

**Resource Priorities**

Although California’s standards envision its students achieving better than 70 percent of students in the rest of the nation, the authors posed questions to teachers and superintendents about whether they thought that the resources provided in California were sufficient to meet the state’s goals. The consensus was that they are not.

The two groups offered different suggestions for how additional resources might be used. Many superintendents indicated that they would use extra funds for additional time for teacher professional development and for teachers and administrators to meet and strategize about the best ways to achieve standards. In the teacher survey, a primary concern of respondents was staffing shortages. Forty percent and more of the teacher respondents, for example, said that they considered student counseling and student health services to be important activities with particularly inadequate staffing. Elementary school teachers were especially concerned about what they viewed as insufficient staffing to teach art, music, and drama, and for English-language support.