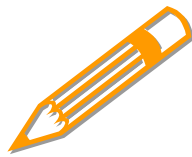


**Making the Grade:
Teachers' Attitudes Toward Academic
Standards and
State Testing**

**Findings of National Survey of Public School
Teachers**

for

Education Week



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Introduction

To teach: *verb.* to impart knowledge or skill.

In a changing world where information seems to expand exponentially, the demands on teachers have become increasingly complex. The debate over what and how teachers should teach and how to measure that learning have become popular topics not only among educators but also among parents, taxpayers, and politicians.

The reform movement was born to push schools and their staff to improve student learning. The centerpiece of reform has become high academic standards, spelling out what children should learn in elementary, middle, and high school; and testing students' abilities to meet these standards has become common practice in states across the country over the past few years.

Teachers are the central players in this drama. A national survey of 1,019 public school teachers conducted for *Education Week* looks at teachers' answers to the question of whether these academic standards are helping teachers teach children more. Do teachers find the standards useful or a hindrance? Do teachers have enough time and resources to understand the standards themselves and to integrate them successfully into their lesson plans? Are tests helping to assess students' abilities or are they taking up too much time in the classroom? In the end, do teachers believe students are learning more?

Summary




To learn: *verb.* to gain knowledge.

The national survey of 1,019 public school teachers, conducted August 28 to September 17, reveals that teachers believe in the principle of raising academic standards. Teachers do, however, see pitfalls in the current way new standards are being implemented.

With new standards written in many states, much of the focus has moved to state testing. The survey reveals teachers are responding, by both using test results to modify what they teach, and teaching to the test. On the positive side, teachers are diagnosing what they need to be teaching generally, as well as what individual students need. On the other hand, most say the standards lead to teaching that focuses too much on the state tests to the detriment of other important material.

As more states put into place new tougher academic standards and statewide testing to gauge progress, educators on the front lines in classrooms say they do not see that establishing standards alone has led to more student learning.

Teachers talk about academic standards

-  Public school teachers generally support the movement to raise standards, but not without hesitation.
-  A large majority of teachers believes that the existing standards in their states are already appropriate, whereas the general public is much less content with what are perceived to be current levels. Teachers give themselves high marks on implementing standards and believe that most of their students are able to meet the state standards.
-  Many teachers credit new state academic standards with making curricula more demanding and increasing teachers' expectations for what students will learn.

- ✎ New standards alone, however, are not credited with actual increases in student learning. While majorities of teachers believe students are learning more and working harder, these changes are less evident to teachers than increases in teacher expectations and rising demands in curricula. Many teachers see a number of factors at work and while standards are a part of the mixture, they are not considered the only causes for increases in learning that they are witnessing.
- ✎ A majority of public school teachers do not believe that one size fits all when it comes to learning. In large numbers, teachers support offering alternative standards to students who do not plan to go to college.

Teachers' views on testing

- ✎ Certainly teachers feel pressure from new standards and state tests. They believe that too much time is focused on testing and that they have too little time to cover all the material necessary to meet the standards.
- ✎ A majority of teachers prefer that graduation from high school be based on various parts of the student's record, not just results from state tests. There is an even greater call from teachers for grade promotion in elementary school to be based on multiple considerations such as grades and individual student assessments, instead of reliance on a high-stakes test.

Integrating standards and testing into teaching

- ✎ Academic standards are having a direct impact on classrooms. Most public school teachers have adopted or developed modules, units, or lesson plans linked to state standards, and they have modified their curricula to fit the standards in the last year.
- ✎ Unlike teacher familiarity with academic standards, teachers feel somewhat less prepared to implement and use the results of state tests. While six in ten teachers report that they are *very prepared* to implement the standards in their classrooms, four in ten teachers report the same for the state tests.
- ✎ To integrate testing into their classrooms, teachers are most likely to be instructing their classes on test-taking skills and using the tests as a diagnostic tool to help guide what they teach and what their students need to learn. Teachers are also amending what they teach to fit what is on the state tests.

Evaluating teacher performance

- ✎ When considering how to evaluate their own performance, public school teachers are much more likely to endorse assessments by their peers and testing their own proficiency, than their students' performances on statewide tests. Indeed, large majorities say being assessed by experienced teachers and passing proficiency tests are good or excellent ways to be evaluated, but only a quarter says using their students' test results would be a good form of evaluation.