

# *Elementary Makes the Grade!*

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## *Executive Summary*



## ***Introduction: A Systemic Approach to Standards-Based Education***

*Elementary Makes the Grade!* provides guidance and information on resources to assist elementary school staff, parents, community members, and policymakers in implementing a systemic approach to standards-based education. This document describes how schools can create a coordinated system in which standards, assessment, accountability, and curriculum are aligned and focused to ensure that all students meet grade-level standards.

The Elementary Grades Task Force, established by former State Superintendent Delaine Eastin, concluded that much of the groundwork for California's evolving standards-based system was initially described in *It's Elementary!* (California Department of Education, 1992). Nevertheless, the Task Force felt that the new document needed to address a number of more recent events and conditions affecting public education:

- The emphasis on implementation of standards-based education differs considerably from that of 1992.
- Many more English learners must now be educated in English-only classes.
- The teacher-student ratio in kindergarten through third grade is significantly lower due to the Class Size Reduction Program.
- California has entered a new era of public school accountability, with rewards for improving schools and interventions for underperforming schools.
- Research conducted since 1992 has expanded our knowledge about how children learn and how we can better educate diverse student populations.

California has developed state standards, new statewide assessments, and a new accountability system. With the shift to standards-based education, grade-span documents have been developed. *First Class: A Guide for Early Primary Education*, released in September 1999, addresses preschool, kindergarten and first grade. *Elementary Makes the Grade!*, released in 2000, focuses on elementary schools. *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students* and *Aiming High: High Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* released in 2001, focus on middle and high schools.

This Executive Summary of *Elementary Makes the Grade!* describes the 5 components and 15 recommendations developed by the Elementary Grades Task Force and the California Department of Education as well as the rationale for each recommendation. For each recommendation, the full document also contains:

- *An Example of Best Practice* that describes what successful implementation of the recommendation might look like.
- *Steps Along the Way* that identifies actions a school might take to begin implementation of a recommendation.
- *Shared Responsibilities* that identify the roles and responsibilities of others, outside of the school, who are needed to ensure the implementation of the recommendation.
- *Selected References and Further Readings and Web Sites*.

## The Components as a System

A standards-based system of education is an integrated system in which each component is an essential part of the whole. The system requires both the development of strong system components that are based on current research and best practices and the linkage among the individual components. Each system component must be well designed and built to fit with the other components to form a powerful system. Although schools and districts may start their renewal efforts with a particular component, no single component will ensure student achievement. In addition, if any of the system components is not implemented effectively, the success of the entire system is jeopardized.



### ***System Component I. Rigorous Academic Content and Performance Standards***

Standards should set clear expectations for student achievement, provide a basis to hold educators and students accountable, and promote educational equity by demanding that all students achieve at high levels (Cross and Jofus, 1997). Content standards describe what all students should know and be able to do as they complete each grade. While *content* standards provide teachers with a broad framework to assist them with focusing on what is most important for students to learn, *performance* standards and accompanying assessment tools should be designed to provide the necessary feedback to determine how well students are meeting the standards.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

##### **Create a Standards-Based Learning Environment.**

While high standards are an important element of the system, standards, by themselves, will not produce results. A learning environment that actively engages students in a challenging program that leads to academic success is crucial. Such an environment should include:

- A belief that all students can achieve high standards even though they may enter the school with different strengths, weaknesses, and life experiences
- Opportunities for all students to engage in a rigorous curriculum
- A physically and emotionally safe learning environment that supports academic risk-taking, invites student participation, and structures cooperative learning experiences
- Excellent facilities, including a well-equipped and well-staffed school library, technological resources, and instructional materials that are accessible to all students
- The support of a site administrator who acts as an instructional leader as well as a site manager
- A system that encourages parents to assist their children in achieving grade-level standards
- Professional development that includes mentoring and coaching and continuously improves educators' knowledge about students' development, subject matter, and research-based instructional strategies

## **Recommendation 2:**

### **Adopt Performance Standards That Specify, How Good Is Good Enough?**

Districts must develop performance standards that specify, “How good is good enough?” to assess the degree to which content standards are being attained. It is through the work of defining performance standards that teachers become clear about what the standards really mean and how they can provide instruction to meet the standards.

Many educators believe that, to be most beneficial, performance standards should be designed using actual examples of student work. The samples should clearly illustrate how well the work should be done so that any student can look at the samples and say, “Ah, I understand now—I can do that.” At the same time teachers should be able to look at student work and say, “Now I understand what types of learning experiences to create” (New Standards, 1997, p. 4).

Descriptors of student work should include examples from individuals representing the entire student population and range of performances. Finally, the students need to see themselves reflected in the work samples if they are to believe that they too are capable of producing such work.

Developing performance standards takes time and requires collaboration among teachers and other stakeholders; however, understanding what it means to meet the standard is often as important as achieving the standard itself (Jamentz, 1998). For example, group scoring leads educators to articulate their reasons for specific evaluations of student work. The dialogue and consensus building that often take place among professionals during their deliberations can be very beneficial.



### ***System Component II. Assessment and Accountability***

Assessment is an essential part of good instruction. In a standards-based system, assessment results are used to:

- Identify students’ progress toward achieving standards.
- Identify students in need of additional instruction or interventions.
- Prescribe a reteaching or intervention focus for individual students.
- Identify professional development needs for individual teachers, schools, and districts.
- Provide information that helps target school and district resources to areas of need.

## **Recommendation 3:**

### **Require that Ongoing Assessment and Analysis of Student Work Drive the Curriculum**

“Assessments play a pivotal role in standards-based education by: communicating the goals that school systems, schools, teachers, and students are expected to achieve; providing targets for teaching and learning; and shaping the performance of educators and students” (Linn and Herman, 1997, p. iii). In a standards-based system, frequent analysis of student work drives the curriculum. The advantage of using students’ daily work as a diagnostic tool is revealed when teachers look at student work and discuss the corresponding standards or performance

expectations very explicitly. “Where teachers do this, changes in teaching and schooling practices almost invariably occur—especially for those students who have been less successful at schoolwork” (Darling-Hammond 1997, p. 237).

The impact of assessment is further enhanced when data are disaggregated to evaluate the performance of specific groups of students. By using the disaggregated data, schools can compare students’ performances in various categories, such as participants in Title I, English learners, gifted students, and special education students. Analyses of disaggregated data can also help educators identify patterns of underachievement so they can make appropriate changes in the curriculum and instructional strategies.

**Recommendation 4:  
Communicate Performance Expectations and Results**

In a standards-based system, teachers can clearly explain the annual expectations and achievement to their students and parents. Parents and students should know what is expected of students to produce proficient work and how student work can be improved to make it proficient.

It is important for students to have opportunities for self-assessment, such as using rubrics to assess their work. Such opportunities help students to be more reflective about their own work.

As districts implement standards-based instruction, they will also need to develop new ways of reporting student progress. Many districts are currently developing standards-based report cards to report students’ progress toward standards.

**Recommendation 5:  
Hold Stakeholders Accountable for Their Part in Students’ Achievement of Standards**

A standards-based system works best when educational stakeholders (state policymakers, administrators, teachers, and students) recognize and accept their responsibility for improving student achievement.

Johnson’s study of successful, high-poverty schools (1999), found that everyone who was involved with a child had an important role in improving the child’s achievement. The talents of all teachers, support staff, administrators, volunteers, and parents were marshaled to support student achievement.

As students progress through the grades, they should also be given increasing responsibility for their own achievement of standards. Students who have a clear understanding of the expectations and the ability to assess their own skills are more likely to assume responsibility for their own learning.

Although parents are not held accountable for the achievement of standards, they share responsibility for their child’s achievement. Parent-school compacts have proven to be a good method for defining the responsibilities of home and school. Many successful, high-poverty schools have created structures to help parents learn about the standards that their children are expected to achieve, to understand the efforts that the school was making, and to assist their children in learning the standards (Johnson, 1999).



### ***System Component III. Curriculum and Instruction***

Curriculum—content, teaching strategies, and instructional materials and resources, including technology—determines what teachers teach and how they actively engage students in learning. The achievement of standards is based, in large measure, on the skill of teachers to organize and implement curriculum.

#### **Recommendation 6: Teach All Disciplines in the Curriculum While Emphasizing Reading, Writing, and Mathematics**

Standards-based curriculum should emphasize reading, writing, and mathematics while supporting the academic rigor of all other core disciplines. “Every child a reader by grade three” and “every child prepared for algebra by grade eight” should not be just slogans; they must become statewide goals for educators.

Being competent in reading, writing, speaking, and listening is essential to academic, personal, social, and economic success. Individuals with the knowledge and skills to use the power of the printed word are more likely to become independent learners, less likely to drop out of school, and more likely to be employed when they become adults (California Department of Education, 1999b).

Although the emphasis of standards-based reform is often on reading and mathematics, elementary teachers must also become familiar with California’s curriculum frameworks in science, history-social science, foreign language, health, physical education, and visual and performing arts. In addition to being important in their own right, these subject areas reinforce literacy and mathematics, provide a context for reading across all subject areas, and supply real life situations for problem solving.

#### **Recommendation 7: Actively Involve All Students in the Inclusive Core Curriculum**

Children of all ability levels and from all linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds should be provided high-quality instruction, challenging assignments, and high expectations for academic success. Research has shown that “poor students and students of color are much less likely to have teachers who have majored or even minored in the subjects they teach. And despite considerable gains in test scores in the 70s and 80s, African American and Latino students’ scores on many measures have stagnated or fallen in the past 10 years” (Chenoweth, 1998, p. 14). Therefore, it is particularly important that elementary schools address these achievement gaps.

Effective instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse groups of children should not differ from effective instruction given to all children. Children should be offered multiple ways to

demonstrate their learning, to participate in classroom activities, and to interact with adults and other children.

To ensure that multicultural concepts are part of the curriculum, teachers need time to broaden their own knowledge by seeking out new ideas, materials, and points of view from a wide variety of sources. Communicating with parents and other community members who volunteer in the classroom can assist teachers to better understand students' cultures and behavior.

**Recommendation 8:  
Implement Aggressive Intervention Strategies**

Schools need a comprehensive approach to preventing academic failure and to ensuring that all students meet high expectations. According to the United States Department of Education (1999b), the number of students meeting grade-level standards would be increased significantly if educators concentrated on:

- Setting clear objectives for students to meet performance standards at key grades
- Identifying student needs early on and intervening with appropriate instructional strategies
- Providing high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students
- Providing professional development that deepens teachers' content knowledge and improves instructional strategies to engage all children in learning
- Providing summer school for students who are not meeting academic standards
- Extending learning time by providing before- and after-school programs, tutoring, homework centers, and year-round schooling
- Reducing class sizes in the primary grades
- Keeping students and teachers together for more than one year

The importance of early intervention cannot be over-emphasized. By continuously monitoring student progress, interventions can be initiated immediately to prevent students from falling further behind.

**Recommendation 9:  
Build Partnerships with Other Stakeholders to Meet the Needs of the Whole Child**

Academic success is most likely when the development of the whole child is addressed within the context of the family, school, and community. Perhaps the most important and productive partnership that schools can enter into is one with their students' parents and families. Children, whose parents are involved in their education, earn higher grades and test scores, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate a better attitude and better behavior, and are more likely to go on to higher education than children whose parents are less involved.

The United States Department of Education (1999a) identifies activities that can lead to successful parent-school partnerships:

- Parent resource centers in schools can draw parents into the school community while providing important information on helping children succeed in core subjects.
- Family literacy programs can teach parents to read in English.
- Home visits by qualified school staff can help parents reinforce their children's learning at home.

- Parental participation in decision making at school can be advanced when parents receive needed information and support.
- Parent-school compacts can outline the mutual responsibilities of home and school.
- Staff training is necessary to provide teachers, principals, and school staff with methods for working effectively with parents.

Other partnerships housed on or near a school campus may address the health and physical needs of children and their families. Research confirms a direct link between student health risk behavior and educational outcomes (Symons and others, 1997). Likewise, after-school programs also have been shown to improve academic achievement and the attitudes of students toward school.

#### **Recommendation 10:**

##### **Develop and Reinforce Positive Character Traits**

Effective schools seek to develop and reinforce character traits, such as caring, citizenship, fairness, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness, through a systemic approach that includes adult modeling, curriculum integration, a positive school climate, and access to comprehensive guidance and counseling services. Classroom curriculum is a natural means by which positive character traits can be reinforced. By integrating character education throughout subject areas, students can see its application to life situations. The climate of a school can also reinforce positive character traits through the attitude of its staff and students, by policies and procedures, and through its physical appearance.

Guidance and counseling services should be an integral part of each school's comprehensive school health system and should provide elementary-grade students with support and assistance in making healthy decisions, managing emotions, coping with crises, and setting short- and long-term goals (California Department of Education, 1994). A first step in providing quality programs and services to students is developing a comprehensive guidance and counseling plan as an integral part of a total educational plan (California State Board of Education, 1995).

#### **Recommendation 11:**

##### **Select Effective Instructional Materials and Resources, Including Technology**

In a standards-based system, teachers need powerful curriculum materials and instructional techniques that are explicitly designed to assist all students to reach the standards. In addition, instructional technology is needed to support the curriculum (Tucker and Coddling, 1998). The State Board of Education has adopted curriculum frameworks and instructional materials that are linked to the standards. In selecting the most appropriate instructional materials and resources, teachers and library media teachers need to consider their students' needs, interests, language proficiency, and cultural backgrounds. In selecting materials, teachers should be asking, "What do I need to enable students to meet these standards?"

Establishing and maintaining a well equipped and up-to-date school library or multi-media center, staffed by a credentialed library media teacher, are essential for connecting students and teachers with the information, skills and resources necessary for them to achieve. Credentialed library media teachers can ensure that the library is an integral part of teaching and learning by

teaching research skills, assisting with the integration of technology, motivating students, and collaborating with classroom teachers on their instructional assignments.

Technology should be integrated into the curriculum based on its relationship to attainment of the standards. For many students, technology is motivating. Students must learn at an early age to become skillful and active information users and creative locators, evaluators, and problem solvers.

### **Recommendation 12:**

#### **Engage in Purposeful Dialogue Between Grade Levels**

It is important for educators to work together to establish successful transitions from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle schools. Purposeful dialogue between preschool and elementary staffs and between elementary and middle school staffs enables children to more easily make the transition to new situations and staff to become more aware of appropriate methods to address students' intellectual, physical, social and emotional development.

In a standards-based system, each student's ability to learn depends on the student's mastery of the content of the previous grade level. Elementary students who transfer to middle school need to be prepared to master the standards expected at the middle school level. By establishing a meaningful dialogue about middle school, elementary school staff can better ensure students an easier academic transition.



#### ***System Component IV. Professional Development***

“Research shows that the single most important determinant of what students learn is the expertise of the teacher” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 6). In a standards-based system, the district's and school's staff development plan should focus on improving the ability of educators, schools, and the district to prepare all students to meet high academic standards. In this plan staff members identify the knowledge and skills they need to help create student success.

The California Standards for the Teaching Profession (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and California Department of Education, 1997) identifies what teachers should know and be able to do in six areas:

1. Engaging and supporting all students in learning
2. Creating and maintaining effective environments for student learning
3. Understanding and organizing subject matter for student learning
4. Planning instruction and designing learning experiences for all students
5. Assessing student learning
6. Developing as a professional educator

### **Recommendation 13:**

#### **Implement a Professional Development Plan Based on Student Performance**

In a standards-based system, professional development focuses on improving the ability of educators to ensure that all students meet standards. Tucker and Coddling (1998) suggest that two of the most powerful methods for improving school performance—analyzing student work and performance (especially using disaggregated data) and identifying best practices—are also among the most effective approaches to professional development for educators. “The first requires teachers to examine their own practices very carefully in relation to the progress that their students are making against the standards; the second gets them into the mode of searching everywhere for the practices most likely to help them meet the student needs that the first activity reveals” (Tucker and Coddling, 1998, p. 120).

An example of a continuous professional development process is the Results Model (Schmoker, 1996), in which educators meet in grade-level teams (or other configurations) to set goals, discuss strategies, and develop a plan for student instruction.

### **Recommendation 14:**

#### **Provide Mentors and Coaching to Improve Professional Skills**

To retain experienced and qualified teachers and to improve student achievement, districts and schools must provide the time and support that successful practitioners need to assist new teachers, teachers experiencing difficulties, and veteran teachers in new professional assignments. The best way to accomplish this task is to infuse mentoring and coaching into all phases of staff development (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Mentoring and coaching are effective practices that improve the skills of all teachers and administrators, no matter where they may be on the continuum of teacher development.

Site administrators who are new to their positions or experiencing difficulties can also benefit from the assistance provided by more experienced administrators. The use of a mentor or coaching program at the district or county level can enhance the abilities of administrators to develop leadership skills; to work with diverse groups to establish a positive school culture; to design and implement schoolwide safety and discipline policies; and to better make budget, management, and policy decisions.



### ***System Component V. District-Level Leadership and Support***

Although there is no one right way to develop a standards-based system, there are five areas in which districts can assist local schools in implementing standards. They are:

- Building consensus around education goals and adopting high academic standards that embody these goals
- Ensuring that student achievement is continuously analyzed and using the results to modify the curriculum, instruction, and opportunity to learn offered to all students

- Providing teachers with the necessary curriculum materials and support needed to assist all students in reaching standards
- Offering professional development to provide the knowledge and skills that teachers need to implement a standards-based system of education
- Delegating additional authority for fiscal decisions to the principals and teachers who will be held accountable for student progress.

### **Recommendation 15:**

#### **Provide Adequate District-Level Resources, Support, and Leadership**

Principals and teachers are often charged with implementing standards-based education at the school level, but broad-based policy direction, leadership, and support for its successful implementation need to come from the district. Determining what is the right amount of district direction and support, however, can often be difficult. Studies have found that the fate of new programs and ideas often rests on the ability of teachers and local school personnel to experiment, learn from their mistakes, and adapt new ideas based on their local circumstances. Without such opportunities, many innovations often fade away when start-up funds stop or implementation pressures end (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

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