

Common Sense on Standards

Freeing Teachers to Be Teachers

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by Andrew Pudewa



The idea of standards in education is not new. Since the first Nation's Report Card in 1969, schools, districts, states, and publishers have been adopting criteria for what should be taught at various grade levels. Like good social planners, the curriculum experts have reverse-engineered their syllabi to determine what should be learned during each year of school in order to accomplish college and career readiness. With the apparent shortcomings of local and state standards, a new universal or “common” standards initiative has arisen, creating what may be both an opportunity and a burden for schools.

In some places, California for example, many teachers welcome the new standards as being less onerous than the extant state standards which seemed both voluminous and impractical. Conversely, we hear teachers elsewhere expressing great concern about changes in curricula that the new standards are precipitating. Additionally, there are many who categorically object to any increased centralized control of education because they perceive dangers in a “national” curriculum. The debate spans both practical and political concerns. However, the real challenge for teachers is much more fundamental.

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At its core, teaching is about students, not stuff. To the degree that standards and materials support teachers in meeting the immediate needs of students, they are a great blessing, providing guides and tools, but if the material that must be taught is inappropriate to the students being taught, frustration and failure will be the inevitable result. To assume that every group of fourth graders—simply by merit of being approximately the same age—should be taught the same thing in the same way at the same speed is a disaster in the making. Every good teacher knows this.

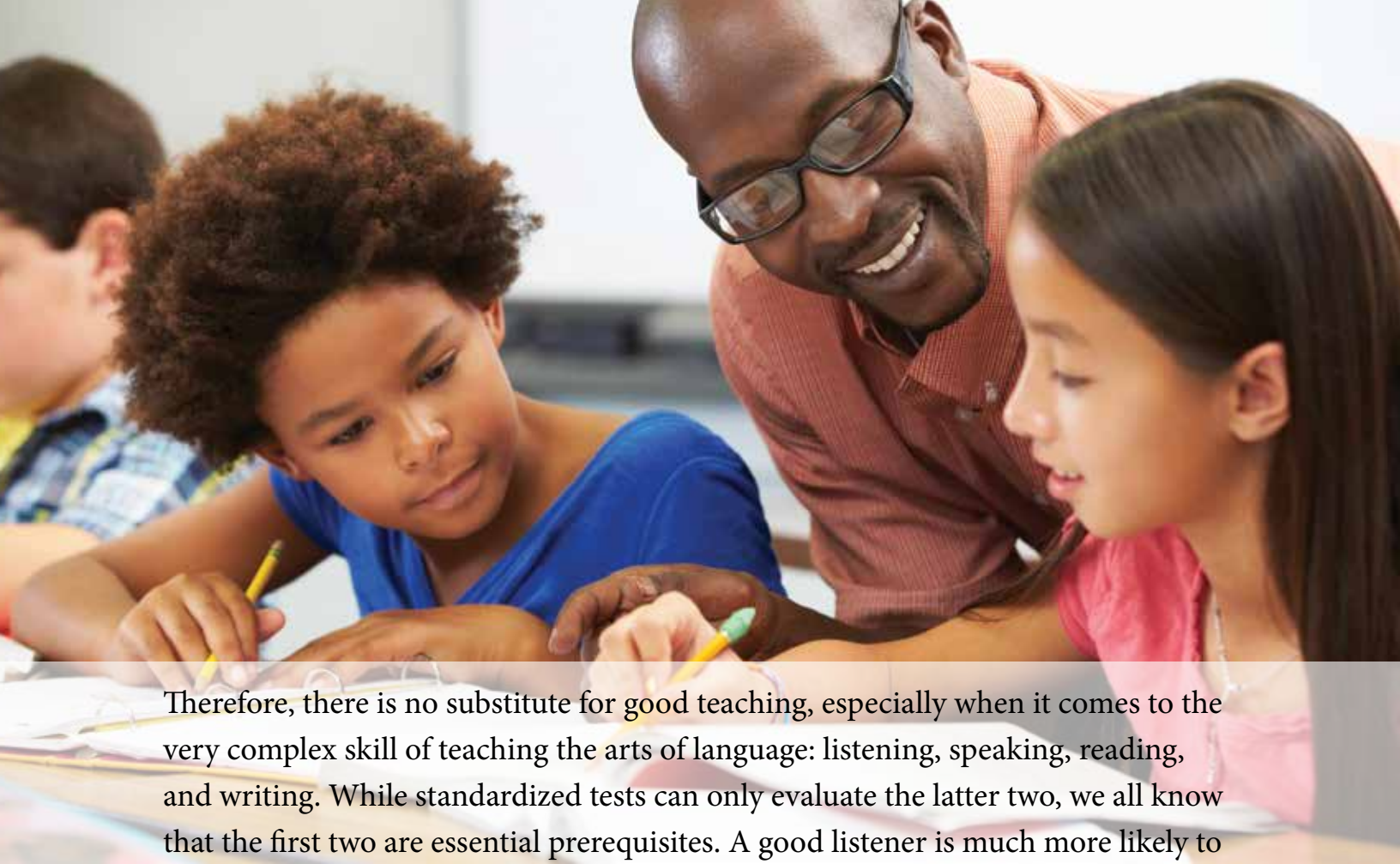


In his *Paideia Proposal*, Mortimer Adler noted that in education we are tasked with teaching in three areas—interdependent but distinct—facts, concepts, and skills. Because these three are learned differently, they must be taught differently. While facts can be memorized and regurgitated, concepts must be discussed and developed. Facts are finite; concepts are infinite. We tend to teach these by texts and by talking, with varied levels of success. Skills, however, require coached practice; they can be developed neither by memorization nor discussion. Learning a skill requires practice—doing—and learning along a pathway. A student cannot be expected to play a Bach minuet before learning a simple scale.

Likewise, the teaching of writing is the teaching of a skill. It must be learned by practice, by doing. And like a music teacher, a writing teacher must understand the pathway; i.e., given this student's ability now, what is the next step? This cannot be foreknown by any set of standards or predetermined by a schoolbook with a number on the cover that corresponds to a student's approximate age. Master teachers know this and realize that textbooks and workbooks are only as good as the teacher using them. Yes, there are the rare, self-directed students who can pick up a book, understand and apply it, and learn a skill somewhat independently, but that is about as unusual as the student who can buy a violin and a video and learn to play well. Coaching is a process of evaluation, modeling of a next step, activity, feedback, and re-evaluation. A curriculum itself cannot possibly do this; only a teacher can. Therefore, if standards—of any flavor—help to clarify the path of skill development by providing benchmarks and next-step suggestions, they can be useful, even empowering to the teacher, but when standards attempt to dictate what must be learned based on age, regardless of aptitude and previous experience, they will handcuff the teacher and harm the student.

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Unfortunately, the trend in textbook publishing is for the major players to create teacher-proof materials consistent with current “standards,” but treating teachers like curriculum administrators rather than practitioners of a profession. This becomes even more dangerous when those publishers are also the test creators, and the idea of “teaching to the test” becomes pragmatic and pernicious. Gradually but inevitably the pedagogy is twisted, attempting to teach a skill like it's information, not only failing to do so, but eclipsing whatever teacher-designed lessons might more appropriately meet the real developmental needs of students.



Therefore, there is no substitute for good teaching, especially when it comes to the very complex skill of teaching the arts of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. While standardized tests can only evaluate the latter two, we all know that the first two are essential prerequisites. A good listener is much more likely to become an effective reader; a child who articulates ideas with better vocabulary and sentence structure is much more likely to become a competent writer. However, many children today are less likely to develop good listening and speaking habits at home. Lost in the busyness of modern life and hyper-stimulated by their electronic entertainments, many students come to school weak in these two foundational skills of communication. And because these four language skills are so closely related to thinking, when language suffers, all learning suffers.

We at IEW have a tried-and-true, common-sense program, a pathway for developing these four arts of language in an integrated, incremental, and effective way. We focus on teachers, empowering them with the tools they need to be excellent coaches—for students of any age—and provide ongoing support and materials to ensure their success. We realize that the challenge of teaching writing is not just in helping students get ideas or use proper grammar, but a much deeper one—of coaching core-level language skills. And we know how to do this. So as you peruse our offerings, consider your real goals, remembering that empowering your teachers to be better coaches will ultimately bring much greater benefit to your students than the newest standards-aligned, foolproof textbooks. We guarantee it.