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Is There a Standard for Meeting Standards?

By Lewis A. Rhodes

Over the past several years, we have focused on the setting and assessing of standards for K-12 education, paying scant attention to the warnings of the local practitioner. These practitioners have cautioned that the separate standards-development efforts could create a smorgasbord of incompatible criteria for whose attainment they will be held accountable. They also point out that although assessing success and insuring success are related processes, present "outside-in" efforts have it backwards. Supposedly parallel assessment processes are being developed as an overlay on the work of schools and classrooms, not as an integral function aimed at increasing daily effectiveness.

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In effect, current standards-setting and assessment-development processes are defining the beginning and end points of a journey that America's schools are expected to undertake. At one end, assessments documenting the current status of American schools--such as those of the National Education Goals Panel--are beginning to provide a snapshot of the starting point. At the same time, the various groups defining "world class" standards for how America's students must perform are picturing where schools must go. In the gap between that beginning and end, one finds little coherent, coordinated national effort to suggest and support the best ways of getting there--i.e., standards for meeting the standards. (The "opportunity to learn" standards and strategies envisioned in the new Goals 2000: Educate America Act primarily will address resource requirements, not how to apply them to attain desired ends.)

In the local world of public education, meanwhile, the processes for meeting new (or, for that matter, old) standards have become a hodgepodge of multiple theories and strategies for curriculum content and organization, instruction, and school structure. But there is yet no clear agreement on the real task: how to address the interdependence of each of those areas so that entire organizations move on a continuing journey of incremental change as part of their daily work.

The negative consequences of this missing standard can be seen in major school districts. In one well-publicized urban district, 26 national foundations or reform groups have developed collaborative initiatives and partnerships. Somewhere in this district's schools one can find an example of every major school reform being considered today, including the state's new curriculum frameworks. Yet, with no regular way for the district to learn from these pilot settings what it needs to know to address the needs of all its students, the 26 well-intentioned change efforts actually sub-optimize the district's capabilities to transform itself.

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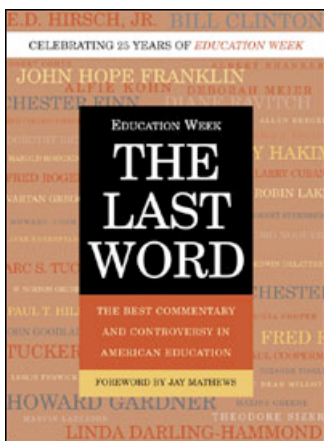
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Are there standards for meeting standards?

Any organization whose work integrates diverse efforts to attain common purposes or results employs a fundamental--if not implicit--process standard that influences the nature of continuing choices and decisions at all levels. In the physical world of travel, this process is called navigation; in the psychological world it is called trial-and-error learning. Both purpose-driven processes are characterized by a fundamental principle: Regardless of where you are going, you have to start from where you are. From that point on, the process continually feeds the creation of understanding how to get there.



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In the management world of human-service organizations (other than education) the starting point for standards-driven daily work is the current status of the individual before them. Core organizational processes are aligned to support the continuing diagnostic-prescriptive decisions of first-line practitioners.

Even nonservice industries have belatedly recognized that their responses, too, must start with the present needs or requirements of their "customer." In fact, a world-class process standard--a standard for meeting standards--is emerging. The

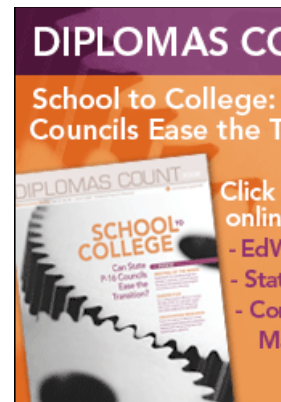
common structural core of world-class organizations--regardless of the nature of their services or products--is a systematic process that allows improvement to be a continuing and supported part of the entire organization's daily work. This process may be called Continuous Quality Improvement, Total Quality Management, or sometimes even just quality. Whatever the label, quality management's systemically applied, systematic strategies and tools provide ways to structure the interactions necessary for the organization to learn from its work. Organizational transformation becomes the consequence of that learning.

One way to envision how this plays out is to picture the structure on a traditional organizational chart. Leaders in successful world-class work settings create a connected learning infrastructure that fills in the spaces between the boxes. They link the people whose daily decisions and choices move the organization toward its goals, purposes, or standards.

In other words, quality management formalizes the informal structure of an organization--the problem-driven interactions and information exchange usually left to chance meetings, grapevines, and other informal, individual get-togethers. As such, it is standard-driven, content-free, and manageable. Leaders can be held accountable for its results.

But what about schools?

The logical question for those concerned with systemic transformation of K-12 education through "standards" and "assessments" is to what extent that task can be addressed through the types of world-class process standards associated with quality management. In the past several years, educators have not been far behind their private-sector counterparts in sensing that the theories, strategies, and tools of quality management have



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some relevance to their work--and have similarly been struggling to figure out how it "fits" with what they know with they have to do.

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But the current national debate on opportunity-to-learn standards suggests that a fundamental barrier exists to the acceptance of these process standards for the daily work of schools. Local school practitioners--who will be accountable for meeting new national and state standards--are handicapped by two "naïve" theories about the work that takes place in schools (i.e., theories developed from direct observation; such as, the earth is flat, the sun and planets circle the earth, or heavy objects fall faster than lighter ones just because they appear to). One such unquestioned theory deals with the observed work of schools as a delivery process, the other with the role of the teacher as an isolated practitioner performing repetitive tasks who does not need to, or have time to, learn from her or his work.

The delivery paradigm frames the actions of some curriculum reformers who believe that schools "transmit," "communicate," or "transfer" knowledge. Yet practitioners who work in schools every day know that they no more "deliver" instruction than hospitals "deliver" medicine. Modern hospitals, however, do deliver appropriate medicine because they are structured around an information-driven process standard that allows continuing generation and analysis of individual "assessment" information. This supports diagnostic decisions about appropriate medicine and other interventions that meet the requirements of world-class wellness standards.

The isolated-professional paradigm shapes many actions of those who think teacher autonomy is the answer to better schools. They assume that local school practitioners already know how to function in new roles and relationships, and only need to be freed to act. Returning to the hospital analogy, medical professionals have autonomy--interdependent autonomy. They recognize that autonomy without knowledge and collaborative support is not freedom.

As local educators have begun to explore the meaning of C.Q.I. or T.Q.M., they are discovering a base of knowledge about schools as connected systems of intrinsically driven knowledge workers that shatters these old theories much as Copernicus's understanding destroyed the Ptolemaic paradigm.

What is emerging from their work with quality management in schooling is a systemic view of a school district as a managed supportive infrastructure--one that provides the technical, social, and psychological context to support the fundamental trial-and-error nature of individual decisions that strive to respond to human needs.

This infrastructure of work roles and relationships provides:

- Regular opportunities for reflection, learning, and planning as part of daily work;
- Regular access to hard data on results and soft data in the form of shared expertise and experiences;
- Tools and processes to focus everyone's knowledge and effort on the core functions of teaching and learning; and
- Support for the development of new, more effective, and satisfying roles for all staff members.

What will it take?

If the current national-standards debate is an example, these local learnings about process standards and accountability are not effectively trickling up. Yet understanding the need for and feasibility of these ideas cannot wait for research to "prove" their effectiveness. If schools are to have the support required to meet world-class standards, we must make visible this universal

management process standard. Policymakers must become aware of the power of this type of process--one that systemically supports and enables its participants to learn how to improve and institutionalize improvements as part of the job. Federal and state policies must support local development of an accountable process infrastructure--framed by learning standards and fed by continuing assessment information--that aligns all roles and relationships to the core functions of teaching and learning.

Without such a manageable, widely applicable process standard, the only thing bridging the gap between where schools are and where they must be will be the hides of local practitioners who once more will be blamed for not already knowing how to get there.

Organizational transformation, the management expert W. Edwards Deming noted, is a "journey." To attempt that crossing without standard tools for navigating through dynamically changing conditions would not be tolerated in any modern endeavor ... except schools.

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