

UP TO WHOSE STANDARDS?

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The dawn of a new school year is upon us.

I have alluded before to the emptiness of the state formulated education standards. Now I want to meet them head on. I focus on the English/Language Arts standards, because everything else depends on the foundation that they provide. As a former mathematics major, I can attest that one cannot learn, say, mathematics well if one cannot read and write one's native language well.

The general Georgia standards for reading are revealing. For kindergarten through third grade, the identical general standard is repeated:

Reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills are necessary tools for effective communication. The mastery of these skills is essential for enrichment and lifelong learning. Several years of research has yielded much information about how children learn to read. This research tells us that to become more skilled and confident readers over time, students need multiple opportunities to build essential skills. In their formative years of instruction, children must be read to and provided opportunities to practice independent reading. Children must develop their ability to read with fluency and understanding in order to build their knowledge of the world.

In simple terms, this means: 'Reading is essential for learning and life. Children learn to read by frequently hearing others read and reading themselves.' In itself, this is self-evidently true.

This general standard is followed by a list of skills to be mastered in various categories (e.g., phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension). However, nowhere can one find a detailed inventory of the specific content that the students are expected to learn. In particular, there are no lists of the precise tasks that are to be mastered within each skill. Nor is there a list of essential readings and cultural content to be studied.

In addition, the repetition of the same standard from grade to grade indicates that there is no meaningful sequence of learning. This is why our schools are filled with unnecessary and frustrating repetitions and duplications from year to year. This has turned movement through our schools into the educational equivalent of marching in place instead of the purposive progress forward that it should be.

The same pattern repeats in grades four through eight, all of which have the identical general reading standard followed by vaguely worded lists of skills.

On the high school level, the standards for American, British, and World literature are virtually identical except for the respective insertion of the words "American," "British," and "World." Here is their opening statement (with the nominal title words omitted):

(This literature module may be taught in 10th, 11th, or 12th grade.) Focusing on a study of . . . Literature, the student develops an understanding of chronological context and the relevance of period structures in . . . literature. The student develops an understanding of the ways the period of a work of literature affects its structure and how the chronology of a work of literature affects its meaning.

(Anyone who wishes to see these standards in their entirety, formatted by me into parallel columns to highlight their sameness, may e-mail robertz466@comcast.net.)

Nowhere in these curricula will one find a list of essential authors and books that must be covered by all teachers. Content, in any meaningful sense, is lacking.

During my career, I have had to attend many professional development sessions at which such standards are unveiled, defended, and explained. The explanation typically involved no more than the presenter's reading aloud (without clarification) the very standards that we had been given already in printed form, as though suggesting that teachers cannot be trusted even to read a simple handout.

Indeed, of all the professional development sessions that I have endured, I would say that 99 percent of them were neither professional nor developmental. They were the institutional equivalent of the "busy work" that pervades our classrooms in the absence of a curriculum.

Teachers leave these sessions complaining, not that the standards are inane, but rather—what I find to be truly bizarre—that the need to prepare students for standardized tests based on them deflects one from teaching the curriculum.

In truth, there is no curriculum. If they were not prepping for tests, most of them would be doing little except filling time.

Georgia's standards are not idiosyncratic. The standards of every state that I know look much the same as Georgia's. Textbook publishers have enshrined these standards in their teacher's editions.

It is possible to formulate a good curriculum that is rigorous, sequential, concrete, and communally significant. Such a curriculum is the Core Knowledge Foundation's *Core Knowledge Sequence: Content Guidelines for Grades K-8*. For each grade level, skills are stated generally and specifically. In Language Arts, there is a detailed list of the poems, books, and proverbs that each student is expected to study at that level. There is no duplication. The goal of the curriculum is culturally shared knowledge that promotes excellence and equity.

A small number of schools has adopted this curriculum with impressive results. Yet, whenever I have tried to introduce this curriculum into a school system, the resistance is fierce. Instead of reaching for something new, they are content to cling to the nothing that they have.

As Lucretius said, nihil fit ex nihilo (nothing comes to be out of nothing). Our current school system proves the truth of that on a daily basis.