

CURRICULUM CAN COME IN THREE FLAVORS

For a good long while, *curriculum* has referred to the things that educators want students to learn. In recent years, educators have used the phrase *content standards* to describe the skills and knowledge that students ought to be learning. And now, because of ever-increasing pressures on educators to produce credible evidence about the extent to which students have actually mastered a state-authorized curriculum, we find that some states have engaged in well-intentioned but counter-productive efforts to isolate a set of state-sanctioned content standards. In large measure, the problem with many states' content standards is that there is no recognition of the practical reality that curriculum can come in three flavors, that is, that --- from an instructional perspective --- there are three meaningfully different types of content standards. To regard all content standards as members of the same curricular species is a serious mistake.

I propose that we consider three types of curriculum, and that we regard each curricular type's content standards differently. The three kinds of curriculum I suggest are the following:

The tested curriculum, that is, the content standards to be assessed annually by the statewide assessment system that is typically the basis of a given state's accountability program.

The taught curriculum, that is, the content standards all of the state's teachers should strive to have students master. However, teacher-administered classroom assessments rather than statewide assessments are employed to help teachers promote their students' mastery of these curricular outcomes.

The time-permitting curriculum, that is the content standards that teachers should pursue if instructional time remains after those content standards in the *tested* and *taught* curriculum have been mastered by a teacher's students.

For the content standards associated with each of these three curricular categories, one of the most crucial considerations is the "grain size" of the skills and/or knowledge that we want students to learn. In other words, how large is the "chunk" of curricular content that we intend for students to master? At each curricular level, I propose that the chief determiner of grain size should be its *likely instructional contribution*. Let me illustrate for each of the three curricular categories I've identified.

In the case of the content standards constituting the tested curriculum, those standards will surely focus on the state's highest priority educational outcomes. Accordingly, the grain size should be as large as possible while still retaining the potential for the tested content standard to be described with sufficient clarity so teachers can make sensible instructional decisions (aimed at promoting students' mastery of the content standard). An excellent example of a suitable grain size is present in the writing-sample tests now widely used in

this country to assess students' composition skills. Another reason for advocating a large grain size for content standards in this curricular category is that, if a curriculum-based state test is to have any positive instructional impact, the test's results must be reported on a standard-by-standard basis for the state, districts, schools, and students. How can teachers improve their instructional efforts if they do not know on which of the state-tested content standards their students are succeeding? Thus, because most state-assessed content standards will have to be measured with a suitable number of items, state tests will realistically only be able to assess a modest number of high-import content standards.

For content standards in the taught curriculum, I lean toward larger grain-sizes than those currently seen in many states' truly sprawling content standards. It is simply easier for teachers to focus on a dozen curricular outcomes than it is to focus on 40 or 50 outcomes. However, the grain-size issue for this curricular category needs to be decided in close consultation with classroom teachers, not only curriculum specialists. We need to give experienced teachers a series of illustrative grain-size options describing the content standards that they must promote. Teachers need to be asked "which of these described content standards would best allow you to come up with on-target instructional plans?" This grain-size determination for content standards in the taught curriculum must not be a perfunctory exercise. Rather, it should be a careful and systematic probing of what every-day teachers regard as the most suitable size of the curricular chunks (content standards descriptions) for which they will be responsible. It is likely that some procedures will need to be installed, perhaps based chiefly on teachers' self-reports, to ascertain the extent to which content standards in this category have, in fact, been addressed instructionally.

Finally, for content standards in the time-permitting curriculum, I'd once more turn to teachers and get their advice about grain size. I should point out that, at least in my view, teachers ought to give actual instructional attention to the content standards in this category throughout the school year, not merely at its close after "everything else had been done." Rather, teachers will be able to monitor their instructional progress during the ongoing school year so that, if instructional time appears to be available en route, content standards in the time-permitting curriculum can be addressed at the most instructionally propitious time. Mechanisms may need to be developed to encourage teachers to tackle content standards in this curricular category.

If there is any merit in the tripartite curricular categories I have proposed here, this suggests that any revision of a state's approved content standards ought to be initiated only after serious attention has been given to the grain-size issue. Then, having reached defensible conclusions regarding the content standards that fall in particular curricular categories, the state's educators should be informed about which content standards are which.

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May 17, 2002