

# Why Standards?

Every state in the country is seriously engaged in an effort to raise academic standards in its public schools.

These efforts are good news, for they represent a genuine commitment to improve the education of every child with strategies we know can make a real difference. These efforts mean that schools are — often for the first time ever — setting out clear goals, lining up everything they do (teaching, testing, training and budgets) to support these goals and then doing whatever it takes to make sure students reach these goals. That's what standards-driven school reform is about.

## **A revolution in what we think is possible**

The idea of challenging academic expectations for every child is a revolutionary one in our country, but it is commonplace in the best-performing school systems around the world, including those in Singapore, Japan, Canada and the Czech Republic. Students in these countries routinely outperform American students, but not because they are more talented. Rather, their schools share a common belief in standards: unambiguous and public statements about what students should learn at each step of their academic careers. These expectations make sure students are learning the right things, that resources and help are applied where they're needed, and that struggling students don't get lost in the system.

But even if there weren't good reason to worry about our international competitors, there are plenty of reasons here at home to make the case for higher standards. All American students should receive an education that gives them the opportunity to succeed in college or a challenging career. Sadly, that is not the case today, as too many students graduate from high school with the reading and math skills of an eighth grader.

The idea of organizing schools to help all students meet high standards is both hard-headed and soft-hearted. It reflects a pragmatic approach that clear goals are essential for any organization to improve, as well as a commitment to leave no child behind.

## **Higher standards for students and schools: Irrefutable, inescapable, irrepressible**

While the progress toward this vision is slow and the work arduous, we believe states are on the right path. Their efforts to buck the status quo and empower educators to ensure every child is learning "the basics" and more will pay off. Here's why this effort is so important.

All students must be prepared for the demands they'll face in a complex world — but student achievement in the United States is unacceptably low.

All students, not just those in the top 25 percent, deserve a great education — but today's education system is especially unforgiving to struggling students.

College coursework is a ticket to success — but too many students aren't getting the skills they need to be successful in higher education.

Companies need graduates with higher skills and knowledge more than ever before — but they aren't finding them.

The public is demanding better schools — but they want actions that truly help students improve and don't just "punish" schools for poor performance.

Schools struggle for many reasons to improve student performance — but an effort built around higher standards for every student can help schools focus efforts and make dramatic gains.

**Details for each of the underlined statements are available at [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org) — Call to Action-Why Standards?**

Source: Achieve

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"You can't achieve quality if you can't measure it," reads an often-repeated truism. In other words, quality — achieving your goals — doesn't happen by accident. It's the result of careful planning; deliberate work; and, most important, knowing your strengths, weaknesses and how you are progressing. Good information is critical to making decisions about how to improve.

That's why the idea of testing has gone hand-in-hand with the idea of raising standards in public schools. Testing plays a vital role in improving teaching and learning. It's unreasonable to ask schools simply to meet much higher expectations without also giving them the tools and information they need to succeed. Educators need regular information about how well standards are being met, which classroom strategies are succeeding and which students are struggling. Parents and students need to know if students are making progress and learning the skills they need to be successful. Good information about student performance can help everyone in the system improve.

For too long, most public schools have lacked common standards and common ways to measure the standards. What's expected has varied from school district to school district, school to school and — worse — student to student.

In the absence of tests, judgments and decisions about schools and students still will be made. But they'll be made using best guesses, faddish ideas or a "bell curve" of student achievement. They'll be made using other measurements, such as attendance rates, student satisfaction or a particular favorite, because "that's the way we've always done things." Or they'll be made using different criteria from different teachers. None of these approaches tells anything about what students actually are learning or how well they are learning it.

"It's worth remembering why the testing and accountability movement swept through all 50 states during the past decade. The 'good old days' prior to education reform produced several ugly facts," observed a *USA Today* editorial in July 2001. "Although there are no quick solutions to such intractable problems, there are plenty of education success stories — including the use of testing — that should encourage school districts to stay the course."

Good tests are important, and Achieve forcefully has advocated for tests that truly match the rigor and scope of challenging academic standards. We believe the best tests are those closely aligned with standards. Achieve is working to ensure state tests are as good as they can be — and need to be.

Here's why tests aligned to clear and rigorous academic standards remain such an important part of any school improvement effort, and here's what we need to do to make them better:

Recognize strengths. Tests are richer and more useful tools than ever before.

Benchmark to the best. Tests are improving, but more work is needed.

Separate myths from facts. Tests aren't inherently bad — or even as bad as some critics claim.

- \* Tests don't "dumb-down" curriculum. Teachers who push their students to think and write well have students who do better on tests.
- \* Teaching to the test isn't a bad habit. Teachers use tests to ensure students are learning.
- \* Tests don't consume too many resources. The time and money spent on annual testing is less than you'd expect.
- \* Tests aren't too stressful for students. Students say testing is reasonable and passing tests is a goal they take seriously.
- \* Test results are used to help improve student learning. Everyone from state leaders to classroom teachers is using data to improve schools now.
- \* Testing remains broadly supported. Teachers and parents aren't rebelling against the use of tests.

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