

## Priority Standards: The Power of Focus

By Peter DeWitt on February 24, 2015 7:10 AM

Today's guest blog is written by Larry Ainsworth, author of *Prioritizing the Common Core: Identifying Specific Standards to Emphasize the Most* (2013).

*So many standards, so little time...*

How can classroom teachers be expected to teach, assess, re-teach, and reassess student understanding of each and every standard in a grade level or course within a limited number of school days each year--especially when there can be as many as 70, 80, and even 90 or more standards in any given content area?

Realistically, they can't--unless they practice the "*inch deep, mile wide*" coverage approach to standards whereby they teach it, the students likely don't get it, but it's time to move on because they have to cover every standard before the annual state test. Anyone who has ever taught students for any length of time knows this doesn't work, and yet the practice continues.

*Why?*

Because the expectation persists that all standards are of equal importance and teachers must ensure their students learn *all of them* each year--regardless of the extraordinary range of students' language levels and learning needs that only add to the instructional challenge teachers face.

In response to the immense testing pressures educators are under today, this "*spray and pray*" method of instruction may seem the only viable solution. But it inevitably results in students leaving one grade or course unprepared for the next. Teachers at the next level must then re-teach what students "*should have learned*" in the prior grade or course before they are able to begin teaching *their own* standards. This situation repeats itself year after year, ultimately snowballing to produce older students who are often several years behind in their learning.

*There's a better way...*

Apply a proven process that *prioritizes* certain standards over others without eliminating any of them. Then provide in-depth instruction coupled with focused assessment of those Priority Standards. By emphasizing depth over breadth, teachers can do a much better job of helping all students retain what they've been taught and move forward to the next grade or course better prepared to take on the standards at that next level.

### Priority or Supporting?

Standards should either play a starring role or a supporting role in each grade level or course. Here's how to distinguish the two:

- **Priority Standards** are "*a carefully selected subset of the total list of the grade-specific and course-specific standards within each content area that students must know and be able to do by the end of each school year in order to be prepared for the standards at the next grade level or course. Priority standards represent the assured student competencies that each teacher needs to help every student learn, and demonstrate proficiency in, by the end of the current grade or course*" (Ainsworth, 2013, p. xv).
- **Supporting Standards** are "*those standards that support, connect to, or enhance the Priority Standards. They are taught within the context of the Priority Standards, but do not receive the same degree of instruction and assessment emphasis as do the Priority Standards. The supporting standards often become the instructional scaffolds to help students understand and attain the more rigorous and comprehensive Priority Standards*" (Ainsworth, 2013, p. xv).

Prioritizing certain standards over others does not mean *eliminating* those standards that do not make it into the starring roles. All standards must be taught and assessed, and re-taught and reassessed, to gain evidence of student competency of those learning outcomes. Prioritizing the standards has nothing whatsoever to do with "lowering the bar," and everything to do with *focus*. It is about "less" being *more*. The difference is in the *degree of focus* given to certain standards over others.

### Objective Selection Criteria: A Must!

Without a definite process to prioritize standards, teachers will often "*pick and choose*" those standards to emphasize based on what they like to teach, what they have curriculum materials for, what they think students need to know and be able to do the following year, and/or those standards most likely to appear on the state test. But without using specific criteria for prioritization, everyone will most likely select different standards from their colleagues and then wonder why students come to them each year with such an inconsistent understanding of prior-grade standards.

The prioritization process relies upon effective collaboration between and among teachers across the K-12 spectrum. Sitting together in grade-alike teams, teachers identify through in-depth discussion those standards that meet the following specific selection criteria:

- **Endurance** (lasting beyond one grade or course; concepts and skills needed in life). Will proficiency of this standard provide students with the knowledge and skills that will be of value beyond the present? For example, proficiency in reading informational texts and being able to write effectively for a variety of purposes will endure throughout a student's academic career and work life.
- **Leverage** (crossover application *within* the content area and to other content areas; i.e., interdisciplinary connections). For example, proficiency in creating and interpreting graphs, diagrams, and charts and then being able to make accurate inferences from them will help students in math, science, social studies, language arts, and other areas. The ability to write an analytical summary or a persuasive essay will similarly help students in any academic discipline.
- **Readiness for the next level of learning** (prerequisite concepts and skills students need to enter a new grade level or course of study). Will proficiency of this standard provide students with the essential knowledge and skills that are necessary for future success?
- **External Exams**--the concepts and skills that students are most likely to encounter on annual standardized tests, college entrance exams, and occupational competency exams students will need to prepare for. (Ainsworth, 2013, pp. 25-27).

When considering whether to select one particular standard over another, I always recommend that teachers discuss and decide which one is the more *comprehensive* or *rigorous*--not the more foundational. I then hear teachers saying to one another, "If students could do this more challenging one, then they would certainly be able to do this other one." One helpful way to identify the *supporting* standards is to decide which ones could fall under the more rigorous or comprehensive priorities.

#### How to Prioritize the Standards K-12

- After the members of each grade-level team identify their initial set of Priority Standards, they record their selections on a piece of large chart paper and post it in a K-12 sequence on the wall of the meeting room.
- All K-12 teachers then look across the charts beginning with kindergarten and ending with high school to determine the *vertical pathway* of those priorities from one grade to the next. Each team shares out its selections and the large group provides feedback.
- The teacher teams are continually looking at the charted selections of the grades below and the grades above the one in current focus, commenting, suggesting changes, or asking for further clarification whenever needed.
- Professional educators may not always agree with one another, but they "*agree to disagree*," resolving any differences of opinion to keep the process moving successfully forward.
- Reflecting on the process at the end of the day, teachers will often say aloud, "*The power of this collaborative process has to be experienced to be believed!*"

The voluminous numbers of standards do not need to remain a daunting challenge for today's busy educators. By "working smarter, not harder," teams can collaboratively select those Priority Standards to emphasize the most and then focus their curriculum, instruction, and assessments to help all students achieve them.

**Categories:** [Classroom Environment](#) [Common Core State Standards](#) [Early Literacy](#) [Professional Development](#) [School Community](#) [Student Engagement](#)

**Tags:** [Common Core State Standards](#) [Corwin Press](#) [Larry Ainsworth](#) [Priority Standards](#)



Sophos UTM

Content was blocked because  
it was not signed by a valid  
security certificate.

For more information, see "About  
Certificate Errors" in Internet Explorer.