Using Learning Standards to Promote Student Achievement

Perhaps the most widespread, global effort at systemic educational improvement over the past two decades has been standards-based reform (SBR). Pioneered in developed countries, elements of this kind of reform are now spreading into developing countries. Although there is no universally accepted definition of SBR, most discussions of the reform include the following six elements:

1. **Content standards**, sometimes referred to by terms such as academic expectations, curriculum standards, competencies, or student learning objectives, that indicate “what students should know and be able to do” in key subject areas at each grade level;

2. **Student assessments**, both formative and summative, to measure and monitor performance in relation to the content standards during the school year and at the end of the year;

3. **Performance standards** that describe and specify the level at which students need to achieve on assessments in order to be categorized as meeting or exceeding standards;

4. **Alignment**, or holding together, of key elements of the educational system—such as curriculum, materials, training, and assessments—to promote attainment of the standards;

5. **Decentralization** of responsibility to districts and schools that allows for more efficient and effective implementation of standards, curriculum, and instruction; and

6. **Accountability** provisions that reward or sanction districts, schools, teachers, and students on the basis of measured performance against standards.

Each element of SBR is critical, but the learning standards—content and performance—must be present for the reform to take place. Content standards establish clear and succinct expectations for student learning. Typically, there are approximately 20 to 40 content standards for each subject per grade level.\(^1\) Content standards are the glue for aligning curriculum, materials, teacher professional development, and student assessments. They should be widely used by supervisors, teacher trainers, principals, and teachers as the basis for creating, implementing, and evaluating education programs.

Performance standards are established in conjunction with student assessments. They have two parts: written descriptors of student performance levels and numerical cut scores on assessments. After scoring the assessments, a standard setting process is used by educators to set cut scores for classifying students into levels. There are usually 3 to 5 performance categories per assessment. Performance standards allow educators to set the bar for student achievement.

In this edition of the EQ Review, three articles provide case studies and examples of SBR implementation. Honduras features a near-comprehensive approach with emphasis on teacher pacing guides and formative student assessments; Namibia highlights national summative student assessments and performance standards; and Mali focuses on content standards (competencies) and their implementation by teachers in the classroom. For more information, please contact Jeff Davis, Managing Research Scientist in the International Development Division of the American Institutes for Research and Project Director for EQUIP1, at jcdavis@air.org.

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Standards-Based Educational Reform and Improving Student Achievement in Honduras

In Honduras, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) under EQUIP1 and the Academy for Educational Development (AED) under EQUIP2 are implementing the USAID-funded MIDEH project (Mejorando el Impacto al Desempeño Estudiantil de Honduras—Honduras Improving Student Achievement Project). Since 2004, the project has worked closely with the Honduran Ministry of Education and local partners to build a national standards-based reform program and create a sustainable educational reform structure.

MIDEH’s nationwide approach is based on the development of internationally-comparable academic standards, teacher pacing guides for classroom implementation, standardized student assessments, and in-service training programs at both central and decentralized levels. Assessments are comprised of three types:

- **Formative** in-grade tests to evaluate progress and resolve problems students may be having in the classroom;
- **Summative** sample-based, end-of-grade tests to provide information for policy and planning at central and decentralized levels; and
- **Diagnostic** tests to help teachers at the beginning of a grade assess which standards from a prior grade have not been reached.

The most critical aspects of the education reform structure for promoting improved student learning outcomes are pacing guides, where teachers in grades 1–11 have instructional materials organized by sequenced standards, along with monthly, formative student assessments. Each student receives an individual assessment booklet containing the monthly tests at their grade level for the year. The booklets have been distributed to all schools. The components of the system are standards-based and aligned to the national curriculum.

Since the beginning of the project, MIDEH has administered end-of-year summative tests to 882 schools and over 100,000 students from grades 1–9, with representative samples at the departmental (regional) level. Score reports are prepared for the central Ministry of Education, all 18 departments, and each school and classroom. Moving forward, MIDEH will expand these summative tests into social studies and natural sciences and improve sustainability by establishing a national institute for student assessment.

Recently, MIDEH has developed diagnostic tests in mathematics and Spanish language for grades 2–11 for teachers to administer at the beginning of the school year. This will be the first time in Honduras that diagnostic tests have been standardized and aligned to the curriculum and other education materials.

Institutionalizing the implementation of these materials in classrooms is critical to developing an efficient educational system. MIDEH’s in-service training program provides teachers, principals, and district and departmental Ministry of Education staff with training in applying and using the academic standards, teacher pacing guides, and formative and summative student assessments. The training program has been successful at promoting decentralization of responsibility from the national level to schools, communities, and classrooms.

Through its work to build a national standards-based reform program, MIDEH has provided tools and built the capacity of teachers, principals, and Ministry of Education staff to create a sustainable educational reform structure. These positive changes ultimately impact students. The project’s partnership with the Ministry of Education has contributed to improved academic achievement (mathematics and Spanish language scores have increased by eight percentage points over the past two years), increased grade 6 graduation rates (from 82.1% in 2005 to 87.6% in 2008), and decreased primary school desertion rates (from 2.5% in 2005 to 0.9% in 2008).

For more information on the MIDEH project, please contact Mireya Batres, USAID/Honduras AOTR, at mbatres@usaid.gov.
Performance Standards for the Namibian National Standardized Achievement Tests

The government of Namibia is in the process of implementing a comprehensive learner assessment system with the four main elements recognized by assessment experts:

- **National examinations**, in which learners take end-of-cycle, national examinations at the end of grades 7, 10 and 12 that are used for selection and certification decisions;
- **Classroom assessments**, for regular use by teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual learners in order to take remedial action;
- **National assessments**, to gauge the achievement levels of students in specified grade levels and subject areas for measuring system performance; and
- **International assessments**, namely participation in Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assessments at grade 6.

Three of these elements—national examinations, classroom assessments, and international assessments—have been in place for several years. In 2009, Namibia’s Education and Training Sector Improvement Program (ETSIP) called for the development of sustainable long-term national student assessments at grades 5 and 7. The Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment (DNEA) has been tasked with developing the National Standardized Achievement Tests (NSAT) to:

1. Monitor learners’ acquisition of skills and competencies in key subject areas at grades 5 and 7;
2. Set baseline and performance targets to monitor the progress of learners at the school level;
3. Provide diagnostic feedback at the school, district, regional, and national levels; and
4. Establish professional and administrative capacities at the DNEA.

The Director of the DNEA, Cowley van der Merwe, asked the USAID Mission for assistance with the NSAT and specifically requested technical support from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), which is now collaborating with the DNEA to design, develop, and implement the tests on a nationwide basis.

In conjunction with NSAT’s second objective, the DNEA is developing performance standards for grades 5 and 7 in each subject area. The performance standards will help stakeholders understand what learners know and can do in all key competencies measured through the NSAT. For example, if a learner obtains a score of 25 out of possible total score of 40 on the NSAT grade 5 mathematics assessment, performance standards would help the teacher and the learner understand the knowledge and skills s/he has or has not mastered in relation to key national competencies. Based on a learner’s performance, the teacher should be able to provide specific content and pedagogical support on the competencies that the learner needs to master. In addition, the performance standards will help stakeholders keep track of schools’ progress from year to year by comparing performance in a given year against a baseline.

An important step in the development of performance standards is determining the number of performance level categories by which learners should be classified. The DNEA conducted a one-day workshop during which teachers and subject specialists determined that learners should be classified into four-performance level categories: **below basic achievement**, **basic achievement**, **above basic achievement**, and **excellent achievement**. The four performance level categories for knowledge and skills demonstrated by the learners are described in the following way:

- **Below Basic Achievement**: Insufficient knowledge and skills across the syllabus.
- **Basic Achievement**: Satisfactory knowledge and limited skills across the syllabus.
- **Above Basic Achievement**: Sufficient knowledge and skills across the syllabus.
- **Excellent Achievement**: Excellent knowledge and advanced skills across the syllabus.

These general descriptions will later be used by teachers and subject specialists in determining cut-off points for these categories on the learner performance score scale.

For more information on the NSAT project, please contact Magdalena van der Westhuizen, USAID/Namibia AOTR, at mvanderwesthuizen@usaid.gov.
Literacy Standards Map Mali’s Road to Reading

The Malian Ministry of Education, with technical assistance from Education Development Center (EDC) through the USAID-funded Road to Reading program, has developed Mali’s first-ever national standards for reading and writing. The initiative—part of the Ministry’s commitment to improving students’ literacy—was prompted by the results of recent studies that confirmed what educators in the country have long suspected: primary teachers do not fully understand the range of skills and competencies students must develop in order to become autonomous readers and writers. As a result, teachers devote the vast majority of their instructional time to decoding (recognizing words based on letter-sound correspondence) at the expense of other skills that are recognized as best practices in teaching children to read.

The following are the nine competencies that form the foundation of Mali’s new national literacy standards:

**Reading**
1. Language mechanisms (ability to recognize sounds and letter-sound relationships).
2. Concepts of print (understanding print and its functions; the role of punctuation, titles, and illustrations).
3. Fluidity (reading quickly, accurately, and with expression).
4. Comprehension (understanding and responding to text).
5. Lexical awareness (recognizing words and their meaning).

**Writing**
6. Original production (expressing one’s own thoughts or ideas in writing).
7. Conventions of written text (respecting norms of spelling, grammar, and punctuation).
8. Coherence and clarity (organizing and expressing one’s ideas coherently).
9. Style (adapting written texts to the intended purpose and audience).

Mali’s new reading and writing standards provide primary school teachers with a clear picture of the nine different competencies, the importance of each competency, and how each competency develops over time. Accompanying grade-level benchmarks specify the observable skills that students should be able to demonstrate by the end of grades 2, 4, and 5. These benchmarks answer the questions: “How good is good enough?” and “What does it look like when a student’s work has met the expectations at this grade level for this particular competency?”

For Bakary Samaké, Head of Division of Teacher Education for the Malian Ministry of Education, the new standards and benchmarks constitute an important resource for supporting improved instruction and monitoring. “Teachers now know, from here on out, what skills students need to develop at key grade levels.” This means that classroom teachers can identify students at risk of not reading and writing well and can develop targeted interventions to address those students’ weaknesses. At the district or national level, the standards can be used to monitor student performance and to inform the design of future teacher training programs.

The Ministry is now developing accompanying teacher professional standards for reading and writing. The new standards will identify age-appropriate instructional practices for each of the nine student competencies that teachers can use to support student learning. Once finalized, the professional standards will provide teachers with a menu of research-based, effective literacy practices to integrate into their teaching, answering the question, “What does it look and sound like when a teacher effectively helps a child learn to read?” The professional standards will also provide teacher supervisors with a valuable lens for observing reading classes and helping teachers to improve their practices.

The student and teacher professional standards constitute a clear road map for improving literacy instruction in Mali and ensuring that all children leave primary school with the skills required to be autonomous readers and writers.

For more information on the Road to Reading program, please contact Kadiatou Cisse-Abbassi, USAID/Mali AOTR at kcisseabbassi@usaid.gov.

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