

Defining World-Class Standards

by Albert Shanker

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Could raising academic standards in public schools do more harm than good? Believe it or not, some educators think so. Making the curriculum more challenging, they argue, will only lower the grades of average students and raise the failure rate of students who are just getting by.

Then why do overwhelming majorities of parents in all racial and ethnic groups support higher educational expectations for their children? Parents are frustrated and discouraged with public schools because they know children aren't getting what they need academically, in some cases not even the basics. What they want, parents keep saying, are safe, orderly schools where high standards of conduct and achievement prevail. Are parents simply misguided?

Of course not. But we don't have to take it on faith. There is powerful evidence that they are right. The latest report in our *Defining World Class Standards* series shows that in other industrialized democracies students of **average** ability — not just university-bound achievers — meet much higher academic standards than their U.S. peers do. These findings add to the picture painted in one of our earlier reports which showed that close to a third of seniors in other countries pass required graduation exams comparable to our Advanced Placement tests. (These are taken on a voluntary basis by only seven percent of U.S. seniors and passed by four percent.)

Our new study, *What Secondary Students Abroad are Expected to Know*, provides translations of required national exams taken by average-achieving ninth- and tenth-grade students in France, Germany and Scotland. Remember, the students are not in the top 25 percent of their class. They represent the middle and lower-middle ranks, the kids who will go on to jobs or vocational training after high school. Two-thirds or more pass the exams!

These three- to seven-hour tests in history/geography, language, math and science differ from country to country, but they all require students to explain their answers, display their math and science proofs and write essays: no exam contains multiple-choice questions. For example:

Scotland Chris needs a ladder to put up a television antenna on the wall of a house. The ladder is five meters long and has to reach 4.8 meters up the wall. For safety, the angle between the ladder and the ground should be between 71° and 76° . Can Chris use the ladder safely? (Give a reason for your answer.)

France Causes of the First World War First, explain the indirect causes (imperialism and nationalism) which facilitated the appearance of the European network of alliances. Briefly describe these networks. Next, tell how the crisis at Sarajevo was directly responsible for the First World War.

It's a very sad day for any student who fails the exam, because a lot rides on it. Successful students receive a diploma or certificate that carries both their exam and course grades. The certificate determines which academic or vocational opportunities they qualify for next — university preparation, technical institute, academic-vocational program, apprenticeship or employment. It's a passport examined by prospective employers and educators alike.

Attaching meaningful consequences to achievement is probably the most important thing these countries do to motivate students to work hard. But they also provide a common academic curriculum from the first year of school up to the secondary level. The content at every stage and

the quality of work required are spelled out in national or state standards, so that all parents, students and teachers know what has to be accomplished in each grade.

Disruption and violence are not tolerated, and students know that misbehavior will have an impact on their academic and vocational prospects. And finally, students move into one of several "tracks" for the last two or three years of high school. But no track has a throw-away program — unlike curricula for the 70 percent of American students who don't go on to four-year colleges. In other countries, the technical, vocational and apprenticeship tracks remain academic in focus, and standards are rigorous. Students who do well on a lower track are able to move to a higher one, and some do.

For years, we've been telling ourselves that our schools offer broad opportunity while other systems focus only on the elite; that we seem to do poorly because we test everyone, while other countries test only their top students. The fact is that other countries have opened up their educational systems to diverse populations while maintaining high standards for all.

America's parents understand that lower standards do more damage to children than high ones ever could. Teachers know this too, but they can't raise standards unilaterally. The people who set them — school boards, administrators, state and federal lawmakers, college officials and employers — have to decide to make school count.

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