

OUR EYES ON THE HORIZON

How Strong Standards, Implemented Equitably, Can Help All New York Students

With New York State once again at a crossroads in the ongoing debate over academic standards, it is time to refocus on what matters most: strengthening teaching and learning so that all New York students receive the quality education they deserve.

All students can achieve at high levels when they are taught at high levels, and strong academic standards are an essential ingredient for students and teachers alike to achieve their full potential. New York now faces critical decisions about the quality of its new academic standards and how teachers and students will be supported once revised standards are adopted. In both cases, the state cannot afford to fail.

High-quality, rigorous, standards-aligned instruction must become the expectation for all teachers. To make that goal a reality, the state must first ensure the rigor of the standards themselves. It must also commit to equitably providing the tools and resources at scale that will enable teachers and school leaders to align their day-to-day instruction and classroom assignments with the demands of the standards, and to better engage families and educators throughout the process.

In fact, in many classrooms across the state, teachers report that the current state standards have provided clarity and coherence around expectations for students. This has led to rich professional experiences for educators and, in turn, helped teachers unlock their students' abilities by focusing on the goals that students need to meet. For schools and districts where standards implementation has been successful, higher

standards have helped teachers enable their students to reach new academic heights and develop deep content knowledge and critical thinking skills. The state must learn from what has gone right, as well as what went wrong, and redouble its commitment to bring high standards to life in every New York classroom — particularly in schools that educate significant proportions of low-income students, students of color, and other groups that have been historically underserved.

The following recommendations are offered by Educators for Excellence, New York Educator Voice Fellowship, The Education Trust–New York, and High Achievement New York in order to provide a pathway to improve opportunity for students and achieve greater equity in New York's schools. We convened educators to learn from their experiences and expertise, as well as observing what has worked in other states and school districts.

It is essential to consider all of these recommendations as components of a single strategy for equity and achievement: With *strong standards* for all students, the development of aligned, high-quality *instructional materials* can help teachers deliver rigorous and engaging instruction, and *professional development*, focused on the implementation and use of these materials and on actual student work, which will foster continuous improvement. Only by integrating standards-based instructional materials with high-quality professional development — and paying particular attention to the needs of historically underserved



groups including students with disabilities and English learners — will we be able to support teachers and improve achievement for all students.¹

In implementing these recommendations, it is also important to note that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers the chance for states to reimagine how federal resources can invigorate teaching and learning. New York should take advantage of this opportunity by investing federal

Title II-A set-aside funds to engage outside experts, educators, nonprofit partners, and higher education institutions to carry out many of the following recommendations. While these recommendations are directed at the state, we do not believe that the State Education Department (SED) should be expected to implement a number of these functions directly. Rather, SED should contract with high-quality outside organizations and leverage their proven existing capacity and ability to scale.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Maintain high standards

Adopting college- and career-ready academic standards sets the context and tone for the type of work New York expects teachers and students to engage in to prepare all students for postsecondary success.

The state has undertaken an important process to review, and hopefully strengthen, the existing standards. The Education Trust–New York asked the national nonprofit Achieve Inc. to review the state’s draft proposed revisions as part of the public comment process. [Achieve’s analysis](#) includes the following findings:

- The draft **Math Standards** are generally rigorous, coherent, and focused. In some cases, the proposed standards improve clarity in ways that other states can learn from, and in other instances

Achieve recommends specific changes to provide additional clarity and context.

- The draft **English Language Arts (ELA) Standards** make it clear that the three critical instructional shifts for college and career readiness — building knowledge, drawing evidence from texts, and developing academic vocabulary — are valued. However, the draft needs direction on the expected complexity levels of text students should read regularly throughout the grades, and there are additional areas where greater clarity and rigor should be incorporated.
- The draft **Literacy Standards for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects** reflect a clear, strong focus on content-area skills in reading and writing. Several specific revisions are suggested.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Update and enhance curricular resources

For the revised standards to make a meaningful difference in classrooms, educators must be able to access high-quality material that helps them see the standards in action, download and modify sample lessons, and ensure that student assignments match the standards — particularly when it comes to writing, cognitive demands, and overall rigor.²

New York State should:

- **Quickly update curriculum modules and other resources on EngageNY.org.** The New York State Education Department’s EngageNY website has become one of the nation’s most-used sources of free, standards-aligned curriculum resources for teachers. Many teachers have found the

material helpful in making the standards concrete and showing what they can look like in the classroom. Existing material should be updated to reflect the revised standards, to provide further resources on how to coach students' deeper thinking skills, to ensure that sample assessments mirror the expectations and language of the state ELA and math tests in grades 3-8, and to include examples of exemplary student work aligned to the standards and curated by teachers. In addition, the curriculum materials developed by or for the state should be culturally relevant and take into account that not all classrooms have such technological resources as smart boards and high-speed Internet access. At the same time, SED should recognize the hard work of teachers over the last several years by making clear that these revisions build on the existing standards and modules.

- **Provide videos of sample lessons.** The state should provide more videos so that teachers can see what successful implementation of the standards looks like in individual lessons and assignments. Modeling best practices — which could be done in partnership with strong educators who have already been trained in the standards and high-quality nonprofit training providers, and by using existing digital platforms — would provide a rich visual reference library for educators and complement the updated modules.
- **Invite teachers to share their own best practices.** New York State can continue to build its standards resource library by inviting educators to submit lessons, curriculum, and videos aligned with the revised standards. This would also send a clear message to educators that the state sees them as full partners in standards implementation and recognizes excellent teaching. All submissions would have to be vetted by a panel of expert teachers or nonprofit organization partners assisting SED in order to ensure alignment and quality before they could be made available online.

ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

The following New York State educators contributed their expertise and ideas to shape the recommendations of this policy brief:

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RECOMMENDATION 3: Provide high-quality professional development at scale

After adopting the current state standards, New York State invested considerable resources in developing state-of-the-art professional development programs, including the Network Training Institute (NTI) and Strengthening Teacher & Leader Effectiveness (STLE). Both provided highly regarded training to a limited group of educators from across the state. Bringing these successful practices to scale — in a state with 200,000 teachers and more than 4,700 schools — remains a significant challenge that the state should address primarily by relying on the capacity of external partners while ensuring quality control at the state level. In addition, as explained above, these professional development opportunities should be linked to and draw on the high-quality instructional materials described in Recommendation 2.

New York State should:

- **Establish clear expectations for how local school districts should prepare for standards implementation.** Successful implementation of the standards requires significant time for teacher-to-teacher collaboration focusing on the assignments students are being given and the results students are producing. The state should generate tools for districts and schools to use in conducting ongoing periodic analyses of classroom assignments against the demand of the standards in order to help teachers improve the quality of instruction. In addition, although professional development decisions are made at the local level, the state should provide examples of high-quality local professional development

BELIEVING IN OUR STUDENTS' POTENTIAL

By **Kim Hardwick**, principal, Center Moriches School District



One of my personal favorite outcomes of the implementation of higher standards at my school was witnessing an amazing collaboration among “special area” and classroom teachers as a result of higher standards. The physical education teachers in our elementary school made it their business to learn some of the mathematical terms and concepts essential to every grade level, and they began to incorporate these ideas into their P.E. courses. Numbers had always been an important part of physical education (counting repetitions, keeping score, etc.), and because of their teachers’ collaboration, students could see how their learning in one subject was connected to and reinforced their learning in another. Our librarian uses LEGO boards in conjunction with teaching elements of a fairy tale to our primary students (taken directly from a grade 1 domain), while continuing to address her own set of standards for library-media. The challenge to meet the new higher standards fostered the need for such collaboration that simply did not exist in our learning community to the extent we have seen in the past five years.

The biggest impact, however, has been a focus on teachers’ openness to what a student has the ability to learn. As we were first exposed to the higher standards New York State adopted, I too often heard, “Oh, my kids will not be able to do that!” But I’m happy to say that my colleagues and I jumped in and learned all we could about the standards. We chose to believe in high standards because we believed in our students. The journey to success in college and life can be challenging, but I know it’s worth it. Every day, when we engage our students in deep and meaningful learning experiences, we are implicitly telling them, “I know you can do this. I believe in you.” The results have been impressive as young children utilize more sophisticated vocabulary than ever before and are engaging in conversations with one another about their own learning.

This is an exciting time to be an educator. Most people agree that we want our children to have multiple options after high school and be prepared to live successful lives beyond the classroom. However, without high standards, a curriculum that is aligned to those standards, and our commitment to place students at the center of the work, I am at a loss for how this goal will be obtained for ALL children.

opportunities, set out its expectations to help guide local decision-making, and create and publicly report on indicators for successful local standards implementation, including shared planning time specifically targeted to this purpose. Finally, the state should identify any barriers to equitable implementation of high standards, particularly in schools that serve significant proportions of low-income students and students of color.

- **Strengthen quality control over regional training and expand access.** Unlike the state-level training, which has generally received high marks from participants, the “turnkey” training that SED has provided regionally has been perceived as being of uneven quality. Although the state cannot directly train every teacher, it is the state’s responsibility to ensure that all teachers (as well as paraprofessionals, assistant teachers, and student teachers) and school and district leaders have access to excellent professional development on the standards that is provided in their region and centered on real student work.
- **Develop more teacher-leaders across the state.** Teachers often learn best from their peers, and the state should support a peer-teacher model that develops and bolsters teacher-leaders and encourages them to provide high-quality professional development as part of an updated “turnkey” approach. Encouraging teacher leadership also reflects and reinforces shared responsibility for successful implementation of the standards. Louisiana’s work may serve as a point of reference for New York to develop its own state-based approach.³
- **Encourage and fund visits to local best-practice classrooms.** Among the most powerful change strategies is the ability of teachers to see their peers in action teaching to high standards. The state should promote opportunities for teachers to visit and partner with high-performing classrooms in their region that are further along implementing the standards and that feature similar student

IMPROVING MY CHILD’S READING SKILLS

By **Maria**, parent, Port Chester Public Schools

My son is a fifth-grader reading more than one year below grade level. His day is organized to meet his needs to move ahead in reading and writing.

There is time in his day where he works with his teacher and a group of students at his same reading level, working on specific strategies. There is also time when the whole class or mixed groups work on more challenging material, which is above his independent reading level.

High standards, coupled with appropriate scaffolding and support, have given my child access to interesting and exciting texts above his reading level. He has come home from school willing to discuss (and sometimes debate) information and ideas based on articles and passages read in the classroom. He works in small groups with students of varied levels where each has the opportunity to contribute and answer high-level questions together. He feels proud to share his ideas and hear his classmates’ comments and questions. His reading level continues to improve, and his confidence (and knowledge) has increased.

populations, grade levels, and content areas. The state should ensure a common framework so that teachers have a structured way to look at standards implementation in the classroom.

- **Develop stronger ties between high schools and local colleges and universities.** Ongoing conversations between high school and postsecondary faculty can help build a shared understanding of the work students actually do in college courses and the work they do in high school courses. This will help high school faculty understand the rigor they need to insist on, and help college faculty have realistic expectations about what they can expect from incoming students. SED should partner with the State University of New York (SUNY), City University of New York (CUNY), and independent colleges and universities to carry out this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Focus on helping all students reach high standards, including students with disabilities and English learners

The successful implementation of high standards is an opportunity to raise achievement levels for all students and to close New York State’s longstanding achievement gaps for low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. Building on the strategies described above, achieving this objective requires providing teachers with additional resources to help students with disabilities and English learners achieve at high levels.

New York State should:

- **Embed resources for students with disabilities and English learners directly into the state’s curriculum modules.** The current materials on EngageNY provide valuable resources for teachers to assist English learners and students with disabilities, but the site offers them in a separate section. The state should expand and embed these tools into the curriculum materials so that teachers can seamlessly incorporate specific academic and behavioral strategies into their classroom practice and see examples of exemplary student work.
- **Provide teachers with targeted curriculum resources and evidence-based practices.** The state should offer more assistance to educators in accessing and incorporating strategies for these special student populations, including by highlighting suggested high-quality resources developed by partners and other nonprofit organizations. In addition, the state should provide modules specifically tailored to self-contained classrooms for students with disabilities — further emphasizing that all students can achieve at high levels when they are taught at high levels.
- **Improve and sustain communication with parents.** Family engagement must become a greater priority for the state and for school districts and schools. The state can help by providing timely sample communication toolkits geared for various points in the school year and sharing best practices for engaging families in multiple languages, including the use of text messaging and mobile applications to reach parents using the most accessible means possible.

SETTING GOALS FOR MY OWN LEARNING

By **Colby**, 7th grade student, Dansville Central School District



High standards matter to education, because without high standards, children might not get the education they need. Standards help students progress through school by providing students with goals to achieve. For example, writing standards

help students know what the quality of their writing should be. Also, without these standards that the students should try to meet, they may not read informational texts closely.

Personally, high standards have affected me by helping me set goals for myself concerning my grades in school. These standards have helped me with my grades by helping me to put my best effort into every paragraph and problem I do in ELA or math. I also think that these standards can help other students by enabling them to set goals for themselves in school as well. My English teacher has learning targets based on the standards to help us set goals for our assignments in English class. After we complete the work, we reflect on how we worked toward the target and what we still need to work on to meet the standard.

HIGH STANDARDS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By **Tara Meagher**, *elementary special education teacher*



All students can learn with the right resources and support. Teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, administrators, and students need to collaborate in order to achieve high standards.

At my school for children with autism, our classroom environment was supportive and carried a steady yet challenging momentum. We upheld high state academic standards for our students and guided them to work-study programs. Our students were engaged and willing to try things that were hard for them. With our strong community, we worked together to challenge and support our students under state standards. Our students with special needs were held to high academic expectations while being trained to work at a local grocery store. The high standards that the state adopted allowed our students to use both their content

and life skills knowledge to participate fully as members of the community.

Students excel in academic and behavioral skills when they are supported and nurtured by high standards from every leader in their school community. I was fortunate enough to have the training needed to teach to high standards for my students. Everyone attended mandatory and useful professional development for two weeks, regardless of their title or level. Paraprofessionals, assistant teachers, student teachers, and aides all received an education toward understanding grade-level standards in order to ensure that all students were successful.

High standards for students means that all schools need this level of professional development and collaborative support for students to develop and thrive. When everyone in a school community is trained, students feel supported so learning excels.

Conclusion

As New York State revisits its academic standards, it is important to remember we are not starting from scratch. To the contrary, many educators, parents, and students across the state have worked hard over the last several years to bring high standards to life — and we are seeing the positive results in classrooms. State policymakers must honor and accelerate these efforts by adopting quality, rigorous standards and making their successful and equitable implementation the highest priority.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example: Geoffrey B. Saxe, Maryl Gearhart, and Na'ilah Suad Nasir. "Enhancing students' understanding of mathematics: A study of three contrasting approaches to professional support." *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education* 4, no. 1 (March 2001): 55-79.

² S. Santelises and J. Dabrowski, "Checking In: Do Classroom Assignments Reflect Today's Higher Standards?" (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2015), <https://edtrust.org/resource/classroomassignments/>.

³ See, for example, the description of Louisiana's Teacher Leader Advisors program in: "ESSA TITLE II-A: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, and Other School Leaders" (Washington, D.C.: Chiefs for Change, 2016), <http://chiefsforchange.org/policy-paper/3108/>.



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