



PLANNING  
— *and* —  
TEACHING  
— *in the* —  
STANDARDS-BASED  
CLASSROOM

*foreword by Robert J. Marzano*

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# Foreword

*By Robert J. Marzano*

This book is about building a bridge to the future. Whether it's obvious or not, the K–12 system of schooling in the United States is in the midst of a massive shift in how it goes about the business of educating our young people. The shift is from a system designed to matriculate students through an established curriculum in age-based groups to a system designed to allow individual students to move at their own pace through the established curriculum. In the current age-based system, all students of a given age receive the same content—students who are at the chronological age to be classified as fourth graders receive the fourth-grade curriculum in all subject areas regardless of their knowledge and skill in each subject area. Students who are at the chronological age to be classified as eighth graders receive the eighth-grade curriculum in all subject areas regardless of their knowledge and skill in a given subject area, and so on. In the system of the future, the process of moving through a school's curriculum will be quite different. Students who would chronologically be classified as fourth graders but have the knowledge and skill to work on seventh-grade mathematics will, in fact, work on seventh-grade mathematics. Students who would be chronologically classified as eighth graders but are capable of learning advanced high school mathematics will, in fact, study advanced high school mathematics, and so on. At a personal level, I believe this future is inevitable. The only question regarding that future is how quickly it will manifest.

Even though this future system seems intuitively appealing and needed, it requires massive structural transformations, not the least of which involve changing grading policies and scheduling policies. In effect, for a school to manifest the new, competency-based future, it must change practices that have been in place for so many decades that their inertia makes them formidable (albeit not insurmountable) obstacles. To overcome such obstacles takes detailed planning; a gradual process of implementation; education for parents, guardians, students, and the community at large; and, above all, time. These daunting facts have led some schools to simply file their dreams of a brighter future on a shelf, to be dusted off and examined at some later time. Fortunately, with this book, Jeff Flygare, Jan K. Hoegh, and Tammy Heflebower provide a starting place that schools at all levels might employ to begin their journey without drastically changing their status quo. In effect, this book represents a bridge to a competency-

based future. The foundation of that bridge is the use of proficiency scales as organizers for standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment. I have found that once schools begin employing proficiency scales, they start to see the possibility of a competency-based future and, in turn, start making plans to manifest it.

I have developed and utilized proficiency scales since the early 1990s. Since their conception, proficiency scales have become a staple for organizing curriculum, instruction, and assessments for teachers in every state. In this book, Flygare, Hoegh, and Heflebower demonstrate how proficiency scales can be generated from priority standards, how they can be used to set goals for student learning, and how they can be used to design assessments. The authors also add an new level of clarity to the use of proficiency scales with their eight-step instructional cycle. This can be applied to any subject area, at any grade level, in any type of system. Finally, this book demonstrates how proficiency scales can be a quintessential tool in communicating students' status and growth to all interested constituents.

For those looking to take the first step toward competency-based education, this is the book to read.

Robert J. Marzano  
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## Introduction

It used to be simple.

Content was what educators had to teach each year. Understanding of that content informed decisions about how teachers sequenced instruction. Long years of experience and teachers' own intuition about what students needed served them well. Students learned through tried and true instructional strategies. From the teachers' perspective, students seemed interested and asked questions, and teachers could see learning happen.

Then the standards movement emerged, and it didn't much affect what teachers did. Standardized tests were aligned to the standards, and teachers were tasked with making sure that they were aligning their teaching to those same standards. A quick look at the standards suggested that existing instruction aligned rather well. Most teachers felt they were meeting the requirements. But sometimes the tests suggested otherwise. Though concerning, the problem didn't merit much change in what educators were doing. After all, teachers could see the learning happening.

But education was changing in a fundamental way. Throughout the world, the move to outcomes-based education meant new challenges for educators. In the United States, education fundamentally changed in 2002 when Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). The most visible changes were state tests, standards, and accountability. But the underlying change was more profound. Before NCLB, the job of educators was to offer learning and to identify those who learned and those who did not. After NCLB, teachers had to find ways to ensure *every* student learned. That is a very different and much more difficult task. It is also a task shared by educators all over the world. Countries as diverse as Canada, India, Russia, and Turkey have adopted the basic principles of outcome-based education. In Canada, while there is no federal-level education ministry, each provincial or territorial government upholds educational standards and benchmarks. Identifying the educational goals for students and holding them accountable for that learning is familiar territory in Canadian schools (National Center on Education and the Economy, n.d.).

In this new world, strategies and teaching methods educators had used for years needed to be revised. Educators' thinking about learning had to undergo a change, too. It was no

longer enough to present content; standards defined clear end goals that all students now needed to reach. Throughout instruction, teachers had to monitor all students' learning and adjust instruction to make sure each student was making progress. Thus, planning and instruction became much more complicated.

But no one told teachers how to do that planning and instructing. Somehow, they were just supposed to do it.

That problem is the genesis of this book. As much as standards have been at the forefront of discussions about education for the first two decades of the 21st century, classroom teachers are still hindered by a deficit of guidance for teaching students to achieve those standards. In this book, we offer practical advice about how classroom teachers can adjust the processes of planning and instruction to align with essential standards, including making sure that selected instructional strategies help students develop the specific knowledge and skills required by the standards. For each activity, assignment, or assessment, we provide advice for ensuring that students benefit in specific ways that are related to the standards identified for the grade level or course.

Whether you are new to the profession or a veteran of decades, you will find useful information and processes related to standards-based planning, instruction, assessment, and feedback. The planning and teaching processes we describe are compatible with virtually any instructional model used by schools or districts, as well as with traditional, standards-based, and standards-referenced grading and reporting methods.

## Standards and Content

In the fundamental shift to standards-based learning, many educators encounter what appears to be a dichotomy between content versus standards. In a traditional, content-based approach, teachers often begin with a resource like a textbook or a curriculum guide that sequences specific content and design instruction to work through that content sequence. The curriculum often becomes, from the students' point of view, a series of facts and bits of information that are sometimes unrelated. Teachers and students may see the purpose of instruction as working through a body of information or skills, unrelated to anything but itself.

By contrast, a standards-based approach means that teachers begin with the identified educational standards for a particular course or grade level. Then, teachers sequence the development of the knowledge and skills required by these standards and design instruction along specific lines that foster that development. Resources such as textbooks are used to aid that development, but they no longer are the primary organizing force of the curriculum.

Teachers who shift to standards-based instruction may find focusing on standards instead of content to be difficult. After all, you may have taught your content for years, you are familiar with it, and standards are relatively new. The good news is that your content will still be there, just in a slightly different context. Your years of experience will serve you well as you see the content in a new way. New teachers may find this shift in focus challenging as well. It could be that you entered the profession of teaching

because of your deep love of a particular content area, and you are enthusiastic to share that love with your students. Be assured that you will be able to do so—within the context of developing knowledge and skills as defined by the standards. In the end, it isn't a choice between standards or content at all. The standards provide a logical sequencing of learning, and essential content will fit within that sequence. But the thought processes involved in standards-based planning and instruction represent a paradigm shift for most educators.

For example, an English language arts (ELA) teacher may continue to share the same beloved works of literature with students as he has in the past. However, he now does so to help students master standards related to literary devices rather than simply because the books are part of the so-called canon. A social studies teacher might still arrange instructional units in chronological order, but the goal of each unit is student proficiency with the relevant social themes and civic concepts rather than the simple memorization of historical events. A science teacher can still employ her favorite demonstrations of chemical reactions, but with an eye toward imparting skills that are applicable across multiple concepts in chemistry, or indeed across multiple scientific disciplines.

This paradigm shift will affect students as well. State or provincial standards are the focus of school and district accountability, and teachers are held responsible for student progress on these standards. In schools and districts where standards are the foundation of learning, students will be aware of the standards and will want to understand their own progress on them. Early in the learning process, the teacher will share the standards with students, identify examples of student performance at various levels of proficiency on the standards, help students understand the sequence of learning they will encounter, and make the standards a central point of everything done in the classroom. These standards-based practices show students the relevance of the activities, assignments, and assessments done in class. Clear purpose helps students encounter learning with a positive attitude. Shifting your focus to a standards-based approach may be intimidating, but it is important and will benefit both you and your students.

## An Overview of Standards-Based Learning

The standards-based approach influences every aspect of classroom practice, from curriculum to unit planning to lesson delivery to assessment to grading. This all-encompassing nature is why we refer to this system as *standards-based learning* (as opposed to other common terms like *standards-based grading*). Standards are the foundation of the system, but educators will transform and apply those standards in various ways to effectively support student learning.

A standards-based curriculum is not merely a list of standards. Most sets of course or grade-level standards contain far too much information for teachers to reasonably cover in the instructional time available. Thus, educators must prioritize standards to create a *guaranteed and viable curriculum* (Marzano, Warrick, & Simms, 2014). *Guaranteed* means that teachers who teach the same grade level or course use and teach the same priority standards, eliminating variability in what students learn when assigned to different classes. *Viable* means that the amount of material covered is reasonable, so teachers can provide

effective instruction and ensure student learning within the allotted instructional time rather than rush to cover too many topics.

To make the standards more functional for instruction, educators can craft *learning progressions* that define basic, target, and advanced levels of a standard or a closely related group of standards. The format we recommend is the *proficiency scale* developed by education researcher Robert J. Marzano (2006, 2009), shown in figure I.1. When creating a proficiency scale, an educator uses the standard as a starting point to write learning targets for each level of the scale. These learning targets represent three levels: content that is simpler and therefore a prerequisite to reaching proficiency on the standard, content at the level of the standard, and more complex content that is beyond the standard. These learning progressions scaffold student learning and guide teachers' unit and lesson planning. In fact, proficiency scales become a central tool of instruction, assessment, and feedback, with lessons, test questions, and scores all based on the scale. Because the scales are an augmentation of the standards themselves, lessons, test items, and scores related to scales are also standards based.

Score	Description
4.0	Advanced content
3.0	Target content
2.0	Simpler content necessary for proficiency
1.0	With help, partial success with score 2.0 content and score 3.0 content
0.0	Even with help, no success

**Figure I.1: Generic form of a proficiency scale.**

Teachers can use proficiency scales to plan units and individual lessons, including instruction on basic and target content, practice with this content, and opportunities for going beyond mastery. Assessments are also a key part of this plan. Aligning assessment tasks to scales and scoring responses accordingly tells teachers and students exactly what students know and can do with respect to the standards. For example, if a teacher develops test questions based on the score 2.0 learning target from the proficiency scale, a student who regularly answers all those questions correctly clearly understands the simpler content. Checking in on students' progress in this way and analyzing assessment data throughout the unit (that is, formative assessment) allows teachers to adjust instruction accordingly and provide support for all learners. This process of planning, teaching, assessing, and adjusting is what we call the *instructional cycle*.

With this overview in mind, the following sections highlight the changes that occur with this paradigm shift to standards-based learning and the benefits that result.

## Changes to the Planning and Teaching Process

For educators who have spent years teaching more traditionally by developing students' understanding of a body of content, using standards may represent a substantial change in the planning and teaching process. To reiterate, instructional planning in a

# 1

## Curriculum Based on Standards and Scales

The foundation of a standards-based approach is, of course, standards. Before standards-based planning and instruction can occur, educators must analyze the standards and transform them into a guaranteed and viable curriculum. These phases of implementation often occur at the school or district level rather than in individual classrooms. However, for the purpose of background knowledge, we review the processes of prioritizing standards and developing proficiency scales in this chapter. For more detail, please consult *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading* (Heflebower et al., 2014) and *A Handbook for Developing and Using Proficiency Scales in the Classroom* (Hoegh, 2020).

### Priority Standards

The first step in creating a standards-based learning system is to distill the relevant standards into a manageable set of content. Teachers are expected to teach a vast array of state or provincial standards. Yet teachers quickly discern that not all these standards are of equal importance. In fact, some are even quite repetitive. Analyses have revealed that many standards documents available for schools and districts articulate more content than is possible to teach practically in the time available to teachers—even after updates intended to address this concern (Marzano, 2003; Marzano & Yanoski, 2016; Marzano, Yanoski, Hoegh, & Simms, 2013; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). In almost all cases, it would be impossible for a teacher to teach every single standard set forth for his or her content area and grade level. Therefore, teachers must determine which standards are most important—that is, which are *priority standards*—to create a viable, focused set of standards for each content area, course, or grade level. We refer to the remaining standards not determined to be a priority as *supporting standards* (Heflebower, Hoegh, Warrick, & Flygare, 2019). Students will still learn the supporting standards, but they will not be the main focus of units or assessments. In the following sections, we explore the process and the qualities by which teachers prioritize standards, and then discuss particular considerations for doing this work as a team or independently.