

How the Business Community Can Help New Jersey Implement the Content Standards

by Joseph G. Rosenstein

In May, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted Core Curriculum Content Standards, outlining what students need to learn to be successful in the 21st century. While I cannot speak for all seven of the content areas addressed in the standards, I have been very involved in the development of the mathematics standards. I can testify that they represent what mathematics teachers throughout the state believe are high achievable standards for all students.

The adoption of these standards does not mean that they will automatically be implemented in the schools. We need to develop and institute statewide assessments which reflect the vision of the standards. We need to develop curriculum frameworks ("how-to" resource guides for teachers and administrators) which provide information and guidance on implementing the standards at the school and district level. And we need to provide professional development activities in order to help teachers bring the standards into their classrooms.

Of the three areas mentioned above -- statewide assessments, curriculum frameworks, and professional development -- professional development is the component which most requires public support. In any case, the State Department of Education is committed to addressing the first two items; the implications of the standards for the statewide assessment program are already being addressed, and efforts to create frameworks are being launched, based in part on the model of the mathematics curriculum framework whose development I have overseen during the past three years. So, I will focus my attention here on professional development.

Let me say this very explicitly. Over the next ten years, teachers will need a great deal of assistance in order to ensure that all present first graders graduate from high school with the skills and understandings that they will need to be successful in their careers and daily lives. Teachers will need to learn and adopt new content, new ways of looking at familiar material, and new instructional techniques; and, in the lower grades, they will need to do this in many content areas, including mathematics and science. They cannot be expected to do this by themselves. They will need guidance from experienced teachers, and they will need time to become familiar with and, step by step, adopt the changes that are envisioned in the standards.

The problem is that professional development has not been part of the job description of the American school teacher. Unlike in Japan, where a major portion of each teacher's day is spent in conferences with colleagues, in curriculum development, and in mentoring relationships involving experienced and newer teachers, in the United States, teachers are generally expected to spend all their time in the classroom.

The changes envisioned in the standards can come about only as we recognize that time for professional growth must be part of every teacher's daily schedule. Unfortunately, few are receptive to this message. When the President of the New Jersey Education Association

recently suggested that it would cost \$17,000,000 to provide assistance to the states 80,000 teachers, little support for his proposal appeared in the press. (By the way, this amounts to little more than \$200 per teacher, which would barely fund a few days of activities.) When it comes time to cut costs, professional development activities are among the first to go.

The problem is that teachers are not treated as professionals. They are entrusted with our children's education, but are not expected to hone their skills or learn new techniques to reach our children more effectively. The State Board of Education has adopted a new vision of what should be taught, and teachers have to become familiar with it before they can transmit it to their students. We wouldn't want a surgeon to try a new procedure on us without first getting instruction and practice. We wouldn't want to hire a lawyer to handle our case without up-to-date experience, and we wouldn't want an accountant to complete our taxes without knowing the current tax codes and procedures. In all of these professions, professional development is a requirement. Shouldn't those who are responsible for educating our children also be expected to learn and grow?

In recent years, schools have adopted the "bottom-line" approach from the business world. But they are often not aware that successful corporations are those in which the process of change is ongoing and where provisions are made to ensure that employees are constantly upgrading their professional skills. Professional employees are expected to learn about new techniques and new directions in management, finances, technology, public relations, etc., and on-the-job time is devoted to this professional growth; successful companies recognize that the time and money they spend in improving the skills of their personnel is an investment that pays off.

One of the most important messages that the business community can convey to schools is the importance of integrating professional development into the life of every professional. Business executives need to convey to their local school boards that they must invest continuously in upgrading the instructional skills of their teachers. The only sector of the community that can bring about this change in attitude is the business community; when educators present this message, it is often viewed as self-serving by a cynical public.

This fall, the Governor is convening a gathering of New Jersey corporate leaders to discuss education. I hope that one outcome of this conference will be clear, consistent and continuous messages by business leaders about the importance of investing in the professional development of teachers.

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