Chapter 6

About Standards

Overview

In Chapter 3, "Activities," we have listed standards references for each activity. This type of listing is now found in most curriculum materials, in order to demonstrate that the activities "meet standards." In a way, these standards references miss the point, because the national standards are not meant to be read in this way. Meeting standards is not really about checking off items from a list. Each of the major standards documents is a coherent, comprehensive call for systematic change in education.

This chapter shows how the material in this book is consistent with national standards at a very fundamental level. We will look in detail at the following documents:

- *Standards for Technological Literacy: Content for the Study of Technology* (International Technology Education Association, 2000);
- *Benchmarks for Science Literacy* (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1993);
- *National Science Education Standards* (National Research Council, 1996);
- *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000);
- *Standards for the English Language Arts* (National Council of Teachers of English & International Reading Association, 1996); and
- *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994).

Most of these standards are now widely accepted as the basis for state and local curriculum frameworks. The first document on the list is included because it is the only national standard focused primarily on technology. The *New Standards Performance Standards* (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1997) is not included because it is based almost entirely on the *Benchmarks, National Science Education Standards,* the original *NCTM Math Standards* (1989), and the *Standards for the English Language Arts.*

Although they deal with very different disciplines, these major national standards documents have many remarkable similarities:

- They are aimed at all students, not only those who are college-bound.
- Using terms like "literacy" and "informed citizen," they argue that education should prepare students to understand current issues and participate in contemporary society.
- They recommend that school knowledge be developed for its use in solving real problems rather than as material "needed" for passing a test. They strongly endorse curriculum projects that arise from students' own ideas, experiences, and interests.
- They focus on the "big ideas" of their disciplines as opposed to memorization of isolated facts or training in narrowly defined skills. In other words, fewer concepts should be dealt with in greater depth. As the National Science Education Standards express it, "Coverage of great amounts of trivial, unconnected information must be eliminated from the curriculum." (NRC, 1996, p. 213)

- The standards reject standardized tests as the sole or even the major form of assessment. Traditional exams measure only what is easy to measure rather than what is most important. "While many teachers wish to gauge their students' learning using performance-based assessment, they find that preparing students for machine-scored tests—which often focus on isolated skills rather than contextualized learning—diverts valuable classroom time away from actual performance." (NCTE/IRA, 1996, p. 7) The standards promote authentic assessment measures, which require students to apply knowledge and reasoning "to situations similar to those they will encounter outside the classroom." (NRC, 1996, p. 78) Furthermore, assessment should become "a routine part of the ongoing classroom activity rather than an interruption" and it should consist of "a convergence of evidence from different sources." (NCTM, 2000, p. 23)
- They highlight the roles of quantitative thinking, as well as oral and written communication, in learning any subject, and they emphasize the interdisciplinary character of knowledge.
- They view learning as an active process requiring student engagement with the material and subject to frequent reflection and evaluation by both teacher and learner.
- They urge teachers to "display and demand respect for the diverse ideas, skills and experiences of all students," and to "enable students to have a significant voice in decisions about the content and context of their work." (NRC, 1996, p. 46)

The ***Stuff That Works!*** materials are based on these ideas and provide extensive guidance on how to implement them in the classroom. We begin our study of technology with students' own ideas and experiences, address problems that are of importance to them, develop "big ideas" through active engagement in analysis and design, and draw connections among the disciplines. While the standards are clear about the principles, they do not provide many practical classroom examples. ***Stuff That Works!*** fills this gap.

Where the Standards Came From

Historically speaking, the current tilt towards national curriculum standards is a dramatic departure from a long tradition of local control of education. How did national standards manage to become the order of the day? In the late 1970s, the country was in a serious recession, driven partly by economic competition from Europe and Japan. In 1983, the National Commission on Educational Excellence (NCEE) published an influential report, *A Nation at Risk,* which painted a depressing picture of low achievement among the country's students. The report warned of further economic consequences should these problems continue to be ignored, and advocated national curriculum standards for all students. Adding to these arguments were pressures from textbook publishers, who felt that national standards would make state and local adoption processes more predictable.

Around the same time, several of the major professional organizations decided to provide leadership in setting standards. The pioneering organizations were the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), whose efforts culminated in the publication of major documents in 1989. In the same year, the National Governors' Association and the first Bush

Administration both endorsed the concept of establishing national educational goals. The NCTM was deeply concerned about the issues raised by *A Nation at Risk* and was convinced that professional educators needed to take the initiative in setting a new educational agenda. Otherwise, the reform of curriculum would rest in the hands of textbook and test publishers, legislatures, and local districts.

Both the NCTM and the AAAS standards projects began with a similar basic position about pedagogy. Influenced by research about what children actually know, they recognized the disturbing fact that "learning is not necessarily an outcome of teaching." (AAAS, 1989, p. 145) In contrast with traditional approaches to education, which emphasize memorization and drill, the new national standards promote strategies for active learning. A related theme of the early standards efforts was that the schools should teach fewer topics in order that "students end up with richer insights and deeper understandings than they could hope to gain from a superficial exposure to more topics…" (p. 20)

Meeting standards requires a major investment of time and resources. Some of the necessary ingredients include new curriculum ideas and materials, professional development opportunities, new assessment methods, and smaller class sizes. The *National Science Education Standards* are the most explicit in identifying the conditions necessary—at the classroom, school, district, and larger political levels—for standards to be meaningful. The authors state, "Students could not achieve standards in most of today's schools." (NRC, 1996, p. 13) More money might not even be the hardest part. Standards-based reforms also require understanding and commitment from everyone connected with the educational system, starting at the top.

The history of standards may contain clues about their future. Standards imply neither textbook-based instruction nor standardized tests. Standards arose because traditional text- and test-based education had failed to result in the learning of basic concepts by the vast majority of students. Ironically, there are many textbook and test purveyors who market their products under the slogan "standards-based." Standards could easily become discredited if those who claim their imprimatur ignore their basic message.

What the Standards Actually Mean

Standards are commonly read as lists of goals to be achieved through an activity or a curriculum. This approach is reflected in the lists of standards references and cross-references that appear in most curriculum materials, as evidence that an activity or curriculum "meets standards."

Presenting lists of outcomes reflects a narrow reading of standards, which can be very misleading. These lists suggest that "meeting standards" is simply a matter of getting students to repeat something like the statements found in the standards documents.

In fact, the standards are much richer and more complex than these lists imply. Many of the standards do not even specify the knowledge that students should acquire, but deal rather with ways of using that knowledge. Here is an example from *Benchmarks for Science Literacy:*

> "By the end of fifth grade, students should be able to write instructions that students can follow in carrying out a procedure." (p. 296)

This standard talks about something students should be able to do,

rather than what they should know. The newly released NCTM document, *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* (2000), unlike the earlier one (NCTM, 1989), explicitly separates "Content Standards" from "Process Standards." The Content Standards outline what students should learn, while the Process Standards cite ways of acquiring and expressing the content knowledge. The Process Standards include problem solving, communication, and representation. The Benchmarks example just cited is another example of a process standard. Similarly, in the English Language Arts (ELA) document (NCTE/IRA, 1996), all twelve standards use verbs to express what students should do, as opposed to what they should know. Any reading of standards that focuses only on content knowledge is missing a central theme of all of the major documents.

There is also material in the standards that qualifies neither as content nor as process. Here is an example from the *Benchmarks* chapter called "Values and Attitudes":

> "By the end of fifth grade, students should raise questions about the world around them and be willing to seek answers to some of them by making careful observations and trying things out." (p. 285)

This standard asks for more than a specific piece of knowledge, ability, or skill. It calls for a way of looking at the world, a general conceptual framework that transcends the boundaries of disciplines. Similarly, the "Connections" standard in the new NCTM document underscores the need for students to...

> "... Recognize and apply mathematics in contexts outside of mathematics." (NCTM, 2000, p. 65)

These are examples of broad curriculum principles that cut across the more specific content and process standards. These standards are not met by implementing a particular activity or by teaching one or another lesson. They require an imaginative search for opportunities based on a reshaping of goals for the entire curriculum.

In general, the standards documents are at least as much about general principles as about particular skills and knowledge bases. The *Standards for Technological Literacy*, the *Benchmarks*, and the *National Science Education Standards* each identifies some big ideas that recur frequently and provide explanatory power throughout science and technology. "Systems" and "modeling" are concepts that appear in all three documents. The presence of such unifying ideas suggests that the individual standards references should not be isolated from one another. They should rather be seen as parts of a whole, reflecting a few basic common themes.

What Use Are Standards?

Increasingly, teachers are being held accountable for "teaching to standards." These demands are added to such other burdens as paperwork, test schedules, classroom interruptions, inadequate space and budgets, arbitrary changes in class roster, etc. In the view of many teachers, children and their education are routinely placed dead last on the priority list of school officials.

Understandably, teachers may resent or even resist calls to "meet standards" or demonstrate that their curricula are "standards-bearing." It is not surprising that many teachers cynically view the standards movement as "another new thing that will eventually blow over."

The push to "meet standards" is often based on a misreading of standards as lists of topics to be "covered" or new tests to be administered. It is not hard to imagine where this misinterpretation might lead. If the proof of standards is that students will pass tests,

and students fail them nevertheless, then the standards themselves may eventually be discarded. Paradoxically, the prediction that "this, too, shall pass" would then come true, not because the standards failed, but because they were never understood nor followed.

Standards are intended to demolish timeworn practices in education. Some of these practices place the teacher at the center of the classroom but reduce her or him to a cog in the machinery of the school and the district, with the primary responsibility of preparing students for tests. The standards documents recognize the need to regard teachers as professionals, students as active, independent learners, and tests as inadequate methods of assessing the full range of learning.

Within broad frameworks, the standards urge teachers to use their judgment in tailoring the curriculum to students' needs and interests. The *NRC Science Standards,* for example, call for "teachers [to be] empowered to make the decisions essential for effective learning." (1996, p. 2) Neither teachers nor administrators should interpret standards as mechanisms for tightening control over what teachers and students do. While they are very clear about the goals of education, the standards are less specific about how to meet them. Innovative curriculum efforts such as *Stuff That Works!* fit very well within the overall scheme of standards.

Teachers who have tried to implement *Stuff That Works!* activities in their classrooms have often come away with positive feelings about them. The following comments are typical:

- *The strengths of this unit are the opportunity to group students, work on communication skills, problem solve ... and plan real life tests. I have watched my students go from asking simple yes/no questions to thinking and planning careful, thoughtful active questions. The students began to see each other as people with answers... I was no longer the expert with all the answers.*

- *I must begin by telling you that I found this particular guide to be so much fun and the students demonstrated so much energy and interest in this area... I was able to engage them in the activities easily... The activities were very educational and provided so much vital information that helped students connect what is being taught to them in math to real life situations, e.g., graphing behavior and using tallies to record information. For my [special education] students, I found this gave them self confidence...*

- *I read the entire guide from front to back... Although the main idea of the unit is not specifically a large focus of instruction in our fourth grade curriculum, I recognized the power behind the ideas and activities and knew that this unit would promote collaboration, problem solving and communication... Overall, I think my students loved this unit and felt enormously successful after we finished...*
- *My most important goal for students is that they feel good about themselves and realize what they can do. I liked these activities, because they had these results.*

The standards are intended to promote just these sorts of outcomes. When a teacher has a "gut feeling" that something is working well, there is usually some basis to this feeling. As the *NRC Science Standards* state, "outstanding things happen in science classrooms today... because extraordinary teachers do what needs to be done *despite conventional practice* [emphasis added]." (1996, p. 12) Unfortunately, even an extraordinary teacher may not find support from traditional administrators, who complain that the classroom is too noisy or messy, or that somebody's guidelines are not being followed. Under these circumstances, standards can be very useful. It is usually easy to see how valuable innovations fit into a national framework of education reform that is also endorsed by state- and district-level authorities. Standards can be used to justify and enhance innovative educational programs whose value is already self-evident to teachers and students.

What the Standards Really Say

In order to justify work as meeting standards, it is necessary to know what the standards really say. In the remainde of this chapter, we summarize each of the six major standards documents listed at the beginning of the chapter, and show how the *Stuff That Works!* ideas are consistent with these standards. We provide some historical background for each of the standards, and look at the overall intent and structure before relating them to the *Stuff That Works!* materials. These sections should be used only as they are needed. For example, if you would like to use some of the ideas from this Guide and are also required to meet the *National Science Education Standards,* then that section could be useful to you in helping you justify your work.

Standards for Technological Literacy: Content for the Study of Technology

In April 2000, the International Technology Education Association (ITEA) unveiled the *Standards for Technological Literacy,* commonly known as the *Technology Content Standards,* after extensive reviews and revisions by the National Research Council (NRC) and the National Academy of Engineering (NAE). In its general outlines, the new standards are based on a previous position paper, *Technology for All Americans* (ITEA, 1996). The latter document defined the notion of "technological literacy" and promoted its development as the goal of technology education.

A technologically literate person is one who understands "what technology is, how it is created, and how it shapes society, and in turn is shaped by society." (ITEA, 2000, p. 9) According to the *Standards,* familiarity with these principles is important not only for those who would pursue technical careers, but for all other students as well. They will need to know about technology in order to be thoughtful practitioners in most fields, such as medicine, journalism, business, agriculture, and education. On a more general level, technological literacy is a requirement for participation in society as an intelligent consumer and an informed citizen.

Given the importance of being technologically literate, it is ironic that technology barely exists as a school subject in the U.S., and is particularly hard to find at the elementary level. In a curriculum overwhelmingly focused on standardized tests, there seems to be little room for a new subject such as technology. To make matters worse, there is considerable confusion over what the term "technology" even means. Many in education still equate it with "computers." The Standards advocate for technology education based on a broad definition of "technology," which is "how humans modify the world around them to meet their needs and wants, or to solve practical problems." (p. 22)

The *Technology Content Standards* describe three aspects of developing technological literacy: learning about technology, learning to do technology, and technology as a theme for curriculum integration (pp. 4-9). To learn about technology, students need to develop knowledge not only about specific technologies (Standards 14-20), but also about the nature of technology in general (Standards 1-3), including its core concepts: **systems, resources, requirements, trade-offs, processes,** and **controls.** Resources include **materials, information,** and **energy,** while **modeling** and **design** are fundamental examples of processes (p. 33). Students learn to "do" technology by engaging in a variety of technological processes, such as **troubleshooting, research, invention, problem solving, use** and **maintenance, assessment** of technological impact, and, of course, **design** (Standards 8-13). Technology has obvious and natural connections with other areas of the curriculum,

including not only math and science, but also language arts, social studies, and the visual arts.

According to the *Technology Content Standards*, design is "the core problem-solving process [of technology]. It is as fundamental to technology as inquiry is to science and reading is to language arts." (p. 91) The importance of design is underlined by the statement, a little further on, that "students in grades K-2 should learn that everyone can design solutions to a problem." (p. 93) Several pages later, the Standards suggest that young children's experiences in design should focus on "problems that relate to their individual lives, including their interactions with family and school environments." (p.100) However, the *Technology Content Standards* offer little if any guidance on how to identify such problems. The vignette provided on the following page, "Can You Help Mike Mulligan?" is based on a literature connection rather than children's environments.

Signs, symbols, and codes are technologies for representing and communicating information. Sign-and-symbol design activities offer easy access to the processes of design, because the design cycle is relatively short, and evaluation methods are obvious. The basic test of a symbol design is: *Can the intended audience figure out what it means?* As Theresa Luongo's work in Chapter 4 demonstrates, even very young children can engage in the design and redesign of symbols. Mary Flores's story shows how non-reading second-graders created graphic signs for kindergarten students and tested them by seeing how well the younger children could interpret them. Through this activity, both groups were developing key insights about design, as one of the kindergarten students indicated when he said, "I don't understand the sign. I think you should redesign it."

Where does technology education "fit" in the existing curriculum? The Technology Standards address this problem by claiming that technology can enhance other disciplines: "Perhaps the most surprising message of the *Technology Content Standards* ... is the role technological studies can play in students' learning of other subjects." (p. 6) We support this claim in the following sections, which draw the connections between the material in this book and national standards in science, math, English language arts, and social studies.

Benchmarks for Science Literacy

There are two primary standards documents for science education: The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) *Benchmarks for Science Literacy* (1993) and the National Research Council (NRC) *National Science Education Standards* (1996). Unlike the *National Science Education Standards*, the *Benchmarks* provide explicit guidance for math, technology, and social science education, as well as for science. *Benchmarks* draws heavily on a previous AAAS report, *Science for All Americans* (1989), which is a statement of goals and general principles rather than a set of standards. The newer document recasts the general principles of *Science for All Americans* (SFAA) as minimum performance objectives at each grade level.

The performance standards in *Benchmarks* are divided among 12 chapters. These include three generic chapters regarding the goals and methods of science, math, and technology; six chapters providing major content objectives for the physical, life, and social sciences; technology and mathematics; and three generic chapters dealing with the history of science, "common themes," and "habits of mind." The last four chapters of *Benchmarks* provide supporting material, such as a glossary of terms and references to relevant research.

Recognizing that standards are necessary but not sufficient for education reform, the AAAS has also developed some supplementary documents to support the process of curriculum change. These include *Resources for Science Literacy: Professional Development* (1997), which suggests reading materials for teachers, presents outlines of relevant teacher education courses, and provides comparisons

between the *Benchmarks*, the *Math Standards*, the *Science Standards*, and the *Social Studies Standards*. A subsequent publication, *Blueprints for Science Reform* (1998) offers guidance for changing the education infrastructure to support science, math, and technology education reform. The recommendations in *Blueprints* are directed towards administrators, policy makers, parent and community groups, researchers, teacher educators, and industry groups. A subsequent AAAS document, *Designs for Science Literacy* (2001), provides examples of curriculum initiatives that are based on standards.

The *Benchmarks* document offers a compelling argument for technology education. The authors present the current situation in stark terms: "In the United States, unlike in most developed countries in the world, technology as a subject has largely been ignored in the schools." (p. 41) Then they point out the importance of technology in children's lives, its omission from the curriculum notwithstanding: "Young children are veteran technology users by the time they enter school.... [They] are also natural explorers and inventors, and they like to make things." (p. 44) To resolve this contradiction, "School should give students many opportunities to examine the properties of materials, to use tools, and to design and build things." (p. 44)

Like the *Technology Standards*, the *Benchmarks* identify design as a key process of technology and advocate strongly for first-hand experience in this area. "Perhaps the best way to become familiar with the nature of engineering and design is to do some." (p. 48) As children become engaged in design, they "begin to enjoy challenges that require them to clarify a problem, generate criteria for an acceptable solution, try one out, and then make adjustments or start over again with a newly proposed solution." (p. 49) These statements strongly support the basic approach of ***Stuff That Works!***, which is to engage children in analysis and design activities based on the technologies already familiar to them. Like ***Stuff That Works!***, the *Benchmarks* also recognize the back-and- forth nature of design processes, which rarely proceed in a linear, predictable sequence from beginning to end.

The uses of symbols, graphics and models for communication are a recurring theme of *Benchmarks*. "Communication" appears as a major category under "The Designed World"; it reappears as "Symbolic Relationships" under "The Mathematical World," as one of the "Common Themes," and as one of the "Habits of Mind." ***Signs, Symbols, and Codes*** focuses on the most basic devices used to communicate information. The activities engage children in recognizing and interpreting signs and symbols in their own environments, and then in designing and testing new ones. The *Benchmarks* section on "Communication" in "The Designed World" recommends just these sorts of activities:

> "Even before children master the alphabet, they know that various shapes, symbols, and colors have special meanings in society (for example, red means danger, a red octagon means stop, green means go, arrows show direction, a circle with a slash means no). Young children are fascinated by the various forms of giving messages, including sign language, road signs, recycling symbols, and company logos, and they should have opportunities to invent forms of their own. Their symbols can be used in classroom routines, illustrating the need to have common meanings for signs, symbols and gestures. They should learn that writing things down and drawing pictures could help them tell their ideas to others accurately.... Students can discuss what the best ways are to convey different kinds of messages—not to decide the right answers, of course, but to start thinking about advantages and disadvantages." (p. 197)

The section on "Communication Skills" specifies symbol design activities in a different context: "By the end of fifth grade, students should be able to write instructions that others can follow in carrying out a procedure [and] make sketches to aid in explaining procedures or ideas." (p. 296) Elsewhere

in *Benchmarks,* the chapter on "The Mathematical World" advocates what we would call "a scavenger hunt for symbols":

> "Symbols are just things that stand for other things or sets of other things or kinds of other things. They can be objects or marks, even sounds. Perhaps it is not too early to engage students in collecting or identifying symbols ... and making up symbols to represent relationships... In this activity, students should be helped to realize that the idea of symbols is not the sole property of mathematics, and letters are not the only kind of symbols used. They should gather and compare the uses of as many different kinds of symbols as they can find in mathematics and elsewhere—hieroglyphics, numbers, icons, musical notation, etc." (p. 217)

The National Science Education Standards

In 1991, the National Science Teachers Association asked the National Research Council to develop a set of national science education standards. These standards were intended to complement the *Benchmarks,* which include math, technology, and social studies as well as natural science. The National Research Council (NRC) includes the National Academy of Sciences, which is composed of the most highly regarded scientists in the country. Over the course of the next five years, the NRC involved thousands of scientists, educators, and engineers in an extensive process of creating and reviewing drafts of the new science standards. The results were published in 1996 as the *National Science Education Standards* (NSES).

Who is the audience for standards? The conventional view is that standards outline what students should know and be able to do, and that teachers are accountable for assuring that their students meet these guidelines. The NSES take a much broader approach, looking at the whole range of systemic changes needed to reform science education. The document is organized into six sets of standards. Only one of the six, the "Science Content Standards," talks directly about what children should learn through science education. The other five address other components of the education infrastructure, including classroom environments, teaching methods, assessment, professional development, administrative support at the school and district levels, and policy at the local, state, and national levels.

Collectively, these standards outline the roles of a large group of people on whom science education depends: teachers, teacher educators, staff developers, curriculum developers, designers of assessments, administrators, superintendents, school board members, politicians, informed citizens, and leaders of professional associations. If an administrator or school board member were to ask a teacher, "What are you doing to address the *National Science Education Standards?"* the teacher would be fully justified in responding, "What are *you* doing to meet them?"

One message that recurs frequently in the NSES is that teachers must be regarded as professionals, with a vital stake in the improvement of science education and an active role "in the ongoing planning and development of the school science program." (p. 50) More specifically, they should "participate in decisions concerning the allocation of time and other resources to the science program." (p. 51) The *Standards* explicitly reject the reduction of teachers to technicians or functionaries who carry out somebody else's directives. "Teachers must be acknowledged and treated as professionals whose work requires understanding and ability." The organization of schools must change too: "School leaders must structure and sustain suitable support systems for the work that teachers do." (p. 223)

Teachers should also play a major role in deciding and/or designing the science curriculum. The *Standards* call for teachers to "select science content and adapt and design curricula to meet the needs, interests, abilities and experiences of students." Although teachers set the curriculum initially, they should remain flexible: "Teaching for understanding requires responsiveness to students, so activities and strategies are continuously adapted and refined

to address topics arising from student inquiries and experiences, as well as school, community and national events." (p. 30) Not only teachers, but also students, should play a major role in curriculum planning. The Teaching Standards make this point explicit: "Teachers [should] give students the opportunity to participate in setting goals, planning activities, assessing work and designing the environment." (p. 50)

The Science Standards do not make the distinction between design and inquiry as sharply as do the Technology Standards: "Children in grades K-4 understand and can carry out design activities earlier than they can inquiry activities, but they cannot easily tell the difference between the two, nor is it important whether they can." (p. 135) Thus, many of the abilities and concepts needed to meet the standard "Science as Inquiry" are also developed through design. These include: "Ask a question about objects... in the environment"; "plan and conduct a simple investigation"; "employ simple equipment and tools to gather data"; and "communicate investigations or explanations." (p. 122)

Signs-and-symbols design activities offer a rich context for developing these inquiry abilities at an early age. Not only are signs and symbols of interest to even the youngest children, but the process of design and evaluation is relatively rapid and free of complications, such as the need for special equipment. All of the stories in Chapter 4 feature children asking questions about signs and symbols they find in their environment, and communicating their interpretations and explanations. In several of the stories, notably those of Angel Gonzalez and Felice Piggott, we also see students planning and conducting investigations of how well their signs and symbols work.

An important aspect of signs and symbols is their role in managing the classroom environment. This role is evident, for example, when Theresa' Luongo's pre-K/K students design symbols for protecting classroom pets; when Guillermina's fourth graders develop ways to manage behavior in the hallways and classroom, when Mary Flores's special education students design graphic symbols for a kindergarten classroom, and when Angel Gonzalez's students develop a signaling system for conveying student needs. The "Teaching Standards" section of the NSES calls for just this sort of involvement of students in designing improvements to their schools and classrooms:

> "As part of challenging students to take responsibility for their learning, teachers [should] involve them in the design and management of the learning environment. Even the youngest students can and should participate in discussions and decisions about using time and space for work." (p. 45)

Principles and Standards for School Mathematics

The first of the major standards documents, *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*, was published in 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). Additional standards for teaching and assessment were published in 1991 and 1995, respectively. In 2000, the NCTM released a new document, *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics*, intended to update and consolidate the classroom-related portions of the three previous documents. Some of the major features of the new volume, different from the prior version, are the addition of the Principles, the division of the standards into the categories "Content" and "Process," and the inclusion of a new process standard called "Representation."

The new NCTM document acknowledges the limitations of educational standards: "Sometimes the changes made in the name of standards have been superficial or incomplete... Efforts to move in the direction of the original NCTM Standards are by no means fully developed or firmly in place." (pp. 5-6) In spite of this candid assessment, the authors remain optimistic about the future impact of

standards. Their goal is to provide a common framework for curriculum developers and teachers nationwide. If all schools follow the same standards, then teachers will be able to assume that "students will reach certain levels of conceptual understanding and procedural fluency by certain points in the curriculum." (p. 7)

The NCTM *Principles and Standards* begin by presenting the six sets of principles that are the underlying assumptions for the standards. Some of these principles are common to the other standards documents: that there should be high expectations of all students, that the goal of learning is deep understanding, and that assessment should be integrated with curriculum. Other principles underscore the need to learn from cognitive research. More than in any other field, there has been extensive research into how students learn mathematics, and this research base is reflected in the Principles. For example, the "Curriculum Principle" calls for coherent sets of lessons, focused collectively on one "big idea." Similarly, the "Teaching Principle" specifies that teachers must be aware of students' cognitive development. The "Learning Principle" cites research on how learning can be most effective.

The standards themselves are organized into two categories: Content Standards and Process Standards. The former describe what students should learn, in the areas of Number and Operations, Algebra, Geometry, Measurement, and Data Analysis and Probability. The Process Standards discuss how students should acquire and make use of the content knowledge. The subcategories are Problem Solving, Reasoning and Proof, Communication, Connections, and Representation. Unlike the earlier NCTM document, the new version uses all the same standards across all of the grade levels, from K through 12. In this way, the NCTM is advocating for a carefully structured curriculum, which builds upon and extends a few fundamental ideas systematically across the grades. Readers may be surprised to find an Algebra Standard for grades K-2, or a Number and Operations Standard for grades 9-12.

Stuff That Works! units and activities offer rich opportunities for fulfilling a key ingredient of the NCTM standards: learning and using mathematics in context. The Process Standard called "Connections" makes it clear that mathematics should be learned by using it to solve problems arising from "other subject areas and disciplines" as well as from students' daily lives" (p. 66). *Stuff That Works!* fulfills this standard in two fundamental respects: it provides mathematics connections with another subject area, technology, and it uses artifacts and issues from everyday life as the source of material for study. The mathematics students learn is drawn from all of the Content Standards, as well as all of the Process Standards except for Reasoning and Proof.

The units and activities in this book offer powerful opportunities for developing the basic themes of the Representation Standard, which reject the memorization of symbols and their use as "ends in themselves." Instead,

> "Representations should be treated as essential elements in supporting students' understanding of mathematical concepts and relationships; in communicating mathematical approaches, arguments and understandings to one's self and others; in recognizing connections among related mathematical concepts; and in applying mathematics to realistic problem situations through modeling." (p. 67)

Through signs-and-symbols activities, students recognize a wide variety of symbols from their everyday experiences. In addition, they explore how symbols operate to represent ideas in compact ways, and how they are used to communicate information. Ultimately, they design their own symbols, and test them with others, which leads to an understanding of how the communication process can fail. These experiences provide the background for the use of symbols, including graphic representations, in mathematics.

Standards for the English Language Arts

By 1991, it had become clear that standards would be produced for all of the major school subjects. Fearful that English language standards might be produced without a firm basis in research and practice, two major professional organizations requested Federal funding for their own standards effort. The following year, the Department of Education awarded a grant for this purpose to the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, which agreed to work closely with the two organizations, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA). This effort culminated in the 1996 publication of the *Standards for the English Language Arts* by the NCTE and IRA. These *ELA Standards* are now widely accepted for their clear, concise outline of English language education.

The *ELA Standards* adopt an unusually comprehensive view of "literacy," much broader in its scope than the traditional definition of "knowing how to read and write." (p. 4) Literacy also includes the ability to think critically, and encompasses oral and visual, as well as written communication. Recognizing that these forms of language "are often given limited attention in the curriculum," the *Standards* outline the variety of means used to convey messages in contemporary society:

> "Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language, but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more. Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts such as illustrations, charts, graphs, electronic displays, photographs, film and video is another essential component of the English language arts curriculum." (pp. 5-6)

According to the *ELA Standards,* there are three major aspects to language learning: **content, purpose,** and **development.** Content standards address only what students should learn, but not why or how: "knowledge alone is of little value if one has no need to—or cannot—apply it." The *Standards* identify four purposes for learning and using language: "for obtaining and communicating information, for literary response and expression, for learning and reflection, and for problem solving and application." (p. 16) Purpose also figures prominently in the third dimension of language learning, development, which describes how students acquire this facility. "We learn language not simply for the sake of learning language; we learn it to make sense of the world around us and to communicate our understanding with others." (p. 19)

Of course, purpose and motivation vary from one situation to another. The authors of the *Standards* make this point, too, in their discussion of **context.** "Perhaps the most obvious way in which language is social is that it almost always relates to others, either directly or indirectly: we speak to others, listen to others, write to others, read what others have written, make visual representations to others and interpret their visual representations." Language development proceeds through the practice of these communication skills with others:

> "We become participants in an increasing number of language groups that necessarily influence the ways in which we speak, write and represent." While language development is primarily social, there is an individual dimension as well: "All of us draw on our own sets of experiences and strategies as we use language to construct meaning from what we read, write, hear, say, observe, and represent." (p. 22)

How does this broad conception of literacy and its development relate to daily classroom practice? The authors recognize that the *ELA Standards* may be in conflict with the day-to-day demands placed on teachers. "They may be told they should respond to the need for reforms and innovations while at the same time being discouraged from making their instructional practices look too different from those of the

past." Among those traditional practices are the use of standardized tests, "which often focus on isolated skills rather than contextualized learning." Prescribed texts and rigid lesson plans are further barriers to reform, because they tend to preclude "using materials that take advantage of students' interests and needs" and replace "authentic, open-ended learning experiences." (p. 7) Another problem is "the widespread practice of dividing the class day into separate periods [which] precludes integration among the English language arts and other subject areas." (p. 8) Taken seriously, these standards would lead to wholesale reorganization of most school experiences.

This introductory material sets the stage for the twelve content standards, which define "what students should know and be able to do in the English language arts." (p. 24) Although these are labeled "content" standards, "content cannot be separated from the purpose, development and context of language learning" (p. 24). In a variety of ways, the twelve standards emphasize the need to engage students in using language clearly, critically and creatively, as participants in "literacy communities." Within these communities, students sometimes participate as **receivers** of language—by interpreting graphics, reading and listening and—and sometimes as **creators**—by making visual symbols, writing, and speaking.

Some teachers have used the *Stuff That Works!* activities and units primarily to promote language literacy, rather than for their connections with math or science. Technology activities offer compelling reasons for children to communicate their ideas in written, spoken, and visual form. In early childhood and special education classrooms, teachers have used *Stuff That Works!* to help children overcome difficulties in reading and writing, because it provides natural and non-threatening entry points for written expression. In the upper elementary grades, *Stuff That Works!* activities offer rich opportunities for students to want to use language for social purposes. Several characteristics of *Stuff That Works!* contribute to its enormous potential for language learning and use:

- Nearly every unit begins with an extensive group discussion of what terms mean, how they apply to particular examples, how to categorize things, and/or what problems are most important.
- The activities focus on artifacts and problems that engage children's imaginations, making it easy to communicate about them. Teachers who use *Stuff That Works!* usually require students to record their activities and reflections in journals.
- This guide, along with *Mapping,* focuses on the problem of communication, and offers numerous experiences in visual thinking and visual communication.
- In the early childhood classroom, and in work with learning-disabled children, signs-and-symbols activities offer a natural and non-threatening route to language literacy.

For each of the *Stuff That Works!* topics, the opening activity is a scavenger hunt or brainstorming session. In a scavenger hunt, students develop an understanding of the topic by collecting and examining physical examples and discussing them. Often there are discussions about what the words mean, and how well some of the examples fit a category. For example, Mary Flores's second graders were grappling with the concepts of "sign" and "symbol," and the differences between them. One student said, "A symbol shows you a picture, a sign tells you the word." Mary's students were beginning to "participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical members" of a literacy community. (ELA Standard #11, p. 44)

Many special education students have very low self-esteem and are deeply frustrated by the difficulties they experience in learning to read and write. Working with a group of non-readers, Mary decided to explore their awareness of signs and symbols in the environment. It turned out that these children were keen interpreters of signs, which they often used to compensate for their difficulties in reading. Mary exploited their ability to understand

graphic symbols to help them make the transition to language literacy. In the process, they were learning "to adjust their use of spoken, written and visual language to communicate effectively." (ELA Standard #4, p. 33)

Students who engage in signs-and-symbols activities learn to interpret and evaluate examples of graphic communication created by others, and also to create and test their own designs. These kinds of experiences in visual communication are rarely encountered in most school curricula, although mandated by the *ELA Standards.* The design of signs, symbols, and codes engages children very directly in considering basic issues of language and communication.

For example, in designing a sign to convey the message, "WARNING, HOT LIQUID!", Christine Smith's students had to decide what kinds of symbols would convey the meaning "HOT." For a symbol to be effective, both the designer and the audience have to agree about what the symbol means. This is an example of learning "sensitivity to the purpose, nature and audience of a text." (p. 20)

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

The social studies encompass a variety of disciplines, all concerned with the complex and changing relationships between the individual and society. Some of these fields have traditionally been taught as separate subjects. By the early 1990s major standards-setting efforts were underway for civics, economics, geography and history. In an effort to provide a framework for these separate disciplinary standards, in 1994 the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) issued *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.* This document is not intended to replace the individual disciplinary standards, but rather to serve as a guide for integrating them under broad interdisciplinary themes.

> "Teachers and curriculum designers are encouraged first to establish their program frameworks using the social studies standards as a guide, then to use individual sets of standards from history, geography, civics, economics, or other disciplines to guide the development of strands and courses within their programs." (p. 17)

According to the NCSS, a primary purpose of social studies is to prepare students for their roles as citizens in a democratic society.

> "NCSS has recognized the importance of educating students ... who are able to use knowledge about their community, nation, and world, along with skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving [for] shaping our future and sustaining and improving our democracy." (p. 3)

This statement covers a lot of ground, and supports both sides of a major political controversy over the role of social studies in the schools. Should students learn what their society wants them to know, or should they develop as critical thinkers who can improve the way the society works? The NCSS *Standards* say "yes" on both counts: they should not only become "committed to the ideas and values" of our society, but also learn "decision-making and problem-solving." A companion NCSS document, *National Standards for Teaching Social Studies* (2000) is even more explicit: "Social studies teachers should ... encourage student development of critical thinking." (p. 35)

What sorts of educational strategies will accomplish these goals? The *Social Studies Curriculum Standards* outline five basic "Principles of Teaching and Learning." To begin with, the experiences should be "meaningful": "Students learn connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes that they will find useful both in and out of school." Learning should "integrate across the curriculum," using "authentic activities that call for real-life applications." In applying what they have learned, students should "make value-based decisions" and develop a "commitment to social responsibility." (pp. 11-12) The *Teaching Standards* set the context for such education, in calling for "learning environments that encourage social interaction, active engagement in

learning and self-motivation." (p. 35)

Angel Gonzalez's "Signals for Student Needs" activity is an example of an extended curriculum unit that provides "for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic." (p. 30) The project not only involved students in solving a problem of importance to them, but also challenged the assumption that only adults can have a voice in how a school is run. At the beginning of the project, the students generated a brainstorming list of problems that lead to disruptions of the flow of classroom activities. Several of the problems on the list had to do with students disrupting a lesson by making requests of the teacher.

The next phase of the project was to make a more detailed list of the kinds of things that lead to these disruptions. Then Angel divided the class into groups, and asked each group to come up with a solution for the disruption problem. The consensus was that a system of hand signals would help to solve the problem by giving students way to indicate their needs unobtrusively. These signals would have to meet a set of criteria, which the class developed. They also agreed upon a list of six different messages, which were the most common sources of disruption. Then each group met again to design its own set of six signals, one for each of the messages. Meanwhile, Angel had arranged with a first grade teacher to run a test of the hand signals in her class.

The next step was to negotiate a common set of hand signals from among the proposals of the groups. For each of the messages, each group presented its idea, and the entire class voted on these ideas. Eventually, they selected one best hand signal for each message. Then they had to represent these ideas on paper, so they could be taught to the first grade class. Again, each group met separately to make its own drawing of each of the six selected hand signals. These were again voted upon, this time by a committee, before creating a master set of drawings to present to the first graders.

These activities, and to a lesser extent those of Guillermina Montano, Mary Flores, and Theresa Luongo, address two of the ten strands of the Social Studies *Standards:* Power, Authority and Governance (VI) and Civic Ideals and Practice (X). The latter of these strands advocates for direct participation of students in "identifying social needs, setting directions for public policies, and working to support both individual dignity and the common good." (p. 30) While the *Standards* propose that these activities take place at the high school level, it is clear that Angel's elementary school children had already begun to accomplish these objectives.

The Governance Strand is concerned with the ways in which decisions are made in contemporary society. By selecting the hand signals democratically, Angel's students were exploring "how groups and nations attempt to resolve conflicts and seek to establish order and security." This process helped them to "become more effective problem-solvers and decision-makers when addressing the persistent issues and social problems encountered in public life." (p. 26) When students design signs and symbols to solve real problems in their lives, they are learning powerful lessons about socially responsible, democratic decision-making.