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Where We Stand

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What Standards?

To say that the "Standards for the English Language Arts," which came out a few weeks ago, miss the mark is a colossal understatement. It would be more accurate to say that they lack any real target. Like the other "national" standards that have already appeared, they were originally intended to guide states and localities in upgrading their curriculums and assessments to meet world-class standards. But good luck to anyone who tries to use the new English standards in that way!

As many critics have pointed out, the English standards are extremely vague; they offer no concrete recommendations about what students ought to learn and when. What characteristics should a good piece of writing by a fourth grader show? What critical tools should eighth graders be able to use when they read a short story or novel or watch a movie or TV program? What about graduating seniors? You could not answer any of these questions by looking at the English standards. They provide some general principles but no idea of where exactly teachers and students are going or how they will know when they have arrived.

Their authors would tell you that this is part of their philosophy. They do not believe that you can or should specify what students ought to learn; you need to be flexible. But these standards offer no way of telling the difference between bare competence and great distinction. Indeed, insofar as the term *standards* means "a measure of qualitative or quantitative value," they are not standards at all. And though they talk a great deal about offering equal opportunities to all students, in discarding the idea of standards, they also throw out the best hope of getting some kind of equity among our widely disparate English curriculums.



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This unwillingness to say what is best for students leads to a real flabbiness about some important and controversial issues. The standards admit, rather hesitantly, that all students need to learn standard English. (They call it the "language of wider communication"—a phrase designed to keep from being disrespectful of any of the languages of "narrower" communication.) However, when it comes to bilingual education, the standards recommend keeping children "in programs that build on their first language," with English, evidently, as a sideline. This of course would ensure that many students would leave school still fluent in their native language only. In other words, English is important, but it is not important enough to make learning it the focus of the "Standards for English Language Arts"! And though the standards assume that children will learn to sound out words and use that skill, they do not explicitly recommend phonics as a necessary tool in teaching children how to read.

These deficiencies are symptomatic of a much bigger problem with the English standards. Good teachers are really part of a priesthood; they are true believers, with a passionate conviction about the overwhelming importance of the subject they teach. A music teacher probably plays several instruments; he goes to concerts as often as he can; and he undoubtedly thinks your life is blighted if you don't respond to music, too. He also has strong views about what is important for his students to know. A teacher like this is an enthusiast—others may even consider him slightly unbalanced—but students are inspired by this kind of devotion. It arouses an answering spark that shows them what learning can be like, and, often, it changes their lives.

No one reading the English standards is likely to believe that a passionate concern with English language and literature is the driving force behind them. There is no love affair with the subject matter; there is not the name of a great book or poem. In fact, the concept of "greatness" seems not to exist. Any "text" could be equal to any other, depending on what you and your students wanted to do. In the dreary wastes of abstraction and relativism that make up the English standards, you would hardly know literature exists or that anybody ever loved it.

Maybe this lack of intellectual engagement is a characteristic of Americans generally. That's what the latest Public Agenda Foundation report *Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today* tells us. It says that American teachers are relatively indifferent to their subject matter and that they reflect the American public in this. Perhaps that is what we are seeing mirrored in the English standards. But a priest is not supposed to be indifferent to his calling—even if lay people are guilty of backsliding—and we cannot expect students to take learning seriously if we present them with English courses based on standards like these.

Students need real standards. They need to learn, from people who care about their subject matter, that some things are more important than others and that certain skills are essential. The English standards, for all their talk about what young people need, would serve all our students very badly.