

## **ACTFL PROFESSIONAL ISSUES REPORT**

# ***State Standards: Connecting a National Vision to Local Implementation***

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### **1. Metaphors for Standards:<sup>1</sup>**

How are standards useful to us?

Standards hold tremendous promise, but also tremendous peril. The promise is that finally parents, students, administrators, AND foreign language educators will have a sense of what instruction in a language other than English means in U.S. schools. Standards can provide common goals and terminology for discussion about language instruction. The peril, however, is that we now need to deliver what has been promised. National standards set the common direction; state standards will focus those goals more specifically to help local districts design their programs, establish curriculum, and plan their instruction.

Metaphors help us to grasp how standards are useful. There is no right or wrong metaphor for standards; however, different views will lead us to different uses of standards. Different perspectives account for the sometimes divisive political battles surfacing around standards in many states. These political debates have often focused on the issue of accountability through state assessment of the learning described in the standards.

**The Flag:** Looking at standards as one looks at a flag puts standards in a position to rally around, to lead us in our charge, to not be tampered with, and to represent what we believe about our teaching. Indeed, the word *standard* can represent the emblem that we follow in a campaign; we even talk of being the standard-bearer, holding up the symbol of our cause for all to see and for our colleagues to follow.

**The Ruler:** When we think of standards as a ruler, we create an uncompromising measure against which students are judged as passing or not. The ruler does not consider unique circumstances, but is held up to a prescribed student performance to decide if it is good enough: either you can do ten pull-ups or you can't; either you can solve three-digit addition problems or you can't. Much of state assessment comes from this metaphor for standards. This issue of accountability poses a challenge to the development of standards, requiring cautious and careful resolution.

**Music Criteria:** In music competitions, the standards are internal. The judges simply know what is high quality, medium quality, or poor quality. Experience and dialogue have created such standards. This knowing develops over years of practice and comparison. Language educators bring their personal standards to bear whenever a paper is graded or a performance is rated.

**The Spyglass:** Standards can help us focus on specific content that is our distant goal. Then throughout the K-16 sequence, standards can keep instruction moving toward that destination. The whole of what could be learned is overwhelming; the spyglass keeps the teacher and student on track toward the overall goal.

**The Journey:** Standards can provide a clear map to get from where we are to where we want to be. Each classroom may be a slightly different journey of methodology and content. Each student may follow somewhat different paths to reach the destination; however, each journey is rich and varied in its own way. As students get closer to the goal, they can function and use lan-

guage in similar ways. The journey is what is valuable, not a single prescribed scope and sequence.

**The Food Pyramid:** Standards can be likened to the six groups of the food pyramid. A “healthy” diet of language instruction will include the five C’s of the national standards: communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities. At the local level, each district may provide different menus based on the food pyramid of standards. Each menu can show an appropriate blend of the five C’s, to guarantee that students make progress toward the standards.

From these metaphors, different uses of standards surface. The writers of our national standards and most of the state projects consider standards as a vision rather than a description of the status quo. The vision provides a common language as our profession seeks to focus language instruction on the same goals, regardless of the program configuration.

## 2. What are standards?

Standards come in different types. Each type of standard serves a different purpose and has a different connection with instruction and learning. Key questions are answered by each type of standard.

What? **Content Standards** explain *what* students should know and be able to do. These general goals focus teaching and learning. In the past, we have generally focused on what students should know; standards as they have developed from the national groups in the various disciplines have added an important element of application, that is, what students should be able to do with their knowledge. It is not enough to know about language; rather, students must learn to use language.

How? **Performance Standards** describe *how* students will show that they are achieving the content standards. Performance standards are written with active verbs to help students, teachers, and parents envision the ways that students will demonstrate what is described in the content standards. Content standards are general in nature; performance standards provide more specific, but still essential, sub-goals.

How well? **Proficiency Standards** provide the criteria and/or scale for judging the degree of progress on the performance standards. Proficiency standards answer

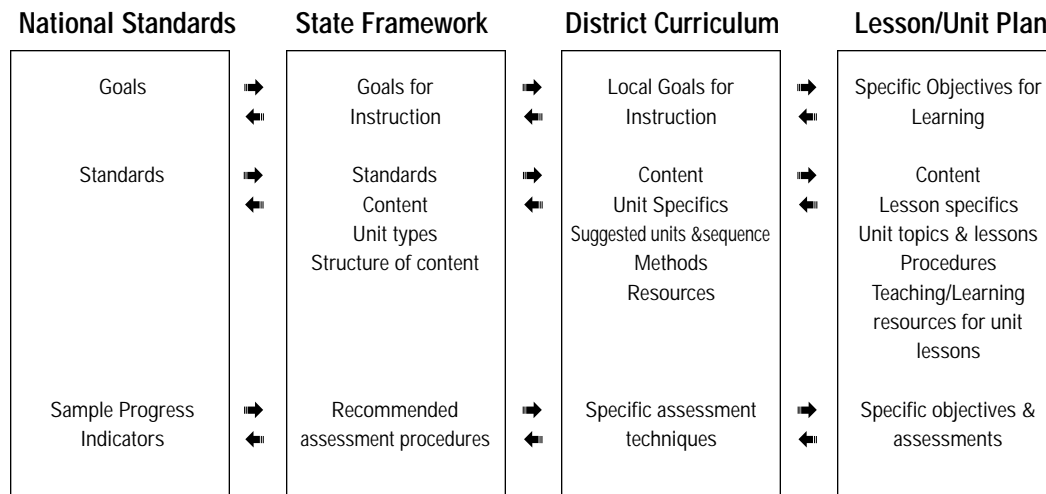
the question of how good is good enough? These standards show a continuum of student performance from unacceptable to exemplary. Proficiency standards may be established as an overall continuum for an entire program (6-12, K-12, or K-16) or may be created for specific courses and even tasks. Teachers use proficiency standards to gauge and report student progress.

When? Where? Who? **Program Standards** offer descriptions of important components of a school or district program, addressing the availability of foreign language instruction for all students, explaining how the instruction is offered each day and each year, and sharing the program configuration and location (e.g., will the program be a part of the regular elementary school day, or will it be offered after regular school hours?). Such standards provide district planners with the critical questions to ask about program design. Program standards also make expectations realistic by describing the conditions that will lead to the student achievement shown in the standards.

Why? **Connections** across disciplines attempt to get at the deeper purposes of education, the common goals of instruction that go beyond any single discipline. Few states are addressing this element of program design; however, it is an important element of our national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*. Standards could connect the element of communication in foreign language and English as well as mathematics and the arts, or show the commonality of developing reasoning skills through the various disciplines.

## 3. Relation of National to State to Local Standards (and Curriculum)

Now that national standards have been produced in several disciplines, states are developing standards to help local districts implement this vision. The role of state standards is to provide a higher level of specificity, the detail necessary to put the national standards into practice in local classrooms. Each element of national standards becomes a guide to the development of a comparable element of state standards and local standards and/or curriculum. In this way, the national standards have a direct impact on a teacher’s daily lesson plans through his or her state and local standards. This relationship is shown clearly in *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, in a model adapted with permission from the National Art Education Association.



Adapted with permission from the  
*Visual Arts Education Reform Handbook: Suggested Policy Perspectives on Art Content and Student Learning in Art Education*  
 National Art Education Association, 1995

The content standards of a national document are adopted or adapted as state content standards or goals, to become a local district's curriculum goals. The degree of the connection to the national standards is, of course, the decision of each state's department of education. The national standards in the U.S. are voluntary, as state standards are in most states. Districts use the national and state standards as models or guides to their local curriculum development.

*Standards for Foreign Language Learning* describes each of the content standards through sample progress indicators. These are very useful to the development of state performance standards. Both the progress indicators and state performance standards are focused on describing each content standard with a more specific task that is age-appropriate, cognitively challenging, worth doing (a valuable use of teacher and student time), and representative of what is essential to learn or be able to do.

The performance standards show a developmental flow when that is appropriate, such as in the area of communication and culture, where higher level skills are developed over time. In other areas of the content standards, the change over time may be an increasing sophistication and a wider context for applying knowledge, but the type of performance standard is the same for novice through advanced learners. As an example, consider a performance standard under the goal of communities: students participate in school or community events that call on their ability to use the target language. This hap-

pens with elementary students as well as with high school students. The change is not that they are doing something different with language, but simply that they can do more with it; it's a question of degree, not of a different type of performance standard.

From these performance standards, individual districts develop their yet more specific curriculum for each grade. This adds the layer of what is expected as the student performance as a result of the specific instruction that is provided at a given grade level. If a middle school program in one district is only able to provide nine weeks of instruction, the grade level expectation of content and performance is different from the district that is able to provide a full year of instruction at the same grade level. For this reason, state and national standards provide a guide, not a required ruler, for individual district programs.

#### 4. Common Elements of State Standards

Examining the standards documents of several states shows that four elements are usually present. With different names, formats, and detail, the following four components usually comprise state standards:

- Statements of the larger goals of what a student should know and be able to do.

Example: Texas calls these the essential knowledge and skills, written for students working toward novice, intermediate, and advanced levels.

- Descriptions of how a student shows accomplishment of the goals.

Example: Indiana has performance standards set in real-life contexts, giving a thematic grounding for assessing student progress.

- Division into proficiency (achievement) goals at certain grade levels.

Example: Massachusetts describes examples of student learning for its learning standards for students at four points in the program (PreK-4, PreK-8, PreK-10, and PreK-12).

- Examples of classroom instruction to reach the goals.

Example: Kentucky provides sample activities and applications for each grade cluster.

Another way of examining state foreign language standards is to note the degree to which they are based on national standards or not. The following listing is an attempt to show this variation. Numerous state documents were started before *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* was completed or even begun. It is a tribute to the developing consensus across our profession that has been occurring for the past decade that several projects that began before the national standards were available have much in common with them. Timing and the different political and educational issues unique to foreign language education in each state led to variety in the form and content of state standards documents.

*States with standards modeled closely on the national standards:*

Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wisconsin

*States with standards related to, but heavily modified in comparison to the national standards:*

Colorado, District of Columbia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, and New York

*States with standards not based on the model of the national standards:*

Arkansas, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and Vermont

*States known to be developing foreign language standards; no information on specific content:*

Alaska, California (new content and performance standards related to the New Standards Project), New Jersey, and Wyoming

## 5. Frameworks, Curriculum, and Assessment

National standards documents allude to instructional and assessment practices but do not specify them. *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* strongly implies a change in how we teach and assess our students; however, it does not specify methodology. The implications for teaching and assessing become clear on reading the learning scenarios, where examples of putting the standards into practice are described from actual classrooms around the country. State standards usually follow this lead, implying but not requiring a set method for teaching or testing. This allows the variations of “menus” as different districts and teachers work toward the same standards.

State curriculum frameworks take the state standards and provide more assistance for districts developing their own program documents. State frameworks may show how the state standards lead to curriculum for different types of programs, different beginning points, and even for different languages. The state framework also shows the link to assessment more clearly, providing examples or the specificity for local practice of assessment that fits the goals of the standards.

Assessment from the state level will be drawn from some elements of the state standards. It is impossible and undesirable for the state to assess all students on all elements of the state standards. State assessment is but one portion of student assessment. Local districts and classrooms broaden the scope of what is assessed in order to show student progress toward achieving the performance standards.

A key purpose of standards is to provide a tool for creating a better match between the official curriculum,

what is taught, what is tested, and what is actually learned. Often, these four elements are not very closely linked; however, standards can provide the means to close the gap in the following ways:

- Standards give focus for developing curriculum, both for the state guide and for the specific local document.
- Standards focus a teacher's selection of what will be taught rather than just covering page after page and hoping that students are getting what they need.
- Standards help a teacher check that assessment does measure student progress toward the goals of the curriculum.
- Standards provide both a clear direction in the classroom and the evidence that students are learning what is expected, by design, not by accident.

## **6. Issues Surrounding Standards**

States and local districts must grapple with some key issues when entering into designing their foreign language instruction. Creating a standards-based, proficiency-oriented program is challenging. Part of that challenge is dealing with issues like those described in this section.

*Do we really mean that foreign language is for all students?*

If we *do* mean that foreign language is for all students and if we promise it, we must deliver it. That means that each student needs to have realistic access to a continuing offering of instruction in the language chosen. Criteria (such as reading ability in English) or assessments that limit the number of students that may enroll in a language program give the opposite message to parents and students. We may need to change the stepping stones of a course sequence that only reflect seat time and move to a truly standards-based, proficiency-oriented approach that places students in a course based on what they can do in a language and moves them on to the next course when they are ready to function comfortably and take on the new challenges to move along the proficiency continuum in the next course. Being truly ready to function in the next course of a language program doesn't automatically and miraculously occur at the beginning of each school year!

*What does the idea of K-12 foreign language instruction imply for our programs?*

First and foremost, a commitment to K-12 foreign language instruction implies that the entire curriculum will change. Curriculum really bubbles up; it does not get directed from the highest level down. Districts will need to get an accurate idea of what students have and can achieve at the earliest point in the program and then design the next appropriate step, grade by grade. Many districts have designed their program based on a common set of standards or curriculum goals and then have written each grade's curriculum only when the students who began at the earliest point—kindergarten, for example—arrived at that grade level. Then the district could design the next grade's curriculum based on the reality of what students had actually achieved, not on what they hoped they would, missing either too high or too low. This means that middle school and senior high offerings must change, not just in offering new content and new challenges for language use, but also in providing means to maintain the language skills of students who after grade 8 or 10 are no longer enrolled in a daily course. Students need new options to grow in their language ability outside of regular courses. Programs must explore ways to bring students together for language practice on a weekly, not daily, basis; teachers must find ways for students to use and improve their language skills by applying them in other classes; information technologies must become a part of how students use language, not just for the personal enjoyment of writing to a keypal, but also for tapping into new resources useful for other areas of interest.

*Will we group students based on their developmental stage of language use, on their grade level, or on the number of years they have had language instruction?*

In the environment of standards, student progress is measured on an ongoing basis, not just with formal end-of-chapter tests or quarter grades. Students need to know where they are in moving along the continuum of proficiency described in state standards for all skill areas. The local curriculum then helps teachers match students to the appropriate course to continue to learn and grow in their language use and knowledge. In a standards environment, the thematic content is new to all students in a given course; their commonality is that they are fair-

ly similar in how well they use the language. When a student shows—through ongoing assessment—that he or she is ready to function in the next course, the student should be moved on. The vocabulary in that course will be new to all the students together as they move into a new thematic focus; the structures will continue to spiral for all of the students, helping all to improve. A student's grade level or the number of years of prior instruction is far less relevant for placement than how that student can use language.

## 7. State Models for Standards

*Texas:* Three components of the state foreign language standards project are under the direction of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, as Project ExCELL. The project is developing student content and performance standards, teacher education standards required by the student standards, and models for professional development based on the standards. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are organized as Basic Understandings (matching the five C's of the national standards); described through student standards; provide generic proficiency descriptors for novice, intermediate, and advanced language development; and incorporate performance descriptions for novice, intermediate, and advanced language levels.

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*Massachusetts:* Content standards for World Languages were made part of the Massachusetts Common Core of Learning. Eight guiding principles set the direction for World Language programs. The curriculum framework that describes the place of foreign language within the common core in K-12 education has four strands: communicating, culture, connecting, and participating. For each strand, learning standards and examples are provided for grades PreK-4, 5-8, 9-10, and 11-12.

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*Ohio:* Ohio's Model Competency-Based Foreign Language Program links standards to content, performance, and proficiency. Content standards are developed through instructional objectives written for each grade level, PreK-12. At each grade level, the instructional objectives incorporate the development of communication skills through four strands: cultural knowledge; multidisciplinary connections, information and knowledge; insights into the nature of language and culture; and participation in multilingual communities at home and around Ohio. At every grade level, a series of performance objectives provides examples of what students need to be able to do to be successful at the next level of instruction. A description of four stages of language development, with selected progress indicators for each stage, establishes standards for proficiency. A foreign language program organized by stages of language development will move a student to the next level only when a student has demonstrated competency at a previous level and has acquired the language skills to be successful at the next stage.

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*Nebraska:* The Nebraska K-12 Foreign Language Standards/Frameworks Project is multifaceted. The standards themselves include goals and standards based on the national model, progress indicators, classroom examples, sample learning scenarios, and sample assessments. The progress indicators show the developmental markers for three levels: beginning, developing, and expanding. In addition, the project is creating teacher education guidelines and model methods courses. Teachers have opportunities for extensive modeling through workshops and institutes, leading to ongoing staff development through a trained cadre of master teachers.

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*Indiana:* Six goals are at the core of the Indiana standards. Although completed as the national standards project was just beginning, these Indiana goals are remarkably similar to the national goals. Each goal is then expanded to content standards for elementary, middle grades, and high school. To accommodate multiple points of entry, the beginning-level standards are repeated for the middle grades and high school. In a diagram linking elementary to middle school to senior high language objectives, additional standards are given for middle grade students who had an earlier beginning point, and more advanced standards are given for high school students in a K-12 program. Then each standard is illustrated through sample performances (performance standards) put in appropriate cultural

(thematic) contexts differentiated for elementary, middle, or senior high school students. Another phase of the project was the development of ready-to-use assessment tasks matched to each standard.

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#### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>These metaphors, developed during early discussions of the Wisconsin state standards projects in 12 subject areas, represent ideas cooperatively generated by various task force members.