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Achieving high standards by starting from current performance

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Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research

Achieving high standards by starting from current performance

A commonly proposed strategy for raising achievement levels in schools is to specify high expectations or 'standards' of student performance and to hold students, teachers and schools accountable for achieving those standards. On the surface, it seems like an eminently sensible strategy. But is it?

ACER encounters this question regularly in our work in developing countries. Many of these countries benchmark their school curricula against curricula in the developed world, sometimes adopting or adapting the curricula of high-performing countries directly. By specifying world-class learning expectations, they hope to lift the performances of their students to world-class standards. Textbooks are written to reflect these high expectations, and teachers are instructed to teach the curriculum specified for each grade.

We are then asked to assist in assessing how well students are performing against curricular expectations. And the answer, almost invariably, is 'very poorly'. In fact, the vast majority of students in these countries often succeed on only a tiny fraction of the curriculum specified for their grade.

We are not the first to observe this. Harvard academic Lant Pritchett has described the curriculum in many developing countries as 'overambitious' and, like us, has concluded that the curriculum 'gap' between national aspirations and actual levels of student achievement often represents several years of school.

A common conclusion is that students, teachers, schools, and perhaps the entire education system, are 'failing'. And, from one perspective, they are. Much hand-wringing often ensues. But Pritchett asks an interesting question: are students failing the curriculum, or is the curriculum failing these students?

Although considerable amounts of money are spent on such assessments, they often provide very little usable information. When students are barely on the dial, it is not possible to pinpoint with any accuracy where they are in their learning, to identify appropriate starting points for action, or to monitor improvements over time. Little wonder that countries such as India – which had two of its states participate in a pilot of the international PISA tests – see little value in being told repeatedly that most of their students perform poorly on tests designed for developed countries and simply withdraw from further assessments.

All of which raises another interesting question. **If you aspire to be a world-class high jumper, is it better to set the bar at the world record height and keep attempting to clear it, or to lower the bar to a level you have a chance of clearing and work incrementally up from there?** If you're inclined to the latter, try telling a country to lower its standards. I can guarantee that you will be accused of 'dumbing down'.

So the response has to be more nuanced than that. Countries have to be encouraged to stick to their high aspirations, but to recognise that progress towards world-class standards often depends on using easier tests capable of identifying precisely where students are in their learning so that interventions can be better focused on current learning needs. Better targeted tests also provide more accurate measures of progress over time.

The argument for targeting assessments and interventions on where students are in their learning (rather than on where somebody wishes they were) is not an argument for lowering standards, providing success experiences or making students feel good. It is based in research evidence that learning is maximised when

students are given realistic stretch challenges – tasks that are neither too easy nor unrealistically difficult. It is also based in a belief that with time, motivation, effort and appropriate feedback and learning opportunities, most if not all students are capable of attaining high standards.

And these observations apply equally in the developed world. For example, at the start of each school year in Australia, the achievement levels of students in each grade vary by the equivalent of five or six years of school. Some students begin the school year several years behind the majority of their age peers and the curriculum for their grade. Each year these less advanced students are assessed against grade-based expectations, and each year most fail to meet those expectations. Many receive failing or low grades year after year. But are these students failing the curriculum, or is the curriculum failing them?

Once again, the answer is not to lower aspirations, but to recognise that the best way to assist students to reach high standards is to target assessments and teaching on current levels of achievement. Continual reminders that students are failing to meet high standards are less effective than establishing where exactly individuals are in their learning, tailoring teaching to meet students at their points of need, and monitoring and celebrating excellent progress towards high standards.