

All states have renewed their efforts to give each child a quality education by evaluating and in many cases overhauling their state education standards. By now, most states have adopted higher College and Career Ready Standards; some have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), some have opted for a hybrid of the CCSS, and others have created their own standards entirely. Whichever standards your state uses, the goal is the same: to ensure that every child graduates high school ready for college or career.

College and Career Ready Standards are an important step in creating better educational outcomes for all students, but new standards cannot stand alone. Each state must implement a robust action plan to ensure that the standards can be successful. National PTA, in partnership with the Learning First Alliance, has outlined five areas where states must focus—in a communications strategy called “Get it Right”—to ensure higher standards have the supports needed for successful implementation.

These areas are broad and the work must be a comprehensive effort at the state level in conjunction with all state and local education agencies and education coalitions in individual states.

1. Alignment of standards, curriculum and assessments.

Once states and local communities institute standards that establish the knowledge and skills they believe students must learn at each grade level, they must put in place curriculum and instructional programs that provide students with opportunities to learn the agreed-upon knowledge and skills. Appropriate tests must be used to measure student progress toward meeting the standards. Students cannot be expected to learn what they are not taught, but too often there has not been sufficient effort to ensure that curriculum and instruction match the standards or are aligned with the tests.

Teachers tend to teach what tests measure. Many assessments rely primarily on multiple-choice questions and measure primarily basic skills, rather than the full range of content and skills called for in the standards. It is essential that assessments measure students’ ability to analyze and solve complex problems, write clearly and synthesize information, and measure their mastery of basic knowledge and skills. Students should be tested through a variety of measurement methods, such as essays and portfolios, as well as multiple-choice questions.

Finally, the data procured from assessments should be available in a timely manner to parents and teachers, and provide information that will help parents and teachers identify gaps in learning and provide additional supports as necessary.

2. Adequate professional development for teachers and principals.

The quality of teaching has a significant impact on student learning. Higher standards require more of educators just as they require more of students. Teachers must be knowledgeable about state and

local standards, about the content they teach and about a range of instructional approaches that will enable them to help all students.

Teachers and administrators must understand how to use information from assessments and student work to improve instruction for both individual students and school programs. Meeting this challenge of ensuring well trained teachers and administrators requires sustained and effective professional development. Both new and veteran teachers and principals need intensive and ongoing professional development with colleagues, mentors and outside experts that enables them to upgrade and hone their knowledge and skills.

3. Sufficient support for children to meet high standards.

Comprehensive and coherent accountability systems can play an important role in helping every child achieve at high standards. Assessment information should provide a basis for decisions about changes in curriculum, existing policies and classroom instruction. Well-designed accountability systems also inform parents, educators and the public about the performance of school systems, schools, important subgroups of students and individual students. This information should help educators, parents and other community members make decisions about how best to improve teaching and learning.

To help all students, particularly those in greatest need, states and districts must invest in programs that work, providing deep and engaging curriculum, extended learning time, well-trained teachers, high-quality school leadership, smaller class size, modern facilities and effective technology. They must also direct greater resources to the schools and students who are the furthest behind.

4. Ongoing communication about the importance of standards and accountability.

Parents and community members must understand and support the content, use and purposes of standards, assessments and accountability. To make this happen, educators, civic leaders and parents must engage in ongoing dialogue and ongoing review of how well parents and other community members understand these issues. There must be accessible, understandable and widely disseminated information about effective implementation of standards, the opportunities provided for students to achieve them and how to make productive use of assessment results. This level of communication is crucial to maintaining public support for standards-based reform.

5. Balanced and comprehensive accountability systems.

Accountability is essential to improving education for all children. Educators are accountable to the public, who entrust their children and taxpayer dollars to them. The public and elected officials are accountable for providing the long-term support and resources necessary to make higher levels of learning attainable for all students. And students are accountable for their own learning progress.

No single test is a perfect measure of what a child knows and can do. Students learn in many ways and should have many ways to demonstrate what they have learned. Important educational decisions about a school or child should always take into account relevant information about student achievement in addition to test scores.