

Book Review

*From Standards to Success:
A Guide for School Leaders*

By Mark R. O'Shea

Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision
and Curriculum Development, 2005

Reviewed by Stella C. Batagiannis

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

In *From Standards to Success: A Guide for School Leaders*, Mark O'Shea, a Professor of Education at California State University, Monterey Bay and Founder and Executive Director of the Institute for the Achievement of Academic Standards, proposes a specific, prescriptive plan for implementing the standards in K-12 schools. The proposed implementation plan includes a focus on curriculum planning devoted to the standards alone, as well as professional development and teacher collaboration limited to the standards.

The lens from which this book is reviewed is that of a former school superintendent, a K-12 educator of over 30 years, and now an assistant professor of educational leadership. Having spent my life immersed in education, my goal has been to seek ways to engage students in learning; to avoid the swinging pendulum of school reform, and to make balanced decisions, guarding against extremes. Although I believe that school accountability and educational standards should have a prominent place in education, unlike O'Shea, I also am keenly aware of the areas of education that are not quantifiable, but, nevertheless, deserve equal attention. For example, we seek to prepare students to live in a democracy and to appreciate and delight in poetry, drama, and works of art, joyous areas of human experience that cannot be reduced to the

Stella C. Batagiannis is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

testing of quantifiable knowledge. O'Shea appears to limit the implementation of the standards to the narrower view.

Teachers should be allowed some freedom in selecting the materials and pedagogy they will use in nurturing a passion for learning in their students. Teachers and the curriculum should facilitate the students' ability to make a contribution to their world. From a pragmatic point of view, it is impossible to meet the educational needs of society if all we give teachers is "one-size-fits-all" manuals and robotic pedagogy.

Some of O'Shea's recommendations are commendable, including: (1) collaborative teacher planning, (2) collaborative teacher review of student work, and (3) the involvement of all teachers in professional development. However, these are effective educational strategies the efficacy of which is not limited to the implementation of standards, as one might surmise from O'Shea's book. For example, teacher collaboration stands on its own merit. Individual school leaders have been implementing different forms of this strategy for years, but limited funding has prevented the universal application of extensive teacher collaboration. In addition, although O'Shea supports professional development, he focuses narrowly on professional development related to the standards alone.

O'Shea believes that prescription is necessary to achieve the standards. He states, "Of even greater concern is the lack of a prescription, or clear technology, for achieving the standards . . . The only missing element is explicit directions to teachers and administrators that, if followed, will lead to standards achievement" (p. ix). O'Shea is a proponent of "tighter controls" (p. 16). Although he criticizes some of the superficial exercises included in textbooks, he does not apply that same notion related to the standards when he claims standards as the pinnacle of curricular planning. Teachers and principals often disagree with O'Shea and view the standards as only minimal expectations.

It appears, too, that O'Shea equates performance-based learning with standards-based learning. However, performance-based learning stands on its own and is not necessarily linked to the standards. Such effective educational strategies cannot give credence to the imbalance proposed by standards-only proponents.

As teachers and administrators address curriculum, they face the challenge of integrating what Michael Fullan (2005) calls the technical, issues of which some knowledge exists, and the adaptive, issues for which there are no current answers (p.45). These terms can be applied both in the classroom and in leadership. According to Fullan, the technical never reaches the level of the adaptive, and the adaptive is the most difficult and complex, as there are no easy answers. At least a balance of technical and adaptive teaching should be our goal. The lowest level of the technical

curriculum, in isolation and untempered by the adaptive, results in sterile, technocratic teaching. This notion provides insight into O'Shea's work.

The first part of the book includes examples that appear to address only the lowest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Although O'Shea eventually mentions the importance of higher-order thinking skills, disappointingly, he does not integrate these higher-order thinking skills into his examples. He maintains that there is more to learning than state and national standards, but then reverts to the standards alone as the sole criterion to evaluate student achievement.

Good teachers and educational leaders acknowledge they must be accountable and that quantitative data of student performance comprises a requisite element in today's popular perception of the world of standards. Leaders also know that education is defined more broadly and includes more than mere standards and quantitative data. Unfortunately, O'Shea's emphasis on standards alone counters these more broadly-based beliefs of student learning.

O'Shea argues that teachers should know "the subject matter of the standards" (p. 34). One could argue teachers need to know their subject matter, period. O'Shea writes as a proponent of prescription and uniformity and would give teachers prescriptive formulas and subject matter as opposed to deferring to teachers' knowledge, creativity, and imagination. He would benefit from considering John Dewey's concepts of "both/and," rather than "either/or" to appreciate the additive benefits of a standards plus approach. "One size fits all" thinking will constrain and deskill outstanding, creative teachers. Teachers in today's classrooms often feel that they are no longer able to be creative, or as one teacher stated simply, "able to teach." Barry Kanpol (1992) identifies such statements as reactions to the deskilling of teachers,

The concept of deskilling has to do with teachers executing someone else's goals and plans . . . Teachers are taught the skills to teach. They are skilled to execute tasks, assignments, the curriculum and so on. Ironically this works in ways to deskill teachers, as they are not the conceivers of plans over their work, that is, they do not determine curricular goals or establish content. (p. 14)

Peter McLaren (1994) also argues a prescriptive curriculum deskills teachers. "Some of the new curriculum technologies have even been 'teacher-proofed,' which only contributes further to the devaluing and deskilling of teachers by removing them from the decision-making process" (p. 219). O'Shea uses language that reflects technocratic, deskilling thinking, "mechanism or theory of action . . . a clear instructional technology for teachers" (pp. 22, 23).

O'Shea maintains teachers seek specific guidelines. It is true that some teachers do seek such guidelines. I believe it is their response to having been deskilled and disrespected. They also are stressed and fearful of consequences in today's technocratic, standards and data-driven environment, an environment that does not encourage or nurture creativity.

In addition, O'Shea refers to the content in the *Nation at Risk* as "powerful reform." (p.1) In my view, the *Nation at Risk* was the beginning of political mandates and control in education, as stated by Kanpol (1992), "Nothing could better exemplify state control than the incessant bombardment of reports, such as the now much publicized 'Nation at Risk,' Carnegie Report, and so on" (p. 13). Fullan aptly defines the limitation of the narrow focus on standards alone, "Governments typically overemphasize assessment of learning at the expense of assessment for learning" (2005, p. 92).

O'Shea proposes eliminating state exams in favor of national uniformity by using the National Assessment of Educational Progress. A national curriculum would logically follow a national assessment. The question then is who would determine that national curriculum? What would happen to local and state influences on education? Thomas Sergiovanni (2000) predicts what would happen if we implemented,

... a cleverly designed, yet unobtrusive, new version of 'one best way' in the form of uniform standards for everyone. When the same standards for all areas are imposed on everyone in a state or a country, they become the driving force for everything important that local schools do. (pp. 31, 33)

Delimiting education to standards and technocratic thinking is easy, but any good teacher knows easy strategies are not the most effective. It has been my experience as a school administrator and superintendent that good teachers explore their subject matter for inferences, for deep conceptual meanings and for the nuances of language. They continually refine their work, semester after semester. They focus on teaching higher-order thinking skills and the tenets of a democratic society. None of this is easy, nor can it be accomplished by prescription.

Within the current singular focus on the importance of teaching standards, educators have been reluctant, if not silent, about identifying other integral pieces of a good education that need to be integrated with standards-based instruction. Today, more than ever, educators must have the courage to be vocal about these issues. For several decades, educators have permitted attacks on public education and have rarely raised their voices in defense. We cannot afford to continue to be silent. Large numbers of teachers are leaving the profession. Strict adherence to the standards and deskilling are major contributing factors to this exit.

Teachers are outraged that they are being asked to parrot the exact words from the teachers' manual. Given the prescriptive implementation of the standards, others claim "teaching is no longer teaching."

The commitment to standards-only teaching is predicated upon a belief that there is only a finite amount of knowledge, which is contrary to all we know. It also assumes there is, in fact, only one good way to teach that knowledge. These beliefs may address the science of teaching, but conversely, the art of teaching, is equally important. The art of teaching requires the freedom to select teaching materials that may be different from those used by colleagues. The art of teaching requires creativity and flexibility, not prescription. Educators should be proponents not only of the science, but also the art of teaching in addressing the standards and in providing students with a more balanced curriculum. I would encourage readers to consider a broader vision of education than O'Shea proposes. This position of advocacy in the face of pressure to address the standards alone will take courage.

References

- Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership & sustainability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Kanpol, B. (1992). *Towards a theory and practice of teacher cultural politics: Continuing the postmodern debate*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- McLaren, P. (1994). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- O'Shea, M. R. (2005). *From standards to success: A guide for school leaders*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Sergiovanni, T. (2000) *The lifeworld of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.