

“Are all of you using the same selection criteria?”

The response is a mixture of laughter and groans. Everyone knows that the answer to *that* question is “No!”

— Start —

How Educators Define “Essential”

In the absence of an agreed-upon set of criteria for prioritizing the standards and indicators, educators will, out of necessity, make up their own. Whether those criteria are implicitly understood or explicitly defined, the following question is uppermost in educators’ minds as they consider what to teach their students:

*“What knowledge and skills must I impart to my students **this** year so that they will enter **next** year’s class with confidence and a readiness for success?”*

This question is what motivates educators to frequently say to their students, “Now *next* year, you are going to need to know and be able to do such and such.” This is their way of forecasting for their students the importance of what they are currently learning as a preparation for future grades while at the same time using that same criterion to emphasize certain standards and indicators over others.

Power Standards Identification Criteria

As common as the above practice may be, all too often it is done by individual educators working in isolation from their colleagues. Educators need to be able to collaborate regularly in order to make the aforementioned question a more explicit and commonly used criterion for effective selection of the most important standards and indicators.

Wouldn’t educators welcome a distinct, agreed-upon set of criteria for distinguishing the “essential” standards from those that are “nice to know?” Such a two-tiered differentiation would yield a focused set of standards and indicators essential for student success.

What are these distinct criteria? Dr. Douglas Reeves suggests the following three:

1. **Endurance**—Will this standard or indicator provide students with knowledge and skills that will be of value beyond a single test date? For example, proficiency in reading will endure throughout a student’s academic career and professional life.
2. **Leverage**—Will this provide knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines? For example, proficiency in creating graphs, tables, and charts and the ability to draw accurate inferences from them will help students in math, science, social studies, and language arts. The ability to write an analytical and persuasive essay will similarly help students in every academic discipline.
3. **Readiness for the next level of learning**—Will this provide students with essential knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in the next grade or the next level of instruction? For example, fourth-grade teachers are unanimous that reading comprehension and math facts recall are essential for third graders who wish to enter the fourth grade confidently and pursue fourth-grade studies successfully. Those same fourth-grade teachers are not unanimous that the ability to assemble a leaf collection, identify dinosaurs, or know the state capitals are required knowledge for entry into fourth grade.

“School, Life, and the State Test”

When I work with educators to identify their Power Standards, I ask a guiding question for Power Standards identification that many have said provided them with the “Aha!” for zeroing in on those standards and indicators that are critical for students to learn:

“What do your students need for success—in school (this year, next year, and so on), in life, and on your state tests?”

These three criteria—**school, life, and the state test**—are an easy set for people to remember when they begin discussions about how to identify their Power Standards. Educators like the positive emphasis on *student success*. I remind them of our earlier discussion about how experienced educators invariably emphasize particular standards over others when they realize that there is never enough time to teach everything with the depth needed for maximum student learning. Rather than continuing to make up their own criteria (what they personally like to teach, what they think kids need, etc.), the three criteria listed above provide a common filter that everyone can use to identify the Power Standards.

Whether you prefer to use Dr. Reeves’ three criteria (endurance, leverage, readiness for the next level of learning) or my own three (school, life, and the state test) is a matter of individual or group choice. Use whichever ones work best for the educators involved. Either set of three will prove effective in determining the Power Standards.

Are These Criteria Equal in Importance?

When I discussed the Power Standards identification criteria with one faculty of elementary educators, a fourth-grade teacher spoke up and said, “Certainly school and life are important considerations for identifying Power Standards, but the reality we are facing today is our state test. If the state is more likely to emphasize certain standards over others on the test, then that criterion must carry more weight than the other two.”

On a large piece of chart paper, I quickly drew a triple Venn diagram, with one of the circles much larger than the other two. I then labeled the larger circle “State Test” and the other two, “School” and “Life.”

Then I said, “This may indeed be the emphasis today, but for the overall success of our students, it is still important to keep in mind what they will need for success in subsequent years of schooling and in life itself. Learning that endures should be an essential criterion that we never lose sight of. If we identify and concentrate on those standards and indicators, isn’t it likely that we will also be preparing students to do well on state tests since a majority of test items will reflect those same standards even if the tests change from year to year?”

The “Safety Net” Curriculum

Dr. Douglas Reeves authored two informative articles that provide a succinct rationale for identifying Power Standards along with an illustration of Power Standards for middle school. He refers to the Power Standards as the “Safety Net” curriculum and defines it as “a very limited set of learning objectives organized for each grade and for each subject. It is not the total curriculum—just the ‘safety net’ that every teacher should ensure that every student knows.”

In my seminars, I encourage participants to share these articles with colleagues as an “executive summary,” an effective way to introduce others to the idea of Power Standards and get the conversations rolling about how a school and/or district can apply these powerful ideas to their own existing standards and curriculum. These two articles are included in the Appendices section of this book.

— Stop —

Questions to Be Addressed

So how does a group of educators begin identifying their own Power Standards? What is the role of the school or district leader? Does every school determine its own Power Standards, or does the district decide the Power Standards that all its schools are to follow? These and other related questions pertaining to the *process* of identifying Power Standards are addressed in the following pages.