



Now is the Time to Strengthen Community and Parental Connections

by Stu Ervay



For twenty years America's public schools have focused on complying with external standards. Most of those standards have been written by, or in cooperation with, state and federal governments. Accrediting bodies have also come up with standards.

In the early years of the standards movement the mandates or strong recommendations were not as well designed or worded as they are now. And they changed regularly, often confusing school leaders and teachers.

Reasons behind the standards movement were associated with an attempt to make schools more efficient, less expensive, and more accountable. Accountability was determined through the development and use of high stakes tests. Test results were recorded on massive data bases and used to make decisions about funding. And to compare school districts with each other.

That movement may have had good intentions. It possibly improved the quality of some school programs. But it also tended to interfere with the American tradition of building strong connections between and among schools, parents, and community patrons.

Local networking, so much a hallmark of American education, became overwhelmed with externally developed and required strategies to upgrade learning quality.

Now this nation is besieged by the Coronavirus Pandemic, an event that is changing the nation in many ways. Especially schools and colleges. Ways of doing things in the past seem hopelessly mired down.

The experience tells us much about ourselves and the institutions we revere.

Parents who once accepted the value of standards and high stakes tests are now in homes with children struggling to learn via an internet platform or some other kind of virtual connection. They can see what their children are doing or not doing.

They see the frustrations of both students and teachers as they struggle with everything from poor internet connections, to maneuvering through a lesson. They feel the frustration of students, either their own or others, who have difficulty understanding concepts or developing basic skills.

Far too many of those parents, as grateful as they are to teachers who try so hard, have concluded that this COVID era is when effective education has been put on hold. A warp in time that can only be repaired when everything "gets back to normal."

But the question is, "What is the future *normal* going to look like?"

The Curriculum Leadership Institute has long advocated strong communication between and among local school stakeholders. Board members are fully involved or informed about everything being done to upgrade curriculum and instruction. Some of them serve on curriculum councils, along with selected others in the community.

All meetings of the professional staff are open to parents and community members, who sometimes participate in subject area committee meetings. Districts are encouraged to make parents and patrons aware of all actions taken to modify curriculum, instruction, assessment, and other matters relevant to the academic program.

Many client districts sponsor hard copy or online newsletters that explain the improvement processes they are undertaking. Some have a close and positive working relationship with the local media. They sponsor excellent web pages that describe what is being done in *substantive* terms.

“Substantive” means those districts share curriculum information, and the techniques they are using to ensure students succeed as much as possible even in these difficult times. They share documents like grade level and/or subject area curricula, that include clearly written “purpose” or mastery statements for EACH subject being taught. Under each purpose statement are listed unit outcomes.

Because both *purpose (mastery) statements* and *unit outcomes* are written using measurable verbs and specific content fields, parents can more fully participate as “guide on the side” teaching assistants. They can do that because what is being taught to mastery is not just “stuff to be covered.” A verb such as “describe” tells parents their student must articulate something orally or in writing, and a content field like “how a hypothesis is developed” means listing or even more detailed information as shown in an entire unit outcome.

Teachers and parents, working together, are continually testing students **FORMATIVELY**. That is a topic for another E-Hint, but the key idea is that ongoing assessment is built on a trusting working relationship between teachers and parents. And no longer dependent solely on high stakes tests and other forms of summative measurement of learning.