Keeping the Promise of Quality
Series

Arizona
Academic Standards and Assessment
Position Paper

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The primary mission of the Arizona Education Association is **Keeping the Promise of Quality Public Education.** To that end, we promote and support efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in Arizona’s public schools. The standards-based approach to education sets rigorous and meaningful expectations for students and for teachers. It offers educators, students, and their parents an opportunity to assess the match between valued knowledge and actual performance. We believe this process will ultimately lead to improved teaching and learning and should offer increased opportunities for success to Arizona’s diverse student population.

We use the term *standards-based education* to refer to an integrated system in which key elements—policies, resources, curriculum, instruction, standards, assessment, and accountability—are coordinated and work in tandem.

We have learned valuable lessons during the four years since the AEA Board of Directors adopted its initial position on implementing the Arizona Academic Standards and AIMS. Among the positive lessons are these:

▲ **Some teachers have discovered how empowering, energizing and liberating their conversations with fellow educators about the Academic Standards and student learning can be. Their sense of efficacy is proportionate to the frequency and depth of these exchanges with colleagues.**

▲ **Teachers' classroom curriculum and instructional strategies change when they are deeply and meaningfully involved in systemic discussions of curriculum articulation and of data analyses. In fact, such sustained teacher participation in discussions and decisions is a powerful form of professional development.**

▲ **The State Board of Education and the Arizona Department of Education are responsive to feedback from educators. Many of the recommendations that the AEA has made are being implemented.**

However, we have also learned these lessons:

▲ **Curriculum alignment in many districts is still very superficial. It often consists solely of requiring teachers to enumerate which Academic Standards are related to each day’s lessons. Mistakenly, teacher understanding is inferred from their compliance with this minimalist approach. It is foolhardy to assume that numerals in a lesson plan book equate to students experiencing a standards-based curriculum.**

▲ **An increasing number of school districts are narrowing the focus of their curriculum to subjects tested by the state.**

▲ **Relevant professional development for teachers ranges from non-existent to inadequate in most instances. When it is available, it is frequently didactic rather than engaging, interactive, and collaborative. (See Professional Development for Improving Teaching Practice and Student Learning published by the AEA.)**

▲ **The amount of time that student testing entails is educationally unsound. Test administration impacts the entire school, reducing time available for instruction and learning. We estimate that up to 20-30 days are affected by state and district testing and test preparation.**

▲ **Even when genuine efforts are made to help teachers align their practice with the Standards, some of them resist or fail to understand the importance of standards-based educational reform.**
The following commentary and recommendations constitute the best thoughts of educators from across the state as expressed to the Arizona Education Association (AEA) Board of Directors, representing 30,000 teachers and support employees in Arizona.

**Perspective and Focus**

The Arizona Education Association has long been on record supporting high standards for students and performance-based assessments in our schools. For more than ten years members of our organization, in addition to our leadership, have actively participated in the refinement of the Essential Skills, the development and implementation of ASAP, and the development of the Arizona Academic Standards in nine content areas. We supported the elimination of the ASAP requirement in favor of developing a more comprehensive and reliable assessment and have taken every opportunity to work with the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) to develop a quality instrument to assess student achievement. We continue to be active participants in refining the content standards, which will guide any continued test revisions.

Throughout this work, however, AEA has remained categorically opposed to using a single “high stakes” assessment as the basis for critical decisions such as promotion or graduation. We believe that the pervasive negative effects of such testing lead to test score inflation, curriculum distortion, and the debasement of teaching. Given the current statutory requirement for a high school graduation test in Arizona, AEA continues to encourage the Department of Education to identify multiple ways in addition to AIMS for students to demonstrate proficiency in the Arizona Academic Standards.

Arizona’s teachers understand that the success of their students on this assessment is dependent on several factors: their ability to align instructional strategies with the Standards and to obtain human and financial resources to support those efforts; broad-based parental understanding of the Standards and parental support of the rigorous academic requirements necessary to achieve them; and student motivation and capacity to achieve these Standards.

The standards-based approach to education is more than the simple assessment of students on one measure in several content areas. It requires the continuous and thoughtful deliberation of professionals who look at current practice in terms of structure, content, and methodology, and modify their teaching strategies in ways that most effectively help students progress in all the areas where standards have been set. In this context, assessment provides the database for looking at results over time and adjusting instruction in a meaningful way. The end result ought to be students who have benefited from a well-rounded, rich educational opportunity and are prepared to move into the world of meaningful employment or post-secondary education.

The focus on student standards and the combination of classroom level assessment, district assessment, and the AIMS test, coupled with the diminishment of the SAT9 test, offer us an opportunity to use testing in a productive manner. It still means that we must take the time necessary to integrate these assessments and use them appropriately. That includes school sites, school districts, and the state looking carefully at materials, texts, course offerings in content areas and elective instruction, graduation and promotion requirements, and the structure of the school day and school year. Systemic rather than piecemeal planning by policy-makers and educators will ensure the long-term success of our students and the continuous improvement of our schools.
Recommendations

Alignment with the Arizona Student Standards

There are four areas of alignment that need to be addressed:

▲ Alignment of state graduation requirements and course of study with the Standards
The current graduation requirements and course of study are not consistent with what educators believe students must learn to meet these requirements. Although the State Board of Education (SBE) is modifying the course of study requirements for high school to reflect the Standards, inconsistency remains. The reauthorization by Congress of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind, has introduced additional complexity to this alignment concern.

• The State Board should address this issue comprehensively with the involvement of parents and educators, and communicate those requirements in all areas as widely as possible. This will necessitate continual review of Board rule as well as legislation.

• Support school districts in their alignment efforts by identifying instructional materials, including textbooks, that substantively comport with the Arizona Academic Standards.

▲ Alignment of district curriculum with the Standards
Many school districts have completed a process of assuring that the district-printed curriculum and course of study include at least the core curriculum Standards components at the appropriate grade level. While these efforts have been inconsistent from district to district, they often result in a constricted curriculum that fails to address the required nine Standards. The state’s articulation of Standards with specific grade levels promises improved consistency. Nevertheless, until the state’s articulation of all nine Standards is complete, many students face a dangerously narrow course of study. That school districts continue to pursue a superficial, mechanistic approach to curriculum alignment also continues to be troubling. The issue is how to make meaningful curriculum changes operational. The most effective curriculum alignment and articulation process has been one that is bottom-up, from each school to the district. It engages teachers in sustained discussions that lead to decisions they understand and support. Actualizing in every school district the state’s grid of Standards assigned to grade levels will require this kind of active teacher involvement.

• School districts should routinely monitor the richness of their complete curriculum in light of all nine Standards. The ADE should monitor how school districts assess student performance to Standards that are not tested by the state.

• The task of district level alignment should be accomplished by involving teachers and other district educators, and communicating that effort in deep and meaningful ways to all staff and parents.

▲ Alignment of classroom instructional strategies with the Standards
We acknowledge that in many districts the curriculum may contain components of the Standards, but essential to actual student achievement in these areas is a core understanding by the teachers of standards-based education, the Standards themselves, and the performance objectives at each level. Teachers need to have the time and resources to develop strategies and classroom curricula that will enable them to teach more effectively to the Standards. All teachers, in all
subject areas, will need to reinforce the Standards in the core curriculum areas and the interdependency of all nine Standards. All teachers must be able to engage in frequent and ongoing collegial discussions about curriculum alignment and the significance of the Standards to their daily work.

- There are a variety of ways districts and sites may wish to address this issue, but, in all instances, they require additional compensated time for teachers. Time for staff planning at a site level—equivalent at the very least to one instructional day—should be provided annually for this effort. This time should not be taken from current instructional time. Sites and districts could structure the time in ways that are most beneficial to their needs. Some possible suggestions might be a full day of planning at the end of the current instructional year, at the beginning of the next year, or dividing the time between half days and early release days.

- Although Proposition 301 provides funding that can be applied toward this purpose, AEA continues to advocate for policy changes to guarantee additional funded non-instructional, professional days.

▲ **Alignment of assessments with the Standards**

Technical analyses assure that AIMS test items align with the Standards. Continual validation is needed as Arizona complies with ESEA requirements that criterion-referenced, standards-based tests be fully implemented by 2005. Compliance will require the development and use of AIMS in more grade levels and subjects. Those new tests will require alignment validation. The Standards themselves should be subject to regular review. As they are revised, the assessments also need to be revised and validated. Adapting to the federal testing requirements makes it even more important to eliminate duplication of testing efforts. This could result in more time for instruction and the use of more meaningful assessment results to shape future classroom instruction.

- The ADE should continually validate the items comprising AIMS and ensure alignment with the Standards.

- As AIMS testing increases, other state-level testing should decrease. The ADE and SBE should seek statutory relief from the requirement to annually use a national norm-referenced test with all students. Relief could take the form of phasing out such tests, eliminating them altogether, administering them to a scientifically random sample of students, substituting the ESEA-required National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), etc. As a start, the SAT9 writing test should be eliminated.

- District assessments need only to provide data on the Standards that are not tested by the AIMS. They should be designed to reduce the testing burden on students

- Classroom assessments, formal and informal, should monitor students’ progress toward performance objectives on an ongoing basis. Teachers need access to professional development in how to craft and use standards-based assessments in the classroom.

**Timeline for Test Development and Use**

▲ **The evolution and use of the AIMS**

We believe that the ultimate goal is to develop an assessment that measures student progress toward the Standards and sets reasonable objectives for knowledge and skills for all Arizona students. Prudent efforts are being made by the Department to assure the reliability and validity of the AIMS. The State

**Recommendations**

- Alignment with the Arizona Student Standards
- Timeline for Test Development and Use
- Test Administration
- Professional Development and Teacher Preparation
- Remediation, Recovery and Enrichment
Board and ADE are modifying the assessments themselves and their implementation timeline based on student achievement data and input from educators and the public. While the promptness of reporting test results has improved, meaningful use of student test results by educators requires even speedier reporting of those results.

- The Department should continue to reduce the time it takes to report test results, setting ever more timely deadlines with test publishers attached to rewards and penalties.
- ADE and AEA need to help educators and the public understand the reason why new assessments are field-tested, especially why some items that are “too difficult” are included in this phase of test development.

**Graduation requirement and diplomas**

We believe that student success is dependent on the opportunity to learn. In addition, parental support and student motivation are enhanced by their knowledge and understanding of what is expected throughout the school experience. We believe the standards-based approach to teaching and learning will lead to higher achieving students who are challenged by a rich and rigorous curriculum in all nine Standards during their educational tenure in Arizona’s schools. We must provide a solid foundation for success. We applaud the State Board’s delaying implementation of the statutory requirement for a high school graduation test, increasing the number of years that the class of 2005 may have experienced a standards-based curriculum. Because AEA opposes the high stakes nature of this assessment, we believe the State Board should consider diploma options that offer all students who complete their high school experience respectful and fair recognition of their efforts.

- Benchmark passing scores should be reevaluated in a responsible and timely manner and reported accordingly to parents, students, and teachers. These scores should remain part of the student’s permanent record. This allows monitoring of performance improvement and conveys the import of meeting Standards.
- All students who successfully complete the required course of study should receive a high school diploma. Diplomas and/or transcripts can indicate students’ level of proficiency on AIMS, i.e., approaches standards, meets standards, exceeds standards. Honors diplomas should be established to designate performance that consistently exceeds standards.
- The State Board and Department must maintain their commitment to Equivalent Demonstrations as ways in addition to AIMS for students to demonstrate proficiency in the Arizona Academic Standards.

**Test Administration**

**Time for test administration that does not reduce instructional time**

The need for adequate instructional time to prepare students to be successful is more essential than ever with the adoption of the Arizona Academic Standards and the accompanying high stakes tests. Early estimates of the amount of instructional time that would be affected by AIMS testing were grossly understated. It seems to impact most of a school for about a week each year. Time to teach and learn is further eroded by an additional two to four weeks when a similar schoolwide impact is caused by administering the SAT 9 and district tests. Student assessment, and in some schools the preparation for testing, takes a noticeable toll on students’ mental acuity, particularly at the elementary level.
They exhibit “test fatigue.”

- Some schools and districts have created testing schedules that make efficient use of time and minimize stress on students. The Department should obtain and broadly disseminate such schedules as samples for others.

- A state testing calendar that assures the return of test results before the end of a school year should be developed annually and announced at least one year in advance. It could include the administration of individual tests or batteries for all levels of assessment during defined testing periods over the course of the year. This would help school districts plan their own calendars and testing schedules to minimize instructional disruption and student “test fatigue.” They could build in additional time rather than use current instructional days. In order to accomplish this, the state would need to add the equivalent of at least two paid days to the calendar to be used by districts for test administration during the year.

- If test security challenges were met, a third option is to administer AIMS components for a half-day per week for a month, dismissing students for the remaining half-day while teachers engage in professional development.

▲ Make testing processes consistent with the best instructional practice
Assessments should be administered in a pedagogically correct manner. For instance, ADE, appropriately, supports educators in using the Writing Process when teaching students how to write. The AIMS writing assessments, however, are administered in such a way as to preclude students’ using the very steps to good writing that they’ve learned.

- Devise methods that allow students to use all steps of the Writing Process during assessment.

▲ Addressing the needs of special populations
The opportunity to learn and be challenged academically should be afforded to all students in our state. At the same time, the assessment of knowledge and academic skill should be free of cultural or ethnic bias, and accommodations for students with special needs must be provided to ensure that results are an accurate reflection of what the student knows and can do.

Special needs students: Our recommendation to determine appropriate assessment for special needs students as part of the IEP process has been implemented by ADE.

- Any additional changes must conform to ESEA and IDEA requirements.

- If passing a test remains a graduation requirement, then Equivalent Demonstrations should be maintained as an option to allow students to earn diplomas who have these as part of their IEPs.

English Language Learners (ELL): Proposition 203 has made it much more challenging to use sound instructional practices and assessment practices that determine a student’s mastery of a subject rather than mastery of English. Testing students in English after they’ve had only a very limited time to learn a new language can lead to an inaccurate and discriminatory view of their performance to the Academic Standards. The ADE should take the lead in creating resolutions to this dilemma. Teachers need to accurately assess students’ content knowledge regardless of English mastery. They can make accurate pedagogical decisions only if they have accurate assessment data on which to base them. The ADE has a responsibility to help them do so by supporting the development of
assessments for instructional decision-making, not only for accountability.

- Invest in the kind of activities listed under “Remediation, Recovery, and Enrichment” below for ELL students.

- Provide incentives and other forms of support for teachers who earn and use endorsements in either English as a Second Language or Bilingual Education.

- Support the development of and access by teachers to assessments that help them perceive students’ actual grasp of content.

**Professional Development and Teacher Preparation**

▲ An aligned curricular context for professional development

Professional development related to the Standards can have a profound impact on teaching practice and thus on student learning when it occurs within the context of an aligned curriculum that is well understood by teachers. One of the most valuable forms of professional development is the meaningful engagement of teachers in the articulation of this curriculum. Through this teachers understand how the Standards and levels of performance relate to one another. They come to know which Standards they and their colleagues are specifically responsible for. And, they are able to identify their own learning needs in relation to those responsibilities. In such a high and well-prepared state of readiness, teachers are receptive participants in professional development.

- Districts should formally recognize participation by teachers in curriculum alignment and articulation discussions as a professional development experience.

▲ Time for quality professional development that does not reduce instructional time

Just as students need ample opportunity to learn a standards-based curriculum so do teachers need ample time to learn how to organize and teach such a curriculum. Research indicates that students perform at higher levels across all grades when their teachers have had extended opportunities to learn about specific standards-based curricula and instruction. Available-on-demand learning opportunities and resources must accompany sustained opportunities for teachers to learn.

- It is a teacher’s professional responsibility to understand standards-based education and the Arizona Academic Standards. It is a school district’s responsibility to address teachers’ need to acquire knowledge about these matters, apply it, and reflect upon the results of their application.

- Teachers need easy access to hands-on materials that support standards-based instruction, monitoring of student work, and record keeping. The Arizona K-12 Center has compiled templates and model lessons to distribute electronically through its web-site and on CD ROM. The Department should multiply its efforts to make teachers and school districts aware of these and other resources.

- Any professional development engaged in related to this effort should be recognized and counted toward certification renewal credit. Acknowledgement by districts of recertification credit is widespread but haphazard. The ADE could assist by communicating regulations to school districts.

- Teacher engagement in school improvement planning and activities should be treated as professional development for purposes of both school district
professional growth and state recertification.

- Partnerships with universities could generate worthwhile graduate work and, in some instances, aid in capacity building for school districts so they are able to sustain quality professional development related to student learning.

▲ **Self-help through professional networking, information exchanges, and technology**

Developing the capacity of districts, schools, and educators to help students achieve at higher academic levels requires focus, time, and mechanisms that support the growth of communities of learners. The activities covered in the following recommendations take place in a variety of forms and in a number of districts, but they are neither systemic nor systematic. The Arizona K-12 Center holds the brightest promise for enhancing these capacities in individual districts and across the state.

- Distribute guidelines for organizing teacher study groups to learn how to use resource materials.
- Explore methods that support the sharing of professional information and strategies among teachers, schools, and districts. This is especially important in districts that are not unified. Such methods might include the creation of standards teams, mentoring, and regional meetings.
- Schedule compensated time for grade, subject level, building, and district planning sessions to discuss and develop appropriate instructional strategies, ideas, and structures. This could also include articulation among non-unified districts.
- Develop collegial processes for schools and districts to use that assist teachers in assessing students’ daily work against the Standards.
- Proposition 301 funds, including performance-based pay, should be invested in supporting the growth of school-based communities of teacher-learners, rather than punitively withheld from “low performing” schools.

▲ **Standards-based teacher preparation**

The curriculum and pedagogy of college classrooms need to incorporate standards-based education to the same degree that K-12 classrooms do. In addition, innovation is called for to deal with the out-of-area assignment of teachers.

- Continue to ensure that Colleges of Education are adequately preparing education students in the content and pedagogy necessary to teach the Arizona Academic Standards and to be proficient in the Arizona Teacher Standards.
- Create incentives for teachers to seek initial or additional certification in high-need content areas and placement in high-need school districts. At the district level, incentives might take the form of stipends. At the state level, they could be part of loan-forgiveness, 2+2+2 programs, and other initiatives.
- Develop new teacher induction and mentoring programs that are standards-based.

**Remediation, Recovery and Enrichment**

Some students will need more time and assistance than others will to demonstrate their competence in the Arizona Academic Standards. Such students should be identified and helped as early in their school careers as possible. Proposition 301 provides funding that can address the interventions listed below. However, it is becoming clear that the available resources will be insufficient. It is also clear that
there is still no state policy or mechanism that will guarantee a student the resources necessary to meet rising expectations in the form of high academic standards. Making full use of resources that are available, such as ESEA-Title I, IDEA, Arizona Reads, is critical to focusing support for helping all students reach a higher performance standard. Some ways to intervene include the following:

- Incorporate reading, writing, and math skills into all areas of instruction.
- Create a Summer Academy for students who have not met the requirement.
- Identify students, including ELL, who are at risk of not meeting the Academic Standards and target resources and programs for them at the earliest possible point of intervention.
- Involve and train parents in how to support their children’s learning.

Summary

The Arizona Education Association realizes that implementation of the Arizona Academic Standards and the accompanying assessments is dependent on a variety of factors. We have identified those we see as most critical to a successful effort toward standards-based reform, and we offer our recommendations to help ensure academic excellence and student success.

▲ Alignment • Alignment must be addressed in order to imbed the standards in the daily work and assessment of Arizona’s students. The specific needs are the alignment of state course-of-study and graduation requirements with the Standards; alignment of district curricula with the Standards; alignment of classroom instruction with the Standards; and alignment of state and district assessments with the Standards.

▲ Timelines • As the Standards and AIMS evolve, adequate time must be taken to ensure the reliability and the highest standard of validity. Teachers need to be informed of the timeline for test development, including the purpose of field-testing new assessments.

▲ Test Administration • Methods of test administration must be developed which minimize the interruption of instructional time and which provide the students the greatest opportunity to succeed. Special populations must be accommodated according to their needs.

▲ Professional Development and Teacher Preparation • Quality professional development will require additional compensated time. Opportunities must also be provided for professional self-improvement through collegial sharing, information exchange, and networking.

▲ Remediation, Recovery, and Enrichment • Students who may need more time and assistance to succeed must be identified at the earliest possible point in their career. Intervention strategies with these students include a longer school day and/or school year, summer academies, cross-curricular instruction, and parent engagement.

We recognize the tremendous opportunity before us, and we look forward to improved teaching and learning and increased student success. We proceed with the caution, however, that we must implement a system of policies, resources, standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment and accountability that is motivating and supportive, not one which is discouraging and punitive.