

## Demystifying Standards, Part I

Starting with the graduating class of 2010 (currently our sophomore class) the high school committed to creating a fully standards-based educational program. This change will soon be the law of the land, as the state of Maine will be passing a new high school graduation bill aimed at having all students leave high school having met all standards laid out in Learning Results – the state's prescription for what all students should know and be able to do when they exit high school. While there will be a time line for all high schools to comply, SDHS chose to be ahead of the curve and have our system in place, now.

An easy way to think about standards is as an itemized list of what you want students to know and be able to do. In the past (and it's still the case for our current juniors and seniors), your report card would simply say, for instance, biology followed by a grade that fell between 0 – 100. Now, instead, students will receive a separate grade on a series of standards for that same biology course. Instead of just needing to get one, general grade above a 70 for the course, students have to be proficient in each of 7 standards in biology. Where's the improvement in student learning?

Imagine, for a moment, that you're making a pizza for a cooking class at the *Regular School for Pizza Making*. The learning target is to make a good tasting pizza. So you make the pizza and your teacher sits down and eats a slice. “Well,” she says, “that's a pretty good tasting pizza. You pass.” Great, you think, but a friend of yours is attending a different school across town, called the *Standards-based School for Pizza Making*. Your friend also had the same assignment, to make a good tasting pizza pie. However, at the standards-based school, he had to meet 4 specific standards:

fresh toppings that hold their natural flavors to the maximum extent possible  
crisp crust on the outside, soft and chewy on the inside  
savory cheese blends  
original, home made sauce that magnifies and works in concert with the overall flavor

Without going any further, who do you think will make the best tasting pizza and why? It's likely that in your answer to this imaginary situation, you've explained why we moved to standards.

If we itemize the learning objectives for each of the various content areas (English, science, math, social studies, foreign language, health & P.E, the arts) then students will increase their skills because they'll need to be concerned with each of the most important aspects of the class, and not just one, overall grade that might hide specific weaknesses. I might be a good writer, for instance, but very bad at punctuation. In the old system, I might still pass the class because my good writing scores would hide my weaker punctuation scores. Not anymore. Now I would have to be both a good writer and a competent grammarian. Add to that list another 5 – 7 standards that I would also have to focus on and you get the idea.

The second pizza maker will create the better tasting food because they have to concentrate on every important aspect of pizza making. They can't hide a poor sauce with an excellent crust.

So whatever else you hear about standards, at their most fundamental level they're an itemized list of learning objectives created so that no student slips through any academic crack. They're more difficult

because of the reality of having more skills and understandings being focused on in a more intensive way. Our goal is to have all our students leave the high school with increased options and confidence to accomplish whatever they set their minds to do.