

# Preface

## *The Nature of Essential Questions*

**E**ducators today are under great pressure to make improvements. Government officials and policy makers regularly proclaim that the vast majority of students are not adequately prepared to succeed in college or careers in the 21st century, and drastic change in education is needed. These same officials often go so far as to prescribe the changes educators should make. In most cases they focus on *standards, assessments, grading, and reporting*. These four areas provide the foundation for nearly every modern education reform initiative. Yet despite how frequently these areas are mentioned in discussions of education reform, it's not always clear just what each means. Rarer still are specific ideas about the changes in each area that will bring about the desired improvements.

Making matters even more complicated is the tendency of educators, when a particular idea or strategy is not working very well, simply to change its name. In other words, we seldom change ideas substantively; we merely re-label them. When educators grew frustrated with certain aspects of *testing*, for example, believing that it undermined instructional purposes and detracted from learning, teachers and school leaders abandoned the term. Today, few educators would admit to doing any amount of testing. Instead, we have *assessments*.

Similarly, for years educators struggled with the use of *essay questions*. They were time-consuming for teachers to develop and difficult to score objectively. So today, teachers as

well as assessment manufacturers have abandoned the use of essay questions. Instead, we have *open-ended*, *constructed-response*, and *extended response* questions.

Our tendency simply to *change the name* has resulted in a tangled thicket of terminology in education that detracts from serious improvement efforts. This became evident to us several years ago when we were asked to work with the members of a school district’s curriculum development committee who were stalled in their efforts to design a new districtwide curriculum. We quickly discovered that what prevented committee members from making significant progress were squabbles over terminology. These thoughtful, dedicated, and highly knowledgeable educators spent most of their time arguing about the differences in *standards*, *goals*, and *objectives*.

To help them get past this hurdle and avoid continued frustration, we wrote a simple statement on a single sheet of paper. Our statement began with the phrase, “The student will be able to . . .” We then added a popular, high-level, performance-based verb such as *demonstrate*, and completed the statement with some elements of content. We showed our statement to the group and asked them to consider it a simple, multiple-choice question. “Please read this statement,” we asked, “and tell us, is this statement a(n):

- |              |                           |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| a. Objective | g. Competency             |
| b. Goal      | h. Proficiency            |
| c. Standard  | i. Performance            |
| d. Outcome   | j. Expectation            |
| e. Target    | k. Aspiration             |
| f. Benchmark | l. New Year’s Resolution? |

The resulting debate was far more serious than we ever intended and took up most of the next hour. When the committee took a break, we left the room and walked to the cafeteria where students were having lunch. There we showed our

statement to 10 high school students and asked them the same question. Unlike the teachers and school leaders on the curriculum development committee who had great difficulty reaching consensus, all the students we asked gave us the same answer: “Who cares?”

We certainly recognize that distinctions in terminology can be helpful, especially when they clarify issues and enable meaningful communication. But the confusion and distraction that such trivial distinctions often cause must be avoided. While it is vitally important in designing any curriculum that educators be clear about what they expect students to learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school, the particular label we attach to those things is immaterial.

This is but one example of the confusion and uncertainty that reigns among educators today with regard to these issues. In our work with school districts and education agencies throughout the United States and abroad, we consistently hear the same essential questions from teachers and school leaders about standards, assessments, grading, and reporting. Some of these questions deal with similarly perplexing terminology. Others reveal serious misconceptions and misunderstandings about aspects related to each area. At first glance, these essential questions may appear to be rudimentary because they deal with fundamental issues that are integral to nearly every modern education reform initiative. Nevertheless, they are questions that continue to stymie and confuse teachers and school leaders at every level of education.

In this book, we have assembled the most common and most frequently asked of these essential questions. For each question, we offer a short, simple, jargon-free, reader-friendly response that we hope makes sense to all levels of readers. Although we address our responses primarily to teachers and school leaders, we hope our readers also will include district office administrators (e.g., superintendents, curriculum and instruction specialists, professional development specialists, and assessment coordinators), parents, board of education members, community leaders, policy makers, and elected

officials. As schools move forward in their improvement efforts, a shared understanding of these critical issues will not only facilitate communication among these key stakeholder groups, but it also will greatly enhance the likelihood of success.

We recognize, of course, that the issues involved with standards, assessments, grading, and reporting are much too complex and far too diverse to be addressed with simple explanations and examples. Success in reform initiatives involving these issues will depend largely on the ability of educators to approach the improvement process with sensitivity, understanding, and a true sense of purpose. Our intent, therefore, is not to offer *the one correct answer*, but rather to clarify terms and provide the basic understanding necessary to guide improvement efforts and to enable success in any context.

We also recognize that certain interpretations, and sometimes misinterpretations, of issues related to standards, assessment, grading, and reporting have led to controversy and opposition. Individuals both inside and outside of education sometimes label themselves as *anti-standards*, *anti-assessments*, or *anti-grading*. We believe, however, that abandoning reliance on these central aspects of modern education is neither feasible nor practical. Important considerations related to equity, quality, and efficiency make it imperative that we use these elements in thoughtful and purposeful ways. What we must do is be honest about the serious yet often unintended consequences stemming from the misuse of these elements and be more attuned to the essential characteristics of effective implementation. Having a clear understanding of these issues and a coherent vision of what they mean for education will help build capacity and support continuous improvements to help more students achieve at high levels.

Our hope for this book, as was true with our previous books, is that we do not find it sitting unread on someone's office bookshelf or in a school's professional library. Instead, we would like to see it shared by educators in schools at all levels, used and reused, analyzed and dissected. We would

like to see it passed around in state departments of education, legislative committees, and board of education meetings. We hope it finds its way into undergraduate and graduate education courses to help those preparing to become teachers and experienced classroom veterans develop a deeper understanding of these important issues. It might even become the focus of study groups and faculty retreats where the answers we present to these essential questions are discussed, argued, and debated. We would like to find well-worn, coffee-stained copies of the book in teachers' lounges, with dog-eared pages and notes scribbled in the margins, where it becomes the basis for brief conversations and extended discussions.

Most important, we hope readers will take an active and reflective approach to the ideas we present. As a result, we hope it stimulates further inquiry and purposeful action. Our greatest hope, however, is that it prompts the development of higher-quality instructional programs, improved assessments, and better grading and reporting policies and practices that help educators do what they most want to accomplish: To help more students learn well, succeed in school, and gain the many positive benefits of that success.

—T. R. Guskey and L. A. Jung