

## Standards Are Not Curriculum.

A standard is an outcome, not a claim about how to achieve an outcome (i.e. a curriculum). Thus, the introduction to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Mathematics states that, “These standards do not dictate curriculum or teaching methods” (p 5). A similar reminder is found in the ELA Standards: “The standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach. For instance, the use of play with young children is not specified by the standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations in this document. The standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document.” (p 6)

Indeed, these statements highlight the intent of *any* set of standards; i.e., they focus on outcomes, not curriculum or instruction. The implication is clear – educators must translate the standards into an engaging and effective curriculum. So, what is the proper relationship between the standards and curriculum? Consider another analogy with home building and renovation; the standards are like the building code. Architects and builders must attend to them, but they are *not* the purpose of the design. The house to be built or renovated is designed to meet the needs of the client in a functional and pleasing manner – while also meeting the building code along the way.

Similarly, while curriculum and instruction must address established standards, we always want to keep the long-term educational ends in mind – the development of important capabilities in the learner as a result of engaging and effective work. In other words, a curriculum works with the standards to frame optimal learning experiences. To shift analogies, the standards are more like the ingredients in a recipe than the final meal; they are more like the rules of the game rather than a strategy for succeeding at the game.

So then, what *is* a curriculum? In research for our initial book, *Understanding by Design*<sup>®</sup> (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998), we uncovered 83 different definitions or connotations for the word, curriculum, in the educational literature! Such a variety of meanings confer an unhelpful ambiguity on the challenge of moving from standards to curriculum. Worse, most definitions focus on inputs, not outputs – what will be “covered” rather than a plan for what learners should be able to accomplish with learned content. This is a core misunderstanding in our field. Marching through a list of topics or skills cannot be a “guaranteed and viable” way to ever yield the sophisticated outcomes that the Standards envision.

The ELA Standards underscore this idea clearly by framing everything around “anchor standards,” all of which highlight complex abilities and performances that students should master for college and workplace readiness. The Mathematics Standards’ emphasis on the need to weave the Content and Practice Standards together in a curriculum makes the same point.