

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

This interview brings a sage voice from the larger world of education into the conversation about standards and results in part-time Jewish education. Ada Beth Cutler outlines the current thinking in and about the standards movement, discussing the advantages, disadvantages, and limitations of using standards as a lever for educational reform. This piece can be useful for groups deliberating on establishing or changing standards for curriculum or teacher training, either communally or nationally. Cutler's insights can assist in making sure that the conversation is informed, nuanced, and contextualized.

Avi West responds to Cutler's article by putting forth a model of "voluntary covenant" in which standards could operate to improve Jewish education without the element of accountability. In West's formulation, equity would be an expression of *tzedek*; legislated goals (*din*) would need to be balanced with specific circumstances and local realities (*rachamim*).

This piece is a good tool for lay and professional leadership of central agencies. West's analysis of the role of central agencies could be equally applicable to other bodies or entities with natural school constituencies, regional as well as national.

An Interview with Dr. Ada Beth Cutler

CONDUCTED BY SHANI BECHHOFFER

What roles do standards play in the world of education today? On what levels do they exist?

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that we live in the age of standards in the field of education. Standards frame the conversation and debate around curriculum, student achievement, educator performance, and issues of equity.

In terms of public education, standards exist at state and national levels. National level standards do not come from the federal government, but rather from various professional and curriculum associations. The very first curriculum content standards came out of NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) in 1991. All of the curriculum associations have formulated national standards since then, but they are not binding to anyone.

The federal government has mandated that all states have curriculum standards for students in each of the major curricular areas. In the new No Child Left Behind Act, it has now also required all states to have assessments that measure whether students are achieving those standards.

There are two main organizations that have developed teacher performance standards. INTASC (Interstate New

Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) has developed standards for beginning teachers. These standards are used for the initial licensure of teachers in the 37 participating states that have integrated them into their state licensure standards. In many participating states, portions of the teacher licensure tests are based on INTASC standards.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), which is financially supported by the federal government and numerous foundations, has set standards for advanced-level teachers. This is part of an effort to distinguish between initial licensure by states and advanced certification at the national level. There are about 20,000 master teachers in the country who have earned certification from the National Board. How and whether this certification is recognized is a decision made by each individual state. Some states give certified teachers a one-time bonus, and some have an annual increment added to teachers' salaries.

Teacher education programs are now accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) on the basis of INTASC and NBPTS standards. Whereas in the old days teacher education

programs were accredited on the basis of their facilities, faculty, course content, and other inputs, today NCATE judges these programs on the basis of their ability to demonstrate that their graduates can meet INTASC and/or NBPTS standards.

How are schools held accountable to those standards?

The tests that states use are the primary method by which schools are held accountable for meeting curriculum standards. So you'll see every year the school average scores published in the newspapers. That creates a great deal of furor in all kinds of school systems, including the middle class and upper middle class districts. Small differences and changes in scores often have nothing to do with the quality of education in that school. For example, since it's usually only fourth graders who are tested in an elementary school, they may be reporting scores from only 50-60 students in one school. This means a few students can skew the average and cause a furor about the quality of the school. Now, in public education, there are serious consequences attached to these test scores. The No Child Left Behind Act mandates that by 2011 all students in public schools have to be performing at a proficient level in reading and math. Schools have to show improvement over time, and if they don't, there are sanctions. The federal government is ratcheting up the stakes and putting serious pressure on schools and school districts to raise test scores.

What purposes do standards serve?

Before the advent of standards, schools focused on what students should be taught and what teachers should do, and there was a great deal of variance from school to school and from district to district in terms of what students actually learned and how high expectations were for student achievement. It was a focus on inputs rather than outcomes. That is like judging a restaurant solely on the basis of the list of ingredients used in its cooking! We can't predict quality or outcomes based on a list of inputs. But for years we've done that in education. Now standards have shifted the emphasis from what is taught to what is learned. In addition, standards tell us what all students should know and be able to do as a result of spending time in a particular grade or subject. This has serious implications for equity. No longer is it acceptable

for students in high poverty schools to learn less than students in wealthy schools.

Standards give people something very concrete to reach for and to measure their work against. For instance, say students are learning Jewish history. A teacher might think about which chapters should be covered. But if curriculum standards say what a student should know and be able to do at the end of the course, the teacher has to design lessons and assessments based on those standards. This helps teachers frame lessons in student-centered ways. The standards tell not what the teacher must do but what the students should be able to do as a result of learning.

The goal is thus to upgrade education and to level the playing field for students across groups such as socio-economic status. Standards have moved the conversation from teaching to learning and are equity-driven.

What are some of the critiques of the standards movement in education, some of the points of controversy about standards and the ways they are used? What would you caution those interested in implementing standards to think about?

Some people, especially progressive educators, are wary, at best, about standards. Criticisms leveled against standards-based reform begin from the assertion that standards often lead to inappropriate standardization. If you look at Dewey's work, learning is supposed to grow out of the lives of the students. If it's already been prescribed what they are going to be learning through a standards-based curriculum, there could be little room for teacher decision-making, for learning in context, or for allowing student interest to guide the curriculum.

What people in the standards movement say in response to this criticism is that standards don't mandate a particular curriculum. The local school district is supposed to take standards and translate them into curriculum. How to get the students to meet the standards is up to the individual school or district.

Sometimes, however, standards are poorly constructed, written in a way that micro-manages what students are taught, moving towards standardization of the curricu-

lum. There has been a huge controversy in the social studies standards: Should standards specify that students know certain dates? Or is that much too prescriptive? In Scarsdale, there are parents who have pulled their kids out from the testing as a protest against the state tests. A number of the schools had prided themselves on doing year-long themes in middle schools – for example, the Renaissance – and everything they did across the curriculum was wrapped around and through those themes. It was popular and successful. Now, the teachers say they can't do that any more; they have to stick to a more standardized curriculum in order to prepare for the state tests. Some parents are quite distressed. This is how standards can work against creativity and individual teacher judgment.

There are also issues with the testing that goes along with standards. Because these tests are often paper-and-pencil, one-shot assessments, they may not tell us what students actually know and how they perform over time. Yet students and teachers are judged on the basis of this kind of test. That is problematic in my mind and in the minds of many people who are against the standards movement. Often, ironically, curriculum standards are written in terms of what students should be able to do, how they can use and apply knowledge. But the paper-and-pencil tests are not aligned with those goals; they may ask students to regurgitate knowledge. Multiple-choice isn't a good format to measure students' capacity to use and apply knowledge.

In some states they do include portfolio assessments that provide a richer, fuller picture of student work and understanding. Some states are using multiple forms of assessment, but in most states it's a snapshot of learning rather than a full picture of student achievement.

Also, many people question the rhetoric that standards are equity-driven. In fact, unless more resources are given to poor and under-performing schools, standards can work against poor students by becoming an even higher bar that underachieving students cannot surmount. Standards can serve as a gatekeeper for these students unless they are given ample opportunity to learn and sufficient resources to support good teaching.

Lastly, there is a lot of controversy about the political nature of some standards. California, for instance, is one

of the states in the forefront of the standards movement and one of the states where politics play a prominent role. Take the example of mathematics. For many years, the California standards were based on the NCTM standards, which downplay rote computation and emphasize problem-solving and the use of calculators. That was quite in vogue when the Democratic administration was connected with more progressive educators. There's been a turn to a more conservative political base in California, and the math standards have changed to emphasize computational skills and de-emphasize problem-solving. So politics play a role in standards, and that's a problem.

Are there "better" sets or types of standards?

In general, the best standards are more inclusive and give more latitude to teachers and schools. It is important to take into account the context in which learning takes place. Standards should enable individual classroom and community needs and values to be addressed.

The national curriculum standards, which have been created by the professional and curriculum associations, should be the basis for state standards. They tend to be of higher quality, formulated by panels of educators, teachers, and higher education experts. Very often, states have used those standards as the basis for developing their own standards. ACHIEVE is an organization that reviews and evaluates state standards as well as state tests. As an organization, it has been most critical of the lack of higher order thinking assessed by state tests.

With regard to professional standards, it's important to note that, although this is not often the case in schools, beginning teachers and administrators should be expected to have different levels of expertise from more experienced educators. After all, they are beginners. There's another purpose for more advanced professional standards. Learning to teach takes place across a career, not just in preparation for a career. Figuring out what teachers need in terms of professional development ought to be tied to more advanced standards. We violate all that we believe and know about student learning when it comes to adults in schools. We provide one size fits all programs; we look at inputs (e.g. three in-service days this year), rather than looking at what we want teachers and administrators to know and be able to do as a result of the professional development, which should be very much tied to student learning.

What needs to be in place systemically in order for standards to play a powerful role in education?

That is another very important piece. Standards alone are necessary but insufficient to drive higher achievement. There has to be a system of accountability and assessments that measure in a fair and equitable way whether students are able to achieve the standards. There ought to be accountability to the standards. But we should look at multiple sources of evidence of whether students have achieved what the standards set out, not a one-shot test. Some of the best assessments look at samples of student work and assess the quality of it. Portfolios, performance assessments, assignments for which students actually have to do something are valid ways to judge student performance. They are also more complicated, but I think it's worth that complication because they give us a richer picture of what students actually know and are able to do.

Right now the conversation nationally is framed around assessment for accountability. That's unnecessarily narrow. There should be a balance between using assessment for learning and for accountability. In order to be useful to teachers, the data from assessments should be readily available to them and should be used to improve learning.

Standards are meant to be high, not minimal. They are meant to drive high achievement, while they're also meant to be where all students should reach. One of the problems with the way we do school is that we have held time constant and allowed learning to vary. We say, for instance, that you should be able to learn basic algebra in one year. Some students are able to, some are not able to, but if we have standards based education, we have to flip that around and allow time to vary and hold *learning* constant. Some schools are doing this. For kids who need more time to learn something, they give them more time, using after-school sessions, Saturday sessions, summer sessions, any additional learning time, in order to hold learning constant. It is an absurdity to assume that everybody needs the same amount of time to learn the same thing.

For all students to achieve high standards, we need "opportunity to learn" standards. That means identifying the resources that need to be in place, whether financial, structural, or human. Otherwise, setting standards is a form of magical thinking. So, if we want teachers to

learn to teach according to standards, we will need time and money for teachers to learn new ways of teaching, to collaborate on developing curriculum, and to improve their own content knowledge. (When it's no longer just a matter of students regurgitating rote knowledge, but rather a focus on more active problem solving, teachers need to have deeper content knowledge.)

In terms of professional standards, if they expect teachers to achieve advanced levels of accomplishment, schools have to be structured to achieve that. Time must be available for work-embedded professional development, which takes place not after school, but as part of their regular work.

I think the other piece is that there has to be community buy-in to the standards, and community can be a synagogue community. Parents and leaders and teachers and administrators all have to believe that those standards are good and appropriate for their students and teachers. Otherwise they won't take hold.

Do you have thoughts about the role that standards might play in Jewish part-time education?

Well, I think there's potentially a very helpful role standards might play in supplementary schools. Certainly we know there's a problem of attracting and developing qualified teachers. We don't have standards that say what teachers ought to know and be able to do. If we had those standards, then we could line up the resources and the policies and procedures that will get us there. It's a form of planning backwards, which means, using a curricular example, you start from what students should know and be able to do, and then you develop the assessments that will evaluate whether students have learned those things. Only then do you go back and figure out what the learning experiences should be. You can take that example and apply it to teachers. If you have decided what beginning and advanced Judaic teachers should know and be able to do, and you understand how you're going to assess that, then you can put into place on a community or national level whatever will help teachers get there.

This applies to Judaic curriculum as well. Very often in supplementary schools, teachers are left to their own devices to decide what students should be learning. What is it that they should know as a result of learning

Bereishit? If there are standards, it will help professionalize supplementary schools and really ratchet up the quality of curriculum in the schools. It has that potential; it's not automatic, because all of the other pieces have to be in place, such as resources, time, appropriate assessments that help you know whether or not students are achieving those standards, as well as professional development.

So, if anyone had the illusion that writing standards is an easy way to ensure quality, it really is an illusion. It's a piece of an entire system that is quite resource intensive, but the idea is that the results can be worth it.

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Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Cutler talks about both standards for student learning and standards for teacher performance and licensure. Underlying each of these areas is a results-oriented approach that focuses on outcomes rather than inputs.
 - The first step, then, would naturally have to be the creation of *consensus* in your group around desired outcomes for part-time Jewish education. To what extent is there agreement in your group about the results that you hope to achieve? What are the obstacles to achieving such consensus?
 - She also makes the point that *assessments* are the key to the impact of any standards. What would be needed to design and administer the sophisticated kinds of assessments Cutler advocates?
- Cutler acknowledges concerns about learning in context, about creativity and individual teacher judgment; yet she asserts, “There ought to be *accountability* to the standards.”

- What leads her to say this?
- What does your group think about whether there “ought to be accountability” in Jewish part-time education?
- Student achievement standards function in the arena of public education because there is accountability in terms of public image and even government sanctions. Who would be accountable to whom for student learning in your context?
- Cutler cautions against “magical thinking,” reminding us that we must have “opportunity to learn” standards. What are the financial, structural, and human *resources* you will need if you want standards to take hold in your context?
- One significant area Cutler discusses is standards for educators. To what extent would this be necessary or helpful in your context? How would you think about balancing expectations about quality with realities of supply of available teachers?

Central Agencies and the Voluntary Covenant: Making a Compelling Case for Standards

AVI WEST

Jewish religious institutions are no strangers to the debate over standards, so current in educational literature. The vocabulary of *halacha*, the Jewish way in life, is filled with terms of measurement and evaluation to determine whether or not an individual has fulfilled a particular ritual or sacred obligation. There are even legal and moral debates as to whether one must merely meet the obligatory minimum standard (*latzeit yedai chovato*) or exceed the letter of the law (*lifnim meshurat hadin*).

Judaism has always maintained that there are standards which demarcate proper from improper, but the tendency of Jewish tradition has historically been to keep those boundaries flexible. An example of the tension between obligatory standards and the need for flexibility is that of *Tefillah*. Jewish tradition has recognized that the prayers of every generation must be kept formalized yet fresh through the creative balance of *keva* (the fixed) and *kavannah* (the self-directed). Therefore, I would react to Dr. Ada Beth Cutler's comments using Jewish value-concepts: The use of