Real Schools, Real Success: A Roadmap for Change

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For over a decade, I have been working with my colleagues on a process for whole school improvement in literacy called the Standards Based Change (SBC) Process (Au, 2005). The essence of this approach is to guide teachers to create their school's own staircase curriculum in reading (Au, 2009), and it was initially developed through work with a single school in Hawaii, Kipapa Elementary School, beginning in 1997. In 2002 my colleague Taffy Raphael began testing the SBC Process as an approach for school change in Chicago. From 2006 to the present we have been combining data from the two sites to document the journeys of schools successful in improving their students' literacy achievement (Raphael, Au, & Goldman, in press). To convey the essence of this research, I will briefly address four topics: (1) research on standards, (2) the logic of the SBC Process, (3) following a roadmap for change, and (4) achievement results.

Research on Standards

In the fall of 2009, when this article was written, national standards for literacy were being introduced in New Zealand for the first time. The U.S. standards movement is much older, having been in place since the mid 1980s, and I believe that it is instructive to consider the U.S. experience as a sort of cautionary tale. We have learned much about the conditions under which standards and related approaches to accountability may well be unsuccessful in improving student achievement (Glass, 2008).

Perhaps the first point of caution is that the very notion of what constitutes a standard can be complex (Pearson, 1993), and that policy makers and educators must attend to several different kinds of standards (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995). The two that are easiest to understand are **content standards**, which describe what students should know and be able to do, and **performance standards**, which address the question of how good is good enough. The other two kinds of standards, delivery and opportunity to learn, are often ignored. **Delivery standards** describe the conditions that must be in place in schools for students to have a fair chance of meeting the content and performance standards (Porter, 1993). Perhaps the most significant aspect of delivery standards relates to whether teachers have received the professional development they need to provide the kind of instruction that will enable their students to meet standards. **Material conditions**, such as a well stocked school library and access to technology, are frequently cited as important as well. Finally, there are **opportunity to learn standards.** Opportunity to learn standards address the fact that students may learn in different ways, and that the same instruction is not likely to yield the same

degree of learning with all students. This concept was central to Marie Clay's work and is reflected in the title of her book, *By Different Paths to Common Outcomes* (Clay, 1998).

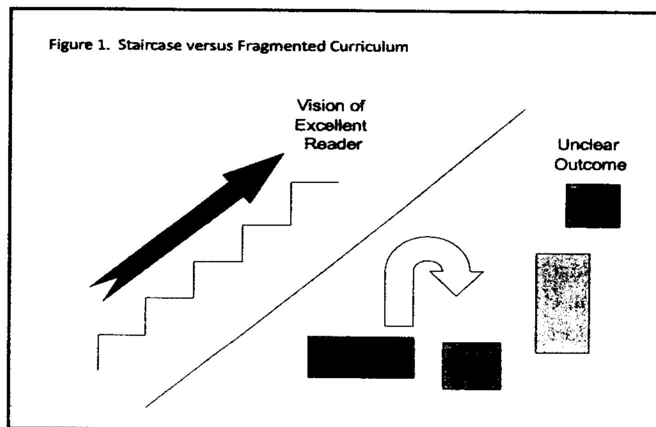
Research in the U.S. (summarized in Glass, 2008) suggests that the absence of attention to delivery standards and opportunity to learn standards has likely been responsible for the absence of learning gains, particularly among students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As Glass (2008) points out, U.S. policy makers have been concerned with reducing the cost of education. Policy makers can make it appear that they are taking action by proposing the relatively inexpensive solution of rigorous standards and assessments, and, in fact, the combination of standards and related assessments is present in all 50 states. At the same time, only a handful of states can show improvement in student performance as a consequence of standards implementation. These states – which include Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont – are those that have invested in multi-year, systematic professional development for their teachers. Professional development, while costly, is the key to success, yet most U.S. states have not been willing to make this investment in their teachers.

The lesson I hope you will take from our experience in the U.S. is that it is ineffective, as well as unfair, to seek to improve students' literacy achievement simply by raising the bar, without giving teachers and students the support that will make it possible for them to reach higher achievement levels. The professional development of teachers is a critical element, necessary for success.

Logic of the SBC Process

In our research on the SBC Process, we have been interested in the question of what it takes for standards based education to be successful in improving achievement, particularly in schools, located in low-income communities, that serve a high proportion of students of diverse backgrounds. Our findings are quite similar to those of Stuart McNaughton (2007) and his colleagues, who conducted the Acceleration of Achievement in Diverse Schools Project.

Our hypothesis with the SBC Process is that literacy achievement is improved when teachers in a school develop and teach following a staircase curriculum. Others have used the term curriculum



coherence as a label for the staircase concept (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). As shown in Figure 1, in a staircase curriculum, each step represents the learning that takes place in a given year in school. The steps are linked and coordinated to lead to the vision of the excellent reader who graduates from the school.

Figure 1 presents the contrast between the staircase and the fragmented curriculum.

Before schools enter the SBC Process, they tend to have a fragmented curriculum. In this situation, teachers at different grade levels may well be providing students with valuable learning experiences. However, because teachers frequently have not had the chance to discuss their instructional goals and practices with one another, learning experiences at one grade level are not built upon at the next. While advanced and normally developing readers can negotiate inconsistencies in the curriculum, gaps tend to hinder the academic progress of struggling learners, in particular.

When we work with a school in the SBC Process, we begin by helping the teachers to form a schoolwide professional learning community (DuFour, 2004). We guide the teachers to work within and across grade levels and departments to create their school's own staircase curriculum. We work through the SBC Process to create a schoolwide conversation about what each and every teacher is doing to improve student achievement through standards. This conversation must involve every teacher in the school, including those who serve special education students and students learning English as a second language.

Often, schools have small study groups of teachers who have been meeting to discuss particular interests, such as vocabulary development. Experience has shown us that we must work with all the teachers in the school at the same time, rather than beginning with small groups of volunteers, no matter how enthusiastic. We have learned that starting with a small group (such as a single grade level), rather than the whole school, has the effect over the long term of reinforcing existing divisions in the school.

When we begin work at a new school, leaders always ask, "How will we get teacher buy-in?" They realize that teachers are going to be skeptical about working with the SBC Process. Teachers in many U.S. schools have experienced a whole series of different programs and initiatives, all of brief duration. For example, a technology initiative is followed by a parent education initiative, which in turn is followed by a science initiative. Each initiative lasts only a year or two, too little time to allow teachers to gain competence in and institutionalize improved practices. Furthermore, as external support quickly evaporates, the dedicated teachers who volunteered to lead these initiatives find themselves in a vulnerable position.

We see a good degree of teacher skepticism to be a healthy sign, and we attempt to answer teachers' questions in a forthright manner. We ask school leaders to make a three-year commitment to the process, to address teachers' concerns that this will be yet another short- lived initiative. We make it clear that our intention is to not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather, we urge the school to keep in place whatever is

going well with respect to its efforts to improve literacy learning, while taking the opportunity of working with the SBC Process to correct any weaknesses in the situation.

A key concept underlying the SBC Process is that teachers' must own the change process at their school (Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008). While we provide guidance to the leadership and the teachers, we will follow their lead, even when our experience tells us that they are going down the wrong path. We take this approach to maintain teachers' ownership and to allow teachers to learn for themselves how the SBC Process can work in their setting.

For example, I worked with a group of teachers who insisted on using questions from a basal reader program as the basis for their assessment of students' ability to identify the theme of a story. It was evident to me that these were lower-level questions that did not address the issue of theme, and I expressed this concern to the teachers. However, it was clear that they did not have the confidence to develop their own questions. For over a year, the teachers administered the assessment based on the lower-level questions. At last, they came to me and asked if it was all right if they changed the questions. They had determined for themselves that the questions did not allow students to write in any depth about the theme of the story. Had I insisted at the outset that the teachers change the questions, there likely would have been two unfavorable outcomes. First, the teachers would not have taken ownership of the change process. Second, they would not have learned why it was important for them to design their own assessment tasks, matched to the learning outcomes they had chosen for their students.

Over the past decade, many U.S. schools have adopted programs ostensibly designed to reduce or even remove the need for teachers to use their professional knowledge and judgment when teaching reading. Examples are seen in highly structured programs where teachers are given scripts to follow (Engelmann & Carnine, 1991). Teachers in schools that rely on such programs come to see themselves as the mere receivers of curriculum. In the SBC Process, we take it as axiomatic that teachers must instead see themselves as creators of curriculum. One of the devastating effects of scripted programs, we find, is that teachers come to believe that their job is to follow the program, rather than to think for themselves about what is best for their students. Our job is to reverse this mindset, to empower teachers to build their school's own staircase curriculum.

At our successful schools, the SBC Process is the main focus, rather than one among many equally important initiatives. Curriculum leaders at these schools tell us that they set aside the equivalent of eight full days per year for teachers to work with the SBC Process. This time is divided among a variety of activities: whole-school workshops, grade level meetings and work time, and cross-grade level discussions. We find that coaching of individual grade levels speeds the process, because grade levels are often are wrestling with specific issues, related to the developmental levels of their students, that do not apply to the whole school.

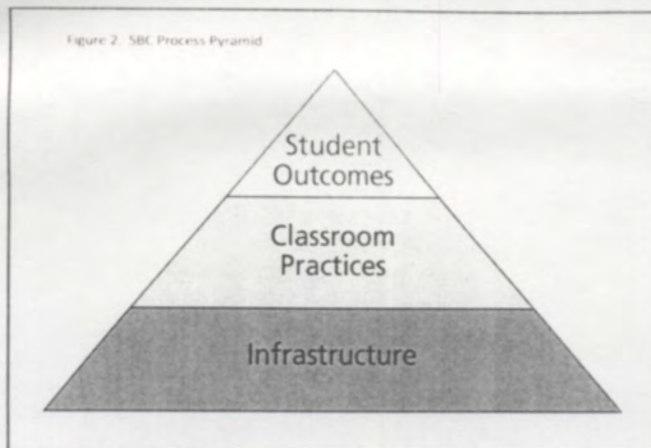


Figure 2. SBC Process Pyramid

Figure 3. Developmental Model of School Change

1	**Recognizing a Need**	***Emerging***
2	**Organizing for Change**	
3	**Working on the Building Blocks**	***Aspiring***
4	**Pulling the Whole School Together**	
5	**Sharing Results**	***Progressing***
6	**Implementing the Staircase Curriculum**	
7	**Engaging Students and Families**	***Inspiring***

teachers' professional development. As shown in the second layer in the pyramid, if teachers are well supported with time and professional development, they can improve their classroom practices, for example, by providing evidence-based teaching (instruction based on the results of formative assessments). As depicted in the top layer of the pyramid, student outcomes will then improve. Schools always seem to be in a hurry to introduce curriculum improvements. Yet without a stable infrastructure, a school cannot sustain its curriculum improvement efforts over the period of time required to see improved results with students.

In our research with the SBC Process, we discovered that successful schools moved through seven levels of development (Raphael, Au, & Goldman, in press), as listed in Figure 3. We now use this developmental model as a roadmap for schools to follow. When we start at a new school, the first thing we do is to conduct a needs assessment to determine the school's starting point on the roadmap. Most schools in Hawai'i start around levels 2 and 3. Our goal is to help a school

Following a Roadmap

In work with the SBC Process, we begin by making sure that the school has a strong infrastructure, as represented in the bottom layer of the pyramid shown in Figure 2. A strong infrastructure includes a schedule that allows teachers adequate time to work together on literacy curriculum development within and across grades. It includes a consistent multi-year plan for

move ahead at least to level 6, the level at which improvement in students' literacy achievement is sustained, on large-scale tests as well as formative assessments.

We describe schools at levels 1 and 2 as emerging because they are often emerging from serious and challenging situations. For example, a school may have had five principals over the past three years, or it may have suffered a 50% turnover in teachers. An individual or small group at the school decides that something must be done to improve the situation. These determined educators begin to organize for change, for example, by creating a new leadership team and by rearranging the schedule so that grade levels have time to work together.

When we arrive at a new school, one of the first questions we ask is "Who is your Kitty Aihara?" Kitty Aihara was the curriculum coordinator at Kipapa Elementary School, where the SBC Process was first developed. In addition to having a strong background in the language arts, Kitty had a long history with the school, having been a kindergarten teacher there for many years. She knew the teachers well, and they trusted and respected her. We have found that schools can move forward more smoothly through the SBC Process when the work is informed by a combined insider-outsider perspective. The outsider perspective is provided by a consultant who has already guided a number of other schools through the SBC Process. However, no two schools are exactly alike, and the school's Kitty Aihara plays an important role by providing the consultant with the insider knowledge needed to customize the SBC Process to fit the circumstances of that particular school.

We label schools at levels 3 and 4 aspiring because they have stabilized their infrastructure and are ready to begin literacy curriculum improvement efforts. It is at this point that we introduce the teachers to the four-part To Do List of the SBC Process (Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008). Once teachers complete the To Do List, they will have put in place at their school a system for improving students' literacy achievement through standards.

The first part of the To Do List involves having the teachers reach agreement on the vision of the excellent reader (or writer) who graduates from the school. This vision provides teachers with a common goal they are all striving to reach. For example, here is the vision statement from a school in Chicago:

> The literacy vision of an Armour graduate is the acquisition of necessary skills and strategies to communicate effectively in all realms of literacy for the purpose of being a critical thinker, problem solver, and advocate in a continuously changing world.

In the second part of the To Do List, the teachers work on the beginnings of the staircase curriculum, leading up to the vision of the excellent reader. Each step in the staircase represents the work of a particular grade level and is defined by end-of-year goals for student learning, which we call grade level benchmarks. The teachers develop 5-7 benchmarks that describe what they consider to be the most important markers of student progress; the benchmarks do not cover the entire reading curriculum. The number of benchmarks is kept small so that teachers and students alike will keep their attention on significant aspects of reading. After teachers have

drafted their benchmarks, we ask them to work on alignment with state and national standards, along two lines. First, their benchmarks must cover all the content addressed in the external standards, and second, their benchmarks must be at least as rigorous and demanding.

Over the years we have found that teachers must develop their own benchmarks, rather than simply copying or selecting benchmarks from an existing list, such as one from their state department of education. Teachers often ask why they must engage in the arduous task of constructing their own benchmarks. We explain that just copying products created by someone else does not lead teachers to the deep understanding of benchmarks necessary to guide curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and to raise achievement. Specifically, teachers must have in mind a clear picture of what they want students to accomplish as readers by the end of the school year. Experienced teachers who gain this clear picture are almost always successful in helping the majority of their students reach the target. Conversely, achievement lags when teachers are not clear about what their students should look like as readers at the end of the year.

Once teachers are clear about their end-of-year outcomes for students, they proceed to the third part of the To Do List, which involves developing assessments to determine how well students are progressing toward meeting these outcomes. Analysis of assessment evidence allows teachers to determine strengths and weaknesses in student performance and to fine-tune their instruction to help students advance. This is the essence of evidence-based teaching, the fourth part of the To Do List.

What happens when schools reach Levels 5 and 6? We describe these schools as progressing because teachers are moving forward to develop and document the staircase curriculum. At Level 5, schools establish a regular schedule for teachers to share their assessment results: pretest, midyear check, and posttest. Recall that our goal is to develop an ongoing conversation about what everyone in the school is doing to promote student achievement through standards. The three-times-per-year sharing is a structured way of supporting this conversation. Teachers at schools in Hawaii often use PowerPoint presentations, as these are easy to update. Teachers at schools in Chicago often participate in gallery walks, posting their assessment results on display boards.

We consider Level 5 to be the turning point, when the SBC Process either becomes part of the culture of the school or fades into the background as another unrealized attempt at improvement. All schools can complete Level 4, the To Do List. Although considerable effort is involved, teachers can work successfully within grade level or department groups to complete the tasks. Level 5 is different, because success at Level 5 requires that the grade levels or departments pull together as a whole school. In our experience, school leaders need considerable support to maintain the degree of focus and discipline required to initiate and then sustain the three-times-per-year reporting of results. Leaders must establish a regular schedule that allows time for teachers to analyze their assessment results and prepare their presentations, and for teachers to share their presentations with the whole school. In addition, as teachers recognize the need

for cross-grade and cross-department meetings to resolve inconsistencies in the staircase, time must be set aside for such meetings.

The focus at Level 6 is on implementing the staircase curriculum. At this level teachers understand their grade level benchmarks and have adjusted them so that there is a coherent curriculum across the whole school. Teachers are ready to document the curriculum by creating curriculum guides for their grade level or department. We introduce teachers to a format for organizing the curriculum guides, consisting of four sections: goals for student learning, instructional strategies, instructional materials, and assessment (Engelmann & Carnine, 1991; Tyler, 1950). However, teachers are free to organize their guides in the manner that makes sense to them; a common variant is to organize the guides by quarters. When teachers are ready to share their guides with the whole school, a carousel is held, usually in the school library. Guides for each grade level are placed on a table, and teachers move from table to table at 10-minute intervals to review the guides prepared by the other grades. By the time the carousel concludes, teachers have gained detailed knowledge of the flow of their school's staircase curriculum across all grades.

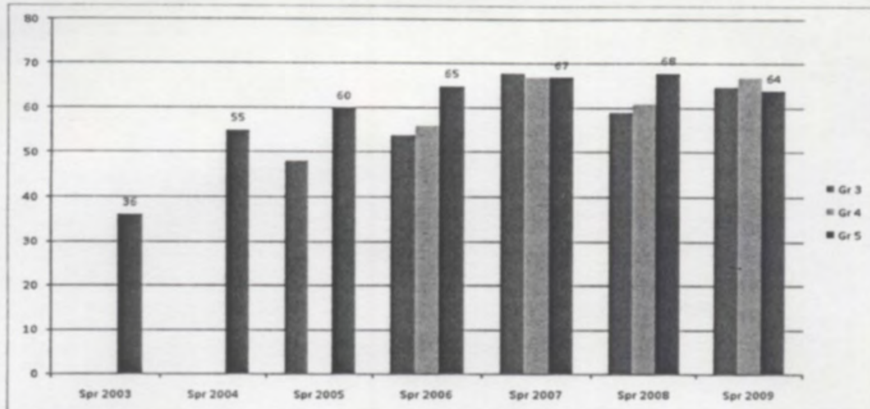
The focus at Level 7, the highest level in the developmental model of school change, is on fully engaging students and families. At Level 6, the curriculum becomes transparent to the teachers because of all the time and effort they have dedicated to creating the guides. At Level 7, the goal is make the curriculum transparent to the students and to their families as well. Right from the start of their work with the SBC Process, teachers have been working on making their expectations clear to students. This is the time when they pull these efforts together. Teachers make sure that I Can statements (Cleland, 1999) are prominently posted in the classroom. Bulletin boards include student-friendly rubrics, as well as students' standards-based work. Teachers introduce student portfolios with self-assessment. Students choose portfolio artifacts that show their progress in accomplishing the I Cans, and they assess the quality of their efforts according to rubrics. Students engage in goal setting, indicating what they already know and can do, and what they would like to work on next. At most schools that reach Level 7, three-way conferences (Davies, Cameron, Politano, & Gregory, 1992) are introduced to replace the typical parent-teacher conference. Students lead these conferences by discussing the work in their portfolios with their parents, while the teacher stands by to respond to questions that may arise.

At Level 7 we have reached the top of the pyramid shown in Figure 2. When teachers know the curriculum so well that they can make it transparent to their students, both student achievement and student engagement will be high.

Achievement Results

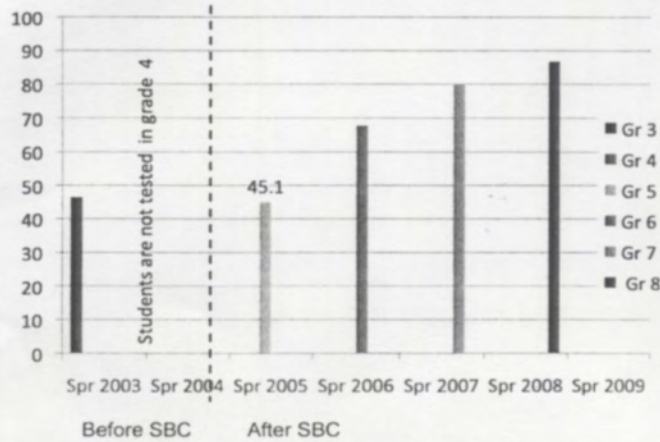
We find that the benefits of the SBC Process go far beyond test scores. Nevertheless, because U.S. public schools are under such heavy accountability pressures, it is important for us to attend to students' progress on large-scale tests. To illustrate the results, we present two

Figure 4. Kipapa Elementary School, State Reading Test
Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Proficiency



sample graphs, one showing reading results from a Hawaii school and the other from a Chicago school. Figure 4 shows the test results from Kipapa Elementary School, the school that has been in the SBC Process the longest. At the start of the six-year period shown in the graph, only 36% of grade 5 students were meeting or

Figure 5. Saylor Elementary, State Reading Test Results
Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Proficiency



exceeding proficiency on the Hawaii state reading test. Over the past four years, from 64% to 68% of grade 5 students met or exceeded proficiency on the state reading test, a dramatic reversal.

Figure 5 shows the test results at Saylor, the pseudonym for a K-8 inner city school in Chicago (Raphael, in press). This graph traces the progress of the cohort of students who were in grade 3 in the spring of 2003. As you can see, as this cohort advanced through the grades, the percentage of students who met or exceeded proficiency on the Illinois state reading test rose from 46.5 at grade 3 to 86.7 at grade 8. These results are in striking contrast to the pattern typically seen in inner city schools, in which the percentage of students meeting or exceeding proficiency steadily declines as students move up the grades.

What accounts for the rise in test scores? We believe that scores improve in

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response to teachers' rising expectations, due to implementation of the staircase curriculum. Consider the case of grade 4 teachers whose entering students have received instruction following the staircase curriculum for the previous four years. As a consequence, when these students enter grade 4, they are reading at a higher level than previous cohorts of grade 4 students. The grade 4 teachers realize that they can raise their expectations for the students' end of year performance, so they introduce more demanding grade level benchmarks. Because teachers have these ambitious new learning targets clearly in mind, they succeed in helping students to reach them, and this higher level of reading attainment is reflected in students' test scores.

Conclusion

The SBC Process gives schools a system for improving student achievement through standards, suggesting ways of avoiding the pitfalls frequently encountered in U.S. attempts to implement standards-based education. The process centers on the professional development of teachers as the key component for success. This is in contrast to the common error made in many U.S. states of simply raising the bar, through new standards and related assessments, without giving teachers the support needed to help students achieve at the higher levels expected.

The SBC Process positions teachers as creators rather than mere recipients of curriculum, thus empowering teachers to rely on their own professional knowledge and efforts, rather than a preset program, to make a difference with students. Through its seven-level developmental model, the SBC Process provides schools with a roadmap for improvement. With the SBC Process we guide teachers to form a schoolwide professional learning community and to work collaboratively, within and across grades and departments, to build a staircase curriculum. Implementation of the staircase curriculum at schools allows teachers gradually to raise their end-of-year targets for students'

learning, resulting in improved literacy achievement on both formative measures and large-scale reading tests. In short, the SBC Process offers a viable approach for schools interested in improving students' literacy achievement through standards with a systematic, multi-year approach based on the professional development of teachers.

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