

Questions and Answers About the Standards

1. WHAT ARE THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS?

The Illinois Learning Standards are statements which define a core of essential knowledge and skills that all Illinois students enrolled in public schools are expected to know and be able to do.

2. WHAT IS A STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Standards-based education uses standards to help educators and their communities identify explicitly what students must know and be able to do. It brings what is to be learned into focus and holds learning as a constant while treating other traditional constants (time, location, instructional materials, etc.) as variables.

3. WHY DO WE NEED STANDARDS?

Among the reasons we need standards are:

- To set uniform high expectations for all students;
- To provide a basis for equal opportunity to learn;
- To clarify the intended results of schooling for all audiences;
- To ease transitions for students who move from school to school and from grade to grade;
- To specify exactly what will be assessed in order to return more useful information about student achievement;
- To establish criteria for a meaningful accountability system;
- To provide a foundation for defining the knowledge and skills teachers need in order to provide instruction for students.

4. WHAT DOES THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS FRAMEWORK LOOK LIKE?

The standards framework is divided into seven learning areas:

English Language Arts
Mathematics
Science
Social Science
Physical Development & Health
Fine Arts
Foreign Languages

Each learning area section contains the following information:

- An introduction to the learning area explaining the learning that is captured in the standards and background information.
- A section called "Applications of Learning," in which five cross-disciplinary abilities are discussed as they apply to the learning area:

—Solving Problems
—Communicating

- Using Technology
- Working on Teams
- Making Connections

- Charts of Goals, Standards and Learning Benchmarks that define the essential knowledge and skills for the learning area.

Goals are broad statements of knowledge and/or skills that organize the subject matter of the learning area. Each goal has an explanation of why it is important and how it relates to life beyond school.

Learning Standards are specific statements of knowledge and/or skills within a goal. Taken together, the standards clearly define the learning needed to reach that goal. They represent the results of schooling and thus may be considered exit standards.

Learning Benchmarks are progress indicators for gauging students' achievement of each exit standard. They form the basis for measuring student achievement over time. In general, benchmarks for the early grades represent basic skills. Later benchmarks build in complexity and rigor from one level to the next, culminating in deep understandings demonstrated through complex performances.

The grade-level clusters for learning benchmarks are early elementary school, late elementary school, middle/junior high school, early high school and late high school. Specific grade levels are not used to allow schools flexibility in how they structure their education programs. The focus is on results, not on how the results are achieved.

5. WILL FOREIGN LANGUAGE BECOME A MANDATED FUNDAMENTAL LEARNING AREA?

The Foreign Languages goals and academic standards are advisory standards provided as a resource for students, teachers and schools that participate in foreign language teaching and learning. There are no current plans to increase curricular mandates for schools.

6. HOW AND BY WHOM WERE THE STANDARDS DEVELOPED?

The Illinois Standards Project began in 1995 with the establishment of seven writing teams, one for each learning area represented in the final framework. Team leaders were selected on the basis of state and national expertise and reputation. The writing teams used extensive resources including national and state standards from across the country. A Coordinating Team composed of a cross-section of Illinois constituencies guided the production of the drafts, which were released for public comment in July of 1996.

The public comment period extended to January of 1997. It yielded extensive suggestions for improving the standards drafts. The University of Illinois at Springfield, under contract with the State Board of Education, created a database of survey information and produced a variety of data analyses. These provided the main source of data used by the seven

refinement teams that began work in February of 1997. These teams included educators, business people, parents, workforce preparation specialists and technology specialists.

An External Advisory Team was convened in February of 1997 to analyze issues that were related to the establishment of state standards and had arisen from the public comment data. This team represented the broad constituencies of Illinois citizens and included both supporters and opponents of state standards. The team produced a report advising the State Board of various opinions on the issues for their consideration prior to adopting the standards. The report is available from the ISBE Information and Reception Center at 217/782-4321.

7. ARE THE ILLINOIS STANDARDS QUALITY WORK?

From the outset, the following set of criteria guided the writing of the goals, standards and benchmarks:

- The standards must be clear and meaningful to students, parents, educators, business representatives and the community at large.
- The standards should include an appropriate combination of knowledge and skills, not just facts alone or skills alone.
- The standards should build upon and go beyond the basics within each of the academic disciplines.
- The standards should be specific enough to convey what students should learn, but broad enough to allow for a variety of approaches to teaching, curriculum, course design and assessment.
- The standards should be specific enough to be used in assessing progress and improving students' learning.

Comments received from Illinois citizens during the public comment period helped revise the standards so that they could better meet all the criteria. In addition, early reports from outside the state by people who compare state standards rank the Illinois Learning Standards as among the best in the nation. (*Making Standards Matter*, 1997, American Federation of Teachers; and *State English Standards*, Fordham Foundation Report, Volume 1, Number 1, July 1997).

8. HOW WILL ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS IMPROVE A STUDENT'S EDUCATION?

Standards alone do not improve the education system. However, they provide the focus, the foundation, upon which other reforms must be anchored. For example, teacher preparation and professional development will be strengthened as college courses and continuing education programs are organized toward providing teachers the knowledge and skills to enable their students to achieve the Illinois Learning Standards. In addition, technology planning, because technology is woven throughout the Illinois Learning Standards, can and must be built around creating new learning opportunities for students to meet and exceed the standards. The analysis of student achievement data in relation to the Illinois Learning Standards will drive the improvement of teaching and learning and the more productive use of education dollars.

9. HOW WILL THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY AFFECT THE LEARNING STANDARDS?

The Illinois Learning Standards must reflect the impact of technology on our world. For example, in English Language Arts, it is important to recognize the increasing roles of visual and media literacy in communication, empowering students to communicate through visual images, animation and video in addition to text. To be successful in a world characterized by change, students will need to learn the basic knowledge and skills of the 1990s and the new century to come and to acquire new ways to learn that will serve them throughout their lives. Using technology in the standards is described as using appropriate instruments, electronic equipment, computers and networks to access information, process ideas and communicate results with their respective applications to each learning area.

10. ARE THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS MANDATORY?

The Illinois Quality School Act (House Bill 2596) required the State Board of Education to establish a set of academic standards within one year of the effective date of HB2596 (signed by the Governor on August 6, 1996). Also, according to Section 5/2-3.63 of the Illinois School code, schools must "set student learning objectives which meet or exceed goals established by the State." The Illinois Learning Standards give schools an opportunity to judge the extent to which their local objectives actually meet or exceed the state goals. Some schools will opt to adopt some or all of the state standards; more often, schools will compare their local objectives to state standards and make any modification(s) necessary to assure that students who achieve the school objectives also meet or exceed the state goals as defined through the learning standards.

11. HOW WILL THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS BE USED?

Clear expectations help take the guesswork out of decisions about programs, materials, equipment and staff assignments. The Illinois State Board of Education will use the Illinois Learning Standards for a variety of purposes including:

- As a guide to redesign the state assessment program;
- As a guide to assist schools and teachers with curriculum, instruction and assessments;
- As a foundation to establish professional teacher standards;
- As a guide to target the use of funds to better support teaching and learning;
- As a means to communicate the purpose and results of Illinois K-12 education to the public.

Local schools will use the standards framework for many similar purposes, such as:

- A guide to organize and share curriculum, instructional methods and assessments across teachers, grade levels and schools;
- A means to gauge student progress through local assessments;

- A guide to focus school improvement plans;
- A means to communicate the purpose and results of schooling to the local community.

12.HOW DO QUALITY ASSURANCE AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING FIT WITH THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS?

Quality assurance looks at teaching and learning; student progress toward, and achievement of, the standards; and the learning community as they work together to build a learning environment. The School Improvement Plan is a blueprint to guide schools toward improving student achievement of the standards. Therefore, the Illinois Learning Standards provide the foundation upon which schools can build their curriculum, instruction and assessment; plan to improve student achievement; and be held accountable for improving student performance. Students' achievement will be measured by their ability to meet or exceed the standards.

13.DO SCHOOLS STILL NEED LOCAL STANDARDS/OUTCOMES AND LOCAL ASSESSMENTS?

The Illinois Learning Standards represent the core of knowledge and skills the students are expected to know and be able to do. As schools begin to align their curriculum with the Illinois Learning Standards, they will discover that many other things that are important to the education of their students are left up to local discretion. They will need to decide which local outcomes/standards are important to their students and continue to teach and assess those as well.

14.HOW WILL THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS AFFECT THE STATE ASSESSMENT (ISAT)?

The State Board of Education will use the Illinois Learning Standards as a guide to revise the state assessment in order to align with, and measure progress toward, achievement of the standards.

15.ARE THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ALL STUDENTS?

Yes. Maintaining high expectations for all students is a component of fairness in education. "All students" includes those who choose college and those who choose more technical career preparation directly from high school; those for whom English is a second language; those who have disabilities, those who are gifted and talented; those who are returning to education for completion of a diploma, even as adults; and those from advantaged and disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

For most special needs students, their Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) will be linked to the standards, with individualized approaches to the depth and timetables for achievement. For students with severe and profound disabilities, few of these standards may apply in terms of achievement, but the standards can still serve as a target.

While the task of helping virtually all students achieve the standards may be daunting, the alternative is not acceptable. Different expectations for different

groups of students lead students to demand less of themselves--and unfortunately allow them to deliver on these lower expectations.

16. HOW WILL SCHOOL PERSONNEL KNOW IF STUDENTS MEET THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS?

The standards and learning benchmarks provide an instructional target for local and state measures of progress. To know if students are meeting the standards, their progress must be measured over time. Most of this measuring will occur in the classroom where teachers see students on a daily basis. There, teachers can check progress in many ways--by observing, questioning, reviewing work assignments, testing or judging projects and performances. Some of this measuring will occur on a larger scale through state assessments designed specifically to check students' performance against the standards across the state, and some will be accomplished using national tests.

Each level of measurement in and of itself cannot provide a complete picture of student achievement. Taken together, however, a learning profile can emerge, allowing students, parents and educators to know how well students are doing and where improvements are needed.

17. ARE THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS A STATE CURRICULUM?

No. The standards are not a state curriculum. Their purpose is to clearly define essential knowledge and skills that students should have as a result of their schooling. The methods and materials used to teach the knowledge and skills must remain the responsibility of local schools and communities.

18. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO STUDENTS WHO DO NOT MEET THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS?

They try again. And again. And again... One of the many advantages of a standards-based system with benchmarks to measure incremental progress is that there is no reason to reach the end of the school experience and then find out some students have not or cannot meet or exceed the standards. The whole purpose is to intervene and accommodate during the school experience. This is viewed as preferable to remediation and punishment for not succeeding.

What if we think in terms of the schooling experience lasting until the standards are achieved? We focus our attention on the achievement of a specific set of knowledge and skills without regard to time. This makes achievement a constant with time as a variable rather than how much can be learned in a fixed amount of time.

19. DO OTHER STATES HAVE LEARNING STANDARDS?

Yes. Most other states have state standards for learning.

20. ARE THERE NATIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS?

Standards have been prepared by learning area groups to serve as a resource for the nation. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) developed widely acclaimed math standards in 1989. National work exists in many learning areas and was used as one of many resources in developing the Illinois Learning Standards.

21. HOW AND WHEN WILL SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS?

Implementation of the Illinois Learning Standards will occur over time. The first state assessment aligned to and measure achievement of the standards occurred in the spring of 1999.

Steps in the process include awareness, capacity building, implementation, refinement and recycling through the process. As educators develop awareness of the standards, they will begin to check alignment of their instruction and student expectations to the standards. As schools and school districts adopt new curriculum materials, an in-depth look at the standards will guide the selection of new materials.

22. HOW WILL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS BE SUPPORTED IN BUILDING THEIR CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT THE STANDARDS?

Moving standards from the written pages of the standards document into action in schools will take time, hard work and a variety of resources:

The Illinois State Board of Education will deliver a coordinated system of support for programs and initiatives that affect student learning. The system will include Regional Offices of Education, professional and community organizations and a variety of individuals working together to coordinate services and resources to meet the needs of schools.

An on-line marketplace will be developed for educators and others to share their best ideas for helping students reach the standards. This will eventually include sample lesson plans, instructional techniques, assessment prototypes, samples of exemplary student work, recommendations on teaching materials and available funding support.

Look for additional resources related to the Illinois Learning Standards on the Illinois State Board of Education Homepage (www.isbe.net).

To make standards work, resources need to be more carefully targeted toward students' achievement of the standards. Recent trends in federal law have moved many requirements for education funds toward standards-driven reforms. State education funds are being targeted to the greatest extent possible toward the standards. Information on using these funds in local schools and programs is available on the Illinois State Board of Education Web page under Grants.

23.WILL THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS CHANGE?

The Illinois State Board of Education is committed to a systematic process for continuing improvement to the Illinois Learning Standards, with emphasis on orderly changes over time. This process will include an annual report to the Board on issues identified through the implementation of the standards, and a formal review of the standards at three-year intervals. The goals of the three-year review will be to (1) respond to identified concerns regarding the content of the standards and (2) reflect changes in essential knowledge and/or skills.

24.HOW CAN I OBTAIN A COPY OF THE ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS?

The Illinois Learning Standards are available on the Illinois State Board of Education website at <http://www.isbe.net>. Copies are also available at all public schools and public libraries.