

Power Standards for the Middle Grades

Center for Performance Assessment

The Need for Power Standards

Every school district in the nation has some form of local or state academic content standards. These standards describe what students are expected to know and be able to do. The standards do not, however, give the classroom teacher and school leader clarity about which standards are the most important for future success. Because of the limitations of time and the extraordinary variety in learning backgrounds of middle school students, teachers and leaders need focus and clarity in order to prepare their students for success in high school. Power Standards help to provide that focus and clarity.

Grades Are Not Enough: Students Must Be Proficient

In a recent study of middle schools conducted by the Center for Performance Assessment, the difference in average grade-point average for those students attending high-achieving middle schools was one-tenth of one point higher than the GPA for those students attending very low-achieving middle schools. In other words, grades typically do not tell students if they are adequately prepared for high school. By contrast, the requirement that students demonstrate proficiency at a few "power standards" is a clear and consistent mandate for high expectations and adequate preparation.

Making Time the Variable

In a traditional middle school setting, students in a 7th grade classroom may have reading levels ranging from 3rd grade to 12th grade. The assumption that all of these students will become proficient in the same amount of time with the same amount of teaching is absurd. In the typical uniform curriculum and standard schedule, these students will leave middle school with the same widely varying abilities with which they entered. Unfortunately, this means that many of these students will enter high school woefully unprepared for the challenges they will face. The clear and simple truth is this: some students need more time to become proficient. Placing all students in the same schedule and expecting uniform results, is prescription for failure. Some students need more time for literacy and math. Denying them this extra time is as harmful as denying unvaccinated students the appropriate medical treatment because "they should have had the vaccinations before they got to middle school."

What About the Other Parts of the Curriculum?

The Power Standards are definitely not exhaustive. They represent the "core of the core" - the essential knowledge and skills students must have to enter high school. If they do not have these skills at the beginning of 8th grade, teachers and school leaders should ensure that the students receive the schedule, curriculum, coaching, and intervention necessary to ensure proficiency in these Power Standards.