

Aligning State Standards and Classroom Level Learning Goals

By Cheryll K. Ostrom

Recent research on student achievement underscores the importance of having clear goals for teaching and providing clear and reliable formative assessment for learning (Ed Trust 2005, Black and Wiliam 2004, Marzano 2003).

Background: Why the Stiggins process?

As we worked with Arts Quality Teaching Network (QTN) arts teachers across Minnesota, we found that although many of them seemed to understand and agree on what the standard benchmarks required in terms of student learning, some still had difficulty translating those benchmarks into clear teaching goals for their classroom work with students and a few teachers couldn't even agree on what learning the standard benchmarks required. We realized we needed a new way to support teachers as they discussed and aligned standard benchmarks to classroom learning goals, classroom learning goals to assessments, and finally reach all the way back to evaluate student learning against those standard benchmarks.

At the time we were struggling to find a new way to talk about these alignment issues with teachers, Zane Schaefer, 2007 Minnesota Music Teacher of the Year, told us simply to “look at the verbs.” Zane was pointing us toward a systematic reading of standard benchmarks relying on the verbs that specify what kind of student learning is called for in a standard. For example, does a standard call for students to “describe,” or “identify how,” or “create?”

Zane's suggestion to more closely examine the standard benchmark verbs came just as we had been asked to work with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Summer Teacher Institutes. The directors of the summer institutes were struggling to help their teachers align standards, classroom learning goals, curriculum and assessment. Serendipitously, we had also begun to read the work of Rick Stiggins and the Assessment Training Institute. (Our interpretation of Stiggins' process is summarized for you in the [Stiggins Alignment Chart](#).)

The Stiggins' process enabled us to have new conversations with each other about the alignment and relationships among standard benchmarks, classroom level learning goals, curriculum and instruction, and, finally, assessment and evaluation. Our understanding of Stiggins became deeper and more specific as we worked with the NEA Teacher Summer Institutes in Maine and Massachusetts to support teacher understanding of what their state standards required and how to align classroom goals, curriculum, and assessment to those requirements. The teachers in the NEA summer institutes will begin the discussion of evaluation—the quality or level of achievement—when they have evidence of student learning from assessments in front of them.

We found Stiggins' work and the alignment process helpful for the following reasons. It has:

- provided a lens to examine the learning required by standards/benchmarks with greater precision
- allowed us to “marry” the learning requirements of the standard benchmarks with teachers' individual classroom curriculum through the process of writing clear, focused classroom learning goals (see the checklist for writing classroom learning goals)
- given us a process for talking not only about the *what* of teaching goals at district and classroom levels, but also pointed us toward possible *hows* of assessing student learning
- informed the work of developing K-12 guideline rubrics (which we began four years ago) to support teachers in determining scoring criteria for judging the quality of student learning

- allowed teachers to be more selective as they work for effective, efficient, multiple and varied assessments of learning while expanding their grasp of the often unanticipated, rich and deeply personal connections students make in their learning

And perhaps most importantly, our adaptation of Stiggins' work with alignment has given us specific language for a continuing conversation about teaching and learning in and through the arts that is focused on student achievement and how we know learning is happening in our classrooms. These discussions have potential benefits not only for our students, ourselves and our colleagues; but also, and equally important, for school leaders, parents and the community at large.

The goal and how Stiggins' work helps us reach it:

In our professional development conversations with teachers, they have often commented about the ambiguity of the standards. They made comments such as, "The standards are too vague," and, "I don't see any curriculum in the standards. How am I supposed to know if I'm meeting them unless they tell me what to teach?" Our first response had been that the Minnesota K-12 arts standards are content standards not curriculum standards. Content standards are a description of what students should know and be able to do. They are written to allow teachers across the state to teach using a variety of techniques and curriculums, which allows students to learn in different ways. Our second response had been to distinguish the difference between the standards as *learning intentions* and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) art processes—create, perform and respond—as curriculum design models to scaffold incremental, intentional teaching. What we call the *large learning* processes provide a foundation for building lessons or units that engage students in the authentic work of the arts. These two responses only took us so far. Some teachers could then *read* their classroom learning activities (curriculum and instruction) into the state standards but others still could not. We intuitively felt there was a missing step, one that would support all teachers in reliably building the relationship between the state standards and their classroom curriculum and instruction.

Our first answer to this missing step problem was provided by Rick Stiggins of the Assessment Training Institute. He offers a relatively simple analysis of standard/benchmark statements based on the verbs (as Zane had so wisely advised us earlier) used to describe the required student learning. Stiggins defines **four possible types of learning** in content standards: **knowledge, reasoning, skill and the ability to produce a product or performance**. These four types of learning intersect in useful ways with other taxonomies of educational objectives such as those developed by Benjamin Bloom and Robert Marzano. As well as clarifying the intent of standard benchmark statements, Stiggins describes a way to develop each of these types into specific classroom level learning goals and to align appropriate assessment activities to them. Using the Stiggins process to develop a classroom level learning goal makes the type of learning required in a standard benchmark clear and observable. The process also helps teachers to align curriculum and instruction to the benchmark requirements and the assessment activities.

For example, visual arts teacher Kathy Grundei of the Blake School chose this middle school visual arts benchmark statement to address in her unit on abstract expressionism (See #7 PowerPoint):

The student will:

3. understand how visual arts elements are similar to and different from the elements of other arts areas, such as dance, music, or theater (this standard benchmark is from the 2003 revision of the Minnesota Academic Standards in the Arts; not the newly revised 2008 standards).

She determined that the benchmark verb, “**understand how** elements are similar and different,” requires the student to learn to **reason** about similarities and differences between the elements of different art forms. Once Kathy made that determination, she wrote the following learning goal based on the benchmark and her specific classroom curriculum that focused on *Lavender Mist* by abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock and on *Kim* by jazz musician Charlie Parker:

3. The student will compare and contrast elements and principles of art and music using the painting *Lavender Mist* by Jackson Pollock and the musical piece *Kim* by Charlie Parker.
(reasoning)

Rather than address all the benchmark statements in the middle school visual arts standard, Kathy selected the five benchmarks she felt her students would be best able to address and she would best be able to assess in a single unit. She wrote four more classroom level learning goals developed from and aligned to standard benchmark statements. The five learning goals for Kathy’s unit do not describe the whole of her curriculum—all the learning activities and instructional steps—in the unit. But the learning goals do describe her **teaching intentions** based on the standard benchmarks and point to the **key elements of her curriculum**. By developing these learning goals, Kathy has selectively chosen those parts of the standard for which she is willing to hold herself accountable for teaching and her students accountable for learning. With specific classroom learning goals that marry the standard benchmark statements to her curriculum, Kathy’s work of selecting or developing assessments and ultimately evaluating student learning becomes much clearer and potentially easier to manage.

And that is the goal of the K-12 arts standards and the NEAP arts processes—student learning that is based on authentic work in the arts which results from incremental, intentional teaching, **and** evaluation of the quality of that learning using evidence gathered through aligned and appropriate assessment tools. When all these are aligned—standard benchmarks, classroom level learning goals, curriculum and instruction, assessment activities and evaluation criteria, research shows student achievement improves. The Stiggins’ process has given us specific language by which to have professional conversations that support all teachers in reaching that goal.

Cheryll Ostrom is an education consultant who specializes in K-12 curriculum and assessment as well as professional development and school improvement. She currently works with the Perpich Center for Arts Education, the state agency charged with leading K-12 Minnesota arts education, and the St. Paul Public Schools. Her prior employment includes twenty-seven years as a Language Arts teacher at Osseo School Senior High and a position as staff development specialist with the Osseo district. Ostrom also worked for the MN Department of Education doing research, development and training for implementing K-12 academic standards and statewide testing.