

Lesson Plans for the Seventh Grade Alaska State Standards in Language Arts

A  
PROJECT

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### **Abstract**

The SBE (standards-based education) reform movement calls for clear, measurable standards for all school students. Rather than norm-referenced rankings, a standards-based system measures each student against the concrete standard. Curriculum, assessments, and professional development are aligned to the standards. However, many teachers find standards burdening and restrictive, and it has been challenging for teachers to infuse them with her, or his personal passions. The purpose of this project is to demonstrate that not only can these new standards be taught effectively, but that teachers can find them accommodating enough for their passions. This project's outcome will include lesson plans, activities, and assessments, along with my personal reflection as to the efficacy of using these new standards without losing the passion for teaching with them.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction/Rationale**

### **1.1 Personal Significance**

When I began my studies to become a teacher at UAF in 1996, there was a big, colorful poster on the wall titled: Alaska Content Standards. These content standards, which applied to all subjects, were an attempt at Standards-Based Reform (SBR). These standards were meant to not only guide educators in what was felt to be the most important concepts in each discipline, but to also inform parents and students of their expectations, as well.

Seventeen years later I still use standards in my classroom. Standards have helped me be thoughtful about lesson planning and rigorous in my instruction. Standards are the tools I use to communicate with students, parents and colleagues on a range of educational priorities and initiatives in my classroom.

These standards, however, are not the same standards that I was introduced to seventeen years ago in my first university education classes. Since their introduction in Alaska, as well as around the nation in the 90s, they have undergone an evolution of sorts. Lively debates have followed standards wherever they have been implemented. Blind faith in standards has led to poor implementation, while contentious debates have led to paralysis and incomplete understanding.

### **1.2 Educational Significance**

As I have learned, the standards are not an attempt by the Federal Government to take over my classroom. I have never been taken to task by any

authority when I decide to deviate from the standards and bring something in that I felt was important to my classroom. Standards are not a dumbing down of my curriculum. Standards are a communication tool first and foremost, a planning tool secondly, and lastly, a means to improve curriculum.

As a coach, businessman, and teacher, I have learned that it is important for stakeholders in any enterprise, whether it be a team, a staff or a class, to be on the same page. Goals, and the methodology to reach those goals become more attainable when they are clearly communicated and fairly transparent. In 1996, standards were at best a comprehensive vision of what we wanted our children to learn. In many cases they were unwieldy and vague. These new standards have been pared down over the years, at times, through heated debate. What more is there has been a shift in standard based assessment (SBA) from content to skills, leaving teachers, parents and administrator with local control.

One of the greatest challenges for teachers and students has been pacing and rigor of the classroom. Without enough rigor in the classroom, or if the pace of the classroom is not adequate, students will receive an education that may focus on some concepts and skills while neglecting others. As this project will demonstrate, these new sets of standards can be taught and assessed comprehensively in one school year and still leave plenty of room for additional creativity and advanced exploration by both teacher and student. Tracking students according to the standards becomes important as children move across the grade levels. Parents and students will know the expectations that teachers have for them. Teachers will

understand these expectations to ensure transitions from grade to grade are smooth, as well as when transferring from school to school.

A well-trained teacher whose craft is creative, dynamic and engaging has the potential to outperform and exceed any of the incarnations of standards over the years. A high-quality, well-trained teacher and standards are not mutually exclusive ideas. Standards in the hands of ineffective teachers will not make them better teachers, but standards in the hands of effective and dynamic teachers become valuable tools for communication, strategy and professional development.

A hammer can be a tool or a weapon and so can standards. And considering the many couches of educational philosophy, and societal interests (ranging from passion to profit, it seems that all parties are willing to use the standards both ways, as a weapon and a tool. The fights over educational reforms however do get caught up in larger educational debates that they have little to do with. Standards can be a boon, bane, and, at times both.

Diane Ravitch, the one time architect turned critic of standards-based reform, has gone from one of President G.H.W. Bush most influential voices, advocating a hard line for teacher accountability and standards continuing that course through the Clinton Administration and G.W. Bush's game-changing No Child Left Behind law. In her latest book, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*, she writes about an impending future for public education that is based increasingly on profit. Dr. Ravitch states that U.S. schools, while not perfect, need less of an overhaul and more of a rethinking. Dr. Ravitch calls for more mental health counselors and prenatal care and healthcare

services in general. She points directly at poverty being the root cause of a student's inability to learn, and to an even greater extent why some schools are failing. From her blog she states the main problem with standards is the way they were created outside the purview of the American National Standards Institute, a nationally recognized board that certifies the process of industry standards (see <http://dianeravitch.net/>).

### **1.3 Purpose of Study**

While standards are not an idea from the future, their future application may become significant enough to warrant a novel look. As I have found the standards taught in my classroom are well meaning and clear, I did not see one thing in the standards that was not worth learning, or was not interesting to teach. I had high turn in on all my assignments, and low, almost no, classroom management issues. I found these standards easy to manage, completely viable to teach, and assess. All in all it has been a great experience being able to clearly communicate expectations to all shareholders in an organized matter while being thoughtful about the materials I used to teach.

I am more certain now than I ever have been that education will continue to present ideas that are worth debating. The literature that has brought us to this point is evidence of that debate. It is more importantly a debate about how our students will be taught. The question as to whether the teacher is the ultimate authority in the classroom, and consequently in a student's education, is also being debated. The establishment of standards that are based on the wishes of a community may not merely preclude what a teacher prefers to teach, but

establishes a standard for what teachers will teach and students will learn. Here, the debate gets contentious.

#### **1.4 Rationale:**

Education in Alaska, to put it simply, is at a crossroads. As we enter the twilight of one federal program, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a consortium of states, fueled by federal funds, have decided to fill the void with a new form of SBR with distinct advantages over previous versions both in their design and implementation: the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Up until this point in my career, I navigated the intricacies of the federal law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB at times encouraged a narrow curriculum, irrelevant data, and a general disdain for progressive and concerted reform. What is worse, NCLB brought little improvement to overall student achievement and may have even done more harm than good. The idea of SBR as sound pedagogy persists.

Significantly, teachers are increasingly held accountable for student achievement and this accountability will increase after full implementation of the CCSS and the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District's (FNSBSD) plans to include student achievement data in a new teacher evaluation plan. This shift overall will create a certain amount of anxiety among shareholders, but especially within the ranks teachers. It will be important to create an environment in which teachers and students will thrive. Transparency at this time of transition is essential to ensure trust between, and among shareholders. To my fellow teachers and administrators, this paper is intended to serve as an example that research

combined with current trends can bring about positive and rewarding results for the public, and institutions we serve.

The new Alaska State English Language Arts Standards (AKELAS) are based upon the CCSS, which have been adopted by 46 states, but not Alaska. Currently, other states are opting out of the CCSS consortium, but it has yet to be seen if the consortium itself will disband. While not an exact copy of the CCSS, the AKELAS show very little difference from the CCSS.

In the past teachers have cited numerous reasons why they have been reluctant to work with standards. Some cite the "encyclopedic" nature of the standards (Sheperd 2009), while others have considered the standards to be too low level (Bandeira de Melo 2009). Other reasons range from they are not what's on the test, to a belief that they are already teaching those standards. Whatever the case may have been in the past, there are new incentives now for teachers to ground their pedagogy in standards, and assess student achievement according to the AKELAS guidelines. The leading incentive is a new teacher evaluation tool to be used by FNSBSD called The Danielson Model (Danielson 2013). As Danielson states

"I think the common core rests on a view of teaching as complex decision making, as opposed to something more routine or drill-based. That's a view I've always taken as well. It requires instructional strategies on teachers' parts that enable students to explore concepts and discuss them with each other, to question and respectfully challenge classmates' assertions. So I see the common core as a fertile and rich opportunity for really important professional learning by

teachers, because—I don't know now how to say this nicely—well, not all teachers have been prepared to teach in this way. I see that as one of the enormous challenges facing the common core rollout." (Rebora 2014)

This new evaluation model ties teacher performance to the standards by including student achievement according to the standards in the teacher's evaluation report.

Further incentive to use the AKELAS is that it is a very manageable document that can be understood by all shareholders and will create pathways of communication. Content areas contain no more than ten standards. In its newest version SBR has listened to educators and simplified past ideas into ten clear and concise standards for each content area that are less prescriptive as to what a teacher is to teach, but defines what a student should be able to know and do, and know when the standard is met.

As *The Great Gatsby* said, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past"(Fitzgerald 1925). Searching for that great American education system that once was, that system which prepared its students for the world after school and beyond. Maybe, it's not into the past we should be looking, but towards the future. In 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was published, there was no Internet and we were a seemingly homogeneous society compared to the U.S. in 2014. With all these changes to our society, both culturally and technologically most of our answers seem to lie ahead of us, however it would be thoughtless to forget the past. It is the blending of past educational theories and best practices with

current changes to our educational system (charter schools, correspondence schools, online learning, etc.) that this project must try to reconcile.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Background of Alaska's Standards

*A Nation At Risk*, published in 1983, became the catalyst for what has become presently a historically long and critical look at education in the U.S. Citing declines in SAT scores; literacy rates and received increased input from business and community leaders. *A Nation at Risk* found that "declines in educational performance are in a large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is conducted"(DOE, 1983). The CCSS is meant to be transparent to all shareholders, parents and students especially; progress will be achievable to all students with immediate, understandable feedback and actionable data that will lead to enrichment, or remediation.

Since 1983 and the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the field of education has made steady and thoughtful progress towards improving the delivery of education in the U.S. After all these years, *A Nation at Risk* continues to served as a catalyst for a more rigorous system of accountability and leading to the reform movement known as Standards Based Reform (SBR). There was then, and still is now a perception that American schools should be doing better in terms of student achievement. Students from the U.S. may be falling behind their counterparts from other industrialized, and not so industrialized nations have been noted (Hanushek 2012).

In the early 1980s Kentucky, Texas and California began experimenting with different aspects of SBR. They each met with limited success, but came away with large portions of their SBR programs intact (Hamilton, 2008).

Then, in 1991, the Alaska Department of Education began a process of creating the state's first standards in education, which included content standards in English Language/Arts. In 1994 the Federal Government passed Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was made law. ESEA (1994) required, "that states set challenging and rigorous content standards for all students and develop assessments aligned with the standards to measure student progress". Standards: content, performance and cultural have undergone adjustments in the last twenty years, but it is safe to say they have stood the test of time as viable paths for educators to go down leading us to the current version of CCSS and the AKELAS.

In 2001 President Bush along with Senator Ted Kennedy ushered through a bill that eventually became a law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This law was seen as a heavy-handed attempt by the Federal Government to exert influence over local schools and districts. The law's initial sponsor was Senator Ted Kennedy would state later in 2007 when NCLB came up for reauthorization. He writes:

We know the law has flaws, but we also know that with common-sense changes and adequate resources, we can improve it by building on what we've learned. We owe it to America's children, parents and teachers to reinforce our commitment, not abandon it.

(Kennedy, 2007)

NCLB it appeared to its critics placed much emphasis on basic skills and rote knowledge. NCLB SBR, the critics went on, applied mandates--mostly unfunded--in a one size fits all model with top down pressure intended to improve student achievement. This type of limited reform, however, lacks key elements of true SBR, such as voluntary shareholder buy in. NCLB's biggest fault was the emphasis placed on test scores. Most critics pointed to how not only did the test scores demanded by NCLB reveal little, but they were also unreliable, and, on a whole, exerted a perverse and corrupt influence on student achievement altogether (Ryan 2003).

Critics of NCLB's form of SBR attacked its reliance on standardized testing in order to measure achievement and accountability. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a chief indicator of a school's success, and largely decided by test scores. These test scores had little impact on student progress. AYP often came too late and was in its aggregate too blunt an instrument to influence student progress in a meaningful way. These tests were not only inadequate tools to affect learning, but the high stakes that these tests were aligned with actually warped the learning environment.

Data has been unreliable and at worst possibly distorted when addressing questions about the success of SBR. In December of 2002, Audrey Amrein and David C. Berliner published a paper detailing the influence of high stakes testing, a common metric in the SBR movement, on achievement and curriculum (2002). In state after state results of tests were mixed.

Critics of SBR raised concerns about NCLB such as teaching to the test, a narrowing of the curriculum and inflexible requirements for special needs and other students. In an Education Policy White Paper on Standards, Assessments and

Accountability from the National Academy of Education on the topic of SBR, it took exception with several tenets of SBR. It calls a fair conclusion, that even though student achievement has been associated with increased accountability, there is no clear-cut or dramatic improvement that these improvements are related to accountability measures alone. Another correction that needs to be made if this current attempt of SBR is to be successful is implementing meaningful assessment. In the past, implementing high-stakes tests, the kind we have seen under NCLB, have shown little or no positive influence on overall student achievement. Correlation between student achievement on state tests and student achievement tests such as ACT, NAEP and AP tests are sketchy at best (NAE, 2009). At worst, high-stakes testing that is accompanying the current era of SBR is actually impeding student achievement by narrowing the material that teachers are covering, material that appears on these other national tests, but not on state tests.

However, a more comprehensive look at SBR reveals that while accountability is essential, SBR is much more than test-based reform. Other facets of SBR are equally important. The kind of high-stakes testing that has been prevalent throughout the course of SBR has not impacted learning as much as was hoped. What is needed now is assessment that primarily impacts instruction, which is what the CCSS and SBAs generate on a continual basis. Assessment when integrated with curriculum and instruction is a pillar of SBR. Sheperd (2009) insists teachers must "develop valid and useful measures of classroom teaching and learning practices" have encouraged thoughtful conversations.

## 2.2 Current Literature

As recently as 2010 Linda Darling-Hammond and Ray Pecheone (2010) detailed what it would mean to develop an internationally comparative educational system and many of their recommendations mirror those made in *A Nation at Risk*. What Darling-Hammond illustrates is the advantages of integrating curriculum and assessment; and, how teacher-created assessment items and performance tasks enhance learning (2008). It is not enough to merely teach these new standards, but they also need to be assessed. Critics of this would say that teaching to the test does not enhance learning, but designing better tests that illustrate the knowledge and abilities each student holds at a given time and reporting that promptly back to the educator just might (Darling-Hammond&Pecheone 2010).

Standards-based Reform, as a movement, has been evolving considerably over the last thirty or forty years towards the CCSS which calls for more than just high-stakes testing and complicated accountability schemes. It currently calls for alignment of key elements of the educational system; the use of assessment of student achievement; decentralization of responsibilities or decision relating to curriculum and instruction in school; and support and technical assistance and accountability provisions related to the CCSS. In practice the various components of SBR have been implemented piecemeal, and has met with the resistance of educators, parents and politicians who are wary of a heavy hand. A careful reconsideration of the facts reveals that elements of SBR have been associated with effective instruction.

Recent attempts at SBR in California, Texas and Kentucky that predate the Federal Government's involvement (Hamilton, 2008) have shown how SBR may be implemented effectively. In each of these three cases accountability through assessment played a significant role in shaping the parameters of SBR. You cannot test what you cannot teach, but you test what you do teach. This required more authentic assessments with local control over what was on the test. Kentucky was rebuffed in its attempts to create innovative assessments, citing the unreliability of scores and the amount of class time that these more authentic assessments consumed and returned to a more traditional standardized test. California, which began with an assessment that "pushed the boundaries of large scale assessment" was also forced to scrap their ambitions in favor of a more cost efficient and data-driven multiple-choice test (Rand, 2008).

In Texas, test scores were unfortunately used to highlight under performing schools, placing sanctions, as well as initiating state supervision against schools deemed low performing. What happened in Texas is what critics of SBR fear most. While knowing if a school is under-performing is not in and of itself a bad thing, after all you can not fix what you do not know is broken, the ramifications of being a low performing school can mean staff being replaced, and even the whole school being closed. Closing schools and firing staff is not an effective use of the knowledge you gain about a school.

In their book, *Pathways to the Common Core* Calkins, Ehrenworth and Lehman (2012) consider the CCSS the most sweeping document in the history of

education. With adoption by forty-five states, the CCSS is an influential document and a viable option to NCLB.

Alaska's latest attempt to implement broad based SBR incorporates the lessons of past attempts, and current approaches from a wide variety of recommendation. Specifically, instead of a federal mandate, compliance with the CCSS is voluntary, and states are choosing whether or not they want to join. As of right now, Alaska is not part of a consortium of 44 states and four territories implementing the CCSS. Like Alaska, Texas, Minnesota, North Dakota and Virginia are remaining wary, but alert to developments around the nation. In the final outcome, determining what works in education and who in what school is doing it at a distinguished level is essential to improving education.

Mistakes have been made implementing standards-based reform, but as we learn from these mistakes, such as test-based reform, and through the review of the literature, SBR continues to be a viable framework. Recommendations, such as taking a more comprehensive approach to implementing SBR (Hamilton 2008), and recommendations for greater accountability systems and increased government involvement (Sheperd, 2009) are encouraging signs that SBR still shows promise.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Having worked with standards since 1996, I am familiar with certain ideas for lesson planning. For the purpose of this project I focused on the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening standards and set out to group them into units. The AKELAS come in two groups of 10, Reading standards and Writing standards, a group of five, Speaking and Listening, and a group of six, Language. This gave me 31 total standards, in which I needed to plan, instruct, assess and record the results. Standards ten in writing and reading are geared towards creating a portfolio, which I would do through completion of the other twenty-three standards. I grouped these standards and came up with eight distinct units, five of which I will discuss here.

### **3.1 Statement of Bias**

There is no formal debate or critique of standards in this paper. Its focus is how to implement them in a seventh-grade classroom. For my own pedagogy I have rarely gone outside the Alaska State Standards to find a framework for my curriculum. I believe the standards, while not perfect, are good and I capitulate to educational leaders their prerogative to govern in the best interest of students the overall educational system my school and consequently my classroom. What this project strives to do is reconcile the needs of the many with the needs of the few who pass through my classroom. Therefore, it is not likely that one will find any support in this project for teaching without standards. While a reader with a critical eye will find fault with this authors perspective, it was not the intention.

### 3.2 Target Audience

I planned and implemented this project at Ryan Middle School (RMS) in Grade seven English classes. Demographically, the students of RMS represent a cross-section of races and socio-economic standings. However, RMS is not a Title 1 school, but only because federal requirements for reporting made on secondary schools are apparently too onerous for the assistance we would receive as a school and the FNBSD has declined those funds.

I also hope to reach teachers so that they will see the benefits of teaching the new AKELAS outweigh the effort that it will take to remake their curriculum. Designing new lessons based on the AKELAS will encourage critical thinking and therefore a more mentally agile student. I hope they see this as an opportunity to use the standards to collaborate with other teachers and reflect upon their own practice in the face of their current classes.

The teacher I want to reach most is the teacher who is just beginning their journey with the standards. Not having a clue about standards, or how to implement them can be a daunting position for a teacher. This project is meant to serve them as an example of a starting point from which they can form their own lessons and ideas.

Another teacher I want to reach is the teacher who will be dismissive of the standards as a reinvention of the wheel. These teachers may get blindsided by the new emphasis put on this curriculum by The Danielson Framework evaluation model. Due to their recalcitrance, they may end up having to play catch-up.

### 3.3 Product Description

Each unit was centered around a novel, or a story with the goal of creating text-dependent discussion questions that would lead to critical thinking and would be exemplified in writing assignments that had the additional goal of creating fluency and mastery of paragraphing and, then, multi-paragraph essays. I chose these novels by first looking at the AKELAS reading standard 10:

10. By the end of the year, read and comprehend a range of literature from a variety of cultures, within a complexity band appropriate to grade 7 (from upper grade 6 to grade 8), with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

I chose *Rikki Tikki Tavi*, *A Bottle in the Gaza Sea*, *Freak the Mighty*, *A Long Walk to Water* and *The Wave*.

The first title *Rikki Tikki Tavi* (Appendix A) gave me the opportunity to discuss India and Great Britain, and colonialism. *Rikki* is written in a short story format and is grade level reading material. The essential question constructed for the story was, "Is Rikki a hero or an interloper?" (Appendix B) Is it right to protect your young at all cost, even if it means exterminating competition? There is no evidence that Nag and Nagaina, the seeming protagonists of the story ever did actual harm to anyone before Rikki, the apparent protagonist, arrives in the garden where the story takes place. These were the text-dependent questions that drove engagement for the students. Comprehension, engagement were assessed with writing a short essay after reading the story, viewing the supporting materials such

as movies and audiobooks and participating, actively, or otherwise, in class discussion.

The next unit, which centered on the book *Bottle in the Gaza Sea* (Appendix I), the Romeo and Juliet type love story conducted via email and instant messenger by Valerie Zenatti. This unit let us learn about the Palestinians, Israelis and their struggles. This novel written in a modern epistolary style was at the high end of the grade level. The essential question was to compare and contrast the lives of the Palestinians and Israelis in terms of fairness (Appendix J). Fairness is a concept with which most middle school students are familiar. After viewing the support materials such as maps, videos and Internet resources, and engaging in class discussions, student engagement and understanding of the unit was assessed by writing a short essay.

*A Bottle in the Gaza Sea* was not the only book, which strengthened the connection between social studies and English. The third unit *A Long Walk to Water* (Appendix G) allowed us to draw on current events, geography and culture. It was also the first unit we focused extensively on vocabulary using the Frayer Model for vocabulary (Frayer, 1969) and focusing on words such as immigrant, refugee and diaspora. This was our first multi paragraph paper and the students would need to choose a word, research and discuss it's importance in the book. Around this idea, and in keeping with a theme of the book, formed the essential question, "Would you rather live in a mud hut where everyone loved you; or, in a palace where no one loved you?" After reading the book, viewing materials such as video, audio and Internet resources, and participating in classroom discussions, students will write a

four-paragraph essay discussing the vocabulary word they chose and its meaning in the book, as well as a short essay answering the essential question, "Would you rather live in a mud hut where everyone loved you; or, in a palace where no one loved you?" (Appendix H)

The fourth unit grew from a book called *Freak the Mighty*. This book, which is told in first-person narrative memoir-style, is set in a poorer neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio. Among the themes in this book were disabilities, broken homes, love and how the main characters Max and Kevin perceive themselves. It was this last theme that created the essential question, "Think about Max and Kevin. How does each think about himself? Is this perception correct? What causes either Max or Kevin to feel this way about himself? Feeling this way, how could it affect their lives? Students were assigned to write a short essay addressing these questions.

The fifth and final unit based on the novel, *The Wave* (Appendix C) also took place in the United States, but in a wealthy area of Palo Alto, California. In the book, a teacher who is teaching his class about World War II finds his students reluctant to believe that forming a dictatorship under the right conditions can be easy begins a Nazi-like movement in his school that kids fail to recognize. *The Wave* which was based on a true story formulated the essential question, "Would you rather be right and alone, or, would you rather be wrong and be popular?" We also used *The Wave* as a vehicle to allow students the platform to write a five-paragraph process essay (Appendix D).

In the end it was the literature that drove these units. These high-interest novels piqued my students' curiosity about places, situations and ideas that were

unfamiliar to them. Conversely, these new ideas were couched in the students' ideas of fairness. In every book there was an issue of fairness that the kids could understand. Complex issues of whether fairness was a right, or did you have to earn it? Was being fair treating everyone equally, or making everyone equal? The process to and through the final formative assessment was regimented and beneficial. Students knew and thrived under the process for learning described previously.

Goals such as vocabulary development could be addressed through the writing process. Standards in reading, writing, and speaking and listening could be grouped into units, and literature and activities would instigate the desired critical thinking skills. Most Those skills are vocabulary development, compare/contrast, cause and effect, drawing conclusions, and describing a process, among others. I used the *Step-Up to Writing* (Auman, 2003) program as well as *Thinking Maps: A Language for Learning* (Hyerle, 2003) to brainstorm an outline for each assignment. I insisted on consistency in approach to learning and procedures for accomplishing assignment so my students could focus on the assignment itself and not the directions for completing the assignment. My instruction was explicit in terms of how to use each of these tools and guidelines in order to complete the assignment. I used *Google Docs* for composing, collaborating and storage of all student work.

I set out to create a minimum number of assignments, just enough to provide evidence that the AKELAS were taught and assessed, believing that students would be able to focus more on the ones that they were given. Too many assignments can distort the real goals of any lesson. I presented the skill above the content believing

that while content does transfer, skills were more essential to a student's success. Each assignment, rubric and associated material were presented, and discussed with the student before we began exploring the material, so students were aware immediately of the goals and expectations.

Assignments became routine, yet retained enough novelty that students never complained of redundancy. The use of technology kept the students engaged and the mastery of new skills each time promoted student confidence. In essence, repetition, which is necessary for mastery, was cloaked in new critical thinking skills as well as new books and other materials.

Students, for the most part, were able to monitor their own learning through a system of checkpoints. This increased the amount of time I spent monitoring students individually, allowing me to spend time with the most needy students. A checkpoint could be an outline, a proofreading checklist or a summative assignment.

In the beginning, knowing that time would be a brutal taskmaster I took all the standards for reading, writing and language and organized them into 10 units with the goal of teaching a new unit every 18 school days. Since one unit of standards, R.10, W.10 and S&L 6 could be represented as a portfolio from the other units, I decided to make each unit 19 days long and reserve eight days for portfolio refinement, four days at the end of the first semester, and four days at the end of the year.

On a big desk calendar, I laid out first the school calendar first, taking into account as many deviations from the schedule as possible, including assemblies,

early outs and school holidays. I also considered this calendar to be flexible and assumed that some units would run long, and others would run short.

It became clear early on that all students learn and accomplish at different paces, so while considering the curricular calendar, I also considered classroom policies in regards to the timely completion of work and grading. I decided that all work would be accepted as long as it met acceptable standards (Appendix). I also decided that I would set no time limits on the assignments, but would establish a suggested pacing guide for students and parents.

In addition, each assignment would be a work in progress until complete when it would receive a grade. I decided students would receive a grade of A+ for completing the assignment. While I understood this was quite unconventional, I believed it encouraged students to turn in their best work, however good it was. Students in middle school are notorious for not turning in assignments. It was critical that students turn in work under this regime, because their progress depended on authentic assessment of skills upon which new skills could be built and weak skills could be remediated. I now believe this policy also helped achieve a high rate of assignments turned in which was 98% in the first quarter and 97% in the second quarter.

Using the Wiggins and McTighe Model (2001) explained in their book *Understanding by Design* (UBD), I engaged in a process that was laid out in UBD according to three stages. Using the AKELAS as my established goals, the next step was to formulate a set of essential questions through which students would gain understanding and skills. In the first unit, "Rikki Tikki Tavi: Hero or Interloper?",

there was only one essential question: Was Rikki a hero or an interloper? As I began to develop further units I became more adept at developing these kinds of questions, however, in this first unit, which I was also using as an initial assessment for a reading, writing and language standard it was, in hindsight, best to only have this one question. In the next unit I would come up with too many, but after that I think I settled down deciding on 1-3 of the most essential ideas of the literature under study.

Moving along Stage 1 in the UBD model to key knowledge and skills, I turned to two programs already in place in our school: *Thinking Maps* and *Step-Up to Writing*. I used *Thinking Maps* to organize the critical sequencing skills that would guide students through the process and to illustrate the essential knowledge they would acquire in order to display the skills, the writing assignment, that was the target of what students should be able to do.

In Stage 2, Determining Acceptable Evidence, I took into considerations the explicit goal of having students answer text-dependent questions. Using the "Six Sentence Paragraph model set out by the *Step Up to Writing Program* (SUTW), I aligned writing prompts so that students would have to gather evidence from the text and explain in their own words how this evidence supported their opinion, or helped them draw conclusions about the text. Aside from the "Bottle in the Gaza: Compare and Contrast" (Appendix) Assignment, where students took evidence for both their details and their elaborations, all questions relied on students drawing conclusions from evidence in the text. In "Rikki", students needed to find evidence that Rikki was either a hero or an interloper; In the "Israeli/Palestinian Unfair

assignment students needed to use evidence from the text and explain in their own words why they thought this was unfair; In "Freak the Mighty Cause and Effect," students needed extrapolate on the causes and effects of Max's personality traits, and so on.

I also let kids pre-grade their paper using the rubrics from the SUTW handbook, spell check and grammar check additionally requiring them to make corrections/changes before submitting their work. No work was accepted that did not meet the minimum requirements of the rubric. The rubric itself was designed to stress the reading, organizing and writing skills desired by both teacher and student. Getting students to understand and use the rubric would help them reach their goals. The rubric used the same vocabulary I used in the SUTW outlines. Additionally it included a category for types of sentences used. With no overwhelming data to support this idea, it still seemed that this was worth remarking upon in the rubric for two reasons: 1) Students should be made aware of the varying types of sentence structures that could enhance their writing, and, 2) Students who are not using complex and compound sentences may need some remediation. In either case, it seems at least worthy of a writing goal.

For the most part, what I accepted was still technically a first draft. A subsequent draft would be derived from this and put into their portfolio. I planned on three portfolios, the first one taken after the first quarter, another at mid-year, and an end of the year portfolio. In the first quarter portfolio there would be the five pieces of writing from the first quarter. In the mid year they would include the best four of those five, and add the two longer pieces "The Long Walk/Lost Boys

Assignment" and "The Wave Assignment". Of the four pieces taken from the first quarter, students would take one of the short pieces and convert it using the method illustrated in the SUTW program. This would give them a total of three short pieces, six-eight sentence paragraphs and three long pieces, four-five paragraph essays. The final portfolio would include these and selected work from the third and fourth quarter.

## **Chapter 4. Reflection:**

### **Introduction**

Having never known anything but standards since I became a teacher in 2000, it is hard for me to imagine teaching without them. Subsequently, the Alaska State Language Arts Standards already had a place in my class in lesson planning and assessment. I was comfortable with the role each played in guiding me to offer my students a comprehensive and viable curriculum. I appreciated how the standards assisted me in thinking about my yearlong goals, allowing me to see beyond the next lesson, the next unit, the next month and am confident that I was fulfilling my part in these students education.

### **4.1 Outcomes**

The outcomes of this project, the lesson plans, assignments and assessments were part of an overall approach to create a cohesive classroom culture in which a strong work ethic, self-reliance in conjunction with collaboration and critical thinking were nurtured and praised. The AKELAS were supported by quality literature and film, intriguing questions, spirited discussion and carefully paced projects. It is hard to say whether standards spawned my lesson planning, or was it my lesson planning that brought to life the standards, but the benefits to the students were considerable.

In the first place, the standards allowed me to set up a yearlong plan and schedule accordingly. I was able to cover each unit with enough time to cover the essential questions, but not too much to where the students became bored. Student engagement was high as we moved along at a brisk but unhurried pace. This

contributed to the classroom culture greatly. I knew from the onset that time management and economy would be necessary and planned accordingly. Students felt the rigor, without feeling the stress.

Using the standards to guide and pace my classroom instruction offered me key concepts and ideas that influenced my assessment. The standards pointed out things worth assessing without overloading the curriculum with assessments. This allowed the classes to focus on a few assessments. These assessments as was mentioned here were turned in at a rate of over 97%. Since the class was portfolio driven, it was essential that students turn in something for us with which to work. I believe these standards kept my classes focused on what was essential, which in turn led to clearer communication between my students and myself.

Another benefit was that with clear goals and rubrics created for and by these standards my communication with parents and administrators was clear and they were able to help students complete the work necessary in order to successfully complete their course of study. Furthermore, creating transparency and sharing my goals, both short and long term, encouraged further communication.

I believe this increased communication and its clarity contributed to the high quality and the high turn in rate of my student's assignments. I also believe that better communication and increased focus on only what was essential reduced the number of discipline issues I had in my class. When your goals are clear, and your directions are clear kids understand you better. When kids understand you better they are less likely to act out. Knowing the assessment at the beginning of the lesson allowed kids with above average academic abilities to work ahead and not be

held back by students who needed more time. Without standards it would be unnecessarily difficult to establish this type of goal-oriented classroom where communication is free flowing and all stakeholders are on the same page.

Another critical outcome was the need to mine more assessment data from the assessments that were already planned. In addition to the portfolios the students were keeping and the narratives I was recording about those portfolios, the next phase would be to keep a record of growth. This could be comparing rubrics from consecutive writing assignments, as well as student surveys. Moreover, student knowledge of topic sentences, thesis statements and the overall structure of paragraphs and multi-paragraph essays could be assessed using a range of summative and formative assessments. While assessing engagement to the lesson comprehension of the literature and the ability to command the processes for completing the assignments were and are essential, writing is a multi-faceted and dynamic skill that in order to improve requires a closer look. Furthermore, as the standards become more familiar there is so much deeper into them for a teacher to go.

#### **4.2 Uses for Teachers in Other Classrooms**

Teachers could use this project in different ways. Most significantly, this project demonstrates one educator's process in unpacking a set of standards. Using the *Understanding by Design* model and formative assessment in conjunction with rich literature based units was a successful way to communicate the standards. Teachers will be able to recognize that the standards as they are being addressed here provide a framework for implementing standards in any classroom.

In addition to using this project as a model for implementing standards, these lesson plans can be used as they were by me to instruct a of seventh, or even eighth-grade class. These lesson plans include materials, activities, and rubrics and are ready to implement in the classroom. Teachers may also use these lesson plans individually, and not all five. Each lesson plan is a unit unto itself, so it's easy to use one or two without having to use them all.

Teachers may use these lesson plans as a framework for teaching literature. Each book was carefully considered not only for its ability to draw in readers, but for the amount of relevance and current support materials (i.e., study guides, web quests and quality films) that bring the story to life and scaffold key elements of plot and theme.

Finally, teachers in other classrooms may find the technological aspects of *Google Docs* useful for composing their essays. *Google Docs* is an essential tool for students. Instructing students on how to use it effectively will increase collaboration and organization. Students will be unable to lose a paper once they start. The instructor will always have access to the student work regardless of in which stage is the paper.

The expectation I have for myself is that I am able to construct lessons, which can illustrate my students' talents and shortcomings. Lesson planning should be a reflection of developing standards to give students the opportunity to succeed, not just in a limited criteria, but in ways teachers may not have expected, or planned. Assignments should reflect a prism of comprehension and a teacher should be prepared to describe who a student is, and what a student can do on an objective

level. When we start to say this is what an eighth grader should know, this is what a sixth grader should know, what we are really saying is that without this knowledge/skill they are not performing at grade level. If this is true then we should look closely at what essential knowledge, knowledge that helps achieve proficiency of a standard, we want our students to know and call them standards. Teachers should be required to teach the standards, whether it comes in the form of Grade Level Expectations, Curriculum or a punch-list. When a group of people is working in concert for common goal collaboration becomes a key to success.

Be that as it may, standards can become cumbersome and in all actuality weigh down a classroom, but teachers should strive to incorporate more standards, and, in some cases, they may just need to emphasize the skills and content they are already teaching in their classroom. A kid should know what they can and can not do based on a more thoughtful target than the daily lessons. Sharing our expectations as educators with the community-at-large is logical for obvious reasons: open dialogue and the process of refinement of the standards through debate.

The fact of the matter is that teachers come and teachers go. They change buildings, districts and eventually leave the profession. The legacy that they leave behind is reflected in the success of their students. These standards will contribute to that living legacy of students by instituting a policy of expectations for our students, their families, their teachers, and policy makers in both school administration and federal, state and local governing bodies. Once agreed upon and implemented, standards will have a beneficial effect on education.

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## Appendix A