State-based curriculum-making: the Illinois Learning Standards

Ian Westbury


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1186740

Published online: 22 Nov 2016.
State-based curriculum-making: the Illinois Learning Standards

Ian Westbury
Department of Curriculum & Instruction, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA

ABSTRACT
This case study of the development of the Illinois Learning Standards of 1997 parallels a study of the development of the Norwegian compulsory school curriculum of 1997, Læreplanverket 1997. The pair of case studies is designed to explore the administration of state-based curriculum-making and, in particular, the use of the administrative tools of compartmentalization, segmentation and licencing. Often the use of these tools serves to make the curriculum as a guiding instrument largely symbolic and/or ideological.

The [Illinois Learning] Standards … are based on the thoughtful input of thousands of teachers, administrators, parents, employers, community leaders and representatives of higher education. Collectively, the statements in this document define what Illinois citizens believe all students should know and be able to do as a result of their public schooling. (Joseph Spagnolo, Illinois State Superintendent of Education in ISBE [1997])

Until the 1990s, the state education agency (SEA) in the US state of Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), had had only a limited responsibility for curriculum-making. Curriculum decision-making, that is, the specification of programmes and subject content, was the prerogative of local education agencies (LEAs). However, in the aftermath of the national agenda for school reform sparked by the Reagan administration’s A Nation at Risk in 1983, many states had become more assertive and ambitious about the state’s role in what had been a local concern.(3,2),(996,993) In Illinois the first of the resulting initiatives emerged in 1985 to strengthen the ‘accountability’ of schools to their communities. A programme of state-wide low-stakes (for individual students) tests in both elementary and high schools was begun, along with the public distribution of ‘Report Cards’ for every public school in the state. ISBE was also given the authority to intervene in schools that were ‘failing’ when judged by the state’s tests.

By the end of the 1980s, such reforms, replicated across many US states, were being judged to be largely unsuccessful in steering a significant improvement of the patterns of school achievement. Consequently a further national mobilization for school reform emerged in the last years of the 1980s centred on the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics (the NCTM Standards; NCTM, 1989) outlining an advisory mathematics curriculum and standards for US schools.

CONTACT  Ian Westbury  westbury@illinois.edu
© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
The *Standards* quickly became accepted as a model for a strategy for improving curricula and teaching. This model entered the public, political arena in 1989 by way of the ‘Charlottesville conference’, at which then-President George H. W. Bush joined all 50 state governors to advocate major changes in US schools (Vinovskis, 1999).

The platform that emerged from this conference contained two planks: (1) raising the quality of learning for all students and (2) improving the learning of the lowest-achieving children. The instruments that were seen as having the promise to achieve both of these goals were (1) comprehensive national *content and performance standards* modelled on the *NCTM Standards* that would serve as the basis for state-mandated curriculum standards and (2) the state-based and -mandated assessment of student performance based on those standards (Manna, 2006; Kendall & Marzano, 1996; Vinovskis, 1999).

In the years that followed the mobilization resulting from the Charlottesville conference was to support three key national policy initiatives:

- The provision of federal funding for national subject associations and other organizations to develop content and performance standards in the sciences, history, the arts, civics, geography, foreign languages and the English language arts (ELA) to stand alongside the *NCTM Standards*.
- ‘Systemic reform’ as the policy framework within which the reform agenda might be enacted. The key policy elites (see Smith & O’Day, 1991; see also Cohen & Spillane, 1992) were making the case for viewing past federal reforming initiatives as unsuccessful because they had failed to engage the loosely-coupled structures and systems around curricula and teaching in US schools, i.e. the system’s compartmentalization and segmentation (see Westbury & Sivesind, 2016; see also Spillane, 1998). They advocated systemic reform, arguing for coherence and alignment across the principal instruments steering US schools, that is, curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, assessment, oversight of instruction, teacher education and teacher licensure (see Cohen & Spillane, 1992).
- Federal funding to enable states to develop content and performance standards as anchors for the other instruments available to them for steering their school systems. In the initial framework for this policy agenda these state frameworks were to be ratified by a newly formed National Council on Standards and Assessment.

In the changed political climate that emerged with the election of Republican, i.e. centre-right, majorities in both Congressional houses after the 1994 election, all efforts towards developing frameworks for mandatory rather than advisory content and performance standards went off the national agenda (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning [McREL], 1993; Wixson et al., 2004). However, the significance of the idea of content and achievement standards for school improvement remained more or less unquestioned and the task of developing and implementing content and performance standards was moved to the state level.

In 1994, the Congress made funds available to states to develop ‘challenging’ content and performance standards and to introduce state-wide assessments based on these standards. However, it was becoming clear by 1994 that the seeming consensus that had emerged around the idea and substance of content standards was illusory. Professional and popular debate about what content should be included in the standards for *ELA*, science, social studies and (even) mathematics was emerging. Such debates were significantly complicating
the effort to mandate standards in states, such as Virginia, that had been early movers in standards-setting (see Fore, 1998).

### Developing the Illinois Learning Standards

#### Some background

In the early-1990s this new platform was picked up by the centre-right governor elected in 1991 and, with the capture of the state’s legislature by the centre-right in late-1992, became the state’s education policy agenda. In the same period Illinois’ business-centred educational lobbies adopted the new national platform of standards, assessment and accountability as their platform for educational reform in Illinois. In mid-1994 a new State Superintendent of Education, Joseph Spagnolo, was appointed with a mandate to follow through on the state’s ‘reform agenda’. Six months after his appointment, and after widespread consultation, he issued a ‘concept paper’, *The Illinois Quality Schools Initiative: ‘Building the Foundations for Change’* (QSI; Spagnolo, 1995), outlining a comprehensive programme for a wide-ranging ‘reform’ of the state’s educational system. The paper picked up all of the elements of the George H. W. Bush and Clinton platforms as projected projects for ISBE: the development of state content and performance standards; changes in the structures of teacher education and certification; more equitable funding for schools; the equalization of curriculum offerings and opportunities-to-learn across the state. All this was embedded in a narrative linking the quality of schooling to economic development and job growth (see Table 1).

The introductory pages of the QSI paper spelt out a ‘vision’ for a far-reaching reform of the state’s educational system. However, the operational ‘Strategic agenda’ presented in the QSI gathered together set of discrete existing ISBE projects *without establishing clear linkages across these projects*. In the ‘Strategies for action’ that followed each component in the ‘Strategic agenda’, the reform became a set of focused managerial tasks for ISBE. In other words, the comprehensive bundle of issues that the QSI paper outlined was fitted into ISBE’s long-standing discrete problem compartments—*despite its framing in the language of systemic reform*. As a result, the proposed *Illinois Learning Standards (ILS)* project emerged as a

---

**Table 1.** The Illinois ‘Quality Schools Initiative’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s not too strong to say that with a system of education that is not meeting the needs of our citizens, we are at risk. Without oversimplifying a complex problem, the risk we endure is related to three fundamental issues. Those are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We fail to adequately educate a significant portion of our children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We have not successfully connected the process of schooling with the world of living and working; and,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We have many students who lag behind students in other industrialized countries, particularly in areas like science and math[ematics]; and many who have not acquired the most rudimentary skills necessary to secure and maintain employment in the dawning of the information age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But even a greater concern is that dramatic changes in our economy and social environment have made the reality of mediocre educational performance even more problematic than in the past. The number of low-skilled, routine production jobs, once the staple of our commerce and business, is now shrinking and only represents a fraction of the opportunities three decades ago.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics and social reality have changed dramatically. More children are now reported to be impoverished than ever before. There is more reported child abuse and neglect than in the history of our country, and violence and crime impact our lives and the lives of our children to an unprecedented extent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The plight of the unskilled and uneducated and the resulting hopelessness is becoming a pox on all of our houses. Although the issues we face are complex and confusing, our system of schooling must change to reflect the new social dynamic and the new economic realities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

single pillar in the reform agenda—bracketed with the national projects developing standards \textit{without} being linked to the plans for a restructured state assessment programme, organizational issues within schools, e.g. pervasive course setting and/or tracking, or course and programmatic offerings in schools.

Of course, each of the components of the QSI project did raise complex problems within their subject-area compartments as well as having their own constituencies, e.g. teachers’ state-wide subject-area associations, universities for teacher education credentialing. Thus ISBE’s goal for the proposed \textit{ILS} project was ambitious—to specify both content and performance standards for the core subjects at both elementary and secondary levels.\textsuperscript{10} Although much of the work around this task had been done by the national standards projects, by the mid-1990s these projects, as well as the emerging standards in other states, were exposing professional and lay conflicts around the specification of the content as well as pedagogy.\textsuperscript{11}

The commission to develop the \textit{Illinois Academic Standards} began its work in Fall, 1995. The first draft version of the Standards was released for public and professional comment in July 1996. The final version, with the new title, the \textit{Illinois Learning Standards}, was formally adopted by ISBE in July 1997. In the pages that follow, I will unpack the organization of the \textit{ILS} project and recount some pieces of its internal history. My questions focus on the structures and organization of the \textit{ILS} commission and, in particular, the possible use in the project of Haft and Hopmann’s (1990) tools of compartmentalization, licencing and segmentation (Westbury & Sivesind, 2016). Do we see versions of these ’German’ tools being used in the very different cultural context of a US midwestern state? Illinois is a crucial test case for the portability of Haft and Hopmann’s (1990) model of state-based curriculum-making.

\textbf{The ILS commission}

The mandate addressed by ISBE’s leadership in creating the \textit{ILS} commission was embedded in the national advocacy of educational reform.\textsuperscript{12} Yet the idea of a state-based school reform assembled from notions of standards and of assessment had strong support from the most influential business lobbies in Illinois and from the well-regarded centre-right state governor. In other words, ISBE had a strong mandate for its \textit{ILS} project from the state’s political and business leadership. The state’s teacher communities were well aware of the national projects developing content and learning standards as well as the federal programme to develop state standards. Within ISBE some key agency leaders also strongly supported the project as a vehicle for their ambition to give ISBE a clearer profile as an active, productive SEA.

\textbf{Organizing the ILS commission}

The \textit{ILS} commission was appointed, managed, supported and monitored by ISBE and co-directed by a leader from a state-supported STEM-focused high school and a senior member of the ISBE staff. Two hundred and seventy individuals served on the commission, organized into three primary teams: a management team, called the \textit{Coordination Team} ($N = 26$); seven \textit{curriculum-writing teams} ($N = 216$) covering the curricular areas of \textit{ELA}, fine arts, mathematics, physical education and health, science, and social studies and history, and foreign languages (advisory only); and a \textit{Superintendent’s External Review Team} coordinating and pondering the feedback on the public drafts of the \textit{Standards} ($N = 24$).
Consultants from a national organization brought experience with standards-writing, formats, etc. to the commission. Representatives of schools, LEA offices and universities dominated the commission, making up 59% of the members (see Figure 2).¹³ When representatives of state-wide teacher unions, school board associations, ISBE, etc. are added, over 80% of commission’s members represented components of the state’s public education system. We should note that, although workplace preparation was an important part of the rationale for the ILS, the community college system (grades 13 and 14), the site of most of formal vocational education in the state, had only one representative on the commission; he was a member of the mathematics writing team. Likewise, high-school vocational education, ‘career education’, etc. were largely unrepresented on the ILS commission.¹⁴

**Compartmentalization**

The exclusion of fundamental school organization and subject canon questions has become so self-evident for syllabus authors that suggestions to treat such questions in curriculum commissions are today met with incomprehensibility. (Haft & Hopmann, 1990, p. 162)

As I have noted, although the QSI green paper was framed within the language of ‘systemic reform’, the tasks it outlined were presented as firmly compartmentalized. Thus such issues as within-school grouping and streaming/setting in middle and high schools and their implications for proficiency standards, programmatic frameworks in secondary schools, and graduation requirements were not seen as within the mandate of the ILS commission. Furthermore, although the issues around education and work (and youth unemployment) were highlighted in the QSI, no mention was made of creating school or curricular structures...
for any expanded or reformed vocational or career education or for developing standards for prevocational, career or vocational courses in high schools.

In addition, the task of creating a framework of specifications and performance standards for the revised state proficiency tests was not built into the mandate of the ILS commission. When the commission members asked about this they were told that it was a matter for ‘later’. (ISBE was to buy an off-the-shelf set of tests for college-bound students as the core of its Prairie State Achievement Test for all grade 11 students.15) In other words, despite the ‘systemic’ characterization of the reform agenda, ILS, ostensibly the lynch-pin of the reform, was developed in a silo, without firm links to other components of what had been initially identified as a systemic reform.

Segmentation

Segmentation … allows [the] strict division of curriculum construction and the public debate on how knowledge should be distributed.

As long as the very purpose of schooling remained an open question, curriculum planners were unable to develop procedures without getting lost in the web of educational and political issues. (Haft & Hopmann, 1990, pp.163, 164)

Haft and Hopmann (1990; see also Spillane, 1998) identify segmentation as a segregation of working groups within organizations such that groups from different discourse communities are gathered together to work on components of the process or product within differentiated settings or structures. The tasks becomes ‘stretched over’ what can be several phases and settings, working groups, subject-area committees, etc. (Spillane & Sherer, 2004), that may or may not be tightly coupled. Text can be passed along from setting to setting but without the context of earlier deliberations, and therefore of meaning and intentionality.
Segmentation is typically seen as an organizational problem inasmuch as breaks up a focus on comprehensive, i.e. systemic, problem-solving (see Spillane & Sherer, 2004). However Haft and Hopmann (1990) contend that the ‘discovery’ by German ministries of education of the constructive ambiguity associated with segmentation made participation for all groups with professional or policy interests in a curriculum deliberation possible—but not in ways that create conflicts of perspective.

Thus within curriculum-making representatives of discrete subject-matter communities or grade-levels can work together without interfacing directly with other subject or grade groups. Like can talk to like, without the confusion introduced by different starting points, i.e. physics, biology and general science, ‘education’ and assessment/testing, the chalk-face and the managerial, etc. But segmented structures, with the support of a project’s buzz words and slogans, can also encourage the illusion that different working teams in a curriculum commission are engaged in a common process, within a shared overall enterprise. Differences in interpretation around the meaning of a curriculum document can be masked!

Needless to say, the process of developing the ILS was stretched over many working levels and groups over several years. The basic design and strategy was mapped at the federal level with the decisions to adopt and fund a national standards-based improvement strategy with assessment as its lever. National subject-based committees were charged with developing national standards. These decisions, and their products, preempted subsequent state-level decisions about the canon of subjects and topics, subject and topic scope and sequence, the place of vocational and career education, etc. In Illinois, this federal strategy was unquestioningly accepted as their mandate by the governor, legislature and ISBE as well as by the state-wide public-interest and professional communities that would be involved in Illinois’s instantiation of the federal platform.

**Segmentation within the ILS commission**

The 270 members of the ILS commission were, as I have noted, divided into three broad task groups: a Coordination team, seven writing teams and a ‘Superintendent’s External Table 2. The template for the Illinois Learning Standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Each learning area section contains the following information:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• An introduction to the learning area explaining the learning that is captured in the standards and background information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A section called ‘Applications of Learning,’ in which five cross-disciplinary abilities are discussed as they apply to the learning area:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Solving problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Working on teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Making connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Charts of Goals, Standards and Learning Benchmarks that define the essential knowledge and skills for the learning area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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.

Table 3. Professional backgrounds of ILS commission teams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teams</th>
<th>ISBE N (%)</th>
<th>Other state N (%)</th>
<th>School N (%)</th>
<th>Intermediate N (%)</th>
<th>University N (%)</th>
<th>Public and professional interest groups N (%)</th>
<th>Business N (%)</th>
<th>Other N (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-ordination</td>
<td>7 (22%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>7 (22%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>10 (31%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum writing</td>
<td>39 (18%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>99 (46%)</td>
<td>23 (11%)</td>
<td>24 (11%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>25 (12%)</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External review</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>21 (38%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46 (17%)</td>
<td>6 (2%)</td>
<td>101 (37%)</td>
<td>33 (12%)</td>
<td>27 (9%)</td>
<td>21 (8%)</td>
<td>8 (3%)</td>
<td>30 (11%)</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Review Team. Table 3 and Figure 3(a) and Figure 3(b) break down the membership of these ILS teams into the nine broad categories representing different communities of practice and/or constituencies for school improvement.16

A segmentation by task would seem clear: 65% of the members of the subject-matter writing teams came from schools, LEA central offices or LEA-level school-centred organizations, or were subject methods faculty in colleges and universities; 18% were from ISBE; and 12% were ‘other’. Thirty-one per cent of the 32 members of the Coordination Team represented state-wide educational, teacher union and public interest groups; 22% were from intermediate agencies such as LEAs; and 9% came from universities.17 Only one person from the schools was a member of this group. Similarly, the 24-member External Review Team was dominated by representatives of educational and public interest groups and business firms (63% of the members); ‘other state agencies’ (13%); and intermediate educational agencies (13%) (see Table 3 and Figure 3a).18

The character of this segmentation is further highlighted in Figure 3(b). The pattern is striking: with a few exceptions, school-level personnel and ‘others’ are only found in the curriculum-writing teams, where they are joined by some representatives of ISBE, central offices of LEAs, and university faculty. Only a thin scatter of representatives of public or educational interest groups, business, or ‘other state agencies’ are part of the writing teams. Conversely, the External Review and the Co-ordination teams contained only a scattering of school-level representatives or ‘others’ but many representatives of ‘business’ and of public or educational interests. In other words, we see a clear structural segmentation across the ILS commission’s teams based on professional backgrounds and ‘languages’: like could talk with like.

Organizationally the goal of such professional segmentation was a sense of shared goals and starting points, preoccupations and language within the teams. This appears to have been the case for at least the writing teams within ILS commission. In their responses to an OCC questionnaire directed at the ILS writing committee members 71% of the respondents reported that they shared a conception of the tasks of the school ‘from the beginning’ of their work together or ‘after a short discussion’; 63% reported a similarly shared conception of the tasks of their subjects/learning areas and of methods/approaches, etc. Only 36% reported shared conceptions around ‘fundamental political convictions’ (see Figure 4).

These curriculum-writers also reported that it was research in education/general pedagogical arguments, arguments made by subject-matter or learning area experts, and educational experience that their teams found significant as they made their final recommendation. They attributed less salience to both political and legal/policy arguments (see Figure 5).

**Licencing**

Licensing refers to a procedure whereby … planning authority is disengaged from executive responsibility …. [A]ssume control, but leave responsibility to others …, to those who finally execute the programme. (Haft & Hopmann, 1990, pp. 162, 168)

Haft and Hopmann (1990) see licencing as a mechanism that effectively decouples an authoritative state-based curriculum or syllabus from the day-to-day work of schools and teachers—such that responsibility for effectiveness and/or implementation is placed in the hands of teachers and schools. In Germany’s traditional pattern of control of schools, the principle of Lehrfreiheit, the freedom given teachers and school to interpret state curricula in their teaching so as to meet the ‘needs’ of their students, instantiates licencing. Teachers
are licensed to teach the content outlined in Lehrpläne—as drivers are licensed to drive, hopefully knowing, and maybe following, the rules of the road.

However, the principles of Lehrfreiheit and licencing also serve to separate curriculum planning, that is, creating and mandating the rules of the road, from implementation—driving in ways that comply with the rules of the road. By implication, the problems around the implementation, teachability and effectiveness of curricula are relocated from the state’s designers to local curriculum-makers, teachers and schools. At best the state’s curriculum-makers ‘steer’ the ideologies and platforms of the system (see Lundgren, 2003)—as US states determine speed limits, at least at the formal level or when policemen are around.

Figure 3. Segmentation: Professional backgrounds of team members. (a) Teams and (b) roles.
The constitution of schooling in Illinois has no principle similar to Lehrfreiheit. However, Illinois has long left the work of curriculum-making (seen as embracing courses of study, the content of those courses and methods of instruction, the selection of textbooks, etc.) largely to LEAs. LEAs may, in turn, delegate curriculum decision-making to individual schools and/or individual teachers. The ILS as such did not bring any new elements to this mix beyond ISBE’s advocacy of the importance of a focus on standards and a threat to build a state-wide

Figure 4. Writing teams: ‘Were there shared conceptions in your Team/group around …’
Note: ‘From the beginning of the work’ + ‘after short discussion’.

Figure 5. ‘What priority or significance was given to the following types of arguments?’
Notes: (1) (a) As your team made its final recommendations, what priority or significance was given to the following types of arguments: Political arguments? (b) Research in education/general pedagogical arguments? (c) Arguments made by subject-matter or learning area experts? (d) Legal or policy arguments? (e) Arguments based on educational experience/practice. (2) 1 = None; 2 = Very little; 3 = Some; 4 = Significant; 5 = Very significant.
accountability system around the new state standards. And in practice the accountability associated with state-wide mandatory assessments and public reporting of results was to direct LEAs’, schools’ and teachers’ attention to the performance standards associated with tests. But the development of performance standards was not, as I have indicated, part of the mandate of the ILS commission and were not discussed within the commission.

**Licencing as a curriculum planners’ tool**

After the final publication of the ILS it was widely reported in the Illinois media that a number of controversial curriculum topics and terms, e.g. evolution in science, had not been reintroduced, despite professional protests (see Matsamura, 1997; Ogle, 1998). In one of our questionnaires to the ILS curriculum-writers, the omission of evolution from the final standards was described by several respondents as an act of ‘political cowardice’.

However, a leader of the ILS commission explicitly invoked a principle of *licencing*—of LEAs rather than teachers—to side-step the issue: as a local decision content that was not in the ILS could, and should, be included in local standards. In other words, the absence of any topics in the state Standards does not preclude LEAs (and schools) from including such topics in their curricula, and was not a basis for criticism of the ILS. In taking this stance, the state’s curriculum-makers, with their interest in avoiding state-wide controversy, redirected the responsibility to local rather than state actors. The ISBE administrators involved with the ILS project understood the utility of licencing as a useful and effective administrative tool separating state-level planning from local execution.

**Conflict in the ILS commission**

Conflicts are inevitable in curriculum-making. They are outcomes of the decisions to be made and of the positions of the actors in the process. Bähr et al. (2000, p. 20)

In their empirical study of Swiss curriculum-making in the 1990s, Bähr et al. (2000) observed that the variety of backgrounds that persons appointed to curriculum commissions bring to their task produces ‘substantial potential for conflict within commissions’ (p. 24; emphasis added). Such conflicts may be what Bähr et al. term *conflicts of form*, i.e. substantive subject-matter conflicts, or *conflicts of position*, i.e. conflicts around views of the tasks of the school embedded in different roles in the system. As we noted above, ISBE’s administrators seemed well aware of *segmentation* and *licencing* as tools for managing conflict in and around the development of the ILS.

However the segmentation within the ILS project departed from what many be thought of as an ‘ideal’ segmentation. As I have noted, ISBE followed the subject canon and frameworks for the national standards and, as a result, conflicts of position were almost built in to some subject-area teams as elementary-, middle- and high-school representatives worked together. Thus the ISBE’s initial social studies committee was not seen by the ‘historians’ in teacher education and the schools as developing standards that reflected their priorities; the initial draft social studies standards were reworked by a newly constituted panel of historians and history educators after the initial feedback cycle.

In the case of the ELA team the *conflicts of form* and the *conflicts of position* around the committee were so serious that the team’s external co-leader published a widely-circulated paper outlining the ideological and methodological differences between the ILS leadership and (some) committee members (Ogle, 1997). As Ogle saw it, the ILS leadership wanted
the language of the *ELA* standards to be ‘acceptable’ across political and school constituencies rather than to be visionary or reflect best practice. The result, as Ogle (1997) put it, was one in which ‘little of our original conception remained ….. What the professional community considered most important was being screened through other [political] lenses’.20

However (and again), seen from the point of view of the *ILS* project managers, all that had been eliminated from the *ELA* committee drafts were *words* like ‘affect’—the meanings behind these words firmly remained in the final document. And, as one member of the Coordination team indicated, where these editorial decisions were reviewed, there was ‘exclusion of some information some thought needed to be determined locally’.

The ISBE leadership took a pro-active stance towards the developmental process, a reflection of their awareness of the potential pitfalls that could occur as the *ILS* were read by some activist constituencies. And, as I have noted, they aggressively used Haft and Hopmann’s (1990) tool of *licencing* to allow the contentious issues circling around the new state curriculum to be dealt with at the LEA and school level. By moving in this way, ISBE sought to avoid the kind of state-wide mobilization of opposition to the standards that occurred in several states (see e.g. Wixson et al., 2004). But there was a price to be paid—hostility towards the project’s managers on the part of some curriculum-writers and critical newspaper commentary after the *ILS* was formally adopted by ISBE. But this criticism was not aggressive; it did not threaten the *public and professional* legitimacy of the *ILS*.

**Problems unsolved**

Another serious problem reflecting the *compartmentalization* around the *ILS* commission was to emerge after the draft standards were released. ‘Preparation for work’ had been a core part of the rationale for the national standards movement as well as the QSI green paper (see Table 1). However, as a reflection of the conflicted understandings of the tasks of the school system, the implicit mission of the school and the starting point for the *ILS* project was defined in terms of *academic* standards: indeed the *ILS* project had been entitled the ‘Illinois Academic Standards’ until the final review.

ISBE began to address this problem by way of an evaluative review of the draft *Illinois Academic Standards* by panels drawn from the state’s ‘Education to Careers’ professional communities (Woodhull, 1997) that had, to that point, been outside the ISBE’s standards project. The upshot was a critique of the absence of notions like ‘careers’, ‘employability’ and ‘workplace’ from the draft *Standards* and a recommendation that ‘academic’ be removed from the standards documents. Thereafter the project became the *ILS* and the final Standards document included an appendix with an anodyne listing of ‘Workplace skills & career development competencies’.

**Conclusion**

In spring 1998, Donna Ogle, formerly the ‘external’ co-chair of the *ILS ELA* team and a vigorous proponent of a ‘reformed’ teaching of the language arts, wrote a third paper discussing her *ILS* experience (Ogle, 1998). Her readers were largely the state’s community of teachers of elementary-school reading and language arts. She began this third paper by pointing out that two of the national organizations that had reviewed the state’s *ELA* standards had ranked Illinois as among the best in the nation21: despite our frustrations about what is lacking in our own standards, they seem to reflect the expectations of many in this “movement”’ (p. 44; see also Ogle, 1997; Ogle & Logan, 1995).22
Ogle (1998) went on to reflect on the ‘implementation’ of the ELA standards and the forthcoming development of performance standards—‘samples of children’s work that serve to illustrate what children should be expected to do’ (Ogle, 1998, p. 44). She talked of the work being undertaken in LEAs to align district and school curricula with the ELA standards and of the positive dialogue that was occurring in and between elementary and secondary schools and LEAs. However the bulk of her attention went to the implications of the standards for the new state-wide tests being developed by ISBE. While Ogle did not highlight the loose coupling between the ILS commission and the development of the ‘new’ achievement tests, this was clearly a major issue resulting from the silos ISBE built for standards-writing, testing.

In raising these issues Ogle was highlighting a tension that was at the heart of the US standards movement/project: Was it the intention and expectation that ‘standards’ would steer school-level curricula? Or would ‘standards’ provide a basis for an assessment that was to be driver of instruction (as they were to become with No Child Left Behind [NCLB] reforms of 2001)?

The narrative of standards

However, in an earlier paper in this series we contended that the core task of the state’s curriculum-making is to develop, and instantiate for both publics and practitioners, official narratives accounting for the work of schools and schooling (see Westbury & Sivesind, 2016). Curriculum-making and the associated implementation processes are the state’s instruments to articulate and communicate these narratives to the constituencies of its schools. In other words, the state’s official narrative becomes an important part of each community’s and school’s narrative about its educational work and its purposes—and thus of the idea of ‘school’ in ‘our’ time.

Although they do not use this language, DeStefano and Prestine’s (2001) 5-year longitudinal evaluation of the ‘implementation’ of the ILS can be interpreted in these terms. Drawing on the state-wide survey of teachers and schools that they undertook in 2001, 3 years after the state’s adoption of the ILS, they sought to characterize the ‘level’ of internalization of the ILS narrative by way of a 5-step typology. Forty-three per cent of the schools in their sample were at Level 3, ‘Transition to an ILS-led system’ (see Table 4): there were

**Table 4. Standards-led LEAs and school practices.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level five: ILS-led system</th>
<th>Continuous review and improvement of policies, programmes and practices with regard to ILS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial implementation time line accomplished, and district moves on to second generation of implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing curriculum revision based on ILS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All new programme development considers ILS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom context and practice aligned with ILS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High level of engagement of all staff in implementation of ILS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students communicate about their learning in terms of ILS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enthusiastic teacher and administrator commitment and support of ILS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deliberate use of ILS in decision-making by parents and community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B&amp;C</th>
<th>71</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tasks of school</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches/methods</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks of subjects/learning areas</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political convictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from DeStefano and Prestine (2001).
• Established plans, policies and timelines for ILS implementation that are well known at district, school and classroom levels.
• Linkages between district curriculum and the ILS.
• Teachers and administrators who are convinced that the ILS are the ‘way to go’ to improve student learning.
• Widespread impact of the ILS on teaching lesson planning, evaluation of student work, textbook selection, resource allocation and professional development. (DeStefano & Prestine, 2001, p. 16)

They note that there had been a 25% significant increase of schools in Level 3 (from 18 to 43%) from the preceding year. However, there were no schools at higher levels of implementation. They go on to point out that outside the schools that were learning the ILS ‘language’ and actively ‘implementing’ the standards by way of their alignment of district and school curricula, there were LEAs and schools that:

- do not have a clear idea of how to go about effective implementation once they move beyond the basics of curriculum alignment and professional development. There is a continuing need to demystify the implementation process as much as possible—to remove [the] ambiguity, uncertainty, and confusion that is currently evident. (p. 10)

DeStefano and Prestine go on to point to the ‘need’ for LEAs to develop local student assessment systems that went beyond the state testing system then used to measure student progress on the ILS. But if DeStefano and Prestine (2001) were correct in this judgement, such a move by LEAs and schools would clearly imply a substantial investment from LEAs. Again, nothing on this scale was foreshadowed in the state's planning or the development of the ILS. Very clearly the state had assumed control in mandating the ILS but, at the same time, it was clear that the responsibility for ‘implementation’ (and defining what ‘implementation’ meant) and the funding, was being left to others (Haft & Hopmann, 1990, p. 168).

As it turned out the standards were to have only a short shelf life as the priority for both ISBE and the state's LEAs. By 2002–2003 it was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) that was dominating the attention of policy-making elites, the federal and state educational agencies, LEAs and schools—to shift attention away from standards-based ‘reform’ towards the forms of test-based school and district accountability prescribed by NCLB.

Nevertheless, some within ISBE continued to believe that the ILS, the state's first curriculum, was the most successful project that the agency had ever undertaken. Its development went more or less smoothly and, to invoke the framework set out in Sivesind and Westbury (2016), the ILS made it possible for (for a short while) for ISBE to offer a seemingly plausible comprehensive narrative for the schools that was in accord with the national narrative and was directed at schools across the state. Many schools could work convincingly on alignment of local curricula and the ILS and enough schools picked up the standards to instantiate the new narrative (see DeStefano & Prestine, 2001). Such developments served ISBE's organizational need to be seen as a significant, effective agency working on behalf of the state's political leaders, schools, interest groups as well as providing a narrative that could be used to brand local schools.

Notes
1. The language commonly used to describe the state's educational structure in Illinois is confusing. ‘ISBE’ refers to both the Illinois State Board of Education as the governing body
for the state’s school system and the agency that supports the work of the Board. The nine members of the Board are appointed by the state’s Governor with the consent of the state’s Senate. The executive officer of the Board, who is also the head of the state education agency (SEA), is termed the State Superintendent of Education. The structure of the Illinois public education system is complex. State-level administration and regulation is the responsibility of the ISBE. However, within the broad framework of US public education, both policy-making and service-delivery are largely matters for local educational authorities (LEAs), that in Illinois range in size from Chicago with its 415,000 students and 19,000 teachers to small rural LEAs that administer only one or two small elementary (K–8) schools.

2. State legislation and regulations specifies the minimum high school graduation requirements in terms of courses and number of units; it also specifies the courses that must be included the curriculum of a state-recognized high school. The content of these courses is not specified. The state’s legislature has also imposed many ad hoc curricular mandates on schools, e.g. (1) Anabolic steroids. School districts shall provide instruction in the prevention of abuse of anabolic steroids in science, health, drug abuse, physical education or other appropriate courses of instruction in grades 7 through 12 and to students who participate in interscholastic athletic programmes; … (2) Black history. All public schools must include in their curricula a unit of instruction studying the events of Black history; … to include the history of the African slave trade, slavery in America and the vestiges of slavery in the United States, (3) Conservation education. All public schools must provide instruction, study and discussion of current problems and needs in the conservation of natural resources and (4) Holocaust and genocide study. All public schools must provide a unit of instruction studying the events of the Nazi atrocities from 1933 to 1945 and include lessons studying other acts of genocide to include those in Armenia, Ukraine, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, the Sudan, etc.

3. ‘Local’ meaning vested in LEAs. Some LEAs have centralized curriculum decision-making; others have delegated much decision-making to the school level. The frameworks for secondary programmes have been (traditionally) influenced by university admission requirements, state legislation and national developments, but determined by LEAs.


5. This movement had a platform filled with mixed messages. On the one hand, the advocacy centred on more ‘demanding’, ‘reformed’ and ‘active’ learning. On the other hand, the advocacy highlighted the idea of ‘standards’, that is, baseline expectations for student learning along with the evaluation of students’ achievements around those standards (see Cohen, McLaughlin, & Talbert, 1993; Wixson, Dutro, & Athan, 2004).

6. Education is a state responsibility in the US constitution. There has been a traditional jealous protection of state and local curricula across the country. In other words, the developments around the standards of the 1990s were themselves a significant new movement.

7. In 1993 Marshall Smith was to become the federal Under Secretary for Education in the Clinton Administration. At the time of that appointment he was Dean of the School of Education at Stanford University. He had been the Chief of Staff of the Secretary of Education in the Carter Administration (1979–1981).

8. One side issue in this mobilization is important for an analysis of the US standards movement of the 1990s. In most states schools are ‘owned’ and directed by LEAs that, as taxing bodies, generate significant local funding for schools. The outcome can be significant within-state differences in programmes and courses as well as facilities like school libraries and science laboratories, information technology, and curricular opportunities, as well as teacher salaries. Illinois had some of the widest inequities in expenditures, and thus facilities, in the US. Needless to say, because of the fiscal implications, many states fiercely resisted the opportunity-to-learn standards that the time many policy analysts were recommending (see Porter, 1993).

9. Spagnolo had been the director of the Virginia SEA and had directly experienced the political turbulence there around that state’s early initiatives around curriculum-making as standards development (Fore, 1998).
10. i.e. covering the subject areas of ELA, fine arts, foreign languages (advisory standards), mathematics, physical education and health, science, and social science (and history).

11. As Spagnolo (1997) was to write in a paper given 3 years later addressing standards-setting from ‘the policy maker’s point of view’: ‘I believe that [the policy maker’s] perspective is bound up in two fundamental elements. One is an educational element and the other is a political element .... There is the problem in putting these things together so they make sense from the perspective of an educator. .... I will tell you that it is a daunting task because in this state, for example, we have 177 legislators, 9 members of a State Board of Education, and a Governor’s staff, all of whom know more about this than I do’ (Spagnolo, 1997, pp. 1, 2).

12. The project was begun after a formal action by the state’s legislature for ISBE to initiate the project: ‘The State of Illinois, having the responsibility of defining requirements for elementary and secondary education, establishes that the primary purpose of schooling is the transmission of knowledge and culture through which children learn in areas necessary to their continuing development and entry into the world of work .... The State Board of Education shall establish goals and learning standards consistent with the above purposes and define the knowledge and skills which the State expects students to master and apply as a consequence of their education.’ Each school district shall establish learning objectives consistent with the State Board of Education’s goals and learning standards for the areas referred to in this Section. (see http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/94/094-0875.htm).

13. This data is drawn from the published listing of all participants in the Illinois Standards Project; work roles and employers are included in the listing (see Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE, 1997]). The occupational roles of members of the ILS commission in Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3 were classified as follows: (1) ISBE: ISBE professional staff and consultants; (2) Other state: representatives of other state agencies, e.g. the Governor’s office, Illinois Department of Public Health; (3) School: school-level teachers and administrators; (4) Intermediate: intermediate agency (i.e. LEA-level) supervisors and administrators; (5) University: university administrators and faculty; (6) Public and professional: representatives of educational, public interest groups; (7) Business: representatives of business firms and (8) Other: other. The category of ‘other’ includes committee members identified as parents, the president of the Illinois Council on Economic Education, a dance consultant, an educator from the Shedd Aquarium (Chicago), a writer, a drama and a music consultant, the executive director of the Illinois Alliance for Arts Education, and a program director from the state’s Arts Council.

14. As were the applied sciences like agriculture, engineering and medicine as well as such fields as nursing (see Ausubel, 1967).

15. In 2001 the ACT test battery, a college-aptitude test widely used in Midwestern universities, along with another ACT-developed off-the-shelf prevocational test and an ISBE-developed science test, became the core of Illinois’s upper-secondary certification system without any public assessment of its content validity in the light of the ILS. The design for the earlier grades testing involved developing test specifications and setting standards for evaluating individual school performance: ‘below standards,’ ‘meets standards,’ ‘exceeds standards.’ Test specification and standards-setting were not included in the scope of the work of the ILS commission.


17. Three of the 32 members of Coordination team came from universities but, in contrast to the university representation in the writing committees, these were university administrators.

18. We can gain further insight into the nature of the segmentation around the ILS curriculum-making process by examining the titles of the members of the different task groups. All but one of the members of the Co-ordination and External Review teams classified as coming from intermediate agencies were superintendents or directors of education; the exception was the director of a major agency in Chicago for in-service education. On the other hand, all but one of the members of the writing groups who came from intermediate agencies had job titles suggesting that their roles involved interfacing with teachers and schools; the one exception was the director of assessment in the Chicago Public Schools who served on the fine-arts writing team.
19. ‘We on the committee know that many of our professional colleagues are confused by the results of our efforts, knowing our commitments and what individual [school] districts have already accomplished …. [But] we were advised that the documents that would be produced were not be ‘Committee documents’, but that the committees were only one of the inputs that were important. The documents were state documents!’ (Ogle, 1997; emphasis in the original).

20. ‘The filters through which each word and priority [of our drafts] were being sifted were very political in nature. Through many discussions and conference phone calls, specific decisions affecting all of the content areas, and ours in particular became clear: First, the audiences that were reviewing our work were not ready to accept what we considered to be the ‘state of the art’, i.e. integrated language arts with a focus on constructing meaning and engaging in integrated learning; Second, embedding the learning of phonics and spelling in meaningful tasks and uses of language was not acceptable; Third, we found a lack of understanding of the reading process as an evolving process …; Fourth, although we are committed to reading and literacy as affective processes that must engage students at a personal level, this concept was found to be unacceptable by others. All mention of ‘affect’ and constructing personal meaning were deleted from our work; Fifth, many words common to our understanding were too politically ‘hot’ or controversial and were removed. Even the term ‘cultural’ or ‘culture’ as in ‘representing a diversity of cultures’ had to be changed (after much protesting by us) to ‘societies’ as a palliative to allow its continued inclusion; and Sixth, much as we wanted to include visual literacy and recognition of new forms of communication, we were overridden (Ogle, 1997, pp. 80, 81).


22. Other reviews of the ELA standards were more critical: ‘… the standards for each cluster say that students should “read age-appropriate material with fluency and accuracy”, but there is no further guidance given as to how challenging and complex the literature should be at each grade cluster’ (Gandal, 1997, p. 51). Other reviews of the ILS have been scathing: ‘The Illinois standards are overstuffed, not with particulars but with vast headings:’ Month-long benchmarks abound (e.g., a middle school benchmark: “Explain relationships among the American economy and slavery, immigration, industrialization, labour, and urbanization, 1700 to the present”). Items are repeated across grades, as though all eras of history are to be taught at all grade levels in equal depth and breadth—exactly the opposite of a well-articulated, teachable kindergarten through twelfth-grade progression of instruction’. ‘The Learning Standards are unteachable and untestable in predictable ways because of their broad generalizations.’ (Gagnon, 2003, p. 62).

23. ‘The performance descriptors are a supplement—not a replacement—for the ILS. They are intended to help teachers align their curricula to the standards and to help students meet performance expectations at ten stages of educational development’ (ISBE, 2002). However some states included performance standards in their state content standards.

24. The policy goals of the standards movement were, of course, ambiguous. In a follow-up evaluation of the ‘implementation’ of the ILS, DeStefano and Prestine (2001) noted that lower-achieving districts and schools were ignoring the ILS in favour of aggressively monitoring their outcomes on the state’s assessment programme. The sanctions associated with poor test results offered more powerful incentives to these districts than the idea of learning standards.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Ian Westbury is Professor Emeritus of curriculum & instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA. He is General Editor Emeritus of JCS. His publications include (with Stefan Hopmann and Kurt Riquarts) Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000).
References


