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EECE 642

5-Minute Read #2 – Unpacking Standards

I think that unpacking standards may look a little different for math than others. So I will discuss that math perspective a little. I know that the article that Troy issued talked about Doug Reeves suggesting, "7 to 12 power standards" and that Ainsworth thinks about "one third", but as a middle school math teacher, I would say there's only about 4 in 7th grade and 5 in 8th grade. In 7th grade, we focus on proportions, unit conversions, formulas and similarity. In 8th grade it's linear equations, solving for x, systems, exponents and graphing. Now, I happen to be in a middle school where there are two (out of two) 5-12 math teachers who have math degrees and a staff that is small and works well together. When I was at a much larger school, we could not agree on how to "unpack" our standards and we ended up seeing more students fall through the cracks. This was a result of poor leadership and a refusal from less knowledgeable teachers on which standards were important.

Let's take a look at 8th grade MCAs in math. There is only one focus on probability and data in 8th grade and that is Scatter Plots. Scatter plots are easy, they're visual, students tend to have their highest percent correct on them AND they make up 25% of the 8th grade math MCAs. This should be a power standard, right? I would say, "no." They have almost no future value for math and are easy to figure out even if you have never seen them before. There is no real concept to them and they do not build on other math. However, I have met teachers who teach this strand incessantly because of how valuable it is to the MCA (again, 25%).

So my question is, "Who has the final decision on which standards to unpack?" I think that question should be asked/revisited each year to ensure everyone is on the same page. We do the same thing for our ELA, our Science and, at a much lesser extent, our Social Studies (we like giving this subject flexibility to ensure engagement - look at its standards if you never have).

So, I say unpack first and select power standards second. As a math teacher, I have to be able to think about what is required for my grade levels through the MCA, and then also think about what is required for future math. For example, in 7th grade I can choose to focus on 7th grade only standards and narrow the power standards down to just 4 of them for MCA purposes. However, only a couple of those translate into future math and therefore may not be my main focus for the students during the school year. Four or five years ago, I may not have been able to do that because I was still trying to master all of the standards and their uses, but now I am able to decipher which power standards can be taught 3 weeks before the MCAs so they are fresh, and which I should continuously teach throughout the year because of their future importance (I hope I'm not confusing you!) to future math.

To piggyback on this idea, I believe that as administrators to be, we need to make sure to help our new teachers become comfortable with all standards and THEN begin to help them decide which standards are the power ones. At my current school, we get about 1-3 brand new teachers a year. It takes them (as it did for most of us) about two and a half years to really find their footing and be good teachers on their own. After that, we can help them look at the power standards and really put a focus on those. Remember how many times you cried as a new teacher? How many more beers you inhaled? I do. Make sure to unpack before you master.