As teachers, we live in a world of standards. From local administration to national education policy, standards permeate every aspect of our teaching lives.

In Adolescent Literacy at Risk? The Impact of Standards, Rebecca Bowers Sipe offers an in-depth look at the world of standards. Throughout the book, she raises questions that are significant to teachers and administrators who are concerned about the direction the standards movement has taken:

• What do we mean by standards?
• Why are there so many standards for literacy and where do they come from?
• How have standards come to be seen as a formula for curricula rather than a platform for collaboration and planning?

In addition to her own stories, Sipe takes us into the world of classroom teachers. These stories demonstrate how innovative educators are able to remain true to best practices in adolescent literacy while working within a standards-based framework. Questioning the ways in which the standards movement has played out in classrooms, school districts, and states, Sipe issues a call for thinking about standards differently. She advocates for supporting and trusting teachers to find ways to make standards support the best of what we do.

As part of the Principles in Practice imprint, Adolescent Literacy at Risk? situates itself in research-based understandings gleaned from Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief and shows how those understandings connect to the standards movement.

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Entering the Conversation: Standards vs. Standardization

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (A Nation at Risk, 1983)
When I read *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, my career as a teacher, administrator, and future English educator was anchored in rich soil. My work was situated in a remarkably diverse school district that allowed me the opportunity to work with teachers drawn from all over the United States and Canada. In the flush of oil wealth that flowed into local school districts in Alaska in the early 1980s, my colleagues and I finally had resources that allowed us to pursue our dream of equitable literacy engagement for all of our students. Literacy leaders from across the country, lured by the promise of working in such a site, came north to help us explore and shape our visions for new and engaging literacy curricula. Those were days filled with promise and excitement, yet in the midst of that challenging work lurked the shadow of questions that continuously troubled us.

We found ourselves wrestling with very fundamental literacy concerns, many of which dealt with issues of equity. What constituted a quality literacy education for all of our adolescents? Whose literary traditions, which visions of literacy, and what types of demonstrations of literacy skill and knowledge should we privilege? What was it, after all, that all students needed to know and be able to do to achieve success when they moved from school into the world beyond our care? Moreover, how should we actually define literacy success amid the rampant technological and social change of the times?

As my fellow teachers and I pondered current research and learning theory within the context of our school district in Anchorage, we found ourselves reflecting upon the many inequities we observed. Even at that time our district was large. With nearly 40,000 students spanning a geographic area the size of the state of Delaware, we worked daily with individuals representing nearly one hundred different languages and very diverse learning needs. As we looked within and across our schools, we realized that our questions about equity were more complex than we had previously imagined.

Even within our single, albeit large, district, students in some schools seemed better prepared, their classrooms more equipped, their teachers more receptive to varied pedagogies and technologies. Even within our own schools—and sometimes within our own teaching—some of our secondary students were immersed in stimulating and challenging English classes, whereas others seemed to be mired in a stifling routine of learning “the basics”: decoding texts, memorizing parts of speech, and literal recall of informational and literary facts within a tightly prescribed curriculum. Tracking of students appeared to encourage certain types of practices. Certainly the expectations framing the education of some adolescents were far from high, and those expectations were definitely not equal. In other cases, even when the curriculum and books provided were the same, student engagement and outcomes clearly were not.

I recall a particular occasion that helped us to frame our thinking and push
our questions forward. As we sorted through our observations about our classrooms, we turned our reflections to our own educational histories. I found myself describing my first reunion with a diverse group of high school friends. As I did so, I was forced to consider—for the first time—the utter lack of equity and high standards characterizing the high school experiences of many of my classmates. My own classes were filled with college-bound students. Identified early—in many cases as early as the primary grades—we had moved through our local school system together. My recollections of school were laced with memories of spirited and practiced teachers like Mr. Hatley, who challenged us to consider the perspectives, special interests, and politics veiled in historical and current events. This amazing teacher opened history for us with a continuous string of deeply textured and nuanced stories. There also were new teachers such as Miss Jones who sauntered into class in tenth grade and innocently announced that we would not only read short stories but also write a book of short stories ourselves, hold a literary reading at which we would sell the books, and then have a party with the proceeds; and there was Mr. Whittington, a first-year teacher who was nearly fired for introducing our senior English class to culturally and politically charged literature before our rural southern community was ready. In each case these teachers not only opened for us engaging, challenging, and authentic work, but they also skillfully scaffolded the requisite strategies and skills we needed to be successful. Somehow along the way, however, I had failed to notice that students in other classes were not always offered the curriculum or methods that I enjoyed.

As I described my observations to my Alaskan teaching colleagues, I once again confronted the inequities that emerge when high expectations are not universally embraced. Had I not been among that class of college-bound students, how would my future have been different? Would I even have felt that a college education was within my grasp? As a student whose parents had not gone to college, who came from a family of meager means, it was hard to deny the impact of high expectations provided by my teachers on the subsequent academic choices and opportunities afforded me.

Interestingly, even as our teacher research group pondered questions about the English language arts programs in our schools, our school district was reporting excellent progress on most recognized literacy indicators. Steady score increases on required standardized tests, increasing high school graduation rates, and higher percentages of students moving through Advanced Placement classes and on to colleges around the nation all suggested that we were doing things right. Of note, these indicators of success from our district proved to be consistent with those reported nationally that suggested steady increases in each category (Stedman and Kaestle, 19–20). Moreover, as later reported by Myers, “by the 1980s, most states were reporting above-average results on norm-referenced tests of
decoding literacy in reading” (107). And yet, despite all these reported gains, our teacher study group sensed that many of our students needed more.

Our process of thinking and reflecting together as teachers, of constantly turning the soil as we moved deeper and deeper into our questions, was one of my first experiences with teacher research. As we questioned, reflected, investigated, and made observations, we found ourselves with even more—and often more troubling—questions, leading to more research. Our district provided equal funding for all of its schools, equivalent funding for materials, and equal pay for teachers. And yet we could all describe a host of inequities that we observed—most often in schools that provided services to our most disadvantaged students. Our initial inquiries were founded on our desire to create challenging experiences through literacy-rich classrooms for all of our students. Now, we began to question whether even careful attention to equity of resources would be sufficient to ensure a level playing field for all.

In 1983 the opening paragraphs of *A Nation at Risk* ignited a concern for me that has underscored much of my professional work since. Despite the alarmist tone of the document and its simplistic solutions to complicated problems, those first paragraphs I cited at the beginning of this chapter struck a chord with my experience.¹ I was increasingly worried that many students might still not be offered the opportunity to excel. I was concerned that lack of high expectations and opportunity to experience challenging curricula might ultimately shape lives in ways that could be limiting and unfair. Moreover, I was deeply concerned that failure to support the development of critical literacy skills might condemn many to a life filled with discrimination and voicelessness far beyond their school years.

I must confess that my initial questions and observations about how to provide high-quality, equitable literacy experiences for all students were fairly simplistic. Eventually, as our teacher research group joined others from around the state through conversations sponsored by the Alaska Council of Teachers of English (ACTE) and the Alaska State Writing Consortium (ASWC), we had no choice but to interrogate our most basic notions about literacy.

I will always be grateful for having been in that place at that time. While the diversity we found in Anchorage schools raised one set of questions, as we looked beyond the boundaries of a city to examine the literacy needs of adolescents who were growing up in small Alaskan communities and villages scattered across a geographic area the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River, we were forced to confront questions more complex than we could possibly have imagined at the outset.

Prior to that moment, I had not stopped to think deeply about how my values so strongly privileged one knowledge tradition and one way of knowing. My un-
questioned assumptions and biases dictated the particular selections of literature I valued and taught and the very Western-oriented approaches to rhetoric and composition I drew upon. Even my unquestioned assumption that literacy was a way to move beyond one’s home community and into the world actually served to devalue the strong heritages of many of our communities.

Our statewide conversations, a mirror of those happening in many other parts of the country, were compelling, and they raised enormous concerns about how we could possibly achieve uniform expectations for all of our students without imposing a new form of inequity upon many. Mingled in these complex deliberations was an emerging sense that our personal and national definition of literacy was too limited in its scope. We came to realize that literacy—as we approached the final decades of the century—required the ability to not only decode and comprehend, but also to draw upon and use higher-order thinking skills; to critically analyze the meanings one makes, to question one’s own interpretations and conclusions as well as those of others, and to situate understandings in relation to multiple contexts and issues (Myers). Moreover, we realized that holding all adolescents accountable to the same expectations would be futile if we did not also address their basic needs for equity in resources, experiences, and cultural/ethnic inclusiveness.

In Anchorage we had come to recognize that, while having high expectations for all students was important, that alone would effect little change if vital issues of equity and access to sufficient and appropriate materials, technologies, and services were not provided. For students who had no books at home, or no books written in a language they or their parents could read, access meant, among other things, providing essential materials. For students who entered school in the fall with particular needs for experiences, strategies, or supports, an equitable education must include sufficient opportunities to allow them to fully realize their potential. And, for true equity to exist, respect for diversity would have to result in inclusion of the stories and the cultures of all students. As standards came to represent high expectations, it became increasingly clear that for higher standards to succeed, we could never entertain notions of standardization in our interpretation or our delivery of them.

This distinction between standards and standardization proved to be an important one. And it is a distinction that I’ve noticed is not consistently made in the current discussion of school reform.

**Moving toward National Standards**

What are standards? And where did our national obsession with standards come from? A little history of the standards movement might help chart the course on which we now find ourselves.
In 1991, President George H. W. Bush and the nation’s governors commissioned the National Education Goals Panel to address educational concerns. Emerging from this education summit was Goals 2000 which described as its mission:

To improve learning and teaching by providing a national framework for education reform; to promote the research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students; to provide a framework for reauthorization of all Federal education programs; to promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards and certifications; and for other purposes. (1)

That same year, the Department of Labor released *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000*. From the SCANS Report and the work of the education summit came Goals 2000. Goals 2000: Educate America Act proposed that by the year 2000, students graduating from American schools would demonstrate “competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography.”

It was in this climate that the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) began the development of the Standards for the English Language Arts in 1992; in beginning this process, they embarked on a lofty goal:

> to ensure that all students are knowledgeable and proficient users of language so they may succeed in school, participate and contribute to our culture, and pursue their own goals and interests as independent learners throughout their lives. (NCTE Standards, 5)

This first national standards project was initially supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois to support work with NCTE and IRA. Though grant funding was withdrawn within two years, NCTE and IRA leaders decided to move ahead with their development project, establishing a four-year national effort that included literally thousands of teachers, administrators, policymakers, parents, and others in the most inclusive conversation ever held about literacy.

Not only did this broad-based effort emphasize a deeply rooted commitment that standards must be “grounded in what we know about language and language learning” (5), but it also placed enormous value on the importance of stakeholders talking and reasoning together. Three “core beliefs” provided a frame for these discussions. These included agreements that “standards are needed to prepare students for the literacy requirements of the future as well as the present”; that
“standards can articulate a shared vision of what the nation’s teachers, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents, and others expect students to attain”; and that “standards are necessary to promote high educational expectations for all students” (2).

Instead of going the route of other national organizations which attempted to capture all the detailed knowledge that experts felt important in a discipline, the IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts (Figure 1.1) instead offered twelve interrelated standards that define the range of experiences and expectations for listening, speaking, reading, writing, and critical viewing. These standards were offered as starting points for curricular planning that could capitalize on the expertise and interests of teachers and students. Instead of being offered as prescriptions, these standards were intended to support conversations and planning at every level of instruction that could mirror the inclusive and dynamic nature of the national standards development process for English language arts.

With enthusiasm, I joined the thousands of others in national standards conversations. I believed in the strength and wisdom of this remarkable and vast collection of educators to sort out the weighty questions inherent in any contemplation of uniform standards and issues of equity. Finally, I thought, educators would have the strength of our national organizations behind us as we lobbied for changes that would improve the quality of literacy instruction for all students. Though teachers across the country were keenly aware of and continued to wrestle with the complexities involved in creating equitable and challenging standards for a diverse population, we nonetheless believed that collaborative work among dedicated English educators would lead to greater opportunity and a more level playing field that honored the traditions and needs of all students.

Each of the twelve national standards addressed a spectrum of literacy expectations that function as an umbrella, providing a framework of expectations. Instead of focusing on particular titles or authors, for example, standards one and two described a need to provide a wide range of experiences with texts that spans historical periods, authors, genres, media, and more. Within this range of textual experiences, the standards described equally ambitious and far-ranging strategies and purposes for text-based experiences.

Perhaps most significant, these standards demonstrated the two organizations’ fundamental belief in the ability of teachers and other local stakeholders to make crucial decisions about best ways to meet the standards for remarkably varied populations. Building from the standards themselves, NCTE moved further to provide guidance for those who were responsible for implementation in three significant ways: through additional policy development, through extensive professional development, and through representative modeling of best practices.
A quick visit to the NCTE website (www.ncte.org) provides educators and interested members of the public with extended policy documents that further define and explicate the standards. For example, the *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing* (Figure 1.2) provides eight guidelines spanning research on all aspects of writing instruction and assessment. This document provides details to guide local conversations about the teaching of writing, and it has been used in the formulation of various state standards documents. Policy documents and guidelines are also

**Figure 1.1. The IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts**

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic, and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).
available for many other major areas of English language arts, including those for adolescent literacy, included in the front of this volume and summarized inside the back cover.

Recognizing that new and evolving expectations for literacy will require that teachers acquire expertise in new strategies, NCTE has designed and hosted many and varied professional development opportunities for educators. While these include traditional venues such as national, regional, and state conferences, efforts also include Web-based supports such as Pathways, CoLEARN, Web seminars, chat rooms, and other electronic forums to support teacher conversations. An active professional development network brings outstanding presenters who address a host of literacy topics into local regions for workshops and institutes. A plethora of print materials—from journals and books to position papers and policy documents—provide examples and models of standards in action to help educators think about their own planning and implementation processes.

All of these efforts are significant because of the foundational messages they embody: Standards should lead the way and encourage informed local conversation and decision making. Standards are not prescriptions; they are guidelines that build from the best research in the field and represent a consensus of the best thinking of literacy leaders. They do not offer scripted approaches; they do not tell us what page to be on at a particular moment in the year; and they do not substitute for professional thinking and planning. Instead, they provide essential support. Standards, in other words, are not the same as standardization.

**Figure 1.2. From NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing**

1. Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.
2. People learn to write by writing.
3. Writing is a process.
4. Writing is a tool for thinking.
5. Writing grows out of many different purposes.
6. Conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers.
7. Writing and reading are related.
8. Writing has a complex relationship to talk.
9. Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships.
10. Composing occurs in different modalities and technologies.
11. Assessment of writing involves complex, informed, human judgment.
A Struggle of Metaphors

English teachers know well the power of metaphor. For many decades, our nation’s schools have operated within a pervasive industrial metaphor indicative of the events going on in the culture as a whole. An entrenched ideology of part-to-whole approaches to learning were so deeply engrained in our post–World War II educational systems as to be largely unquestioned. It is this thinking that has promoted assembly line models of learning: breaking complicated literacy tasks down to their smallest parts, teaching and testing the parts, and eventually producing a shiny new high school graduate who would roll out of the school and into college or the workplace fully prepared for the challenges ahead.

It is important to recall that this industrial metaphor has not always been our prevailing notion for schools or for learning. Through much of our nation’s history, the metaphor that guided thinking about schools was far more agrarian and organic. To sense the full impact of the difference in thinking, one might consider the stances of the farmer and that of the factory supervisor. Within the farmer’s context, much must be considered. Deep knowledge of context, location, seeds, fertilizers, technique, skill, and craft is required to coax a crop from the earth. The farmer knows that some variables are within his control; others simply are not, though he can do some things to compensate. He might not be able to prevent a drought, but he might be able to provide needed extra resources through irrigation. Even accounting for his best planning, there are factors beyond his control. Though every seed might come from the same previous crop, meet the same standards for selection, and receive equivalent expert care, the production will vary.

In the farmer’s domain, the notion of high standards enters at every level of the process. The farmer must know a great deal about selection of raw materials; about methods for planting, nurturing, and cultivating; about processing and marketing his product. The farmer works for and expects a high yield from all of his crops, and he sets high standards for his own work to produce a quality crop at the harvest. Though there are predictable steps in the process, nothing is prescriptive. Instead, it requires bringing the best research and knowledge to the task of growing the crop every day, making thoughtful judgments on a continual basis, and realizing that to achieve the high standards for performance he hopes for, he will be required to vary technique based on the conditions he confronts daily.

The farmer realizes that growing quality crops is a highly recursive process, one that requires careful and reflective practice across a career. Every crop is different. Crops in different fields vary in growth patterns. The strategies that work best with one set of circumstances may be less effective in another. The job of the farmer is to pay attention to the very complex and interconnected set of circumstances in play and to bring the very best professional expertise into practice day-by-day.
Think of the contrast to the assembly line. Certainly there are many thoughtful and professional judgments that have gone into creating the parts that will be assembled on the line. And yet, within the process itself, parts are parts. Each part is complete, perfect, and ready to fit into its allotted slot. If it isn’t, it becomes part of the scrap pile to be melted down so that the process can begin again. In the assembly line world, it makes sense to break down processes to their smallest component, and each piece must do its function consistently. Quality control provides the testing to ensure that parts become bigger units, and these units all move from the line functioning in exactly the same way.

The contrast between agrarian and industrial metaphors is important in order to understand the struggle currently embedded in the nation’s movement toward standards-based education. If standards have been conceived with an agrarian view, they provide guidance for educators who, in turn, draw upon their own professional and continuously developing knowledge to create learning environments that support the growth of all students. Within this metaphorical view, teachers realize the critical need to observe literacy learners constantly, drawing upon formative and summative assessments to better understand what their students are learning and how they might need to modify the lessons or content to better address learner needs. Implicit in this vision is the requirement that teachers be experts in their discipline and in their pedagogy. With this expertise, they become essential to the daily and long-term decision making that must take place if standards are to be translated into effective instruction for students. The IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts exemplifies this vision of literacy education.

What happens if the metaphor adopted is instead one of an industrial approach? I would imagine that schools would experience a push toward standardization. There might be an effort to treat all students as if they are the same, and, if by chance they come with different experiences, needs, or interests, to ignore those variables. Within that framework it would be logical to offer them the same program of studies, the same instructional materials and methods, and the same tests to determine how close to the target goal their achievement has come. It would certainly make sense to break down each process to its smallest parts, develop a recommended sequence for teaching the skills and, at the end of the process, assemble the entire “package” into a finished product: nouns and verbs one year, phrases the next, clauses later, until the student is ready for the moment when everything comes together in a self-actualized wholeness as manifest in the essay or the research report. Of course, we would want to test each new piece of knowledge along the way and check it off when the target level of expertise was attained. And conveniently, once a skill or bit of knowledge was checked off, learners could confidently move forward, knowing that this piece was permanently in place.
There is a bit of substance that is very alluring about the industrial model. As a new teacher, I was, in fact, convinced that isolated instruction within a sequence made sense. I recall vividly the week that I spent teaching seventh graders rules for using commas. Each day we explored one more grade-appropriate rule. I created worksheets that provided practice with commas in a series, at the end of introductory clauses, after complete clauses in compound sentences, and more. Students completed the worksheets and did amazingly well on the test that Friday. Grading the test over the weekend, I experienced that lovely moment of self-congratulation that so often precedes a fall! Come Monday, I discovered that the students had indeed learned something about commas. They seemingly had surmised as a group that their teacher loved commas, so they went home, filled salt shakers full of them, and commenced to sprinkling each of their various pieces of writing with a liberal dash over the next months. Though a painful lesson, I did learn once again that my students were not parts on an assembly line, that teaching even the most minute convention is a highly recursive process that is best learned within an authentic, integrated context.

Before moving on to consider how each of these metaphors is inherent in the standards that feed into the open funnel and, hence, into classrooms around the country, it is important to remember that American education has been intensely influenced by each of these metaphors during some point in our history. Prior to the twentieth century, we were far more rooted in an agrarian model for education than we are now. Along with the industrial revolution, the last century brought us assembly line practices that have influenced almost every aspect of education (Nehring, 425–432). Depending upon what happens with standards implementation in the next decade, that influence is apt to continue and possibly to intensify. That’s why it is so essential that educators know what influences are in play, what beliefs are shaping the standards for their states, and, ultimately, how to situate themselves in the state and national conversation so that they can help shape standards that support adolescent literacy rather than hinder it.

**Standards and Adolescent Literacy**

More than a decade after the IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts were adopted and long past the establishment of Goals 2000, with its target that “every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship,” literacy leaders continue to express alarm about the state of literacy among adolescents. *NCTE Principles of Adolescent Literacy Reform* (2006), the larger document upon which *Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief*,
referred to in this volume, was based, opens with its own alarming announcement: “Over 8 million students in grades 4–12 read below grade level, and 3,000 students with limited literacy skills drop out of high school every school day” (2). Citing studies by ACT, this document goes on to report that “only about half of our nation’s high school students are able to read complex texts” (2), and it describes the dire challenges facing under-literate adolescents as they move through and beyond K–12 schools. These are startling pronouncements, particularly in light of two decades filled with discussion and the adoption of policy, standards, legislation, and increasingly high-stakes testing for students.

There is much reason for concern. From our nation’s earliest history, our leaders have cautioned us that we cannot maintain a democratic society unless we have informed, literate citizens. We have become increasingly aware of the impact of the new “flat world” described by Tom Friedman. Now more than ever, young people will face heightened competition in all aspects of their academic and economic lives.

As I noted earlier, definitions of literacy have shifted, and this is particularly true for adolescent literacy. Views of literacy as the ability to decode and comprehend texts and to write simple, coherent sentences are simply insufficient for the challenges facing citizens of the twenty-first century. For today’s young people, literacy extends far beyond reading, encompassing “reading, writing, and a variety of social and intellectual practices that call upon the voice as well as the eye and hand” (Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief, 14). In school and outside of school experiences support the development of literacy as students interact in varying social settings, work with a host of media, and participate in an array of personal, family, and community activities. Teachers have a unique and vital role in supporting literacy development, but so do parents, friends, and a wide range of others with whom adolescents interact.

Today, we know a great deal about adolescent literacy, but unfortunately this research base is sometimes ignored. The current debate about standards too often falls victim to myths about literacy, defining, in very narrow ways, what students should know, where they gain literacy skills, and the purposes for which literacy skills are important. When all students are subjected to the same approaches, texts, and assessments without accounting for individual interests, strengths, needs, and preferred methods of demonstrating knowledge and skills, the good intentions of the standards movement slip dangerously off track as practices become standardized. What, then, do we know about adolescent literacy?

Adolescence represents a unique moment in literacy development. Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief describes literacy as encompassing all of the language arts, as an “ongoing and non-hierarchical process” (14) that is recursive,
social, and unique to the task at hand. At this crucial crossroads, while continuing to develop their literacy skills, adolescents also rely heavily on literacy to engage in academic and social interactions. Students have acquired a level of comfort with particular literacies and disciplines, and the skills they exhibit as well as the choices they make are apt to reflect those comfort levels. Adolescents, as any middle or high school teacher can attest, are social creatures; they use their literacy skills as they engage home, peer, and academic communities, among others, for a wide variety of purposes. Standards that address only a narrow understanding of adolescent literacy are often doomed to failure.

Motivation, we also know, is key to adolescents’ success and “can determine whether students engage with or disengage from literacy learning” (Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief, 16). Building motivation requires strategies that engage, challenge, draw upon past experiences, and encourage connections to current questions and interests; building these strategies will necessitate use of diverse texts and an emphasis on self-selection. Building comprehension must account for many traditional literacy skills but also include strategies to help students read their worlds, including the worlds made of diverse disciplines and filled with media-rich texts. Critical thinking promotes a stance that necessitates reflecting about one’s own thinking—self-monitoring, interpreting, analyzing, using literacy across disciplines, and drawing upon technology in specific, thoughtful, and appropriate ways (6–7). If literacy education fails to develop motivation, comprehension, and critical thinking, adolescent learners will not be engaged, and our staggering concerns about adolescent literacy will continue to spiral.

Research on adolescent literacy has left few doubts about the importance of particular types of practices and suggests in the strongest possible ways the importance of particular types of standards. Standards should address essential questions about what all students should know about literacy and be able to do with literacy. What teachers, administrators, and policymakers do with standards must account for what we know about student needs and reflect the best pedagogy available. However, as I’ll discuss in Chapter 2, not all standards that are funneled down to teachers reflect this deep understanding of adolescent literacy. As we examine other national standards in Chapter 2 that are influencing local classrooms, consider these two questions as a way to frame the discussion:

1. How do each of the various standards documents account for current research on adolescent literacy?

2. What values are represented by the standards that are included in each?
Note

1. *A Nation at Risk* signaled the beginning of a movement many see as igniting a crisis mentality about education. Berliner and Biddle, for example, talk about this clearly in their volume *The Manufactured Crisis*. 
As teachers, we live in a world of standards. From local administration to national education policy, standards permeate every aspect of our teaching lives.

In Adolescent Literacy at Risk? The Impact of Standards, Rebecca Bowers Sipe offers an in-depth look at the world of standards. Throughout the book, she raises questions that are significant to teachers and administrators who are concerned about the direction the standards movement has taken:

- What do we mean by standards?
- Why are there so many standards for literacy and where do they come from?
- How have standards come to be seen as a formula for curricula rather than a platform for collaboration and planning?

In addition to her own stories, Sipe takes us into the world of classroom teachers. These stories demonstrate how innovative educators are able to remain true to best practices in adolescent literacy while working within a standards-based framework. Questioning the ways in which the standards movement has played out in classrooms, school districts, and states, Sipe issues a call for thinking about standards differently. She advocates for supporting and trusting teachers to find ways to make standards support the best of what we do.

As part of the Principles in Practice imprint, Adolescent Literacy at Risk? situates itself in research-based understandings gleaned from Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief and shows how those understandings connect to the standards movement.

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