



Taking It to the Minimum?

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Many of us make the big mistake of setting learning targets that represent maximum rather than minimum standards of proficiency. Instead, our learning goals should represent the floor, not the ceiling. Sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it? Shouldn't learning targets be pretty high so that our students have something to shoot for?

Yes, and no. Our learning targets should be rigorous and challenging so that our students can stretch themselves to learn and grow. However, they should not be so rigorous and challenging that few of our students are likely to ever reach them.

### **Are Teachers' Expectations for Their Students too Low?**

Thinking of the standard as minimum rather than the maximum performance does not mean lowering expectations; it actually ensures that more students will be challenged. If you see the standard as the maximum performance, you set limits on what your students can do. You leave them nowhere else to go. But if you see the standard as just the beginning, not only does it not seem as daunting, but also it presents a challenge to all of your students by setting the expectation that they will exceed the standards.

Thinking about our learning goals this way requires us to reexamine what we mean by mastery. Does mastery mean that students are performing at the level of an expert? Does it mean that students are doing what we would expect for a similar student in that grade level? What exactly do we mean when we say that a student has mastered something, and is that kind of mastery a reasonable expectation?

Often, we will find that our expectations of what students should know and be able to do represent an ideal—an ideal not necessarily required by the standards of our course or grade level. Thus, although we would love for students to write like Pulitzer Prize winners, the standards only require that they write like highly proficient 3rd graders. Although we would love for our students to conduct experiments worthy of a Nobel Prize, the standards only ask that they conduct an experiment according to the scientific method.

### **Meeting Differing Levels of Need**

Thinking in terms of minimum versus maximum performance also allows you to differentiate your instruction both for students who are struggling and for students who need more challenge and enrichment without teaching two curricula. Imagine that you had a class full of students and they were all required to jump over a string that was two feet high. Some of your students are great jumpers and jump over the string easily. Others cannot jump over the string no matter how hard they try. How do you help everyone meet the standard and remain challenged?

One solution is to keep the string at a maximum height of two feet for every student. Those students who can jump it do, and those students who can't fail at the task. For some students the task remains impossible, for some it is just the right amount of challenge, and for others it is so easy that they soon become bored.

Another solution is to move the string up and down based on the students' individual jumping abilities. For the students who have difficulty jumping over the string, you can lower the string to a more comfortable jumping height. For the students who can easily jump it at two feet, you raise the string to a more challenging height. While this approach will make sure that every student is successful jumping over the string, not every student will do so according to the two-foot-high standard.

The third choice is to anchor the string at two feet high on one end and slant it upward to a height of eight or even ten feet at the other end. Then, line up all the students along the string at a height that is challenging for them and allow them to jump. As soon as jumping becomes too easy for them, they can move up to a higher part of the string. In the meantime, you work with those students who cannot jump the string at the two-foot-high height to develop their jumping skills. In this way, every student is challenged and the standard is not compromised.

The same concept can be applied to teaching. If you see the standard as the maximum performance for students, then the students who have already mastered the standard have nothing else to shoot for and soon become bored. If you see the standard as contingent upon the abilities of the students in your class, then not only do you wear yourself out moving the standard for each student, but also the students who might struggle are never asked to meet the standard.

However, when you think of the standard as the minimum that students are required to master, and see that it does not change regardless of where students are, then you not only challenge those students who have already mastered the standard, but also you support those students who struggle to meet the standard on their own. In the end, more of your students are likely to meet the learning goals and to be continually challenged while doing so.

### **Tips for Differentiating Instruction**

Try these strategies for meeting the varied needs of your students:

- Examine each standard and decide the minimum evidence that students have achieved mastery of the standard. Then decide the maximum evidence. Use this range as the parameters for your differentiation activities with students so that you are differentiating up from the standard rather than down.
- Divide your district or state learning standards into need-to-knows and nice-to-knows. The need-to-knows are all those standards that students need to master to pass the summative assessment (including the state proficiency test or AP and IB exams) as well as any standards students need to master to be successful at the next level of schooling. The nice-to-knows are those extras that enrich the course. Focus on differentiation strategies that help all students master the need-to-knows. Once students have mastered the need-to-knows, use the nice-to-knows to provide challenges and enrichment.

- Create a learning contract. List the minimum amount of work students need to complete to demonstrate mastery of the standard. Require this work of all students for them to receive credit and a "C" grade. Then add other work that represents enrichment or reinforcement activities. If students complete two extra activities, they can earn a "B." If students complete four extra activities, they earn an "A."
- Create one lesson plan for the entire class and build supports for struggling students and enrichment opportunities for advanced students. Differentiation doesn't mean that you create different lesson plans for different students in the class.
- Determine how to support students who have not mastered the standards. First, determine whether the standard is asking students to master content or process. If it is a content standard, vary the process by which students acquire the content. If it is a process standard, vary the content students use to acquire the process.

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[Robyn R. Jackson](#) is the author of the upcoming ASCD book *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching*. This article is excerpted from the book, which will be published in January 2009. She is also the author of *The Differentiation Workbook*. To learn more, visit [www.mindstepsinc.com](http://www.mindstepsinc.com).