

Preface

When we began teaching, back when the Earth was cooling, there were no standards. We were given a piece of paper with a few math facts and another with social studies topics relating to the neighborhood for Gayle's Grade 3/4 classroom and for Lin's PreK to 12 reading and special education students. We had limited training as to what and how we were to teach. Basically, we built the road as we traveled through the curriculum, more "gosh and by golly" than intentional.

We wanted to do the best for our students, but there were few guidelines, and our lack of experience left us little to draw on. Gayle realized that even though she had won the top teaching award out of 875 graduates at her university, in the classroom, she didn't even know what she didn't know. Lin struggled to find assessments and to figure out how to meet the needs of struggling adolescents, many of whom had initial versions of Individualized Education Plans. Even with some information about her students, Lin was not really certain what the objectives were for other classes. At that time, the targets for learning were inconsistent or just not in place at all. The standards and benchmarks available to us now provide welcome guidelines to help teachers know where they are going and how to judge success, both for themselves and for their students.

Intuitively, we did our best to integrate learning around themes, as that seemed to be a way to engage students and tie the curriculum together. However, instructional units were designed not around standards (as we had none) but rather around neat learning activities. We also lacked assessment strategies so we didn't always know what students knew or could do. So we planned great units of study, but the wrong students came. They were in different places than we thought they might be, and they had different interests, capabilities, and intelligences. Or we had a great lesson plan, but it just didn't work for some of our students. Gayle didn't have enough tools and information about learning in her repertoire to do much more than "say it louder and slower" one more time when students had difficulty, but that method often didn't work. Of course, whether it worked was not really an issue then because there was really little accountability at that time. Teachers taught, and the students' job was to learn. Lin's first experience with other content-area teachers and their reactions to her

students was disappointing. It was hard for content-trained teachers to account for differences in reading and writing skills. We simply had not been taught those strategies. Teachers really had little inclination and few resources to persevere until *all* students learned.

Thankfully, we had a group of committed, seasoned teachers at hand in those first schools who were generous and encouraging and who shared materials and strategies with us. Today, we are fortunate to have both standards that clearly show us the target and a set of solidly research-based instructional techniques and assessment tools to facilitate learning for a diverse group of learners. Gayle's daughter and son-in-law are teachers at the beginning of their careers, and she has watched with interest as they continue to evolve in their new roles. They have the advantage of "beginning with the end in mind," with standards to guide their thinking and planning. Their knowledge base and skill development in teaching are ever expanding in relation to the diverse group of students they serve. Special education students, students with emotional and behavioral disorders, students learning English as a second language, and multiple other groups of students are in their classrooms, and they are constantly trying to respond to the complexity of the mix with varying approaches to teaching and learning. Standardized tests are also a reality for them and cannot be ignored. They see the stress this testing creates for students and parents, but they also know that there are so many other worthwhile facets of the assessment process that inform them about students and their progress.

As an assistant superintendent, Lin faces the challenge of continual updates about the latest regulations, rules, and legislation affecting schools. Teachers, too, face new pressures and dilemmas as they try to meet the needs of diverse students. Lin's talented staff are far more prepared today to meet current challenges, yet even with all the excellent training available to them, they continue to have questions. In Lin's district, hardworking teachers, committed administrators, and a supportive board of education are all trying to make the right choices for students. While we know so much more about learning, questions still remain about where and how to focus our precious time with students and still meet the high criteria for accountability. With such limited time and resources, how can staff make the best choices for students with very different needs and styles?

This book is our attempt to help all teachers and administrators make sense of planning from standards, differentiating learning for the diversity in their classrooms, and using the data that they collect from their students. We would have been so grateful all those years ago to know what we know now. It is an exciting time to be in education with all that we have discovered and researched in the last 30 years. Teaching truly is an art and a science. We believe the creativity of great teachers mixed with the knowledge and skills we now have make our profession a challenging and exciting one both for teachers and for students.