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Priority Standards and Learning Intentions

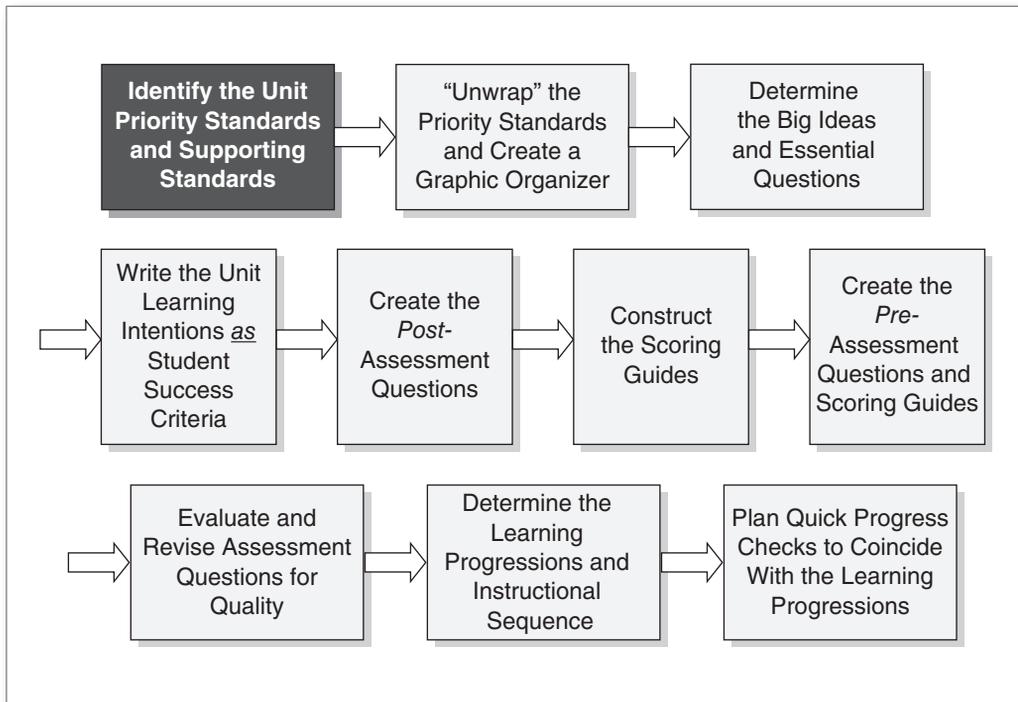
In This Chapter You Will Learn:

- The rationale for prioritizing standards.
- The pivotal role Priority Standards play in the CFA 2.0 design process.
- The relationship between Priority Standards, supporting standards, and unit learning intentions.

Now we are ready to look at the ten CFA 2.0 design steps individually and describe them in more detail. The first highlighted step in Figure 4.1 shows its foundational position in the linear sequence. CFAs are written to assess student understanding of the Priority Standards *only*, yet the supporting standards often provide the instructional scaffolds that students need to ultimately attain the priorities. Synopses of these two foundational steps will introduce the examples later in the chapter.

UNIT PREPLANNING

When educators are ready to create a unit of study, the first task is to decide what they want the unit to be about. They go about making this

Figure 4.1 CFA 2.0 Design Step 1

decision in different ways. Either they have in mind an overall instructional focus that leads to their selection of the standards that match it, or they look over the standards in a particular content area and identify a few important standards to build a unit around. However, if their units of study are already organized and sequenced into a curriculum pacing calendar, most likely the standards have already been decided and included in those units. They simply select one of those predetermined units as their starting point. Whichever approach educators use, it results in a clear determination about what the unit focus will be.

Now the challenges begin to show up. All of the standards at every grade and in every content area need to be taught, and student understanding of those standards must be assessed. Yet educators know that certain standards are more important than others for students to learn, and those particular standards require more classroom instruction time to teach. Curriculum pacing guides lay out how long each unit of study is to last, but educators are often unable to keep pace due to their students' varying speeds of learning. Pressure to cover the entire curriculum to prepare students for spring standardized achievement tests too often leads to superficial instruction and shallow student understanding.

In the face of these challenges, educators are opting for the only logical solution. They are abandoning the ineffective practice of “inch deep, mile wide” instructional coverage of too many standards in favor of *prioritization*. They are sitting down together in separate K–12 grade-level teams to thoughtfully and systematically classify each grade-level standard as being either “priority” or “supporting.” Then the large K–12 group comes together to vertically align all of the grade-level selections from kindergarten through Grade 12.

Here are the definitions of Priority Standards and supporting standards, key terms that are used throughout the CFA 2.0 design process.

Priority Standards are “a carefully selected *subset* of the total list of the grade-specific and course-specific standards within each content area that students must know and be able to do by the end of each school year in order to be prepared for the standards at the next grade level or course. Priority standards represent the *assured student competencies* that each teacher needs to help every student learn, and demonstrate proficiency in, by the end of the current grade or course” (Ainsworth, 2013, p. xv).

Supporting standards are “those standards that support, connect to, or enhance the Priority Standards. They are taught within the context of the Priority Standards, but do not receive the same degree of instruction and assessment emphasis as do the Priority Standards. The supporting standards often become the *instructional scaffolds* to help students understand and attain the more rigorous and comprehensive Priority Standards” (Ainsworth, 2013, p. xv).

THE RATIONALE FOR PRIORITY STANDARDS

The most compelling reason for prioritizing the standards or learning outcomes is the voluminous number of standards assigned to each grade level and course in nearly every content area, K–12. Ask classroom educators, and they will almost unanimously agree that it is an unrealistic expectation to thoroughly teach, assess, reteach, and reassess student understanding of all grade- or course-level standards in the limited amount of instructional time they have with their students. In addition, English language learners (ELLs) and students with any kind of special need generally require increased instruction and assessment time. And because the annual standardized achievement tests typically occur weeks before the

end of school—educators have *less* than a full academic year to ensure that all students master all standards.

Obviously, educators would love it if every student in every grade and content area could learn every standard assigned at each grade level, but this is just not a realistic goal. For an educator to think it is more important to cover every standard than to focus on teaching high-leverage standards for depth of understanding is faulty reasoning. Students will not benefit from superficial coverage of the standards. They will not retain what they are superficially taught, and this will necessitate the reteaching of those standards in subsequent grade levels. This domino effect can continue for years, delaying educators in each succeeding grade level from teaching the standards they are supposed to be teaching.

Because a “spray and pray” approach to covering standards results in students falling further behind each year, educators are becoming increasingly aware of the vital need to prioritize K–12 standards in targeted content areas *prior to* any curriculum and assessment design or instructional planning. They can then emphasize grade-level Priority Standards repeatedly in different curricular units of study throughout the year. This is why CFAs assess student understanding of the Priority Standards *only*—to make sure that students have multiple opportunities to deepen their understanding of those standards that K–12 educators have determined to be the most critical for all students to learn.

Even though this makes sense intellectually, a simple count of the total number of grade-level standards in state and provincial documents tips the scales in favor of prioritizing standards and learning outcomes. It is the norm, not the exception, that the number of standards at each grade level in all content areas adds up to well over one hundred. In *Rigorous Curriculum Design* (2010), I showcased examples of such high numbers of standards from three randomly selected states and one Canadian province (see pp. 41–44).

STATISTICAL RATIONALE FOR IDENTIFYING PRIORITY STANDARDS

Not only does prioritizing seem the only logical solution to this dilemma from a practitioner’s point of view, respected educational researchers and thought leaders agree.

W. James Popham (2003) has long supported this call for prioritization and an assessment focus on the priorities:

Teachers need to prioritize a set of content standards so they can identify the content standards at which they will devote powerful,

thoroughgoing instruction, and then they need to *formally and systematically assess student mastery of only those high-priority content standards*. (p. 36; italics added)

Robert Marzano has also advocated a “less is more” approach to standards for well over a decade, and his statistical rationale for doing so is as relevant today as it was when first showcased in *Common Formative Assessments* (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006):

The following calculations determine the time educators would need to effectively teach all the standards students are expected to learn by the end of high school.

- 5.6 instructional hours per day × 180 days in typical academic year = 1,008 hours per year × 13 years = 13,104 total hours of K–12 instruction.
- McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) identified 200 standards and 3,093 benchmarks in national- and state-level documents across 14 different subject areas.
- Classroom teachers estimated a need for 15,465 hours to *adequately* teach them all. (pp. 32–33)

Furthermore, Marzano (2003) reveals a powerful “reality check” regarding how many of those instructional hours each school day are actually dedicated to instruction of students:

- Varies widely from a low of 21 percent to a high of 69 percent.
- Taking the highest estimate of 69 percent, only 9,042 hours are actually available for instruction out of the original math calculation of 13,104 hours total.
- 200 standards and 3,093 benchmarks needing 15,465 hours cannot be taught in only 9,042 hours of instructional time. (pp. 24–25)

Marzano concludes his statistics with an insightful quip: “To cover all this content, you would have to change schooling from K–12 to K–22” (interview by Scherer, 2001, p. 15). He recommends a fractional guideline for reducing the number of standards: “By my reckoning, we would have to cut* content by about *two-thirds*,” and ends with a dramatic assertion: “The sheer number of standards is the biggest impediment to implementing standards” (Scherer, p. 15).

Note the asterisk added after the verb “cut” in the quotation above. Marzano was not likely advocating the actual *elimination* of two thirds of

the standards, but rather making the point that, in most standards, approximately one third of them are truly significant and worthy of in-depth instruction and assessment focus. The remaining two thirds can be taught within the context of the essentials but without the same degree of emphasis.

With more than a decade of experience guiding thousands of K–12 educators and leaders through the prioritization process, I have repeatedly found this “one third” fractional recommendation to be an accurate guideline. In recent years, however, educators who prioritize the Common Core English language arts standards typically select as priorities between one third and one half of the total list of grade-specific standards due to the increased rigor of these standards in comparison to state standards. Let us look briefly at the internationally benchmarked Common Core standards to support my assertion that these too must be prioritized.

THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts actually include fewer standards at each grade level than most states and provinces, do yet they still are up there in number. Case in point: there are 73 grade-specific Common Core standards (inclusive of all ELA strands) in kindergarten, and the total number of standards equals or exceeds that number in all subsequent grades through high school (Ainsworth, 2013, p. 6).

The numbers of CCSS in mathematics are deceptively fewer than those in English language arts. Yet many grade-specific standards appear as full-paragraph descriptions with related subpoints beneath them rather than the single-sentence math standards typically found in state and provincial standards documents. Even though such “thick” and lengthy standards may really only be about “one connected mathematical idea . . . the density of the content will prove formidable for educators to teach and for students to learn, both conceptually and procedurally” (Ainsworth, 2013, p. 13).

The Common Core State Standards have been intentionally designed to include *vertical learning progressions*, the grade-to-grade flow of standards that progress in rigor from kindergarten through high school. Each standard is linked to a College and Career Readiness standard that students must master to be prepared for the standards at the next grade level. This fact—that the CCSS at each grade level are the prerequisites for the standards at the following grade level—underscores the need for prioritization. Rather than attempting to hurriedly cover all of the standards each

year, educators instead can strive to ensure that all students acquire the Priority Standards as *assured competencies*. This sensible approach is far more likely to prepare students for successful attainment of the standards at the next grade level.

When prioritizing the Common Core, educators must take great care not to “break” or interrupt these learning progressions because they all intentionally connect from one grade to the next. To prevent this from happening, after initially selecting the priorities at each grade level, teacher teams should track the progression of each Priority Standard *vertically* from K–12. Then the teams need to make whatever changes are necessary in the standards selected to ensure that the vertical learning progressions of these priorities remain intact.

THE NEED FOR OBJECTIVE SELECTION CRITERIA

Regardless of the standards to be prioritized (state, provincial, or Common Core), educators approach the prioritization process with questions: “Which standards do we choose as the priorities? How do we decide? What happens if and when we don’t agree?” In response, here are a few important guidelines to keep in mind:

Teams of K–12 educators collaboratively determine those standards that are the most rigorous or comprehensive at each grade level, not those that are the most basic or foundational. Priority Standards should represent the “end game” of what students must know and be able to do by the end of each grade level.

To prevent differing professional opinions from getting in the way of reaching a consensus as to which standards to choose (state, provincial, or Common Core), K–12 teams use these objective selection criteria (Ainsworth, 2013):

- *Endurance* (lasting beyond one grade or course; concepts and skills needed in life)
- *Leverage* (crossover applications within the content area and to other content areas; i.e., interdisciplinary connections)
- *Readiness for next level of learning* (prerequisite concepts and skills students need to enter a new grade level or course of study)
- *External exam requirements* (national, state, provincial, college, and career) (pp. 25–27)

Standards that meet *all* of these established criteria qualify as Priority Standards. These preliminary selections are not set in stone, however. One

of the great benefits of this process is how it depends upon professional discussion. The goal is for participating educators to reach an initial consensus regarding the Priority Standards selected. There will be opportunities to modify and change those preliminary selections along the way, particularly during the K–12 vertical alignment step when participants look to see how the selected priorities at one grade level mesh with the priorities selected at the grade level below and at the grade level above.

There is one additional criterion for educators to factor in when prioritizing the Common Core standards in math, and that is the *critical areas of focus*. Appearing in the preamble (introduction) of each grade level’s math standards, the critical areas of focus specify where the greatest degree of instructional time should be spent. Standards that reflect these critical areas of focus should be strongly considered as priorities along with the four established criteria.

PRIORITIZATION, NOT ELIMINATION

Identifying Priority Standards is not an irresponsible recommendation to ignore any standards not designated as priorities. It is imperative to continually remind everyone in the school and district community, “The Priority Standards are *not* all we teach,” even while allocating the greatest amount of instruction and assessment time to those standards determined to be absolutely essential for student success in current and succeeding grade levels.

Continually communicate to everyone this message: “Prioritization, not elimination,” especially to those not involved in the selection process. *All standards must be taught*. The Priority Standards just receive *greater* instruction and assessment emphasis. The supporting standards play a supporting role as instructional scaffolds, to help students understand the more rigorous Priority Standards.

SPECIAL EDUCATORS, SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATORS, AND SPECIAL AREA EDUCATORS

Priority Standards can be of great benefit to special educators, to teachers of students whose primary language is other than English, and to educators of content areas not directly assessed on the annual standardized achievement tests.

Special educators who serve students in multiple grade levels and with diverse learning needs find that Priority Standards provide them with a sharp focus on those standards that have been determined as being

the most essential. These specialists can write specific student learning goals required by Individual Education Plans that target the Priority Standards. Having this information enables classroom and special education teachers to plan needed modifications and alternative forms of assessment to help their students demonstrate progress toward learning the Priority Standards by the end of the full school year, even though the standardized achievement tests occur several weeks before.

Teachers of English language learners also find the Priority Standards extremely beneficial. In certain areas of the United States, for example, there may be one hundred or more different first languages represented in the student body. Rather than striving to assist students whose primary language is other than English to learn and demonstrate proficiency in *all* standards, educators can utilize their second-language acquisition skills to help ELLs attain the Priority Standards.

Educators in *all* content areas benefit from the identification of Priority Standards, not just those in the four “core” areas typically tested: English language arts, mathematics, science, and history/social science. Priority Standards have been successfully identified by educators in visual and performing arts, physical education, world languages, library media technology, automotive technology, junior ROTC, basic and advanced ceramics, early childhood education and development, computer applications, free enterprise and entrepreneurship, and in other content areas as well.

INTERDISCIPLINARY PRIORITY STANDARDS

After the Priority Standards are identified in the academic core, educators next identify those that have interdisciplinary applications. Since language arts is regarded as the “delivery system” for all the content areas, educators identify the particular reading, writing, and language Priority Standards that educators in all content areas can emphasize to improve student literacy. Such standards, representing the ability to read informational text, write in a variety of forms (narrative, explanatory, and persuasive), and so on, apply across the curricula.

In the Common Core, “K–5 literacy standards for history/social studies and science/technical subjects are embedded within the K–5 content strands. Secondary educators in these content areas need to determine how they will emphasize these literacy standards *in tandem with* their content-area standards” (Ainsworth, 2013, p. 45). Toward this end, secondary interdisciplinary teams do this by first prioritizing the Common Core 6–12 literacy standards for science and history/social studies and then integrating them with their prioritized content area standards in units of study.

Similarly, to improve student numeracy across the curricula, educators can assist students in learning many mathematics Priority Standards through other content areas, such as art, music, and physical education. Math Priority Standards typically include the ability to use

- all four basic number operations (+ – × ÷) with and without calculators;
- fractions, decimals, and percentages;
- two-dimensional scale models;
- graphs, charts, and tables;
- estimation; and
- [perform] tests of reasonability. (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006, p. 36)

Such interdisciplinary English language arts and mathematics Priority Standards, as well as the Priority Standards identified in all other disciplines, are essential for students to understand and be able to apply, not only for success on high-stakes assessments but in daily life as well.

Readers interested in learning more about the step-by-step process for prioritizing the standards—applicable not only to the Common Core but also to all state standards and provincial learning outcomes—will find it fully explained and illustrated in *Prioritizing the Common Core* (Ainsworth, 2013). Profiled in the book are narratives contributed by leaders from six school systems across the United States, who personally directed the prioritization process. They describe in detail how they accomplished this important work with educators in their own districts.

LEARNING INTENTIONS AND SUCCESS CRITERIA

Even though the Priority Standards are the primary source for determining the unit learning intentions—the specifics of what students are to learn and be able to do—in the CFA 2.0 process they are not synonymous with those intentions. Otherwise, the standards statements verbatim could serve as the stand-alone learning intentions.

As introduced in previous chapters, the purpose of learning intentions for the educator is to sharply focus assessment design, curriculum choices, instructional delivery, and selection of learning activities for the entire unit. For students, learning intentions can be written *as* success criteria that state explicitly how they will be expected to demonstrate the learning intentions. Referencing these success criteria, students set personal learning goals for what they intend to achieve by the end of the unit of study.

John Hattie includes multiple references to the companion terms “learning intentions” and “success criteria” in *Visible Learning* (2009) and

Visible Learning for Teachers (2012), his two in-depth compilations of evidence-based research that have been derived from over a thousand educational studies in classrooms worldwide. Here are a few excerpts from these powerful volumes that convey the meaning and purpose of learning intentions and success criteria:

Learning intentions describe what it is we want students to learn in terms of the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values within any particular unit or lesson. Learning intentions should be clear, and provide guidance to the teacher about what to teach, help learners be aware of what they should learn from the lesson, and form the basis for assessing what the students have learnt and for assessing what the teachers have taught well to each student. (Hattie, 2009, pp. 162–163)

Success criteria describe for students how to be successful in attaining the unit learning intentions.

The purpose of the success criteria, or “What are we looking for?” is to make students understand the criteria for judging their work and, of course, to ensure that the teacher is clear about the criteria that will determine if the learning intentions have been successfully achieved. . . . The success criteria, or “How will we know?” need to state as exactly as possible what the students and teacher will want to see. (Hattie, 2009, pp. 169–170)

The more transparent the teacher makes the learning goals, the more likely the student is to engage in the work needed to meet the goal. Also, the more the student is aware of the criteria of success, the more the student can see and appreciate the specific actions that are needed to attain these criteria. (Hattie, 2012, p. 46)

Learning intentions let students know upfront, *before* any instruction and assessment take place, where they are headed in their learning journey. Some of those intentions will represent easier-to-grasp surface understandings, while others will signify deeper understanding to be acquired through exercise of higher-level thinking skills. Clearly understood learning intentions are indispensable to educators who are in charge of charting the course for that journey. They must first know exactly what students are to learn in order to decide how they will assess student understanding of that learning. It is the “where to?” step of knowing the destination prior to any actual trip planning.

Examples of ELA and math unit learning intentions and student success criteria are presented in Chapter 6.

ILLUSTRATING THE CFA 2.0 DESIGN PROCESS

The first step of the CFA 2.0 design process shown at the beginning of the chapter has two parts, summarized here.

CFA 2.0 Design Step 1: Identify the Priority Standards for the Unit. From the complete list of grade- or course-level Priority Standards, select three to five standards maximum to be the learning focus of the unit. These specific Priority Standards should come from a *combination* of strands or domains within the content area, and not be limited to one strand or domain only. The Priority Standards assigned to the unit are the foundations from which the unit learning intentions will be decided.

CFA 2.0 Design Step 1: Identify the Supporting Standards. The supporting standards are the standards that connect or relate to the Priority Standards but do not receive the same degree of instructional emphasis. The CFA assesses student understanding of the Priority Standards only, not the supporting standards. However, the supporting standards provide instructional supports, or scaffolds, to help students achieve understanding of those Priority Standards. Select a limited number of supporting standards that directly connect to the unit Priority Standards.

In the following two examples excerpted from two units of study, one in English language arts and the other in math, the Priority Standards and related supporting standards provide the foundations for determining the unit learning intentions. These same standards will be used to illustrate each of the nine remaining design steps in later chapters.



CFA 2.0 DESIGN STEP 1

English Language Arts

Unit Focus: Reading Informational Text

Grade 5, Unit 5

Unit Name: Exploring the Role of Point-of-View in Argument

Unit Length: 30 days (25 instructional, 5 Bridge)

Informational Text

(Priority CCSS) RI.5.6 Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

(Supporting Standard) RI.5.4 Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a Grade 5 topic or subject area.

(Supporting Standard) RI.5.8 Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text, identifying which reasons and evidence support which point(s).

Writing an Opinion

(Priority Standard) W.5.1 Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

(Priority Standard) W.5.1a Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which ideas are logically grouped to support the writer's purpose.

(Priority Standard) W.5.1b Provide logically ordered reasons that are supported by facts and details.

(Priority Standard) W.5.1d Provide a concluding statement or section related to the opinion presented.

(Supporting Standard) W.5.8 Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work, and provide a list of sources.

Note: Writing standard W.5.1c was not included as part of this particular unit of study.

Source: 5th Grade Curriculum Design Team, San Diego Unified School District, San Diego, CA.

Note how **Priority Standard RI.5.6** is followed by its two supporting standards, *indented* to show their supporting role as instructional scaffolds necessary to help students achieve the more rigorous Priority Standard. In the same example, the **Priority Standard W.5.1** and its related subpoints, **Priority Standards W.5.1.a, b, and d** are followed by one supporting standard, also indented, to show its supporting role as an instructional scaffold. Positioning the supporting standards beneath the Priority Standards in this way underscores that relationship.

In the following math example, the two supporting standards listed at the end connect to and support *all five* of the unit Priority Standards.



CFA 2.0 DESIGN STEP 1

Mathematics

Standards Focus: Ratio and Proportion

Grade 6

Unit Name: Ratio and Proportional Relationships

Unit Length: 20 days (18 instructional, 2 Bridge)

Priority Standards (One Main Standard and Related Subpoints)

6.RP.A.3 Use ratio and rate reasoning to solve real-world and mathematical problems, e.g., by reasoning about tables of equivalent ratios, tape diagrams, double number line diagrams, or equations.

- a. Make tables of equivalent ratios relating quantities with whole number measurements, find missing values in the tables, and plot the pairs of values on the coordinate plane. Use tables to compare ratios.
- b. Solve unit rate problems including those involving unit pricing and constant speed. *For example, if it took 7 hours to mow 4 lawns, then at that rate, how many lawns could be mowed in 35 hours? At what rate were lawns being mowed?*
- c. Find a percent of a quantity as a rate per 100 (e.g., 30% of a quantity means 30/100 times the quantity); solve problems involving finding the whole, given a part and the percent.

- d. **Use ratio reasoning to convert measurement units; manipulate and transform units appropriately when multiplying or dividing quantities.**

Supporting Standards

6.RP.A.1 Understand the concept of a ratio and use ratio language to describe a ratio relationship between two quantities. For example, “The ratio of wings to beaks in the bird house at the zoo was 2:1, because for every 2 wings there was 1 beak.” “For every vote candidate A received, candidate C received nearly three votes.”

6.RP.A.2 Understand the concept of a unit rate a/b associated with a ratio $a:b$ with $b \neq 0$, and use rate language in the context of a ratio relationship. For example, “This recipe has a ratio of 3 cups of flour to 4 cups of sugar, so there is $3/4$ cup of flour for each cup of sugar.” “We paid \$75 for 15 hamburgers, which is a rate of \$5 per hamburger.”

Source: Jan Christinson, author-consultant.



SURFACE AND DEEP LEARNING IN THE STANDARDS

The targeted Priority Standards and supporting standards in both of these units represent a blend of both deep and surface learning. Usually, the Priority Standard is more cognitively demanding than the less rigorous supporting standard.

For example, in the English language arts unit, the Priority Writing Standard W.5.1, “Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information” will require more of students than the related, but less difficult-to-learn excerpt from the supporting standard W.5.8, “Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources.”

In the math unit, the main Priority Standard, 6.RP.A.3, “Use ratio and rate reasoning to solve real-world and mathematical problems, e.g., by reasoning about tables of equivalent ratios, tape diagrams, double number line diagrams, or equations,” requires a more comprehensive—deeper—understanding students need to attain through problem-based

application. Yet part of 6.RP.A.3c, “Find a percent of a quantity as a rate per 100 (e.g., 30% of a quantity means 30/100 times the quantity),” represents a more straightforward—surface—learning outcome, even though it too is a Priority Standard.

EN ROUTE TO THE LEARNING INTENTIONS AND SUCCESS CRITERIA

After the Priority Standards are selected for the unit of study, they must be “unwrapped” to identify the concepts, skills, and levels of cognitive rigor they represent. The identification of these elements, along with Big Ideas and Essential Questions, will then enable educators to clearly pinpoint the unit learning intentions and student success criteria and then create the matching end-of-unit CFA questions.

Before reading on, please take a few moments and write your responses to the following success criteria for this chapter, or simply evaluate your understanding of each performance statement on a scale of one (low) to five (high). Identify and close any learning gaps you may have. Once again, if you are reading this book as part of a professional study group, share your thoughts and ideas with colleagues. When finished, you will be ready to start the “unwrapping” step in Chapter 5.

Success Criteria:

- Summarize the rationale for identifying Priority Standards.
- Explain the role of Priority Standards in the CFA 2.0 design model.
- Describe the relationship between Priority Standards, supporting standards, and learning intentions.