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National Standards: Following the Pendulum of Debate

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NATIONAL STANDARDS: FOLLOWING THE PENDULUM OF DEBATE

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In March, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) released drafts of the proposed National Standards for K-12 education in English Language Arts and Literacy, History/Social Studies, Science, and Math. The draft standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts with the goal of providing a clear and consistent framework to develop “college or career ready” students. In this draft, the authors attempt to define knowledge and skills students that high school graduates need for entry-level, credit bearing academic college courses and workforce training programs.

The debate over adoption a common set of national K-12 education standards has swung back and forth like a pendulum over the years. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton proposed “Goals 2000” which would have provided a framework for high standards and more accountability for schools and educators. The idea was met with strong opposition, and was eventually dropped. President George W. Bush picked the idea up again -- but this time at the state level -- with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB essentially mandated that states develop their own standards and accompanying assessments. To some extent, the legislation has been effective in that all states have engaged in standards-based school reform by developing curricular standards and administering related assessments.

Predictably, the existence of 50 unique sets of standards and 50 distinctive state exams has resulted in concerns over differences in the rigor of standards between states. This has encouraged advocates of national standards to redouble their efforts to develop common standards to be shared by all states.

SUPPORT

The mention of national standards is still met with immediate opposition by many. Nonetheless, the movement is gaining momentum. For example, last year, governors and the chief state school officers of

48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia committed to developing a common core of state standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics for grade K-12.

A national set of standards would provide important guidance to teachers.

According to proponents, there are three main problems within our current educational system that national standards would address. First, national standards would bring needed uniformity of goals and expectations to a system that is currently fragmented. For example, some believe that this lack of uniformity has led to poor U.S. student performance on international exams as well as the low achievement and attainment of disadvantaged students across the nation.

Second, supporters claim that a national set of standards would provide information and clarity with regard to what teachers should teach. For example, the existence of standards would let parents and taxpayers know what to expect and also let teachers know what they are expected to teach. Such supporters point to nations outperforming the U.S. that have standardized curricula.

IF IMPLEMENTED, NATIONAL STANDARDS SHOULD:

- Be aligned with college and work expectations
- Be clear, understandable, and consistent
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards
- Be informed by standards of other top performing countries
- Be based on evidence

Finally, national standards would free up educators across the nation from reinventing the wheel and creating their “own” state-level standards. What, after all, is the difference between math in North Carolina and in North Dakota? According to advocates of national standards, there is no logical difference.

Furthermore, supporters believe these standards would provide coherence across districts and states that would enable children to be taught to high standards regardless of their circumstance. This would benefit students in several ways. Standards could legitimately mitigate the negative effects highly mobile students experience from moving from school to school. In the end, sufficiently high standards could result in greater educational equity by raising the level of instruction for students in low-performing schools.

OPPOSITION

Opponents of national standards are found across the political spectrum. Conservative critics argue that educational decision-making should take place at a local level and view the idea of national standards as a federal intrusion into state and local business. These opponents of standards further maintain that, while equity is desirable, uniformity may not be. Others fear that national standards, while theoretically useful, would undoubtedly suffer from problems with implementation. For example, the rigor of standards would likely be diluted in the political process.

Liberal opponents worry that the imposition of national standards would allow for too much influence from those in politically powerful positions. For example, the development of national standards would certainly influence assessments, curriculum, textbooks, and professional development. Thus, there would be numerous opportunities for politically and economically powerful groups to profit from the adoption of these standards at the expense of student achievement.

WHAT NEXT?

The Obama Administration has taken a firm stance in support of state-led and voluntary national standards. However, it would be difficult for state policymakers to ignore the “voluntary” standards if Title 1 funds were tied to adoption (as proposed). The draft standards released in March were met with opposition in many states, including those with policymakers who had initially committed to the development of these standards.

Critics argue that the proposed common standards do not meet the “fewer, higher, clearer” goal which was initially stated. In any event, the final standards are expected to be released in late spring and time will tell if our national leaders remain behind this controversial proposal and attach federal funding to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

For more information about this policy brief, contact oepe@uark.edu

Supporters	Opponents
<p>“They’re good, solid — indeed very ambitious — academic standards for primary and secondary schooling, at least in the two essential subjects of English and math. Students who attained them would be better off — readier for college, readier to get good jobs, readier to compete in the global economy — than most are today.”</p> <p>- Chester E. Finn Jr, President: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.</p> <p>“The draft standards of course leave curriculum decisions to the states, but the message is clear: there must be a curriculum. And it must be coherent, specific and content-rich. Truly to adopt these standards means to adopt a curriculum having greater specificity and coherence than any currently followed by a state.”</p> <p>- E.D. Hirsch, Founder of the Core Knowledge Curriculum</p>	<p>“National standards are a seductive but dangerous idea. People tend to support national standards because they imagine that they will be the ones deciding what everyone else should learn...but the reality is that we are a large, diverse and decentralized country with strong democratic traditions, making national standards-setting a futile task.”</p> <p>- Jay P. Greene, Endowed Chair in Education Reform: Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas</p> <p>“Virginia has a successful standards-based reform program -- the Standards of Learning...abandoning those standards would be very disruptive to our school divisions, our teachers and our students. We've made all of this progress in the last 15 years under the SOL program. It's not something we're just going to walk away from.”</p> <p>- Charles Pyle, Virginia State Department. of Education Spokesman</p>