

## The Case for National Standards in American Education

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Efforts to raise student achievement in the nation's urban schools are paying off. Math and reading scores are going up—in most cases outpacing the national average for improvement—while superintendents are staying on the job longer and more schools are debunking the myth that urban schools can't perform at high levels.

Increasingly, though, it is becoming clear that even the best efforts will not get all students to the levels of performance needed to compete in today's global economy, unless we repair the patchwork system of U.S. standards that encourages high expectations in one community while discouraging those expectations in another.

In the absence of a clear and consistent set of national academic standards for what should be expected of all children, each state instead sets its own standards for what kids should know and be able to do. Sometimes these standards are high; often they are not. Either way, they drive the teaching and learning in America's classrooms and serve to perpetuate the nation's educational inequities at a time when we should be working to overcome them. It's as if we are telling all our students to climb a mountain to get a high school diploma, yet while some work hard to reach a 9,000-foot peak, others are asked to scramble up a 3,000-foot hill.

The disparities in what schools expect of students and teach them are profound, and they play out daily in the nation's classrooms. To meet standards in one state, a student may not have to distinguish integers as even or odd until 4th grade, add fractions until 6th grade, or multiply and divide fractions until 7th grade. Meanwhile, a child attending school in another state is expected to calculate the perimeters and areas of basic shapes in 4th grade, and multiply and divide fractions in the 5th

grade. No matter when these skills are taught, students are often expected to know them at very different levels of depth and rigor.

These different expectations create different outcomes. Perhaps the best illustration comes from results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a voluntary set of rigorous tests taken by students nationwide, and how they compare to state results. In 2005, for example, 89 percent of 4th graders in Mississippi, a state considered to have low standards, reached the “proficiency” level on the state’s reading test. This sounds encouraging, until you consider that only 18 percent of Mississippi 4th graders scored at or above the proficient level on the NAEP reading test. In Massachusetts, a state with relatively high standards, the gap is narrower. Fifty percent of 4th graders were proficient in reading on state tests, compared with 44 percent on the national test. Clearly, reading proficiency means something very different in these two states.

There is also evidence that some states, under the weight of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, are actually lowering their standards at a time when an avalanche of reports—from the National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Government Accountability Office, and other entities—suggest that we need to be raising them.

This problem is particularly urgent in America’s largest cities, which educate millions of the students the nation most desperately wants to help. Many urban districts now have their instructional programs so tightly aligned with their respective state standards and assessments that they miss what NAEP rightly tests with such rigor.

There is a better way, and it begins with the development of rigorous, uniform national standards for what we expect of all children, starting with the core areas of math and science.

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National education standards would give all our schools common targets and clarify what we expect teachers to be teaching and what we will hold schools and districts accountable for. National standards would give us, for once, a common definition of what academic proficiency means and what it doesn’t mean, rather than having 50

different definitions. Not only would this help schools focus their efforts on one set of high standards, but it also would help clear up the confusion that arises when a district does well on state exams only to score in the low teens on NAEP. Further, national standards would undercut the temptation by states to lower their standards or dumb down their tests to meet federal targets.

National standards would help propel U.S. economic competitiveness because they would allow the country to set expectations higher than those of our international competitors and ensure that high school graduates across the country were adequately prepared to compete in the global economy, no matter which state they came from. The vast majority of high-performing nations we must compete against economically already set their own national standards—many of them higher than the standards followed in most of our states.

Public education is supposed to promote a level playing field for our young people. Instead, the standards now in place do the opposite by institutionalizing uneven expectations and outcomes. National standards would allow us to smooth out such inequities and close some of the gaps that are at the heart of America's lackluster international rankings. That means not only holding students in all of our cities to the same high standards as students in more affluent areas, but also helping their schools target resources on the goals and expectations that will raise and sustain student achievement.

We also need national standards so that the country can determine more effectively who is making the most progress and how they are doing it, something that is nearly impossible to do under the fractured assessment system the nation now has in place. National standards would give curriculum and test developers, publishers, and education schools something to which they could align their work. In an attempt to include every state's standards, textbooks now cover more material than can be mastered in a school year, resulting in more remedial work in subsequent grades.

There is little reason to think, as some critics have claimed, that national standards would undermine the nation's tradition of local control of schools. That would remain intact. Besides, the laws of science and math do not change when state lines are crossed, and do not require much local discretion.

There are signs that the push for national standards is gaining traction. In January, U.S. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd of Connecticut, a Democrat, and U.S. Rep. Vernon J. Ehlers of Michigan, a Republican, proposed a bipartisan plan to provide incentives for states to adopt voluntary education-content standards in math and science. In addition, U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts introduced a bill that would encourage states to benchmark their own standards and tests to NAEP. The goal of both proposals is to push academic standards upward.

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Meanwhile, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation has offered suggestions on how national standards might be realized, including the common-sense approaches of creating a voluntary set of national standards that states could adopt and relying on small groups of states to partner in the development of shared academic standards. No doubt there are other ways to proceed.

But right now it is more important to make national standards a national priority than to debate how they might be achieved. To that end, the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of 66 of the nation's largest urban school districts, recently became the first national group of education officials to endorse national standards, joining a number of think tanks that had already done so.

Leaders of these urban school systems have made innovation and excellence a priority. They have experimented with nontraditional leadership, smaller schools, and aggressive interventions in low-performing schools. They have moved to attract and retain qualified teachers with new compensation systems that reward performance, and by providing better training and support for teachers. And they are becoming smarter and more targeted in their use of limited resources. The efforts are producing results.

But without a common benchmark to track their progress, these efforts may be in vain. Above all, urban school administrators and teachers believe that the best way to counter challenges posed by poverty or limited English proficiency is not to lower expectations, but to raise them. That is why they now call on Congress and state officials to consider options for pursuing national standards.

Ultimately, national standards and tests can help us ask and begin answering questions that we could never pose using state tests alone. This can help raise the quality of public education in the nation's cities and build a foundation for the future economic well-being of the United States. Only through national standards can we truly deliver on the promise of equity implicit in the purpose of public education, and give all our young people a real shot at the American dream.

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