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# *Educational Reform Through the Implementation of National Standards: A Response*

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## *Abstract*

*At this writing, federal initiatives for education reform seem to be taking their last gasps. There is a question as to whether Goals 2000 will make it to the year 2000. The development of voluntary, national standards has generated considerable debate both as to the desirability of such standards and the enlarged federal role in education. What is killing these initiatives and are they worth saving?*

## **Background**

Federal initiatives in education have constitutional, social (including economic) and political implications. These implications concern us as policy makers attempt educational reform based upon the implementation of national standards.

It can be argued that schools already have the resources, flexibility and, indeed, the responsibility to implement the necessary reforms. Why then do we need federal intervention in the reform process? The 1994 Goals Report provides this answer:

Public dissatisfaction with low levels of student performance, increased global economic competition, and consistently poor showings on international assessments led policy makers to conclude . . . that the United States had been spending too much time merely practicing and had not devoted sufficient time to improving performance. The National Education Goals were created to reverse that trend (Vol. 1, p.12).

It appears that federal reformers are working from an assumption of general public dissatisfaction. They believe that schools have gravitated toward a minimum competency curriculum and that most state standards, where they exist, provide a floor, not a goal, for practice. In this scenario many, if not most, schools are below standard, a situation which the federal reformers view as politically intolerable.

The United States has never had explicit, national content or performance goals, thus the establishment of standards represents a profound shift in educational practice. Not until recently have individual states set challenging, absolute standards for their student populations. While the absence of common standards has not prevented some schools from setting their own ambitious goals, many schools set their sights too low. In the absence of common, specified, demanding content standards and high expectations for students, schools have gravitated toward a minimum competency curriculum. This trend has been so marked that some observers have suggested that what we now have is a 'de facto' national curriculum of basic skills.

The notion that standards are integral to educational reform has been at the forefront of the educational and political debate since the publication, in 1983, of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The document recommended that "schools, colleges and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards" (p. 27). This popular, and in some respects seminal, document set a national agenda for education. Its major thrust was that all children can learn; schools must have high academic standards; for a school to achieve its goals, texts, tests and curricula must be tightly coupled; test scores will ensure that schools and teachers are held accountable (Cuban, 1993, p. 25).

President Bush gathered the state governors at the Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1989 where they embraced the concept of national goals and performance measurement and called for a greater sense of direction, combined with competitiveness, accountability and results in education. These themes were contained in the Bill, *America 2000: Excellence in Education Act* sent to the Congress in May, 1991 (Mulcahy, 1995).

*A Nation at Risk* and *America 2000* were the result of a consensus forged among national political and business leaders. Players included the National Governors' Association (NGA), the Business Coalition for Education (an umbrella organization for corporate America), and the National Council on Educational Standards and Testing (NCEST). They concluded that tougher and better schooling would boost a sagging economy and that a fragmented and failing education system needed centralized guidance as well as incentives and penalties to motivate students and teachers to work harder.

In 1993 President Clinton's Bill, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* may have softened the emphasis on accountability and competitiveness, but the commitment to standards remained (Mulcahy, 1995). The Act gave educational standards a statutory institutional existence in the form of the National Educational Standards and Improvement Council, NESIC.

Driven by the logic behind the standards movement educators and policy makers have sought to give renewed direc-

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tion to the very fragmented system we know as public education. Standards may be a start in the right direction, but they leave us pondering. There are unanswered questions, uncharted directions and uncharacteristic emphases that require thought and processing. Are national standards ever feasible in a nation as diverse as the United States and in an education system with a long history of local control? Are standards simply a way to blame the teacher and the learner for the failure of the system? Are American schools failing because teachers and students aren't trying hard enough? Have we entirely given up the Deweyan notion of making the school fit the learner? What will these new standards do to disadvantaged school populations who are just now beginning to show marginal gains in educational achievement?

### **What Standards are We Speaking of?**

The Reagan and Bush plans involved a performance-based, accountability model with clearly defined outcomes for schools, i.e. standards for content, performance, and teaching. Clearly, the purpose was quality and excellence. The Clinton model expanded the concept of accountability to include delivery standards which provide assurance that each student has a fair opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills set out in the standards. The addition of this element shifts the focus and ensures that inputs as well as outcomes are accounted for. Delivery standards explicitly introduce equity into the equation.

It is important to account for both inputs and outcomes in any measure of educational achievement. Almost a century ago John Dewey told us that what the learner brings to the learning process is as important as any content that we may wish to instill. The affective and social objectives of education are every bit as important as the curriculum content. A century of research has borne out the truth of Dewey's assertions. Any measure of educational outcomes judged against national norms must, realistically, account for local differences (inputs) as they impact opportunity to learn.

### **The Pros and Cons**

Typically, supporting arguments equate the international standing of the United States and competitiveness of its economy with the optimal development of the nation's human capital. Supporters argue that national educational standards will ensure the nation's preeminent position in trade, technology, and world affairs.

Proponents hold that many states have insufficient resources, both human and fiscal, to establish their own standards and assessment systems. They maintain that the establishment of challenging national standards will encourage states and school districts to raise educational expectations; that standards will help improve both the quality of schools and teacher professional development by providing a clear, common set of challenging goals; and that national

standards, applicable to all children, will help to provide the impetus for equalizing equality of educational opportunity across the nation (Smith et al. 1994, p.18).

Contesting the position are an equally explicit set of arguments. The collective national experience with centrally established standards, in education and in other sectors, has not been promising. Standards, generally, are "minimum standards" that serve to drag down the entire system. If such were to be the case with education standards, the entire nation would suffer. Relatedly, the establishment of national standards would draw attention away from the many, very positive state and local initiatives now underway. Opponents worry that if challenging national standards are established but the enabling strategies and resources are not available, the result will be a disservice to students. Other arguments depict national standards as too narrow and restrictive. Critics posit that national standards will lead to a national curriculum, inhibiting local and state creativity and initiative. Finally, the assertion that the great cultural, ethnic and regional diversity of the nation makes it unlikely that a common set of educational standards would enjoy widespread acceptance.

### **Are Standards the Answer?**

The national standards approach to educational reform involves both misconceptions and untested assumptions. Built into the Reagan-Bush-Clinton reforms is the assumption that rigorous standards will eliminate a crisis in education and guarantee the achievement of national goals. No such guarantees exist. What is guaranteed is centralized power and control over what will be taught and who will teach in the nation's schools.

The terms "quality" and "standards" are borrowed from industry where they, in fact, denote control. In the context of education, a unified system of quality assurance can be construed as controlling who will teach, what they will teach, and how this content will be taught. In this industrial metaphor for education the curriculum consists of content fields that have standard, measurable outcomes. Surely, education is not mass production; teachers are not in the business of administering uniform treatments and delivering a standardized product!

The view of the new federal reformers may be too narrow. To offer standards as the basis of educational reform may be to miss the point. Are American schools failing because some students and teachers are not working hard enough; because they cannot meet proscribed standards? Do schools, operating in a pluralistic society, have the right (never mind the ability) to create a homogeneous product, while ignoring differences in the cultural and life experiences of learners? Would the new age federal reformers have us revert to strategies rejected long ago by John Dewey, where the learners have to meet the standards set by the school or be labeled laggards? Kenneth Goodman (1994) who takes an uncompromising stand against national standards, claims

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that the movement is an attempt to centralize power and privatize education.

The standards movement promises the political power brokers that by controlling outcomes they can control schools while appearing to support local control and they can avoid spending money to deal with the real needs of education. With national standards in place, the laws of the marketplace can be introduced encouraging profit makers to compete with public schools and judging all in terms of their ability to meet standards (p. 39)

### **In the Face of History**

National standards become a question of feasibility in a nation as diverse as the United States and an education system with a long history of local control. The tradition of local control, dating back to the colonial era, has generally confined arguments about what schools should teach, to localities. Populations tended to be fairly homogeneous and participants in such discussions often shared similar beliefs and traditions. As O'Day and Smith (1993) point out, "(e)ven where school populations reflected greater cultural, linguistic, or religious diversity the political disenfranchisement of large groups often resulted in decisions (about how best to educate) being made by fairly homogeneous groups of leaders" (p.293).

In the last half century the situation has changed significantly. As the demand has broadened for social, political and economic equality among groups and as populations within school jurisdictions have become more diverse and educationally aware, debate over curricular content has become more intense. In these newly aware constituencies, arguments linking curriculum and educational standards to issues of political power or cultural legitimacy have erupted, periodically, along racial, religious or ethnic lines (O'Day & Smith, 1993).

### **Politics and National Standards**

The U.S. political system was deliberately designed to frustrate central power. Institutional checks and balances and shared authority within the federal system were constructed to thwart powerful, centrally coordinated action. In education, authority was divided among local, state, and federal governments with the latter having only marginal influence. The very size and diversity of the country cemented the system into place.

State government is the constitutional center of US education. To this point in our history, state and local education authorities have been only modestly constrained by federal initiatives usually stemming from categorical aid or Supreme Court decisions. President Bush, seeking a way around this constitutional obstacle, brought together the state governors at the Charlottesville Summit to forge an agreement. To ensure that the agreed-upon standards remained constitutional, they were deemed voluntary; no school could be required to adopt standards established by the federal government.

Federally instituted standards raise fundamental questions of educational politics and competing public values, more especially in terms of traditional governance arrangements and multiple control. Implicit in the new standards is a critique of the traditional mechanisms that have produced the present fragmented and incoherent standards. These reforms rest, at least in part, on a new balance of power including a pronounced shift, from local and state, to national control. The creation of new consensus building organizations such as the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and the National Educational Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) together with a reliance on federal strategies that promote cooperation between the states is bound to effect a power shift from the state capitols to Washington.

There are many who believe that the present decentralized structure is the essence of American education. Conversely, among the reformers are those who admire countries with strong, centralized ministries of education. The differences are rooted deep in the political culture. There is within the nation a deep suspicion of government coupled with a strong democratic desire for popular participation in pursuit of communal goals. Yet, it appears that the nation is ready to recognize that a lack of national standards has cost us dearly; that national systemic reform, in the guise of national standards, is the answer.

The political dynamic of standard setting is a puzzle. To produce the consensus necessary for national standards, it appears that we must change the present governance arrangements. However, experience has taught us that the democratic processes that produce these new arrangements will likely yield a whole new bureaucracy that, inevitably, will distort and perhaps frustrate the best intentions of the reformers. Ironically, the reformers who decry the current lack of structure may find structure their undoing.

### **A National Curriculum?**

Given the above political considerations how far removed are we from a national curriculum? Mulcahy (1995) reasons that it is only through content that content standards can be manifest. And it will be the acquisition of this content that will signal that content standard has been met. Therefore, to specify content standards is to specify content and specified content sounds suspiciously like national curriculum.

While standards may be voluntary, schools that prepare their students to meet such standards may give them an edge when it comes to college entrance and employment. In these circumstances, voluntary national standards may readily become 'de facto' national curriculum.

There are still other considerations that raise doubts. The national goals, as currently constituted, identify nine subject areas - math, science, English, the arts, foreign lan-



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guages, history, geography, civics and economics. Originally fewer were presented and one could argue that others could be added. This raises the question as to what knowledge and which performance skills ought to be included and excluded. Why these subject areas and not others? The current legislation does not offer an explanation.

There is an assumption in the Bush and Clinton legislation that what a student should know and be able to do is delimited by the traditional disciplines. It could be argued that conventional academic knowledge excludes from the curriculum much of the non-academic knowledge as well as the attitudes and skills that lead to personal and group fulfillment. Community and workplace skills that build harmony, tolerance, responsibility and cooperation are not necessarily inherent in conventional academic disciplines (Mulcahy, 1995). There remain large segments of the population of school professionals and administrators who are uncomfortable with the whole concept of a national curriculum.

### **Control and Resources**

Both control and resources are at stake in any restructuring of educational governance. Proponents of local control argue that meaningful standards will result from adaptation to local conditions coupled with external support and assistance. The new breed of systemic reformers has a much more business like approach. They view education as public investment. In this scenario, standards serve as a starting point for a complex political process aimed at securing greater resources for education in return for greater accountability. Standards are the political basis for an exchange between public policy makers who control resources and educators who control instruction.

What if national standards are enacted without the provision of necessary resources? Current inequalities in the provision of resources in the nation's schools brings this scenario well within the bounds of possibility. The specter of unfunded mandates coupled with gross inequalities in the provision of resources will lead to resistance, if not rebellion, on the part of teachers.

When high standards are proposed, they are likely to be followed by educator requests for more resources. Policy makers are wary of initiating such a cycle. In the present tight economy, the battle for higher education standards is difficult to initiate and even more difficult to win. Voters are lukewarm and policy makers have reason to be cautious.

### **Reform and Educational Opportunity**

The American school, quintessentially a white, middle class institution must, increasingly, accommodate students from outside this cultural mainstream. These changing demographics point to a sharpening and intensifying of cultural conflicts. Nowhere will this become more apparent than in the contested terrain of school curriculum. Critics fear

that national content standards will not reflect the culture of students from minority backgrounds.

How will minority, low-income and limited-English-proficiency students fare under new national standards? Proponents of national standards answer that well designed, systemic reform intended to improve the overall quality of schooling benefits the entire school population; and that "a rising tide lifts all boats". Standards are a powerful new policy instrument designed to promote and sustain equality of educational opportunity. Minority advocates worry that, just as minority students are beginning to succeed in terms of the standards and tests currently in place, elites are changing the rules of the game. The fear is that this will replicate the cycle of failure and further embed social stratification. Larry Cuban (July 14, 1993) echoes these concerns in an article written for *Education Week*.

With the evidence drawn from big city schools after almost a decade of effective-school programs and tougher state standards and tests, one predictable outcome is that systematic reform will miss the very schools that are most often used to justify the strategy. Thus it is fair to ask Congress: How national can a national strategy be that misses almost half of all schools in the country? (p. 25).

Some advocates for disadvantaged students, frustrated by the failure of 30 years of school finance reform and desegregation in education, hope that national standards will provide the impetus for a new round of court litigation based on substantive equity (Myers, 1994). Those who doubt the value of the present reform movement quote the concerns of poorer, urban school districts which lack the human, fiscal and material resources to achieve higher standards (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Kozol, 1991). We have ample evidence that schools serving low-income, minority students consistently have fewer resources and learning opportunities.

### **Consensus**

Specifying standards can galvanize opposition across the professional, political, and social spectrum. Educators and policy makers are keenly aware of the problems that result when notions of change are not widely shared in the community. As a result, most national standards projects are engaged in a broad review and feedback process to gather diverse input. The hope is that this process will yield a shared vision and a foundation for support and impart legitimacy to the standards (Massell, 1994).

Goals 2000 recognizes the importance of consensus building and speaks of "collaborative efforts . . . that are taking place at all levels of governance and, hopefully, in every community" (1994, Vol. 1, p. 14). More to the point, it is prepared to back the process with federal dollars. It embraces the policy of giving subject matter professional groups a much larger role in shaping the discussion. In December 1995, the National Academy of Sciences released the final version of the

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national science standards. Among the diverse groups involved in the delivery of these standards were the National Science Teachers Association, National Science Foundation, US Department of Education, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the National Institutes of Health (*Education Week*, Dec. 13, 1995, p. 9).

The present policy may give the subject matter professionals a much larger role in shaping the discussion, yet consensus requires more than agreement among professional groups. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, which has lead the way in developing standards, went through a lengthy process of feedback and revision following initial development. Their standards, when published, were accompanied by the caveat that professional standards are to “direct but not determine practice; to guide but not prescribe teaching” and that “no tight implications for practice may be inferred” (Ball, 1992, p. 27).

The polarization of the political system, the power of interest groups and the concomitant access to financial resources makes consensus more necessary, yet more problematic. The achievement of ambitious and challenging standards can be at odds with the objective of broad consensus. Juggling public opinion, professional status, and dollars will provide the creators of the standards with their major challenge.

### **World Class**

The 1991 report of the National Educational Goals Panel (NEGP), in language that was incorporated in Goals 2000, sets forth the criteria that national content standards must be “world class”. This requirement emerged out of concern that US students lag behind their counterparts in other countries and the consequent issue of America’s declining competitiveness in global markets. Such considerations have strongly motivated school reformers in the 1980’s and 90’s.

We need to exercise some caution in judging calls for reform based upon our situation relative to other nations. For example the British Education Reform Act of 1990 is sometimes used by reformers as a basis for comparison. This act established national curricula and, although it did leave room for some local input, it is considered to be highly prescriptive. The underlying social values and aspirations which motivated the British legislation may be at odds with the egalitarianism and the social rights agenda which permeates public school education in the United States.

Arguments based upon international comparisons can be of doubtful validity, statistically or otherwise. If, for example, high school exit exams are the basis for comparison, then high school completion rates need to be taken into consideration. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) maintain that school achievement may have more to do with cultural factors than formal standards. They point out that American parents tend

to assume that learning is fundamentally a matter of the child’s innate ability rather than a child’s effort to learn. This widespread attitude is in marked contrast to that of Asian parents who emphasize, to their children, the necessity of applying themselves diligently and who consistently invest their time and resources in supporting their children’s efforts. They point to a further cultural limitation in the manner in which the high or low status of teachers positively or negatively affects the quality of the talent pool from which future teachers are drawn.

### **Standards: A Narrow View of Education**

Are national standards simply a code name for outcomes based education? The standards movement offers political and business power brokers the prospects of control of schools through the control of outcomes. This outcomes based model leaves out the learner. Instead of beginning where the learner is, national standards map out a preordained path for learners as determined by some national committee of experts.

The notion of a standardized product is inappropriate in education. The Common School model of education was designed to empower us to play an informed role as citizens. It was envisioned as the forum where we learned the social skills and strategies necessary to become participants in a democratic society. Meeting national standards does not serve these important goals. They may, however, serve the laws of the market place. Market place competition, as is invariably the case, will define us in terms of “haves” and “have nots” and will lead inevitably to ethnic, economic, and ability segregation.

### **The Limitations of Standard Setting**

The national standards strategy may, ultimately, fail for it attempts change within the existing education system. So many factors that influence the outcomes of education lie outside of the existing system and as such will not be influenced by setting standards. Education is practiced within a social and economic context. Home and parental expectations cannot be subject to standards; they vary enormously across the socio-economic spectrum.

The national standards movement, in common with all education reform movements, expresses itself in egalitarian terms (e.g. “all students”). It proposes a common structure and measurable national outcomes. However, current curricula feature a maze of structures that differentiate students into tracks, ability groupings, special and regular education, gifted and talented programs, remedial and enrichment experiences, and so forth. How do we set national standards for students in such a differentiated structure?

Proponents of national standards may set their criteria for compliance but students respond to signals from other sources. The labor market sends signals to students about

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the connection between their educational achievements and their economic prospects. An economic upturn and the consequent prospect of employment sends a much clearer signal to students than the possibility of meeting mandated national standards.

The legitimacy and effectiveness of the standards approach may depend, ultimately, on the ability of the reformers to strike a balance between the common culture and the needs of the diverse elements within it. In the past, top-down reform with its "cookie-cutter" approach has not been particularly successful for it neglects the diverse infrastructure and the local discretion that are integral to education. Perhaps the US educational enterprise has grown to be so vast, so diverse and so bureaucratic that it is unable to respond to the challenge of systemic change implied by national standards. In 1990, Chubb and Moe concluded that the present democratic governance of education had left the system overbureaucratized and unresponsive. In their view, education is too hierarchical, too rule-bound, and too formalistic. Further, the specific political institutions by which the schools are governed actively promote and protect this overbureaucratization.

### In Conclusion

There are signs that educational reform under the aegis of national standards is not about to happen. Some educators are breathing a sigh of relief while others are bemoaning a lost opportunity. The standards - norms - testing approach is a reductionist view of education. It flies in the face of educational theory from the Deweyan, student-centered to the constructivist approach currently occupying center stage in educational thinking. A nation as culturally and ethnically diverse as the United States, with an education system rooted in traditions of state and local governance, is unlikely to reach national consensus over content and performance standards, at least in the short term.

Inevitably, the use of national standards, for accountability purposes, will lead to conflict between levels of educational governance. If local educators are held accountable for performance standards those schools and districts that lack resources will cry foul. The addition of unfunded mandates to the existing gross inequities in the provision of educational resources will prove disastrous.

Finally, the deep suspicion of government that is almost integral to the nation, may prove the undoing of the whole enterprise. The implementation of national educational standards can be viewed simply as public sector officials aiming to expand their authority. National standards take us into

the arena of congressional debate where politics, not education, is the standard fare. Politicos are interested in the 'short term fix'; their lives are bounded by considerations of re-election. The implementation of national standards is, by its very nature, a long term operation. In such a mismatch, Washington will not sustain its interest in education reform.

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