

Keep Steering Clear of National Standards

By Neal McCluskey

Touting national standards is the cool thing to do in education right now, and with almost all of the nation's governors recently joining an effort to draft common standards, the fad has taken a much-publicized step toward legitimacy. But just as he did with the so-called stimulus, South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford fought the peer pressure, essentially telling nationalizers, "thanks, but we'll run our own schools." It was the right thing to do.

What all but four governors signed onto is the Common Core State Standards Initiative, a joint effort by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers to create national reading and mathematics standards. But the movement didn't start there – it's been around for years, powered by the simplistic notion that one national bar must be better than fifty state standards.

"We need national standards, and assessments to measure them," U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently opined. "The idea of having 50 states designing their own standards is crazy."

Crazy? Really?

There's no compelling evidence that national standards are the key to excellence. What advocates typically point to is that almost every nation that beats us on international comparisons has national standards. But, then, almost every nation that does worse than we do has such standards. And Canada has no national standards but does very well on international exams.

How about the theoretical case?

There certainly isn't a good one based on how standards would be set. Whether done by states alone, states together, or Washington, the decisions would ultimately fall to politicians, people whose primary concern is their own political success, and that means placating the folks with the greatest motivation and ability to influence education politics: the teachers, administrators, and others whose livelihoods come through the schools. And those people, rationally, would prefer to have the lowest possible standards imposed on them.

That said, there are several advantages to having individual states in charge, though they are slight because the main pressure at all levels is to keep standards low.

When each state is responsible for its own standards there is at least some pressure to keep benchmarks high; caring parents, or companies in search of a better educated workforce, might gravitate toward high-standard states. And when states stand alone, their leaders can't adopt poor standards and use the fact that they are common as an excuse.

Perhaps most important, in a diverse nation it's simply more logical to have multiple standards. Children have very diverse aptitudes and interests, making it ludicrous to believe that they should all be moving at the exact same pace, at the exact same age, on the exact same subjects.

Of course, much of the recent impetus behind national standards has little to do with evidence, or any sort of inherent national-standards superiority. It's about No Child Left Behind, the federal education law that perfectly illustrates how political reality creates educational folly.

NCLB, for a refresher, acts tough by requiring all students to be "proficient" in mathematics and reading by 2014, but tells states to define what "proficiency" means. That practically begs states to set proficiency at rock-bottom levels, keeping federal bucks coming and schools out of hot water.

The national standards crowd, of course, says that NCLB's problem is that it touts a single goal without setting a single standard. But that's just a symptom of the law's underlying disease: Like all laws, NCLB was designed first and foremost to help the politicians who passed it, and that makes protecting politically potent special interests paramount. So even if NCLB had set a single standard, it would have had no teeth.

But if national standards don't offer any real hope, what are we to do?

What Governor Sanford has been urging for years: implement real public and private school choice. Let parents choose from among independent schools able to specialize in the needs and desires of unique children, and watch competition push standards ever-higher.

Unlike government standards-setting, this makes sense in theory. It's also backed by proof.

All but one of the ten random-assignment studies – the research "gold standard" – that have been conducted on choice programs have shown that at least some students whose parents could choose did better academically than those whose parents couldn't, and none did worse. The one outlier showed no significant difference between choosers and non-choosers.

Similarly, an exhaustive review of research comparing education systems around the world conducted by the Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson revealed that the more market-like the education system – the more consumer choice and provider freedom – the better the performance.

Finally, British researcher James Tooley reveals in his new book *The Beautiful Tree* that entrepreneurial private schools are not only abundant in the poorest villages and slums of

the world, but are educating students much more effectively than are free public schools. Of course if they didn't, they'd go out of business.

So while the rest of the country follows the national standards craze, South Carolina is wisely steering clear of it. But the Palmetto State could do much better. It could finally implement full school choice, and be on its way to truly powerful education reform.

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