

# An Interview with Neal McCluskey: No Evidence or Research for National Standards

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**2.22.10 - Michael F. Shaughnessy - There has been a serious push to implement some sort of national curricular standards for a few years now, energized, it seems, by what many have seen as a No Child Left Behind Act “race to the bottom” on standards**

**An Interview with Neal McCluskey: No Evidence or Research for National Standards**

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Neal, you have just released a paper on assessing the case for National Curriculum standards. What brought this about?

There has been a serious push to implement some sort of national curricular standards for a few years now, energized, it seems, by what many have seen as a No Child Left Behind Act “race to the bottom” on standards.

NCLB, recall, requires public schools to get all kids to reading and math “proficiency” by 2014, but leaves it to states to set their own standards, write their own tests, and define proficiency for themselves. As a result of this structure it has been difficult to determine which states have set reasonably high standards, which haven’t, and which, ultimately, are just dumbing proficiency down to keep the federal dollars flowing. The animating ideas behind the national-standards push are that (1) having a single standard will make it hard for states to game accountability; (2) “algebra is the same in California as it is in Mississippi”: and (3) national standards will be high standards.

The evidence typically cited to support these assumptions? Simply that the nations that do better than we do on

international assessments almost all have national standards.

The impetus behind my paper was to delve into the actual research on national standards, going beyond the extremely simplistic argument that those who beat us have national standards. If the nation is going to be pushed into having a single, government-imposed standard for every public school and student I thought the empirical research should at least be discussed.

2) Is there are real, robust, research to show that having a national curriculum would strengthen the U.S.?

There is not.

For one thing, the high-quality research on national standards – research that compares “control” to “treatment” groups – is very limited. Moreover, much of what does exist is centered not just on national standards, but national standards coupled with high-stakes assessments for students, meaning tests that can impact high-school graduation, grade advancement, etc. This is not something contemplated – at least not loudly – under U.S. national-standards efforts currently underway, most notably the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Finally, while much of this very small body of research suggests that national standards coupled with high stakes for students has a positive effect on testing – but not necessarily overall educational – outcomes, it typically fails to adequately control for unobserved variables, most notably cultural variables that could drive both the likelihood to centralize standards and the desire to do well in either academics or just easily tested subjects.

3) Are there any nations around the world that seem to benefit from a national curriculum?

Well, some nations with national curricula do well on international comparisons – Finland, Japan – but there are also nations without national standards, such as Canada, that place high. Similarly, many countries with national standards do very poorly on international assessments. And even after controlling for such things as national wealth it is extremely difficult to isolate whether countries does well because they have national standards or for myriad other possible reasons.

4) I have been to the Netherlands on many occasions. What are they doing correctly there, or is it just that the Netherlands is a very homogeneous country?

It is certainly logical to expect that a more homogeneous nation would have a greater ability to establish a single set of standards than a more heterogeneous country, and it doesn't get much more heterogeneous than the United States. Concerning the Netherlands specifically, while the country has national standards it also has very widespread school choice. This is important because choice enables families to select schools that share their values and desires, defusing many potentially paralyzing conflicts and forcing schools to compete for business. Again, though, it is very difficult to control for potentially important factors like culture in determining what drives a nation's success.

5) Standards are ubiquitous in free markets- True or False and what exactly does this mean?

Absolutely true. Franchising is a standard -- franchisees have to meet uniform requirements of their parent company. Product evaluations by publications like Road and Track for cars, and U.S. News and World Report for colleges, set national standards for products and services from which consumers and evaluators often both profit. In K-12 education, Advanced Placement tests – which an independent organization writes and students choose to take – establish

standards that are national in scope. And, of course, standards are imposed -- but also constantly evolve -- whenever someone has to earn customers. Customers determine what they want and how much they will pay for it..

- 6) Let's talk about diversity, or what I would call the extensive heterogeneity in America. How would this impact any attempt to bring about national standards?

Diversity – racial, religious, ethnic, ideological, linguistic, etc. – makes it very difficult to establish national standards because the greater the diversity, the harder it is to get people to agree on a single standard.

The most difficult subject on which to reach agreement, not surprisingly, is history, because peoples' identities are often tightly intertwined with their group memberships. When national standards were proposed -- and failed -- in the 1990s, no subject caused greater consternation than the history standards. Science, though, is also a tinderbox, with battles over human origins, or the treatment of global warming, creating great dissension for religious or political reasons. And math and reading have proven hugely controversial, largely due to diverse pedagogical convictions. Whole language or phonics? Calculators in fourth grade or not until eighth? And then there are questions about how much art or music a student should learn. Finally, there is very basic disagreement over whether education should be geared toward critical thinking, STEM subjects, vocational training, etc.

It's easy to say everyone should meet the "same, high standards." It is another thing entirely, however, to actually get and enforce such standards.

- 7) Would there possibly be an increase in private and parochial and charter schools if national standards were implemented?

I've seen no concrete proposal that would link establishing national standards with allowing greater school choice. Some national standards supporters, though, I think would be pleased with a "tight-loose coupling" in which anyone could choose a school as long as the school met national standards. That said, one of the primary benefits of non-government schooling is that educators can be innovative, which is the key to long-term improvement. Force everyone to teach the exact same thing and much of that innovation goes out the window.

- 8) Is there empirical support for educational freedom?

There certainly is – much greater than for national standards. There have been, for instance, ten randomized-assignment studies – the research "gold-standard" -- of voucher programs in the U.S., and only one failed to find at least some superior achievement gains for voucher students while finding no inferior results. The one outlier simply found no instance of superior or inferior voucher performance.

But looking only at U.S. voucher programs really narrows the potential scope of educational freedom research. Much more telling has been the work of my boss, Andrew Coulson, who has [reviewed over 65 studies](#) from around the world, reporting more than 150 separate statistical findings on provision of education. By a 15-to-1 margin the studies found that free-market provision of education outperformed government-monopoly provision.

- 9) Do those people in Washington have the Constitutional and legal right to impose a national curriculum on say, Rhode Island or Montana?

The words of the Constitution make clear that the federal government has zero authority to do anything in education  
[educationnews.org/.../58860.html?print](http://educationnews.org/.../58860.html?print)

other than in Washington itself, federal installations, or in prohibiting states from discriminating in their provision of education. Authority to be involved in education is nowhere in the specific, enumerated powers given to the federal government, and that Washington therefore has no authority to meddle in education is reinforced by the Tenth Amendment proclamation that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

To work around this, Washington rarely just tells states they have to do something in education. What the feds do is tell states they have to do things if they want federal dollars. So states only have to comply with federal education rules if they want billions of dollars back that came involuntarily from their citizens in the first place.

This gimmick is at work with national standards. Though supporters of such efforts as the Common Core State Standards Initiative are quick to proclaim that their standards-drafting is “state-driven,” and that states will voluntarily agree to use the final standards, already federal money is being attached to adopting national standards. Whether a state has signed on to national standards, for instance, is a big part of whether it can win “Race to the Top” funds. And it is very difficult to imagine a reauthorized NCLB that doesn’t require that states adopt national standards so that they can be held accountable for outcomes.

In short, DC can’t directly impose national standards on Rhode Island or Montana. It has to take the money of Rhode Islanders and Montanans first, and then demand adherence to national standards if they want some of that money back.