

[Obama Pushes New School Standards](#)[| Print |](#)

Written by Jack Kenny

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A \$14 billion program to improve the education of impoverished students will mean more money for financially strapped state governments — *provided* the states adopt new academic standards. In a meeting with the nation's governors at the White House today, President Obama said the overhaul of the No Child Left Behind Act he is proposing to Congress will require the states to present "college and-and career-ready" standards in reading and math.

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Under the current NCLB, signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, states are required to adopt "challenging academic standards" in reading and math, but the law leaves it up to the states to decide what is "challenging." States have adopted widely differing standards, with some adopting lower standards to have more students and schools in compliance as a condition for continued funding. For the past year, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers have coordinated an effort to develop national standards. Last year, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan pledged support for \$350 million in federal economic stimulus money for the creation of national tests. To date, Texas and Alaska are the only states not participating in the project.

Texas Commissioner of Education Robert Scott said last June that he would look at the new standards when they are completed, but he was not interested in taking part in the planning and discussions.

"I will absolutely look at them and make sure that Texas's standards are always higher," he said at the time. Texas native Margaret Spellings, the nation's Secretary of Education during the second Bush administration, had been a critic of the state's standards. But last year, she called the national effort a "little bit of a Trojan horse," and said the state was charting its own course in improving education standards. "Texas is moving forward on higher standards right now. You don't need to move forward on some multi-state process to tell you what to do," she said. "I worry that this is a lot of process and a lot of changing the subject." In Alaska, then-governor Sarah Palin said when the project began that the state would adopt and wait-and-see approach.

"If this initiative produces useful results, Alaska will remain free to incorporate them in our own standards." Palin said. But improving education requires more than issuing standards, she added. "The standards are not the problems we face," she said. "The major challenges are persistently low achievement among some students and low graduation rates. Now is the time for the state and school districts to work together to improve instruction and student achievement."

Obama, at a White House gathering with the governors, who are in Washington for the winter meeting of the National Governor's Association, spoke of the need for the United States to create and uphold high economic standard in order to maintain economic leadership in the world. During a visit to South Korea last year, he learned of that country's determination to educate its children to prevail in competition with the next generation of Americans.

"That's what we're up against," Mr. Obama said. "That's what's at stake — nothing less than our primacy in the world. As I said at the State of the Union address, I do not accept a United States of America that's second-place."

The No Child Left behind Act, a revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, has been the target of critics on both the left and right since it went into effect. While some have complained the program is under-funded and places too much emphasis on standardized testing, others have opposed the law as another step in the nationalization of education. The U.S. Constitution assigns no role in education to the federal government and the education of children has traditionally been left to local and state governments, with a growing number of parents homeschooling and others enrolling students in private religious or secular schools.

But the push for national standards has enjoyed bipartisan support in recent years, with former officials of the Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush administrations voicing their support. Despite two decades of Republican pledges to abolish the U.S. Department of Education, the budget and powers of that department have grown significantly under Republican as well as Democratic administrations. In 2007, Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) and Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.), sponsored a bill to create a national curriculum in reading and math. Then, as now, some critics questioned the need for a uniform approach.

"But how exactly would homogenizing our curriculum and testing make us more competitive?" asked Andrew Coulson of the libertarian Cato Institute in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece. Competition, not arbitrary standards, he said, fosters progress.

"We understand this point implicitly in every field outside of education," wrote Coulson. "We didn't progress from four-inch black-and-white cathode ray [TV] tubes to four-foot flat panels because the federal government raised television standards. Apple did not increase the capacity of its iPod from 5 to 80 gigabytes in five years because of some bureaucratic mandate. And the Soviet Union did not collapse because the targets for its five-year plans were insufficiently ambitious. Progress and innovation in these and almost all other human endeavors have been driven by market incentives: consumer choice, competition among providers, the profit motive. The absence of these incentives — as in the Soviet Union — has led to economic decline and collapse. Not surprisingly, the link between standards and performance in public schooling is noticeably weaker than it is in other areas, because government schooling is a monopoly, not a market."

For decades, some traditionalists have voiced moral as well as practical objections to assigning the duty of education to government at any level. The late F. J. Sheed, in a book titled *Society and Sanity*, insisted it was "grotesque." A minimum definition of education, he observed, is that it is a process of preparing man for life. But the modern democratic state cannot tell you what a man is—matter or spirit or both—or what life is for. About such matters, the secular democratic state must claim neutrality among competing philosophical and religious views.

"To be fitting men for living, not only not knowing what man is or what living is for, but without even thinking the questions relevant, is odd beyond all words," Sheed wrote. "Yet it does not strike people as odd. And the depth of their unawareness of its oddness is the measure of the decay of thinking about fundamentals."

Photo of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, President Obama, and first lady Michelle Obama before the president signed a memorandum on childhood obesity: AP Images