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Pro-Con | Are national standards for public school students a good idea?

Yes

A topic that leads to great speechifying and chest beating in state legislatures is “national standards.” Georgia lawmakers practically sneer when they say the words.

Why? Most Western European countries follow national curricula in their schools and chart their students’ progress through national testing. And those countries typically outscore the United States on achievement measures.

Yet we remain wary of national standards and tests, insisting that American parents can gauge their children’s skills through the hodgepodge of local standards and tests. Without national benchmarks, Georgia parents can’t compare their children’s performance with students in New York or Maryland. Yet their children will be competing with those kids for college slots and jobs.

The issue is now on the forefront since the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers released a public draft of the college- and career-readiness standards in English-language arts and mathematics for K-12.

Maureen Downey, Atlanta Journal-Constitution

NO

Set high national standards, make schools and students meet them. Sounds simple — but it isn’t.

For the last two decades, “standards-based reform” has dominated education. And what has it produced? It’s impossible to say for certain, but the signs aren’t good. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, since the early 1990s achievement has been largely stagnant, and what gains there have been have often been less pronounced than increases before the standards craze. Of course, when you think about it, having uniform standards for all kids simply makes no logical sense, especially in a nation as diverse as the United States. Children have myriad needs, abilities and desires, and it’s absurd to demand that they all learn the same thing at the same pace. That’s why the key to all kids’ realizing their full potential isn’t standardization but freedom.

Let parents choose among competing, autonomous institutions, and watch real accountability, specialization and innovation reign.

Neal P. McCluskey, Cato Institute, for The New York Times