

Published: January 14, 2010

Published in Print as: **Resurgent Debate, Familiar Themes**

U.S. Common-Standards Push Bares Unsettled Issues

Familiar Themes Emerge in Resurgent Debate

By [Sean Cavanagh](#)

It is one of the simplest ideas in American education—and [← Back to Story](#)

one of the most confounding: Elected officials and educators have been talking about establishing national, or common, academic standards for at least a half-century.

On its face, the logic of that goal seems incontrovertible.

Why should students in one state be introduced to a topic such as fractions as 1st graders, to cite a common example, when their peers in other states won't cover that mathematics topic until later? More broadly, why does the United States—a mobile society in a globally competitive era—maintain an education system that tests students, trains teachers, and churns out textbooks and classroom materials based on the myriad and often idiosyncratic demands of different states?

In several higher-performing nations, a single set of national academic standards guides all or most of those decisions. Yet in this country, the obstacles to establishing national standards have proved numerous and persistent, even amid concerns about the United States' international standing in education.

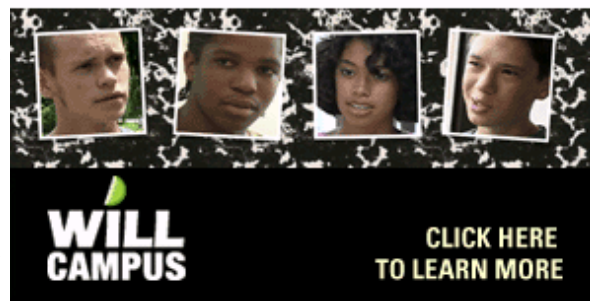
Some regard nationwide standards as a threat to the United States' federal system and the widely supported principle of state and local control over curriculum. They often point to federal law—such as the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#), known currently as the No Child Left Behind Act—containing language that prohibits the U.S. government from endorsing specific curricula.

Others say that documents meant to serve as standards don't provide enough direction, provide too much, or don't focus on the correct content—criticism that has been leveled against new drafts of common standards crafted over the past several months.

Backers of the latest high-profile push for common standards

Socially relevant,
fully interactive
video games for teens

VIDEO GAMES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE



Quality Counts 2010:

Fresh Course, Swift Current

Overview

[Executive Summary](#)

[U.S. Common-Standards Push Bares Unsettled Issues](#)

[A National Yardstick for Gauging Math Progress](#)

Web Extras

[State Highlights Reports](#)

Feature Stories

[Putting New Standards Into Practice a Tough Job](#)

[Effect of Common Standards on Publishers Uncertain](#)

[State Standards Loom Large in Mass. Classrooms](#)

[College and the Workforce: What 'Readiness' Means](#)

[State-Federal Tensions Loom in](#)

—including U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the two national teachers' unions, and numerous education advocacy organizations—believe it can succeed where previous national-standards efforts have failed, partly because it comes at standards from a different direction.

One major distinction, emphasized by supporters of the new project, is that it is being led by the states, in the form of two Washington-based organizations that work with state officials, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, rather than the federal government, whose involvement has bred skepticism and resistance in the past.

In fact, the CCSSO and the NGA say they are not attempting to create “national” standards at all, but rather “common” ones—hence the name of the project, the [Common Core State Standards Initiative](#). Its scope is reflected in the partners helping to direct it, including Achieve Inc., a Washington organization formed in the mid-1990s by state governors and business officials, and two prominent sponsors of college-entrance testing, the Iowa City, Iowa-based ACT Inc. and the New York City-based College Board.

As of December 2009, the standards-writers had drafted standards for college and career readiness in English/language arts and mathematics, with standards in those subjects for grades K-12 to follow. State governments, in most cases boards of education, will be asked to adopt the documents when they are finished.

That does not mean the federal government is a disinterested observer: The Obama administration has pledged \$350 million in federal stimulus money toward helping states craft common assessments based on common standards.

Lagging Achievement

In large part, the renewed interest in standards stems from long-standing sources of frustration among U.S. policymakers. They point to American students' disappointing performance on U.S.-based exams like the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP—and, increasingly, on international tests like the [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study](#), or TIMSS, which have received intense scrutiny in recent years.

Forty-eight states have agreed to take part in the current common-standards venture. Governors and other backers are motivated by lackluster test results and by worries about their states' ability to attract employers amid growing international competition, says Dane Linn, the director of the education division for the NGA's Center for Best Practices.

“Governors know that there are only so many tax credits you can use to lure employers to your state,” Linn says.

Standards Effort

Commentaries

[First, Do No Harm](#)

[Debunking the Case for National Standards](#)

[We've Always Had National Standards](#)

[Differentiate, Don't Standardize](#)

State of the States

[Holding All States to High Standards](#)

[Methodology, Sources, and Notes](#)

[Methodology](#)

[Sources and Notes](#)

States Seeking Guidance on Standards

When crafting and revising academic standards, a large majority of states have looked beyond their own borders for guidance. In nearly all of these cases, the work of national subject-matter organizations—such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Council of Teachers of English—has influenced state efforts. About half those states also examined the frameworks of other states for their own standards development, although considerably fewer engaged in some form of international comparison or benchmarking. States often reported drawing on information from multiple sources.

"You need a workforce."

State leaders also question the wisdom of pouring millions of dollars into potentially duplicative efforts to draft standards, assessments, and curricular materials. "There's growing interest in creating an economy of scale that can't be done independently," Linn adds.

The idea of establishing consistent, nationwide expectations for students has long enticed American political leaders.

That interest dates at least as far back as the post-Sputnik era, when policymakers fretted that the United States' educational and technological capacity was slipping behind that of the Soviet Union. In 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke broadly of a need for clearer national goals and standards in education, as the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Institute noted in a recent report. Yet the idea failed to gain traction politically.

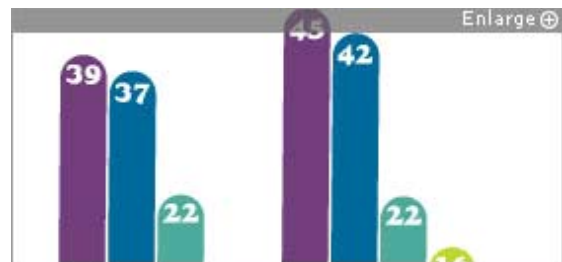
A little more than a decade later, fellow Republican President Richard M. Nixon said the fear of national standards had become one of the "bugaboos of education." Nixon did not favor national standards, but predicted support for them would grow, if school performance and standards at the local level did not improve.

Still, the appeal of national standards lived on. President George H.W. Bush, along with the nation's governors, agreed to set national education goals at a 1989 "education summit." The Republican later proposed legislation, known as the America 2000 Act, to establish voluntary national standards and tests, an undertaking that failed to gain congressional support. His administration, however, funded development of voluntary national standards in history and other subjects.

His Democratic successor, President Bill Clinton, signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which supported state efforts to develop standards; created a standards-certification panel, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council; and echoed many of the objectives outlined at Bush's education summit. Voluntary national standards, supported with federal funding, were released during the Clinton administration in arts, civics, geography, social studies, English/language arts, history, science and foreign languages.

Yet the base of support for standards efforts soon crumbled. In 1994, Lynne V. Cheney, the former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, criticized a draft of the history standards—an effort the NEH had helped pay for—arguing that they presented an overly negative picture of the United States and Western civilization.

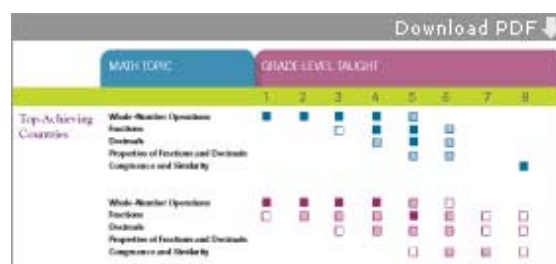
The same year, the U.S. Department of Education



SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010

United States vs. International Standards

William H. Schmidt, a professor of education at Michigan State University, has analyzed the math content taught in six high-performing countries, as judged by their showing on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS. He has found that those countries tended to cover fewer math topics, in greater depth, than did a random sampling of 21 U.S. states, which tended to repeat the same topics, year after year, with very little depth being added each time the topic was covered again. This chart is based on a composite of the math content covered at each grade by at least two-thirds of the top-achieving countries and two-thirds of the states sampled.



SOURCE: "A Coherent Curriculum: The Case of Mathematics," William H. Schmidt, Richard Houang, Leland Cogan, 2002

Standards: Snapshots From a

withdrew funding for the project to come up with English standards, citing a lack of progress and saying that the document's goals were too vague. In 1995, the U.S. Senate passed a nonbinding resolution denouncing the history standards. A year later, the Republican-led Congress eliminated the standards-certification panel.

One of the lessons of the 1990s was that “the specter of a federally led effort” would invite political controversy, recalls Michael Cohen, who served as assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education during the Clinton administration and is now the president of Achieve. “There needed to be a different way to talk about it.”

Despite setbacks for proponents of such standards, several major national-standards documents emerged during the late 1980s and 1990s, produced by organizations of educators and subject-matter experts. Those included the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Research Council, and the National Council of Teachers of English.

While some of the documents drew strong opposition from those who questioned their content, they also influenced states' development of academic standards in the years that followed.

During the mid-1990s, many states were only beginning to create and refine their own standards. Today, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have their own standards across subjects. Yet those documents vary enormously in content and structure—and in quality, according to analysts who have reviewed them.

The hope was that national standards developed in the 1990s would bring more consistency to state documents, but that didn't happen, in part because the national documents “weren't sustainable politically and didn't take hold,” says Cohen, who was a technical adviser for *Quality Counts 2010*.

Meaning of 'Standards'

Some of the variation in state standards today probably stems from a lack of clarity about what a standard actually is.

Most educators and curriculum experts define a standard, in simple terms, as an expectation for what a student should know—in a subject, at a grade level, or over a span of grades. State standards are typically meant to tell teachers, parents, and the public what content is most essential, and what will appear on state tests and in textbooks.

There are also “performance standards,” methods for judging students' mastery of academic material. Performance standards are often measured through “cut scores” on tests, designed to show whether students have met an academic goal, such as “proficiency.”

While not new, performance standards have received increased attention in the years since the No Child Left Behind Act took effect in 2002. States are required under the law to ensure that students make academic progress in reading and math, and that all students reach “proficiency” by the end of the 2013-14 school year. Yet states set very different thresholds for judging proficiency, leading

Half-Century

1957

The Soviet Union launches Sputnik, the first man-made satellite to orbit Earth, setting off a wave of concern among Americans about the nation's technological dominance and the quality of math and science education.

1959

1970

1983

1989

1991

1994

1995

2002

2009

critics to question the legitimacy of their exams as true gauges of what students know.

To add to the confusion, educators and elected officials sometimes use the terms “standards” and “curriculum” interchangeably.

But “curriculum” usually refers to a much more detailed explanation of the academic content that should be taught. Many states, for instance, have broad academic-content standards, then supplement them with secondary curricular documents to give teachers and others additional direction on lessons, professional development, and test content.

Among the clearest differences between the current standards movement and those of the 1990s are the new draft documents’ authorship and their source material.

Unlike many of the standards efforts of the 1990s, the bulk of today’s “common core” process is not being led by major professional associations, but rather by groups that represent or work with state leaders—the CCSSO, the NGA, and Achieve—and by college testing and placement groups, the ACT and the College Board.

Another difference, the CCSSO and the NGA argue, is that their standards will be based on “evidence” and “research” on what constitutes high-quality academic expectations. For instance, the college- and career-readiness standards are going to be based on evidence from experts and research that shows how they are aligned to the requirements of colleges and employers, the CCSSO and the NGA assert.

Of course, what one researcher sees as “evidence” may strike another as mere opinion.

Michael W. Kirst, a professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, argues that the best research suggests that the skills students need to succeed in different kinds of two- and four-year colleges, and in different jobs, are much more varied than the common-core officials acknowledge. “The burden of proof [for those assumptions] rests with CCSSO/NGA,” Kirst wrote in a recent online essay.

Lessons From Abroad?

One of the factors driving recent interest in standards is the worry over the United States’ mediocre performance on international tests. The results from country-by-country exams such as TIMSS and the **Program for International Student Assessment**, or PISA, vary but generally show U.S. students scoring in the middle of the pack in math and science, well behind top performers such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea.

Yet some scholars say policymakers are misinterpreting those results and their meaning in the standards discussion. Determining which aspect of a nation’s education system drives achievement—standards, as opposed to well-trained teachers, or a strong societal emphasis on education, or other factors—is difficult, they say. And while many high-performing countries have national standards, so do many low-performing ones.

One scholar who has examined the impact of national standards, John Bishop of Cornell University, has found that the greatest gains for countries come not from having standards, specifically, but in having standards connected to strong, curriculum-based exit exams. Standards are needed to create the exams, but the tests reinforce—to students, parents, and teachers—what students are supposed to learn says Bishop, an economist and associate professor of human-resource studies.

In a paper released last fall, Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, found little evidence of a connection between high-quality state standards in

the United States and strong academic achievement. Whitehurst, who previously headed the federal Education Department's Institute of Education Sciences, compared the rankings given to various states' standards by two different organizations, the Fordham Institute and the American Federation of Teachers, against their scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The "effect size," or numerical strength, of the connection between good standards and strong test scores was weak, he found.

Curriculum Crucial

A more powerful driver of educational improvement, Whitehurst concluded, is curriculum, which shows a stronger effect and is potentially cheaper to implement.

Few would argue that the mere adoption of national standards is what propels higher achievement in top-performing foreign countries, says William H. Schmidt, a professor of education at Michigan State University who has researched nations' standards extensively.

The real distinction, Schmidt argues, is that the high-achieving countries' standards are of exceptional quality, which he defines as "focused, rigorous, and coherent." He bases his conclusions on a detailed comparison of American states' standards in math and those of high-achieving countries.

One of Schmidt's oft-cited conclusions about U.S. elementary and middle school math instruction is that it is a "mile wide and an inch deep." Students repeat topics year after year without ever mastering the most critical and challenging material, he says.

The de facto standard for many American teachers is the textbook, Schmidt says, and such texts are not written "coherently," typically run several hundred pages in length, and are jammed with lessons and concepts meant to satisfy different states' standards.

"The book is the book, and you follow the book" is the unwritten motto in many U.S. schools, he says.

Establishing more-uniform standards would bring more equity and efficiency to the American education system and "make the whole operation of our education system so much more simple, streamlined, and easy to work with," Schmidt says.

Local Decisionmaking?

Yet others question why a standards effort led by either the federal government or the current multistate consortium would raise standards for students.

Neal McCluskey, the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, does not dispute the discrepancies in different states' academic-performance standards. But while nationwide standards seem like a good idea "in the abstract," McCluskey says, states are better suited to "look at innovations and try them."

Others question the current standards effort for different reasons. Alfie Kohn, an author critical of what he sees as a misguided push for ever-higher academic standards and more high-stakes testing, says the proposed common standards will inevitably impose "national" standards on curriculum and instruction, regardless of what supporters of the project claim.

Despite scant evidence that national standards improve student learning, U.S. policymakers have bought into the false idea that uniform expectations amount to higher and more equitable ones, Kohn says.

"The farther away you get from classrooms, the farther away from the needs of students you are," he

says. "There have to be enormous variations in how we teach, given the variations in different classrooms." ("**Debunking The Case for National Standards,**" this issue.)

Others, meanwhile, express concern that the Common Core State Standards Initiative will produce weak standards, or be picked apart by various political and cultural factions—what Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Fordham Institute and a technical adviser for *Quality Counts 2010*, calls the "forces of folly."

His organization favors the creation of national standards, and has been critical of many states' standards across academic subjects, which it regards as trading specificity and rigor for vague content and what Fordham deems political correctness.

Some observers also say that the common-core standards should provide more specific direction on necessary language arts and math skills.

So far, the drafts are less detailed than many national-standards documents created by subject-matter groups. While the initiative's documents hold up certain literary works and historical texts as "exemplars"—such as excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" in the language arts document—they also explicitly defer to state and local authority on key decisions.

Many "important decisions about curriculum will necessarily be left to states, districts, schools, teachers, professional organizations, and parents," the draft of college- and career-readiness document says. "This document does not contain a required reading list."

The lack of specificity on content disappoints E.D. Hirsch Jr., an author and a professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia. ("**First, Do No Harm,**" this issue.) Hirsch is the founder of Core Knowledge, a nonprofit group that advocates for grounding students in a grade-by-grade core curriculum, and develops curricula in grades K-8 toward that end.

Effective standards, Hirsch argues, are, in effect, "curriculum guides," which provide clear direction on the content students should master. Educators, in fact, would be wise "to abolish the word 'standards,' " as it is currently used, he says, because it amounts to "an evasion."

"If these standards offer no definite content guides of their own, and they also don't insist that localities do it, what good are they?" Hirsch says. The value of the standards, he adds, ultimately depends on "whether what's produced has a good consequence."

Even as work continues on language arts and math standards, CCSSO and NGA officials have had tentative discussions with representatives from the social studies and science communities about crafting standards in those subjects. Science standards could benefit from recent advances in cognitive research and other areas illuminating how students learn and how to order lessons, says Francis Q. Eberle, the executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based National Science Teachers Association.

Good standards "are absolutely critical because of the needs we have for improving the science [skills] of students across the country," Eberle argues. "It would really re-energize the field."