

# The Washington Post

## D.C. and Massachusetts to vote on national school standards

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School boards in the District of Columbia and Massachusetts are on the verge of adopting national standards for English and math, adding momentum to a movement that in a few months has swept Maryland and two dozen other states.

The board votes scheduled Wednesday come as a new report finds that the "common core" standards backed by governors and state schools chiefs are more rigorous than what most states have expected from their students.

The report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which advocates raising academic expectations, compared the proposal with the jumble of standards that have been in effect in 50 states and the District. It asserted that the proposed national standards are "clearly superior" to the math standards in 39 states -- including Virginia and Maryland -- and to the English-language arts standards in 37 states, including Maryland. But the report also found that the current D.C. standards in English are superior to the common core standards, even though D.C. public schools have long been known for weak performance.

Such findings underscore, experts said, that without great teaching there is no guarantee that raising standards or even adopting

common standards will strengthen public education.

"Bad standards are not fatal, and good standards are not a cure-all," said Chester E. Finn Jr., the institute's president. "But it's far better to have a good destination in mind for your kids than to have none or a bad one."

Academic standards have long been left to the states as a matter of local authority. Efforts to establish national standards in the 1990s foundered amid criticism that it would give the federal government too much power in schools.

But this year, a proposal for voluntary national standards sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers has gained traction. The Obama administration has encouraged the movement and dangled

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potential financial incentives for states to join but has not provided direct funding to groups that have drafted and promoted the standards. Instead, the plan, which defines the skills and knowledge that students should learn every year, was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other private donors.

The math standards expect, for example, that first-graders will "tell and write time in hours and half hours using analog and digital clocks," that sixth-graders will "fluently divide multi-digit numbers using the standard algorithm" and that high school students will be able to prove various theorems about triangles. The institute found that the math proposal was generally strong but that its presentation of high school material was "disjointed."

The English standards call for third-graders to "describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events," and for 11th-graders to "demonstrate knowledge of 18th-, 19th- and early-20th-century foundational works of American literature." The institute rated the proposal highly but found parts of it to be "a bit bloated and confusing."

Critics say national standards, even if voluntary, will enlarge Washington's role in public education. "It is opening the door to federal control," said Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the libertarian Cato

Institute. "That is the most alarming centralization of power in education you can come up with."

About 25 states have adopted the standards, according to Education Week and the National Association of State Boards of Education. The Maryland State Board of Education adopted them in June. Virginia officials say they do not plan to adopt the proposal and will instead rely on their benchmarks known as the Standards of Learning.

Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright said that the Fordham review was based on incomplete information and that the SOLs are comparable to the proposed national standards.

The D.C. State Board of Education is expected to vote on the common core standards Wednesday. Board President Ted Trabue said he is optimistic the measure will pass. "We

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strongly want our students to be on par with those in the rest of the country," he said. D.C. State Superintendent of Education Kerri Briggs said approval would enable the city to join with states in developing assessments, curriculum and teacher training.

Action on the proposal is also expected in Massachusetts. Mitchell D. Chester, the state education commissioner, is recommending that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopt the package with additions. The state, with highly regarded standards and a strong achievement record, is being closely watched. Some experts say Massachusetts should not seek to fix what isn't broken.

But Chester wrote that the proposed standards would provide "clearer signals to K-12 students about their readiness for success at the next level, including readiness for college or careers."

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