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## 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 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

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of common standards crafted over the past several months.

Backers of the latest high-profile push for common standards—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.

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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

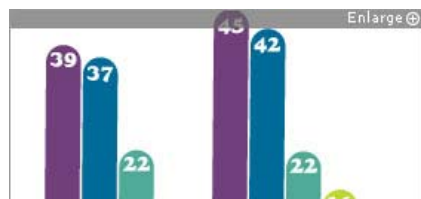
employers amid growing international competition, says Dane Linn, the director of the education division for the NGA's Center for Best Practices.

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

**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.



SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010

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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 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

### 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 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

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 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."

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**NANCY ILLING** wrote:

The meaning of 'standards' is certainly a necessary discussion as the nation looks at standardizing education. But the first discussion we need to have is the PURPOSE of standards. A school may have standards for behavior. Do all students meet these standards? No. The standards are 'expectations.'

Do we set standards that must be met for a student to move to the next grade? Then I believe you are setting up children for failure. Otherwise you have to set the standards based on the lowest common denominator. Then what message are you sending children?

There are no "standard" children nor do we have "standard" adults.

So let's not set standards that become requirements.

1/14/2010 2:31 PM EST on EdWeek

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**John Richard Schrock** wrote:

Much earlier this last decade, the South Korea Ministry of Education took a look at their students' top scores in international comparisons, and stated that they were not impressed. They have national standards so of course train students to take tests. They were not getting Nobel Prizes.

Each year I go to China and observe their system where everyone teaches to the "gao kao" leaving exam, a standardized system where curricula are totally aligned to the test, which is exactly what national standardization drives. No Chinese-born scientist has ever been awarded a Nobel Prize for research done in mainland China. The U.S. has 273 Nobel Prizes, all from scientists trained under non-standardized curricula (before the recent spate of reforms). Impose nationalized standards and be prepared to kiss teacher professionalism, creativity, and future Nobels goodbye. Only in the U.S., where the state standardization effort has been so abysmal, and a factor in driving good veteran science teachers from the field and diverting creative young college students out of teaching, would we propose to extend standardization to the national level. The international evidence argues against standardization. In American education, that is compelling evidence to charge ahead.

John Richard Schrock

1/14/2010 3:28 PM EST on EdWeek

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**Aligned By Design** wrote:

The common core state standards initiative is about one thing and one thing only, improved teaching and learning, i.e. classroom instruction and student achievement. If the standards don't impact the taught curriculum, they represent little more than an academic exercise. Why the tough love?

The recently released Study of Instructional Improvement (SII) research report is clearly found that that teaching and learning alignment breaks down at the classroom level and that the quality of instruction and student achievement depends more on the "taught" than "written" curriculum. It confirmed the findings of other respected research and documented dramatic differences in the kinds of skills and content taught from classroom to classroom and confirms that the quality of instruction from classroom to classroom within schools are greater than the differences in instructional quality between schools.

The result of this variation in practice is a major gap in the opportunity students have to learn important content, regardless of its inclusion in the written curriculum. The researchers were concerned by a lack of clear, agreed-on standards for practice among the teachers with the implication that schools and districts need to do more to guide and support classroom instruction.

The study exposes weaknesses in the quality and alignment processes that are intended to connect standards with curriculum and assessments and supports the fundamental questions raised by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Russ Whitehurst, Bill Schmidt and others in the article. The common core standards initiative may provide an outer framework for a better path forward, but the policies and practices guiding their state, district and classroom implementation do not provide the required strategy and supports needed to improve student achievement and close learning gaps.

Within the context of our decentralization system, U.S. education leaders can and must pursue a better strategy, one that retains the creativity and variability of teacher practice while ensuring that the classroom curriculum is high-quality and that teachers deliver the core curriculum content that all students should learn. Why wait another 10-years to 'confirm' what the research community has already found?

Education is all about the point of instruction, and the NGA and CCSSO need to articulate an implementation strategy which transparently communicates a linear, guaranteed connection between their new standards and the individual student in New York, Orgeon or Mississippi.

1/14/2010 4:46 PM EST on EdWeek

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**KC Cat** wrote:

Public Education in America is based on the principal of local democracy.... that is, a normal person, in a normal place, decides what is normal, locally....this idea of normal can vary from Alaska to Louisiana....and America derives a unique strength from this arrangement.... Start letting select "leaders" from afar control education.... And America will alter the formula that has made it a diverse and wonderful nation for over 200 years....

1/14/2010 5:32 PM EST on EdWeek

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**Leonard Waks** wrote:

Mr. Schrock hits the nail on the head. Any standardization of American education will assure further deterioration of our educational system. Our great national advantage is our wonderful culture of freedom. Take it away from our states, our districts and school boards, our school leaders and teachers, and our kids, and if you are very very lucky you may obtain the same results as communist China, and for the same reasons -- and in the meanwhile continue to drive out our best teachers and the children of our wisest and most concerned parents.

All of this talk of "standards" exists only to appease the tiny minds of those unable to grasp the idea of free people. Dictate to them, the idea goes, and they will do what you wish. Fat Chance. They will simply back away slowly until they can run.

By ignoring our unique culture of freedom, the standards movement



decontextualizes consideration of education.

And Ms Illing also hits the nail on the head. There are no standard children. Finland and Japan are reasonably homogeneous societies, so it may make some sense to talk of common expectations. America by contrast is wonderfully diverse, and also includes so many children still suffering from the legacies of slavery and wars of conquest. Making education into a race between these children and those of the affluent sets the former up for failure.

Wake up. Lets get the greatest intelligence bearing directly on the free mings and latent abilities of each and every kid right where it can be discovered -- in the classroom interaction between an unimpeded and caring teacher and an individual learner.

1/14/2010 5:47 PM EST on EdWeek

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**Faketeacher** wrote:

"Standard"

It is unfortunate that no one seems to know what a standard is.

A standard is NOT what someone should know or how someone should know it. Trying to capture "essential" content is ridiculous; especially at the rate content is growing.

Plotting a cognitive journey is also ridiculous since cognition is unique to every individual.

A standard might be:

\*One of many pathways for a learning journey, not a detailed description of the route taken or content at the destination.

\*The kind (chemical content, properties) of steel used to make a tool. Not what the tool is to be.

\*The color, shape and type face for a road sign, not the content of the sign. Interstate highway signs provide guidance to a destination of your choice, not the 'standard' destination.

\*A common document structure used for technical instructions or job descriptions, not the content/style of the instruction or the content of the job.

\*The scientific method is a standard approach to problem solving, not the problem to be solved or the solution set.

\*Navigation tools, the stars in the sky, don't prescribe; they make achievement of a goal possible.

Yong Zhao in "Catching Up or Leading the Way" does an outstanding job of explaining the harm of standards misunderstood. He fit his literary effort within the "standards" for publication of his cognitive journey.

Assessment? That's a daily task, not within the scope of normalized, one size fits all testing. Outcomes post graduation is the true assessment. America's continued progress and success in science, governance, economics and innovation indicate there might be something right about education today.

Yes we must continually improve. See Edwards W. Deming for instruction on how that is accomplished.

1/14/2010 6:27 PM EST on EdWeek

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**R. S. Lloyd** wrote:

I hope we all know, and do not forget, that this rush to standards business is just that - business. And, it is BIG business. That is why major political leaders have

big money in national testing - you might have heard of no child left behind? Read instead, "no dollar left behind." Read also, "teaching to the test," instead of what must be the unshakable focus: "student-centered education"

Politicians supporting required, across-the-board, National Testing have only their most selfish personal/corporate interests guiding their decisions.

The corporation that can secure a required national testing contract ends up taking all the "little" state test contract business - ALL of it. That lucky pig with the national testing contract gets one harmonguous, supersized, 50-state money pie contract with thick crust, extra cheese, all the toppings and unlimited refills. This National Standards Test contract would make our DOD country's contracts look like milk money.

And of course the test itself is just the tip of this titanic iceberg of cash. Think also of all of that support money to be made from their assessors, their software designers, their publishers, their certified consultants to get schools up to national acceptance (and all of the University teacher preparation reform requires trainers, new courses...), and then their test revision costs and so on and so on.

All of the reseach and documentation from all of the ivory halls, from decades of observation, theory, and practice, that demonstrate why national testing is counter-productive to making each student better educated to face and successfully participate in the world, does not amount to a hill of beans against the mountains of money to be made by standardized testing at a national level for a first-world national budget like that of the USA.

If politicians, and those in positions of educational leadership on every side of the aisle, truly cared about and acted in the best interest of the nation's students, their ideas and actions would be a voice in unmistakable support of genuine student-centered quality education. When we do that as a country - really commit to that student-centered paradigm for international education - we will not rely on some corporation to let us know if the education system is working.

1/14/2010 7:40 PM EST on EdWeek

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**Chris Banks** wrote:

First and foremost, I'd like to point out that this article fails to use the word ACCOUNTABILITY--not even once. The argument about standards is useless unless there is a method for holding people accountable! Principles must run their schools and teachers must run their classrooms, but to achieve what? Nobody seems to be able to answer that in concrete terms. Somewhere in America this year an eighth grade student will proceed on to high school having failed all of his or her core classes. The same hold true for countless others as well. That is a travesty! That is what standards MUST be about. The greatest minds in education in this country or any other can debate until the sea dries up, but until that one problem is solved, we will continue to fall behind as a nation. The American educational system's problem isn't what we are or are not teaching, it's how we hold those persons responsible for learning, teaching and administering ACCOUNTABLE. Or in our case...fail to do so at all.

1/15/2010 12:36 AM EST on EdWeek

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**paulhoss@hotmail.com** wrote:

Sean,

Excellent piece. There's a great deal here to consider.

1/15/2010 6:42 AM EST on EdWeek

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**Fangtai** wrote:

U.S. education has always had standards and has always expected those standards to be met for students to move forward. The standards have usually been represented by letter grades, A, B, C, D, and F, with C being the average, or middle value. Sadly, nobody is satisfied with average, seeking to have all students scoring higher than average or be permanently banished to the wasteland. The C has gone from being a stanadard to meet, to being the standard to beat at all costs. I am reminded of a friend in high school who actually strived to maintain a stright D average. He did not want to flunk, but he

dispsed the sytem of grading so much that he purposely worked to get D's in all classes. The setting of national standards must needs dilute standards to include the largest number of students. This entails setting the bar at least slightly below average to accomodate for the differeences that exist in all schools. It is not necessary, nor practical that all students progress from high school to college. It is not legally possible in any of the fifty states to require all students to graduate from high school, or even to remain in school for a full twelve years. It is time to stop and take a long look at what is really needed in education. Students should be able to read by the end of third grade, do simple aritmetic by the end of fourth garde and have an understanding of mathematical concepts before entering high school. The third standard should be students able to express themnselves clearly in at least one written language. From this point, basic mastery of the three "R's" students should be able to learn what they feel the need to learn by using the tools they developed in school.

1/15/2010 9:04 AM EST on EdWeek

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