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The Ohio Education Gadfly: Why Common Core standards are a welcome upgrade for Ohio »

POSTED ON MARCH 24, 2010 AT 3:45 PM BY KATHLEEN PORTER-MAGEE

Like the tide, great standards lift all boats

There's a debate brewing about how much—if at all—great standards contribute to education reform. This week, the *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial saying that they are not as important to student achievement as universal choice. And recently, Cato's Neal McCluskey published a report (and yesterday a blog [post](#)) arguing, essentially, that standards don't really drive achievement and thus that the move to draft rigorous common standards is distracting us from pushing reforms that might actually drive student achievement. Namely, universal choice.

At face value, this argument just doesn't sit well with me. To be clear, I'm a huge proponent of school choice. In fact, in the nine years I've spent working directly in and with schools, I've only worked in schools of choice—both public charter and private schools that were part of the DC opportunity scholarship program.

But, to say that advocating for more rigorous standards is a distraction from reforms that will drive student achievement seems so far removed from everything I've ever experienced in education.

First, the DC Catholic Schools Consortium (now the [Center City Consortium](#)), which has served hundreds of at-risk students thanks to the Opportunity Scholarship Program, was able to realize the dramatic student achievement gains they've achieved in part because they made the bold choice to adopt Indiana's standards, which were far superior to their hometown DC and Maryland standards. And they very intentionally used these standards to drive curriculum, assessment, professional development, and consequently, student achievement across their classrooms.

Second, the success of high-performing charter schools—including [Achievement First](#), where I served as Senior Curriculum and Professional Development director for more than four years—is thanks in very large part to the adoption of rigorous standards. When the standards in the states in which these schools operate are too low, they are augmented. At Achievement First, for example, when we were looking to develop a truly rigorous high school curricular and instructional program, we evaluated standards from AP courses, IB programs, and top state standards to determine which set of expectations would help us set the bar where it needed to be. (And, of course, AF and all successful public and private schools do this all the time across all grade levels.)

But, even outside my own narrow experience, there is evidence that standards matter.

Take today's release of the [2009 NAEP reading results](#). Unsurprisingly, Massachusetts—the state that has the strongest ELA standards in the country—is leading the nation in reading achievement.

But, if you scratch beneath the surface, there is even more to Massachusetts's remarkable story. Not only do they have the greatest percentage of students scoring at or above proficiency, but they also lead the nation in every single category.

In other words, students scoring in Massachusetts's **bottom 25%** score higher than students in the bottom 25% of any other state in the nation. And students scoring in the top 25% perform better than students in the **top 25%** of any other state.

In other words, thanks in large part to adopting rigorous standards and to using these standards to drive curriculum and instruction across the state, Massachusetts has lifted **all** of its students. Sure, there's more to do, and school choice could undoubtedly help. But it's just hard for me to believe that Massachusetts's results have nothing to do with having the most rigorous standards in the country.

And this is why, for states whose math and ELA standards are currently so abysmally low, the **Common Core standards** initiative holds so much promise. Done right, adopting more rigorous ELA and math standards has the potential to push every student in the state to do better. This is surely something worth doing if we can do it right.

–Kathleen Porter-Magee

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Comments

Erin Johnson:
March 24th, 2010 at 4:23 pm

Kathleen,

How does this fit in with Whitehurst's analysis showing standards having no effect on student learning, but curricula having a significant effect? Is his data wrong?

http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/1014_curriculum_whitehurst.aspx

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