

Will National Standards Improve Education?

The pros and cons of mandating what American schoolchildren should know.

Contributors

- **Uniformity Is Not Equality**



Alfie Kohn, author

- **Making a Bad System Worse**



Neal P. McCluskey, Cato Institute

- **At-Risk Children Will Benefit**



Michael Goldstein, MATCH Charter School

- **Equalizing Mediocrity**



Sandra Stotsky, University of Arkansas

- **Common Standards Are Helpful**



Richard D. Kahlenberg, Century Foundation

- **Understandable, but Wrong**



Bruce Fuller, University of California, Berkeley

Making a Bad System Worse

Updated July 21, 2010, 12:04 PM

Neal P. McCluskey is the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute and the author of "[Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples and Compromises American Education.](#)"

National-standards supporters are trying to address a real problem: When left to their own devices, districts and states have either established low standards or weak accountability, or both.

An education policy and bureaucracy based in Washington benefits no one, except the people employed by it.

But imposing national standards does nothing to change the basic political reality that has created this dismal situation: Public schooling is a government monopoly, and the people employed by it – those who would be held accountable – are the most motivated and best organized to engage in education politics. The result is that sooner or later they get what they want, and what they naturally want is as little accountability to others as possible.

If anything, national standards will make this intolerable situation worse, pushing accountability-gutting forces up from 50 statehouses and focusing them all on Washington.

But if neither district, state, nor federal control can solve our problems, what can? Eradicating government monopolies. Rather than having government fund and control schools, let parents control education dollars and choose among autonomous educational options. Then, rather than using politics to circumvent accountability, educators will have to compete for customers, driving both real accountability and ever-improving standards.

We know this works, with [abundant research](#) showing that the most free-market education systems consistently outperform monopolies. In contrast, there is [no meaningful empirical evidence](#) that national standards improve outcomes.

Why the free-market success? It's certainly in part because markets don't suffer from the special-interest dominance that has crippled state standards and accountability. But there are other benefits. Perhaps most important, freedom enables schools to specialize in the differing needs of unique children rather than having to treat all kids like carbon copies. It also requires ideas about "the best" standards to compete, and keeps bad standards from taking everyone down with them.

Unfortunately, none of this seems to register with would-be national standardizers. Given their goal, that's bad news for everyone.

Topics: [Barack Obama](#), [Education](#)