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Obama proposes to raise academic standards by linking them to state benchmarks

By Nick Anderson
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President Obama announced Monday he will seek to raise academic standards across the country by requiring states to certify that their benchmarks for reading and mathematics put students on track for college or a career.

The proposal, part of Obama's evolving blueprint for a [revision of the No Child Left Behind](#) law, was released as the president met with governors in Washington. It will give a further boost to a [state-led movement](#) toward common standards, a groundbreaking development for a public education system in which current expectations for students vary widely from coast to coast.

Under the proposal, \$14.5 billion in annual education aid for students from poor families would be tied to states' action on standards.

Only those that have what the administration calls "college- and career-ready" standards would qualify for the funding, known in education circles as the Title I program.

There might be some debate about defining such standards. College-ready would mean the ability to begin college without needing remedial courses, according to the administration, and career-ready would mean high-level skills in math and literacy, among other abilities, roughly equivalent to what's required for college.

"If a university, state, or school district begins preparing educators to teach to higher standards, we'll give them the support they need," Obama was expected to tell a gathering of the National Governors Association, according to prepared remarks the White House circulated Monday. "And to make sure we're delivering for our kids, we're launching a competition to reward states that join together to develop the highest-quality, cutting-edge assessments required to measure progress; and we'll help support their implementation. This goes hand-in-hand with all our efforts to give every American a complete and competitive education."

White House and Education Department officials said a state could show that its benchmarks meet the expected level two ways: by adopting standards developed through a consortium of states or by certifying, in a process to be developed with universities, that their existing standards are high enough.

The first option plainly supports an initiative governors and state schools chiefs launched last year to draft new benchmarks for math and English language arts. Forty-eight states, including Maryland and Virginia, are part of the initiative, although it is unclear how many will adopt the final draft, to be released in coming weeks. The District is also part of the initiative. Texas and Alaska are not. Kentucky this month became the first state to decide to adopt the standards, after officials reviewed a late draft.

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Under No Child Left Behind, which President George W. Bush signed in 2002, states are free to set standards without federal guidance. Experts say many states have lowered standards to help schools meet the law's testing and accountability requirements.

"We have to stop lying to children," Education Secretary Arne Duncan told the National Governors Association on Sunday. "We have to look them in the eye and tell them the truth at every stage of their educational trajectory."

Despite the momentum behind the common standards initiative, some critics suggest that it is a back-door attempt by the federal government to impose national standards. The Obama administration denies that charge.

Still, efforts to establish national standards in the 1990s foundered on the argument that state and local authorities should not cede control of what gets taught in schools.

That line of attack, dormant for some time, might revive as the common standards movement gathers steam.

"Rhetoric of the president and other national-standards supporters notwithstanding: There is NO meaningful evidence that national standards produce better educational outcomes," Neal McCluskey, an education analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote in an e-mail.

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