

The New York Times

## ROOM DEBATE

A Running Commentary on the News

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### National Academic Standards: The First Test

By *THE EDITORS*

Left to right: Wikimedia Commons, Library of Congress, The New York Times English curriculum examples: a scene from “Pride and Prejudice”; Walt Whitman; a New York Times front-page article from April 15, 1865.

The [first official draft](#) of proposed national educational standards was released on [Monday](#), a joint project of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The curriculum guidelines detail math and English skills that all students should have by the end of high school. Forty-eight states (Texas and Alaska are the holdouts) have signed on to the effort, called the Common Core Standards Initiative, to write the standards. This is one step on a long road: there is a 30-day comment period, and then the panel convened by the governors association will work on grade-by-grade standards from kindergarten onward.

What are some strengths and weaknesses of the new proposal? What are the obstacles to adopting common curriculum standards? Should this be a national goal, or should education reform efforts be directed elsewhere?

- [Michael Goldstein](#), charter school founder
- [Margaret Crocco and Anand Marri](#), Teachers College
- [Sandra Stotsky](#), professor of education reform
- [Robert S. Siegler](#), professor of cognitive psychology
- [Neal P. McCluskey](#), Cato Institute

#### The Real Issue

***Michael Goldstein** is the founder of MATCH Charter Public School in Boston.*

In the 1990s and early 2000s, each state created its own set of standards and tests. You might think: “That’s crazy! Each state reinvented the wheel?” Yes. Some Republicans would sign on to the standards movement only if combined with states’ rights.

The politics has changed. All governors now recognize a problem: incentives to set low passing scores. Currently, a kid in Alabama might pass a 4th grade reading test that, if he lived in Massachusetts and took our version, he would fail.

Moreover, even “good” states have easy tests. Here in Massachusetts — regarded as tops in the nation in our standards — a kid can be deemed “proficient” with scores under 50

percent correct. Even “advanced” on tests often comes nowhere close to meaning “on track to be successful at a state college or university.”

Little of the public squawking, though, is about how difficult the tests are (not). That’s too bad. Instead, three groups battle. Some educators balk at all standardized tests. Traditionalists want kids to know how to read, how to add  $1/4 + 1/2$ , what caused the Revolutionary War, etc. A third group wants fewer facts and more “thinking.”

A first draft of these national standards was perceived as mushy. The new round is drawing guarded praise from some traditionalists. Good news.

But to most teachers, the real issue is not the standards. Few teachers do more than glance at them. Have you ever read these things? They tend to be laundry lists, listing every possible topic. There’s no way to cover it all.

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### **It’s About Educational Equity**

*Margaret Crocco and Anand Marri are, respectively, professor and assistant professor of social studies and education at Teachers College, Columbia University.*

The Common Core Standards initiative, led by governors and chief state school officers around the country, has released drafts of potential new national exit standards in English and math for graduating high school seniors. We haven’t yet read the standards, but their very existence should be seen as promising by all the educators, employers, policymakers, school and government officials, parents and students who, during the past decade, have articulated their desire for “rigorous and challenging curriculum.”

That phrase was ushered in with great fanfare by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, but efforts at getting there have aggravated longstanding problems of inequitable

education related to what we call “the access gap.” Several factors account for the lack of access to high quality curriculum for many students, especially tracking, curriculum narrowing, highly varied state educational assessments, and local differences in school funding formulas.

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Reducing the “access gap” — the longstanding problems of inequitable education.

Tracking is the decades-old process of sorting students into different classes with differentiated curriculum keyed to perceptions of ability level. Research on tracking indicates that teachers’ perceptions of students’ ability correlate strongly with race, class and gender. Curriculum narrowing is a more recent phenomenon, one that results from widespread testing of math and language arts under No Child Left Behind. Subjects such as science and social studies not to mention arts and music, which do not get tested, often do not get taught. The school day in urban schools is often spent drilling math and

language arts to bolster test scores.

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## More Complex Than Simple English

***Sandra Stotsky** is professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas.*

The basic problem with this long-awaited draft is that it proposes a set of high school exit standards for a subject that does not exist and that no teachers are trained to teach. This country's English teachers are not prepared to teach what the draft wants them to teach. Nor can secondary reading teachers teach what the draft wants high school English teachers to teach.

What does the draft want taught in the English curriculum?

Standard 18 makes it clear: "Demonstrate facility with the specific reading demands of texts drawn from different disciplines, including history, literature, science, and mathematics." As the draft explains, "Because the overwhelming majority of college and workplace reading is non-fiction, students need to hone their ability to acquire knowledge from informational texts...[and] ...demonstrate facility with the features of texts particular to a variety of disciplines, such as history, science, and mathematics." Keep reminding yourself that this is an English language arts standard, not a high school exit standard.

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English teachers are not prepared to teach students how to read technical material in other areas.

In case one has doubts about the nature of the camel that has been set forth in this draft, all one has to do is look at the 10 sample passages that illustrate the kind and level of reading to be addressed by English teachers by grade 12. Their hearts will leap to see excerpts from a novel by Jane Austen, a speech by Toni Morrison, and a letter by Martin Luther King Jr., as well as a Walt Whitman poem on Lincoln's death and coverage in The New York Times of Lincoln's assassination.

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## The Numbers Gap That Matters

***Robert S. Siegler** is the Teresa Heinz professor of cognitive psychology at Carnegie Mellon University and the Tisch Distinguished Visiting Professor at Teachers College at Columbia University.*

The standards for mathematics education that have been released are a good start toward providing a coherent national curriculum. Among the features that seem particularly well chosen are the emphasis on estimation as a means of promoting understanding, on number lines as a means of explaining rational number concepts, and

[www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org) An example from the draft of mathematics standards.

on probability and statistics as essential components of the mathematics curriculum.

More important than any single feature or set of features in the standards, though, is the contribution they make toward a national curriculum, freely agreed to by representatives of the states. At present, variations in curricula from school district to school district mean that children whose families move a few blocks or a few miles away flounder in some subjects where they lack prerequisites that were not covered in their old districts, and are bored in other subjects where the instruction repeats what the students already learned.

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It is no coincidence that the countries with much higher mathematics achievement than the U.S. have national curriculums.

These variations hinder learning, especially among children whose parents move often, and make impossible direct comparison of learning across districts and states, which are essential parts of evaluating the performance of the educational systems in those districts and states. It is no coincidence that all of the countries with much higher mathematics achievement than the U.S. — Japan, Korea, Singapore, the Netherlands, Finland, etc. — also have national curricula and teach the same subjects in the same grades throughout the country.

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### **One-Size-Fits-All Doesn't Work**

*Neal P. McCluskey is the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.*

Set high national standards, make schools and students meet them. Sounds simple -- but it isn't.

For the last two decades, “standards-based reform” has dominated education. And what has it produced? It's impossible to say for certain, but the signs aren't good. According to the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), since the early 1990s achievement has been largely stagnant, and what gains there have been have often been less pronounced than increases before the standards craze. And no, the problem hasn't been tight fists: Between 1990 and 2005 inflation-adjusted [per-pupil expenditures](#) rose from \$8,971 to \$11,643.

So what has caused the disappointing results? There are many factors, but arguably the biggest is political reality.

Like most people, public school system employees would prefer not to be forced to meet high standards in their jobs.

Unlike most people, they often have the power to make that happen. Because their livelihoods come from government-run schools, they are more motivated and better

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Children have myriad needs, abilities, and desires, and it's absurd to demand that they all learn the same thing at the same pace.

organized than anyone else when it comes to education politics, and that has given them outsized influence over how they are -- or are not -- held accountable. And it's a power they've used at the local, state, and national level.

Still, most nations that surpass us on international assessments have national standards. Isn't that proof that they work?

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