

Standards-based Reform: Lessons from the Past, Directions for the Future

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The pending reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act has renewed calls by groups across the ideological spectrum for national standards. The bi-partisan Commission on No Child Left Behind (2007) recommended the development of voluntary model national content and performance standards and tests in reading/language arts, mathematics and science based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) frameworks. If states did not adopt these standards and tests, states would have their own standards and assessments subjected to public review against the national model. The Fordham Foundation also supports the concept of voluntary national standards and assessments with federal regulatory relief as an incentive for state adoption (Finn, Julian and Petrilli, 2006). The Education Trust suggests incentives for states to adopt “college-and career-ready” assessments and performance standards and sanctions for states with large discrepancies between proficiency rates of the own assessments and NAEP (Education Trust, 2007). In contrast, state and local education organizations have adopted positions calling for greater flexibility, multiple assessments and measures of accountability, and a focus on capacity-building in NCLB (CCSSO, 2006, 2007; Forum on Educational Accountability, 2007; NCSL, 2007; NEA, 2007).

The arguments in support of national standards today echo those of the past: they will promote democracy, equity and economic competitiveness. The arguments against national standards are also familiar: they will lead to the establishment of a national curriculum; one size does not fit all; and local communities, not the federal government, know what is best for their students. The context for the debate differs, however, from earlier years. The extent of the federal government’s involvement in elementary and

secondary education is unprecedented. Many disciplines have national standards, developed by professional organizations and/or by the federal National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) for the NAEP framework. NAEP's proficiency levels have become defacto national performance standards, benchmarks against which the performance of states is judged (or confirmed). Indeed, it is the disparity between state and NAEP proficiency standards that has been a driving force in the current push for national standards.

If the nation already has defacto content and performance standards, it would appear that the adoption of incentive-driven, voluntary national standards is a logical next step in federal education policy. Yet, the same underlying issues bedevil the adoption of national standards now as in the past: what kinds of standards, whose standards and with what effect? More specifically, policymakers must reach consensus on the type, content and specificity of the standards; determine who will develop the standards; and facilitate the implementation of the standards. This chapter discusses what we have learned over the years about standards and standards-based reform in an attempt to inform and improve future policy. It is organized around six points that have implications for future policy:

1. The United States has a long history of education standards, and standards-driven reform, but the type, target and use of these standards has changed over time.
2. Standards matter.
3. Incentives to use standards matter.
4. Who establishes the standards and incentives matters even more.

5. Consensus over standards remains elusive in our highly fragmented and decentralized education system.
6. Standards are necessary but not sufficient to change teaching and learning.

The chapter begins with a very brief overview of the history of standards in the United States. The second section discusses the implementation and effect of the standards movement over the last 30 years. The final section raises a set of issues facing policymakers who advocate national standards (or any standards) as the keystone of education reform in the years to come.

A Brief History of Education Standards

While the current focus on education standards seems fairly recent (dating to the 1985 National Governors Association report, Time for Results and the 1989 Charlottesville summit), education standards have been expressed through laws, common curriculum and textbooks, and entrance requirements for over 200 years. The type (content, performance, input),¹ target (students—all or differentiated; teachers; schools; districts) and use (improving educational quality, increasing educational opportunity, monitoring, gatekeeping) of the standards, however, have changed over time.

One could argue that our founding fathers delineated the first education standards in their writings about the purpose of education and in the education clauses of early state constitutions. For example, Article 83 of the NH constitution of 1783 spelled out not only the purposes and focus of public education, but a set of education outcomes as well.

¹ Content standards are descriptions of knowledge and skills that students should acquire in a particular subject area at different grades or grade spans. Performance standards identify different levels of student attainment or mastery of the content, or how good is good enough? Input standards are the human, programmatic and fiscal resources required for a school's operation.

[Art.] 83. [Encouragement of Literature, etc.]; Knowledge and learning, generally diffused through a community, being essential to the preservation of a free government; and spreading the opportunities and advantages of education through the various parts of the country, being highly conducive to promote this end; it shall be the duty of the legislators and magistrates, in all future periods of this government, to cherish the interest of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries and public schools, to encourage private and public institutions, rewards, and immunities for *the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and economy, honesty and punctuality, sincerity, sobriety, and all social affections, and generous sentiments, among the people.* (Italics added). (NH Constitution)

Ravitch (1995) argues that schools in the nineteenth century had common content and performance standards as defined by relatively similar curricular materials (e.g., readers, geography books), grading systems, and, for high schools, college admission requirements and examinations. In 1893, the Committee of Ten, a group of college presidents and professors who wanted to bring some order to the hodge-podge of high school curriculum and to improve and standardize preparation for college, established high standards for *all* high school students, whether college- or work-bound. Similar to the current standards-based reform movement, they recommended what should be taught and how in each subject area, how student knowledge should be assessed, and how

teachers should be prepared to teach the content. These standards affected few students, however, as only one in ten youth were enrolled in high school at the turn of the 20th century. In a sense, schools had common standards in the 19th century, but the extent of students' common schooling was determined by the duration of their time in school and their access to educational opportunities.

During the first half of the 20th century, program and content standards for students became differentiated. The Cardinal Principles of Education, issued by the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (CRSE) in 1918, called for a differentiated, rather than a common, curriculum—one that would adapt the school program to individual differences in interest and ability. This approach seemed well-suited for the expanding population of high school students who came from working class and immigrant families and trends set in motion by this report dominated the mainstream of the education profession through the 1940s. Thus, although more students attended and completed high school, they did not experience a common curriculum. As Ravitch (1995) has noted, the principles of the Committee of Ten and college admission standards defined the content of the academic track in high schools, while those of the CRSE applied to the general and vocational tracks. Periodic attempts to increase the rigor of curriculum and instruction in selected subjects, such as mathematics and science in the 1950s and 1960s, were targeted primarily on the high achieving students.

At the same time, the administrative progressives focused on upgrading and standardizing the qualifications of teachers, physical plants, the length of the school year, types of instructional materials, and libraries. States implemented these input standards

in non-Black schools through legislation, regulations and school accreditation, but the type and level of educational opportunities available to students continued to differ by district urbanicity, size, wealth and racial/ethnic composition.

Since 1965, policy has focused on equalizing educational opportunity, first through input standards and resource equalization, and then through content and performance standards. The ideal is similar to that of the Committee of Ten, to ensure that all students have access to a common, rigorous education.

The equity movement of the late 1960s directed new attention to inequities in school inputs, particularly for schools in poor and minority communities. At the same time, increased state fiscal support of education and concerns about students' inability to read and compute ("Johnny Can't Read") led many states to implement testing and other policies in the 1970s to hold educators accountable for the operation and performance of their schools and to hold students accountable for the mastery of basic skills through high school graduation tests. When states instituted minimum competency tests in the 1970s, teachers paid attention to the competencies and prepared students for the tests. In New Jersey, for example, as the percent of students passing minimum competency tests rose, the state incrementally increased the rigor of the tests, although it continued to test basic skills. This emphasis on basic skills (an example of low-level standards-based reform), coupled with federal funding for compensatory education through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), increased the performance of minority students and, to a lesser extent, students from educationally disadvantaged families (Smith and O'Day, 1991). Concerns were raised then, however, as now, that teachers narrowed the

curriculum to the tested content, which was low-level math and reading. And the basic skills movement primarily impacted students in low-income schools and communities.

Success in raising basic skills was not matched by a commensurate rise in student performance on higher-order skills or in performance that was on par with the country's international competitors. This situation triggered the next round of education reform—one focused on higher quality input standards (A Nation at Risk) and, increasingly, on more rigorous content and performance standards (e.g., Time for Results, 1986; National Education Goals Report, 1994). The standards-based reform movement, which emerged in the late 1980's and early 1990's through the work of a group of education leaders, governors, businessmen, researchers, and professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), was designed to address the shortcomings of input-driven education reforms. Under the theory of standards-based reform, states establish challenging content and performance standards for all students and align key state policies affecting teaching and learning--curriculum and curriculum materials, preservice and inservice teacher training, and assessment—to these standards. Then, states give schools and school districts greater flexibility to design appropriate instructional programs in exchange for holding schools accountable for student performance (Smith and O'Day, 1991).

These ideas initially received the support of President George H. W. Bush who, in the aftermath of the 1989 education summit, unsuccessfully proposed a system of voluntary national standards and tests. The Clinton Administration subsequently took a “carrot and stick” approach to promote and support nascent state standards-based reform

efforts. The Improving America's School Act of 1994 (IASA) required states to develop challenging standards in at least reading and mathematics, create high quality assessments to measure performance against these standards, and have local districts identify low-performing schools for assistance. The Goals 2000 legislation and programs like the National Science Foundation's State and Urban Systemic Initiatives provided funds for states and localities to design the components of a standards-based system and to build the capacity of local districts to implement these reforms.

During the mid- and late-1990s, states and school districts began to move in the direction of standards-based reform, consistent with the intent of IASA. But state policy responses were uneven. While all states developed assessments, standards, performance reporting, and in most cases, consequences for performance, states found different ways to define what it meant for schools to succeed, what indicators to include in their definition of success, and what the consequences would be (Goertz and Duffy, 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was designed, in part, to address this variability in state policy. With the enactment of this law, the federal government expanded its role significantly, requiring states to test more and set more ambitious and uniform improvement goals for their schools, and prescribing sanctions for schools that fail to meet these goals. The substance of academic content and proficiency standards remains the responsibility of states, however. Federal law forbids its agencies from mandating, directing or controlling the specific instructional content, curriculum, programs of instruction, or academic achievement standards and assessments of states, school districts or schools, although it can and does use grants to support the adoption of instructional programs with a particular focus (Fuhrman, 2004).

In summary, the current standards movement has many things in common with the past. There have been periodic pushes for common standards over the centuries and the call for higher standards for all students is not new (e.g., the Committee of Ten). What is new, however, is that the talk of high standards takes place in a context where all students are expected to attend and complete high school. Accountability for the outcomes of schooling has shifted from students to schools and school districts, and the purposes of assessment have expanded from placing and promoting students to generating indicators of performance of the education system, motivating educators to change their instructional content and strategies, and aiding in instructional decisions about individual students. In addition, states are moving from school finance systems focused on inputs and equity to those focused on adequacy; that is, ensuring that school districts have sufficient resources to provide all students a quality education as defined by state standards.

Implementation of Standards-based Reform

Standards-based reform is designed to establish clear goals for student achievement through the establishment of standards and related assessments, generate data to improve teaching and learning, create incentives for change through rewards and sanctions, and provide assistance to low-performing schools. Studies of standards-based reform conducted over the last ten to fifteen years show that standards and accountability systems are driving educational change.

Standards matter.

Although the public is divided in its support of the No Child Left Behind Act (Rose and Gallup, 2007), there is general acceptance of the concept of higher academic

standards among the public, educators and policymakers. Most parents support continuing to raise standards and most students say requiring them to meet higher standards for promotion and graduation is a good idea (Reality Check 2006). Teachers also believe in the intrinsic value of standards. They feel that state standards identify what their students should know and be able to do, the standards are compatible with good educational practice, and the public should hold students and educators to account for meeting certain outcomes. Teachers like common measures to calibrate teachers' expectations, and find standards useful for bringing focus and consistency of instruction within and across schools. They also find standards helpful for guiding their own instruction and align their instruction to them, although they feel that standards include more content than they can cover in a year, and are, in some cases, too vague to provide useful guidance (Massell et al., 2005; Hamilton et al., 2007; Kannapel et al., 2001; Reality Check, 2006).

The legitimacy of state assessment systems is much lower, however, particularly among teachers. Teachers do not believe that state tests are necessarily a good measure of their students' mastery of content, and many raise concerns about the lack of alignment among standards, assessment and curriculum. But teachers report they align instruction to assessment and focus more on standards (Goertz and Massell, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2007). Teachers, schools and districts are also paying attention to the data generated by assessments. Teachers review assessment results to identify students who need additional help, topics requiring more emphasis, and gaps in curriculum and instruction. Districts and schools are increasing their use of student data in school improvement planning, to change curriculum and instructional materials, and to focus

professional development (CEP, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2005; Massell, 2001; Padilla et al., 2006). Although teachers feel that their students are over-tested (Reality Check, 2006), teachers, schools and districts want more information on student achievement. Since the mid-1990s, districts and schools have supplemented state tests to measure continuous progress toward district and/or state standards, provide instructional feedback to teachers, offer student-level information for parents and teachers, reinforce constructivist teaching through performance assessments, and/or evaluate programs (Massell and Goertz, 2002). With expanded state testing under NCLB, districts have turned to interim or benchmark assessments to track student progress during throughout the school year.

Incentives to use standards matter.

Accountability has gotten people's attention, for better or worse. Educators are responding to the press of performance-based accountability even though they feel that accountability and assessments narrow the curriculum and constrain their teaching approaches, and even when they do not feel an immediate threat from sanctions or see the possibility of rewards (Goertz, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2007; Kelley, et al., 2000; Massell et al., 2005). Stronger accountability has also focused educators' attention on traditionally underserved populations of students. While some educators still question whether all students can learn to high standards, their expectations for these students are considerably higher than in the past. Teachers report they search for more effective teaching methods, focus more on standards and on topics and formats emphasized in assessments, and change some elements of their instructional practice in response to state assessments (Goertz and Massell, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2007; Kannapel et al., 2001;

Stecher, Barron et al., 1998). And districts have responded to accountability press by providing assistance to schools, although not always the kinds of intensive support envisioned under NCLB (CEP, 2007a; Hamilton, et al., 2007; Padilla et al., 2006).

Consequences, however, are not sufficient in and of themselves to motivate action consistently across districts or schools. Staff in some low performing schools feel little press and react only minimally. An important factor in whether or not staff are responsive is whether their district leaders take a strong stand on accountability, mandating or in other ways encouraging their schools to take action. Professional pride and the acceptance of the intent of reform are other factors that explain changes in teacher behaviors (Goertz and Massell, 2005).

Researchers have identified negative consequences of increased accountability press as well. High stakes accountability has led to more time on test-preparation activities, narrowing of the curriculum, and increased attention to “bubble kids” (c.f., Booher-Jennings, 2005; CEP, 2007b; Firestone, Schorr and Monfils, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2007; Shepard and Dougherty, 1991). For example, nearly two-thirds of the nationally representative sample of school districts surveyed by the Center for Education Policy in 2006 reported that they had increased time for English/language arts (ELA) and/or mathematics in their elementary schools since 2001-02. The average increase for these districts was about 30 minutes a day in ELA and 18 minutes a day in mathematics. About 40 percent of districts reported they had decreased time in other elementary subjects (CEP, 2007b). In some cases, districts were responding to state guidelines for more time on primary grade reading instruction. Concern over the negative impact of more difficult tests on students, particularly students of color and English language

learners, has slowed the development of new high school tests aligned with higher standards and led some states to delay when passage of these tests would be required for high school graduation (Fuhrman, Goertz and Duffy, 2004). And, under the press of NCLB sanctions, states have called for changes in ways that schools are identified for improvement, such as increasing subgroup sizes, incorporating confidence intervals in the measurement of proficiency, and using growth models.

Who sets standards and incentives matters even more.

States use different processes for setting and updating academic content standards, setting proficiency standards and designing accountability systems (c.f., Massell, 1994; Goertz, 2001). Who sets standards can affect the legitimacy of standards among educators and the public. Teachers are more likely to support standards set by other educators or their professional associations than by government. In Pennsylvania, for example, opposition to standards introduced in the late 1980s under the name Outcomes-Based Education left a legacy that standards generated by the state were tainted by politics. This dampened educators' support for state standards introduced in the early years of the 21st century (Massell et al., 2005). Kim (2007) has argued that without the imprimatur of exemplary classroom teachers, the National Reading Panel's recommendations lacked legitimacy with some professional organizations and practitioners, slowing their adoption in the classroom. The composition of this and other national consensus reading panels raised the issue of whose research was most valued—that of university academics or that of practitioners. [\[Need to reference David Gamson's paper and his argument about the democratic nature of professionalism.\]](#)

However, standard-setting by educators can leave standards politically vulnerable. For example, literacy and mathematics standards developed by teachers, professional organizations and state departments of education in California and Arizona in the late 1980s and early 1990s) shifted pedagogy and related assessments toward a less traditional approach to teaching and learning. The states developed performance-based assessments designed to both measure new kinds of learning and to expand constructivist modes of teaching. Implementation of the new standards was supported by networks of like-minded teachers. Low student scores and technical problems with the tests in both states, and poor performance on the 1992 and 1994 NAEP tests in California, triggered intense public and political scrutiny of the content of the standards as well as the format of the assessments. This led to a call by the governors, state boards of education and legislatures of Arizona and California for revised standards developed by more broadly representative groups. The resulting standards placed greater emphasis on basic skills and traditional pedagogy and assessment formats (Carlos & Kirst, 1997; Smith, Heinecke, & Nobel, 1999; Wilson, 2003).

Tensions also exist between the accountability requirements of NCLB and state-designed accountability systems in several states. Although all states have developed accountability policies that meet the requirements of NCLB, at least 11 states have their own way of rating schools. These state systems differ from federal policy in several ways: inclusion of additional subject areas and/or non-academic indicators; use of performance indices to combine performance on multiple state assessments; application of growth measures; and exclusion of subgroup performance. These policy design decisions—particularly the use of growth models and lack of subgroup accountability—

result in the identification of many fewer low-performing schools than under NCLB and have created a public relations nightmare for states, particularly in suburban school districts which are highly rated under state measures (Goertz, 2005). As a result of these differing accountability determinations, many states have requested that NCLB be amended to permit the use of growth models for demonstrating academic gains, even if these gains fall short of what is required for students to meet NCLB proficiency targets.

Consensus over standards remains elusive.

Although professional organizations like NCTM and AAAS have used consensus processes to develop standards, consensus over the content of standards remains elusive both within and outside the education community. States have faced philosophical battles over what should be taught (e.g., evolution, social science content) and how (e.g., different approaches to teaching mathematics and reading). For example, after gaining control of the Kansas State Board of Education—twice, religious conservatives voted to change that state’s science standards to include alternatives to the teaching of evolution. The teaching of mathematics became the subject of heated controversy in California and other states, with traditionalists (including university mathematics professors) battling reformers over appropriate pedagogy (teacher-directed versus student constructed knowledge), and curricular emphasis--process (problem-solving and mathematical reasoning) versus content (facts, computation and algorithms). Similar fights took place over reading curriculum policy: what is the best way to teaching reading—through the direct instruction of phonics and skills, using controlled text, or indirect instruction through students’ interaction with authentic literature, in an approach called “whole language”?

These battles are not new. Schoenfeld (2004) argues that the underlying issues being contested in mathematics education are more than a century old. Is mathematics for the elite or for the masses? Should mathematics be studied because it develops the ability to reason, for its cultural value, or for its economic value? Controversy over the role of phonics instruction in reading instruction dates back to Horace Mann who argued that children should first learn to read whole words, an approach dubbed “look-say” in the late 1940s (Kim, 2007). [\[Add reference to Mirel paper on controversy in 1930s over what is good civics education.\]](#) And the debate over the teaching of evolution pre-dates the Scopes trial of 1925. Standards-based reform has shifted the venue for these battles, however, from local school boards to state boards of education and state legislatures. While skirmishes continue in local communities and debates rage in the academic and practitioner communities, combatants now mobilize to influence the content of state curriculum frameworks, and, in many states, the selection of instructional materials.

Standards are necessary but not sufficient to change teaching and learning.

Rigorous standards require teachers to teach different content and to teach that content differently. Building teachers’ knowledge and skills is a crucial component of the change process, and the theory of action underlying both standards-based reform and NCLB assumes that states and local school districts possess, or can develop, the capacity to assist school improvement efforts, to bring all students to proficiency, and to pay for these efforts. Under the NCLB Act, states and local school districts are to share responsibility for supporting low-performing schools. States must establish statewide support systems composed of school support teams, distinguished educators and principals from successful schools. Local school districts must provide technical

assistance in analyzing data, identifying and implementing effective professional development and instructional strategies, and revising school budgets. Districts must take specified actions with Title I schools in corrective action, such as instituting a new curriculum with appropriate professional development, decreasing management authority or restructuring the internal organization of the school, appointing outside experts to assist the school, and extending the length of the school day or year.

Districts have been aligning curriculum and instruction, both vertically to state standards and horizontally to other elements of district and school policies and procedures, for over a decade. Many districts have taken additional steps to align instruction by developing more specific local standards, publishing curriculum guides with standards, frameworks and pacing sequences, and issuing documents that mapped the content of required textbooks to standards and assessments (c.f., Goertz, Floden & O'Day, 1996; Massell & Goertz, 2002; Padilla et al., 2006). Most districts with schools identified in need of improvement report using other strategies, such as school improvement planning, the use of data and research to inform instruction, increasing the quantity or quality of professional development, providing extra time for and/or more intensive academic instruction to low-performing students, and increasing instructional time in reading and mathematics, particularly in elementary schools. Districts are also restructuring the elementary school day to teach core content areas in greater depth (CEP, 2007a; Padilla et al., 2006). Identified schools have adopted new curricula in support of curricular alignment; teachers have participated in professional development focused on alignment of curriculum, standards and assessment, reading and mathematics instruction,

and, to a lesser extent, data use and instructional strategies for specific student subgroups (Padilla et al., 2006).

States and districts lack capacity, however, to provide intensive support to low-performing schools and students, the kind of support they need to meet the high academic standards as envisioned under NCLB. Only half of the districts with schools in need of improvement report they have school support teams and only one-third provide additional full-time school-level staff to support teacher development and/or mentors or coaches for the principal (CEP, 2007a; Padilla et al., 2006). Furthermore, this support has not been available to all schools in improvement status. For example, in districts that provided these services, less than half (43%) of continuously identified schools reported they received help from their district's school support teams and only 14% received a principal mentor or coach. About two-thirds (63%) of the schools received assistance from a school-based staff developer and only half (55%) of the schools reported receiving special grants to support school improvement. In some cases, districts targeted limited resources to their lowest-performing schools; in others, low-performing schools volunteered to participate in district initiatives (Shields et al., 2004; Padilla et al., 2006).

These averages mask considerable variation in the capacity of districts to assist their low-performing schools. In 2003-04, the latest year for which data are reported by district type, schools in larger districts were more likely than schools in smaller districts to report they received resource-intensive support. For example, three-quarters of continuously identified Title I schools in the largest districts (more than 38,000 students) received assistance from school-based staff developers compared to only one-third of schools in small districts (fewer than 3,500 students). Similarly, half of schools in the

largest districts received help from school support teams compared to only 29% in the small districts. About one-fifth of identified Title I schools were located in districts that did not provide any school-based staff developers, school support teams or principal mentors to these schools. Only half of small and rural school districts provided any form of on-site assistance, yet, these kinds of districts accounted for 20% of identified schools. Intensity of support also differed by district size. Large districts assigned more full-time equivalent (FTE) school-based developers to low performing schools, and school support teams in the larger districts spent more days in each identified school than those in small districts (Padilla, et al., 2006). Other research has shown that large school districts have greater capacity to support standards-based reform, although the positive effects of size may be moderated in high-poverty districts (Hannaway and Kimball, 2001; Weinbaum, 2005).

This variable level of support is worrisome because most technical assistance comes from school districts. Districts report they turn to multiple organizations for help: their state departments of education (98%), education service agencies or local consortia (77%), institutions of higher education (56%), regional educational laboratories (53%) and comprehensive regional technical assistance centers (45%) (CEP, 2006). The most frequently used state strategies are special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts, alignment of curriculum and instruction with standards and assessments, professional development through the federal Reading First program, and provision of school support teams and educational or management consultants (CEP, 2007a). As with districts, however, resource-intensive state assistance covers only a portion of low-performing schools. In 2003-04, only 46% of districts with identified

schools reported that their state was the source of additional professional development staff or school support teams (Padilla, et al., 2006). Few districts received full-time staff to support teacher development or mentors for principals from their state (Shields et al., 2004).

Both states and districts report that they have insufficient staff or funds to serve all identified schools and districts. While state departments of education (SEAs) report they are becoming more focused on technical assistance, only 11 states felt in 2006 that they were able to provide assistance “to a great extent” to districts with schools in improvement, corrective action or restructure. Thirty-one states responded they were “moderately” able and eight states were “minimally” able. Half of the states reported that their capacity to provide needed support was affected “to a great extent” by insufficient numbers of staff (27 states) and inadequate federal funds (23 states); another 18 states reported that their capacity was affected “moderately” by each of these two factors. Thirty-six states felt constrained by a lack of state funds. States in which at least one-quarter of schools did not make AYP reported challenges to providing technical assistance more often than states with fewer low-performing schools (CEP, 2007c). States with large or growing numbers of schools and districts identified for improvement are focusing support on their most challenged schools. This situation has generated calls for differentiated treatment of and consequences for schools under NCLB. One proposed revision to NCLB would create two separate and distinct school improvement and assistance systems: one for chronically struggling schools; and one for schools that miss AYP in only one or two student groups and need only minor interventions (Miller-McKeon draft discussion bill, 9/2007).

The Future of Standards-based Reform

Education policy in the United States has changed considerably in the last 20 years. All states have content standards, assessments and accountability systems that include all students and focus attention on student learning. In most states, the rigor of standards is higher than in the past, although many argue that current standards are not rigorous enough (c.f., Achieve, the Commission on No Child Left Behind, Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce). If low standards are the problem, then the solution lies in generating higher quality academic standards (perhaps national standards), getting states to adopt them, and supporting schools and districts in implementing more challenging curriculum. The theory of action underlying standards-based reform remains the same; only the standards change. The push for national standards-based reform raises five issues for policymakers, however.

First, what is the nature of the problem? Are standards too lax? Are they too general? Are they too incoherent? Critics charge that standards in most states are not as challenging as those in high-performing nations and too few students are gaining the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and the workplace (Achieve, Education Trust, NCEE). In contrast to other countries, our state academic standards are unfocused, lack coherence and have led to a curriculum in the United States that is “a mile wide and an inch thick” (Schmidt, McKnight & Raizen, 1997; Rothman, 2004). Or, have we established suitable standards but set our expectations for student performance too low? States vary widely in the percent of students who are proficient on their state standards, ranging from 87% in Mississippi to 34% in Missouri (National Assessment of

Title I, 2006). Is this range due to variation in content standards or in proficiency standards? Is there a problem with the quality and coverage of state assessments? If we establish national standards, must we also create national assessments and proficiency standards (such as NAEP) to accurately measure what students know and are able to do?

Second, what do good standards look like? How specific should they be? What learning trajectories should they incorporate? Should they include assessment frameworks? Instructional strategies? What research exists on the most effective characteristics of standards? Have any states benchmarked their standards against international standards and, if so, with what effect on teaching and student learning? Do we (and how do we) know if one state's standards are superior to another's? How can research on how students' learning typically proceeds over time in specific content areas inform the design of standards?

Third, who should develop national standards? Should this be the purview of federal organizations, such as the National Assessment Governing Board; national bodies, such as the National Academy of Science; professional organizations in the disciplines, such as NCTM or AAAS; or consortia of states, such as the American Diploma Project? What should be the relative roles and contributions of academics, practitioners, parents, business and the public in the development of standards? As discussed earlier in this chapter, these decisions have both normative and political implications.

Fourth, what are the incentives for states to adopt new standards? Is it politically feasible for the federal government to require states to benchmark their standards against national, international or multi-state standards as a condition of receiving Title I funds?

Previous attempts to do so have failed. The Goals 2000 Act of 1994 created a federal agency, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), with the responsibility of certifying voluntary national content and performance standards and certifying that state standards “are comparable to or higher in rigor and quality than national standards” (Ravitch, 1995). The new Republican majority in Congress repealed this provision of Goals 2000 the following year and the federal government now approves each state’s standard-setting process, not the content of its standards. It is also unlikely that federal legislation will include monetary incentives for change. An early version of the NCLB Act considered monetary sanctions for states that did not close the achievement gap among student subgroups. This idea was dropped, however, and the law requires only that all states participate in NAEP. The publication of NAEP scores is intended to serve as a check on state assessments, enabling the public to compare state proficiency standards and confirm changes in student performance. We do not know, however, whether publicizing discrepancies between performance on states’ own assessments and NAEP has led any states to consider raising their standards, particularly because the validity of the NAEP proficiency levels has been questioned (NRC, 1999).

Fifth, what kinds of support do states, districts, schools and teachers need to improve failing schools and raise student performance? Who will provide the needed resources and support? Is it fair to hold students and schools accountable for meeting more rigorous academic standards if they are not given the opportunity to learn the tested content? Because a high school diploma is a property right, courts require states to ensure that high school students have sufficient opportunity to learn the skills assessed on a test required for graduation. These include teaching the tested skills (“curricular

validity”) and evidence of successful remediation attempts. This principle does not apply, however, to other education accountability policies. The Clinton administration and Congressional Democrats tried unsuccessfully to include school delivery, or opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards, in Goals 2000 and the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The National Governors Association was a leading critic of these proposals, fearing that even voluntary national OTL standards would be used in state courts to determine the adequacy of their states’ school funding systems. Although the concept of OTL standards remains controversial (and not well defined), NCLB’s requirement that all schools have “highly qualified” teachers is intended to address one inequity in the delivery of educational services. Yet, large disparities in education spending across as well as within states remain a major barrier to ensuring equal access to a quality education.

In conclusion, adoption of national standards would appear to address concerns about the quality and equity of elementary and secondary education in the United States. Frameworks for national standards exist in several disciplines already. Based on experience with current standards, national standards could make some difference in what is taught and in what students learn. Yet, they are not a panacea for what ails American education. As with most public policy, the devil is in the details of the design and implementation of national standards. And the proposals raise the ever present issue of who controls our educational system. While the federal government expanded its role significantly under NCLB, states remain constitutionally, fiscally and substantively responsible for education, and schools and their staff ultimately determine how standards

are enacted in the classroom. Can national standards alone bring coherence to our highly decentralized and fragmented educational system?

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