

## Common Standards: The Time Is Now

After years of debate, the nation is now taking a bold step toward ensuring that all students graduate ready for college and careers. Under the leadership of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, a panel has drafted a set of Common Core State Standards for college and career readiness.

The initiative was designed around a set of principles that are significant in several ways. First, this is an unprecedented bottom-up effort, in which forty-eight states committed to work together to set common, rigorous expectations for all students. Second, the developers pledged to ensure that the standards were evidence based—that is, that they represented the knowledge and skills necessary for students to be prepared for college and careers, and that they were benchmarked against standards from high-performing nations. Third, the goal was to come up with a core set of clear standards that can be taught in classrooms, rather than the voluminous lists of topics often found in state standards.

These principles will help ensure that the standards will raise expectations for all students and that these expectations will be the same no matter where students happen to live. That would represent a sea change in American education, one that is sorely needed. The wide variations that currently exist are unacceptable and are especially harmful to low-income students and students of color. All states and schools should expect *every* student to graduate from high school ready for college and careers.

By themselves, standards can contribute a great deal to educational improvement. By providing a vivid picture for students, parents, and teachers of the abilities all students need to demonstrate, they can help guide learning. They also provide guidance to curriculum and test developers to ensure that materials support what schools are expected to teach and that schools are accountable for meeting the standards.

Yet standards alone cannot raise the level of student learning. Their full power can only be realized when all parts of the system are in place. In that respect, as significant as the standards development may be, it represents only a first step in an ambitious improvement effort. Over the next few years, states will need to develop tests, curriculum materials, and professional development programs aligned to the standards. Yet these efforts can be more efficient and effective with common standards, since each state need not develop these tools on its own.

This brief will outline the need for common standards that are rigorous, clear, and focused, by examining why higher expectations are needed for all students and why variations in expectations are unacceptable. It suggests ways that common standards will help lay the foundation for a stronger education system that will prepare all students for college and careers.

## **Why Higher Standards?**

For most of the last century, American high schools prepared a small minority of students for college. Most students who graduated from high school—if they graduated at all—went directly into the workforce, often to low-skill jobs. As recently as the 1960s, only half of all Americans had completed high school.

This situation was fine as long as people could secure a productive future with a high school education. This is no longer the case. The gap between the income earned by those with a college degree and those with a high school diploma is large and growing, and almost 90 percent of the highest-paying and fastest-growing jobs require some postsecondary training.<sup>1</sup> Yet nearly 30 percent of students drop out of high school before graduation, and among those who do graduate, only a third are prepared for college and careers. And the students who tend to pay the highest price for our failure to educate all students effectively are disproportionately poor students and students of color. *All* students, no matter their background or career aspirations, need to be prepared for postsecondary education.

In addition, the United States will require an educated citizenry if it expects to remain competitive in the global economy; the rest of the world is leapfrogging past the U.S. in educational attainment and performance. Fifty years ago, the U.S. had the highest high school completion rates in the industrialized world. No longer. Now, the completion rate places eighteenth out of twenty-three Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with comparable data, and the U.S. is fifteenth among OECD member nations in college completion.<sup>2</sup> Students in other countries, moreover, regularly outperform U.S. students on cross-national assessments. On the Programme for International Student Assessment, a measure of students' ability to apply knowledge to real-world problems, U.S. fifteen-year-olds ranked twenty-fifth of thirty countries in mathematics literacy, twenty-first of thirty in science literacy, and twenty-fourth of twenty-nine in problem solving.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly we must do more if we are to remain competitive in a world that is becoming better educated every day. Yet there is some evidence that we may be moving in the opposite direction: Seven states lowered their standards of proficiency for eighth grade reading between 2005 and 2007, and nine states lowered their standards in eighth grade mathematics over that period.<sup>4</sup>

## **Why Common Standards?**

The need for all young people to be prepared for postsecondary education and careers ought to be the concern of every state. But there are particular reasons why a common set of standards is imperative.

The first has to do with equity. Why should the expectations for what students know and are able to do depend on where students happen to live? Youths who graduate from high school in Wheeling, West Virginia, will face the same global economy as graduates from Walla Walla, Washington. Students from both cities, and everywhere in between, need to be equally prepared to compete effectively. And in a highly mobile society like the United States, a student should not face lower expectations when she moves to another state. Setting lower expectations will consign one group of students to a grim future. Yet, unfortunately, that's what the current system, in which each state sets its own standards, does to too many young people. And unfortunately, low-income youths and children of color too often end up with lower expectations.



A second reason for common standards has to do with efficiency. States currently spend between \$517 million and \$750 million annually to develop, publish, administer, score, and report on tests. While this total represents less than 2 percent of the \$500 billion spent on K–12 education, it nevertheless is a considerable sum, particularly at a time when nearly all states are facing a financial squeeze. Common standards provide an opportunity for states to pool together to develop tests based on a common framework. New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont understand this: they came together to create the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), which has since been joined by Maine. As their experience has shown, states can save money and develop more sophisticated instruments that do a better job of measuring the full range of knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate.

A third reason is to generate political will for higher expectations. Raising standards is a risk, since some students might not meet them right away. By joining together with other states, state leaders might be more likely to take on the challenge of raising standards for all students.

### **Don't We Already Have Common Standards? Yes, but ...**

In January 1992, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, a congressionally mandated panel of public officials, educators, and researchers, issued a report calling for national standards in core subjects and a related system of assessments to measure progress against the standards. Following the report, the George H. W. Bush administration provided grants to a dozen national organizations to develop standards. (Separately, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) had already developed standards in that subject.) These documents were the first common education standards.

The idea, according to Diane Ravitch, who was assistant U.S. secretary of education at the time, was to “have no federal oversight agency, but to encourage professional fields to shape a consensus about what students should know and be able to do. Eventually, the standards would make their own way into the schools (or not) by virtue of their quality, as the NCTM standards have, and not because of the coercive power of government to enforce them.”<sup>5</sup>

However, these standards did not exert the influence that the developers, and the National Council, had hoped. For one thing, several of the standards proved quite controversial, making it unlikely that they would be adopted across the country. The standards for U.S. history, for example, attracted a great deal of criticism, and the U.S. Senate voted 99 to 1 to oppose them. (The standards were subsequently revised.) The standards for English language arts, developed by the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, never got off the ground. In March 1994, the U.S. Department of Education canceled the contract with the three groups, citing a lack of progress. The department had criticized draft standards as vague and said they failed to define what students should know and be able to do.

Even the math standards, once regarded as exemplary, have attracted controversy. Critics contended that the standards deemphasized instruction in basic skills and promoted what they called “fuzzy math.” The NCTM revised its standards in 2000 and placed a greater emphasis on basic skills, but the so-called math wars continue to rage.

In addition to issues surrounding the standards themselves, the standards failed to influence practice because there was no structure in place for them to guide state actions. As part of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which provided grants to states to develop standards and assessments, Congress



in 1994 established a national body, the National Education Standards Improvement Council, to oversee the development of state standards and ensure their alignment with the national standards. However, the council attracted substantial opposition from members of Congress, who charged that it represented a “national school board.” The Clinton administration never named members to the council, and it was abolished before it ever convened.

President Clinton made one more attempt to set national standards when he proposed voluntary national tests in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics. However, this idea also ran into deep opposition on Capitol Hill, and Congress cut off funding for the initiative.

## **The Problem with State Standards: Variations in Educational Opportunities**

Without common standards to guide them, each state developed its own set of standards, along with its own tests and performance standards—measures to determine whether students had reached the standards. States’ authority over standards was reinforced by the No Child Left Behind Act, which required all students to reach “proficiency” on state standards by 2013–14, but left it up to each state to set standards and determine what proficiency meant, as well as the trajectory schools needed to follow to reach the goal.

The result of the fifty-state solution has been wide variation in what students are expected to learn. In some states, the expectations are challenging and reflect the knowledge and skills students need to succeed beyond high school. In too many others, the expectations are far lower. Students can graduate from high school after meeting all the goals their states set for them, and still be unprepared for college and the workplace.

The state standards vary in many ways.

### **Variation in Content**

Although it might seem logical that the content students need to know would be the same across state lines—algebra is algebra in both Delaware and Oregon—in fact the standards vary widely in terms of expectations for student learning. According to a study by Andrew Porter of the University of Pennsylvania and his colleagues, the degree of alignment between standards in different states is relatively low. In fact, they found, students are more likely to encounter the same topic—say, multiplying fractions—as they move from grade to grade within the same school than they would be if they moved in the middle of a school year to another state.<sup>6</sup>

### **Variation in Quality**

In addition to the differences in content among states, standards also vary in their quality—how specific they are, and how well they can guide policy and practice. Three national organizations that have evaluated state standards—the American Federation of Teachers, the Council for Basic Education, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation—have found a wide range of quality in the standards. For example, Fordham’s most recent review of state English language arts standards gave five states a grade of A, fifteen a grade of B, twenty-two a grade of C, four a grade of D, and four a grade of F. Although these grades represent an improvement since the previous survey, in 2000, many state standards are still weak in specifying the content students should learn.<sup>7</sup>



The Fordham report also asserts that many state standards are created by consensus, rather than vision, and that, as a result, standards suffer from “kitchen-sinkism”—the tendency to put everything in to please constituents, rather than to focus on the content and skills students need to learn.

### **Variation in Proficiency Levels**

Perhaps the most widely publicized difference among state standards is the variation in their definitions of proficiency—the level of performance they expect students to demonstrate. One measure of this variation is the difference between the proportion of students deemed proficient on state tests and the proportion who reach the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). For example, in Tennessee, 87 percent of fourth graders are proficient on the state test in mathematics, compared with 28 percent who are proficient on NAEP. In Massachusetts, on the other hand, 40 percent of fourth graders are proficient on the state test in mathematics, compared with 41 percent on NAEP. Although these comparisons are not exact—because state tests and NAEP are different, and the standard-setting processes are not comparable—other studies have shown similar variations. For example, Cronin and his colleagues aligned state tests on a common scale and found that third graders in Colorado could be considered proficient by scoring at the 6th percentile, while Massachusetts fourth graders had to score at the 77th percentile to be considered proficient.<sup>8</sup> And the National Center for Education Statistics found that the difference between the proficiency levels in the five states with highest standards and the five states with the lowest standards was equivalent to the difference between the “basic” and “proficient” levels on NAEP.<sup>9</sup>

### **Variation in College Readiness**

Not surprisingly, the differences in expectations among states have produced widely different results in student learning. Nationally, according to ACT, 23 percent of the class of 2009 who took that organization’s college admissions test earned a high enough score on all four components of the test to be considered college ready. This is disturbing enough—most of these students plan to attend college, but only a fourth are prepared to enter. The level of college readiness also varied widely by state, from a low of 10 percent in Mississippi to a high of 39 percent in Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup> Students in some states are clearly more prepared for postsecondary education than others.

## **How Will Common Standards Help?**

While standards alone cannot raise the level of achievement of all students in the United States, a set of common standards for college and career readiness, benchmarked to international expectations, can do a great deal to help students, parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers begin down that path. They will also lay a foundation for a new system that can lead to dramatic improvements in all schools.

First, by setting clear expectations for what students should know and be able to do, the standards will help students understand exactly the knowledge and skills they need to develop. They can compare their own work against the examples of high performance and see what they need to do to improve. Parents, too, can use the standards to determine whether their children are taking the coursework that will lead to success, and whether their children’s schools’ course offerings and materials are adequate.

Teachers can use the standards to plan units of study that will enable students to reach the expectations. They can also see what to remove from their traditional curriculum, since college-ready standards are expected to be considerably leaner than the long lists of topics in many state standards documents.



School and district administrators can use the standards to plan professional development. By assessing the current abilities of their teaching force, they can see what skills need to be strengthened. They can also redeploy teachers with particular skills to schools that need them, and assess course offerings to see if all students have access to coursework that will lead to achievement of the standards.

To be truly effective, however, standards need to be part of a broader system that also includes assessments that measure performance against the standards, accountability systems that determine whether schools are making progress, curriculum and materials aligned to the standards, and support for teachers to ensure that they are able to teach what the standards expect all students to learn. All of these elements will take time and resources to develop. Yet the standards represent a foundation; without them, the entire edifice could not stand.

## **What Can We Do?**

A 2006 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation called the idea of common standards “the impossible dream.”<sup>11</sup> There is plenty of reason to believe that the effort now under way will not be quixotic. For one thing, the public strongly backs the idea. In the 2009 annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll on public attitudes on education, two thirds of respondents—Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike—supported “requiring all fifty states to use a single standardized test.”<sup>12</sup> The project, led by the state schools chiefs and the NGA, also has the strong endorsement of a number of key national organizations, such as the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Parent Teacher Association, the American Association of School Administrators, the Hunt Institute, and the Business Roundtable.

This support is important, but it is not enough. Public education in the United States has lasted nearly two centuries without common standards, and a change of this magnitude requires concerted grassroots effort on the part of citizens, businesses, community organizations, and public officials. For the students who are in high school now or about to enter, we all need to work together to make college- and career-ready standards—for every young person, in every state—a reality.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, “America’s Dynamic Workforce: 2007” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2007), [http://www.dol.gov/asp/archive/reports/workforce2007/ADW2007\\_Full\\_Text.pdf](http://www.dol.gov/asp/archive/reports/workforce2007/ADW2007_Full_Text.pdf) (accessed October 7, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow’s World, Briefing Note for the United States* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> V. Bandeira de Mello, C. Blankenship, and D.H. McLaughlin, D.H. *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto NAEP Scales: 2005-2007* (NCES 2010-456). (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> D. Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> A. Porter, M. Polikoff, and J. Smithson, *Is There a de Facto National Curriculum?: Evidence from State Standards*, paper prepared for the National Research Council Workshop on Assessing the Role of K–12 Academic Standards in States, [http://www7.nationalacademies.org/cfe/Porter\\_Smithson%20State%20Standards%20Paper\\_Tables.pdf](http://www7.nationalacademies.org/cfe/Porter_Smithson%20State%20Standards%20Paper_Tables.pdf) (accessed October 28, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> C. E. Finn Jr., M. Petrilli, and L. Julian, *The State of State Standards 2006* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> J. Cronin et al., *The Proficiency Illusion* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Bandeira de Mello, Blankenship, and McLaughlin, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards*.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.act.org/news/data/09/collegeready.html> (accessed October 28, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> C. E. Finn Jr., M. Petrilli, and L. Julian, *To Dream the Impossible Dream: Four Approaches to National Standards and Tests for America’s Schools* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> W. J. Bushaw and J. A. McNee, “Americans Speak Out: Are Educators and Policy Makers Listening? The 41st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 91, no. 1 (September 2009): 8–23.

