The Time for National Content Standards

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After a history of more than 25 years, the national-standards movement seems to be at peak intensity. In April of this year, representatives from 41 states met under the auspices of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to work toward the establishment of common guidelines in mathematics and English language arts. As of the first week of June, 46 states had formally agreed to join in the effort. ("46 States Agree to Common Academic Standards Effort," June 10, 2009.) Even though the 50-state, 50-standards system that has emerged out of standards-based reform has increasingly come under fire from researchers and policymakers, there has as yet been little investigation of the extent to which these many sets of standards differ, one from another.

We wondered whether the current state standards might be so alike as to already constitute a de facto national intended curriculum. If this were true, national standards, though not difficult to implement, might not even be needed. On the other hand, if state standards documents cover widely different content, there might be greater need for a push toward consistency. In either case, national standards would be more efficient and probably of higher quality than the hodgepodge in place now.

We investigated data on content analyses of standards documents in mathematics and English for 14 states, based on a framework the two of us devised with John L. Smithson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison—the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum, or SEC, framework. What we found was illuminating: Nationally, content standards in the 14 states were, in fact, poorly aligned at individual grade levels. In both subjects, standards documents contained roughly one-quarter the same content across states at grades 4 and 8. When we added up all the content covered across grades K-8, the amount in common increased to roughly 50 percent for each subject. In short, the evidence suggests that the content standards currently in use vary quite widely from state to state.

We did find evidence of a shared “core” of standards, though, with certain content areas relatively highly emphasized across all the states we examined. This common core constituted about 13 percent of a typical state’s standards in English and about 19 percent in mathematics, providing some common ground on which to begin building voluntary national standards.

Of course, developing such national content standards would mean that the 50-state, 50-assessment system would no longer work. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (and, indeed, all of standards-based reform) is predicated on the notion of assessments of student achievement aligned to rigorous content standards. These are intended to drive teachers to align their instruction to the standards and raise student achievement. A common assessment could not be far behind common content standards.

There is no guarantee that voluntary national content standards would be better than the standards currently in use by states, but there are at least five good reasons to think that they would be.

First, national content standards would help ensure that all students are expected to have an opportunity to learn rigorous content in academic subjects. As it stands, there is wide variation across states in the content students are expected to master. While some local input into the
content of standards may be desirable, surely there can be a consensus about a nucleus of important material that all students should master for core academic subjects. Especially in mathematics and science, it is hard to see why a student in Chicago should learn material substantially different from what a student across the border in Milwaukee does. In an increasingly globalized world, such arbitrary differences probably are not useful.

Second, a common set of standards would allow for improvement in the quality of standards. Our analyses suggest that standards can be of low cognitive-demand levels in certain states, and that there is no understandable reasoning to the distribution of challenging content across states. The development of voluntary national content standards would be done with greater expertise and closer scrutiny than most states can provide. These standards should prove to be more coherent and rigorous than the current state standards.

Third, as a practical matter, creating and re-creating standards for from eight to 12 grades in multiple subjects across 50 states is time-consuming and wasteful. States are revising their content standards, and these revisions are costly in both money and manpower. To implement a common set of standards might be more expensive initially, but would offer, over time and across states, savings that were considerable.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, undertaking the development of voluntary national content standards would allow the standards-setting process for each subject area to essentially start over again, informed, but unencumbered by, the mistakes and the inadequacies of past state efforts. In our view, the original intention of standards-based reform—to focus the curriculum and provide greater depth and less breadth—has generally not occurred. Moreover, state content standards are organized in a way that lacks a clear message about what content is most important.

Finally, many believe, and some research supports the view, that content standards get purchase on instructional practices through aligned assessments. No Child Left Behind requires that each state develop assessments aligned to that state’s challenging content standards. Using methodology similar to that in our investigation of state content standards, we looked at state assessments in nine states in English and 11 to 13 states in mathematics and found modest to quite low alignment between those states’ assessments and their content standards. Development of voluntary national standards would almost surely lead to a voluntary national test, and the test would, we hope, be more carefully aligned to the standards and have a greater impact on the content of teachers’ instruction.

The common-standards movement does present potential pitfalls. States often bristle at the idea of education policy being forced on them from above, and they may also want more control over the content their teachers teach in their classrooms, particularly in English and history. But we can address this concern by keeping the standards voluntary, and by pointing to the success of the New England Common Assessment Program, or NECAP. Further common standards need not be completely prescriptive of every item to be taught in schools—rather, they could represent a rigorous core of content in key subjects to which states could add.

Most importantly, what if voluntary national content standards are simply low-quality? What if they don’t focus on the most important content for students to master? We agree that there is some risk. We wonder, though, whether the risk is any greater than the variability in content from teacher to teacher if there were no content standards and aligned assessments.

The NGA and the CCSSO are moving in the right direction at the right time. There is ample evidence that students across the nation are being taught to master different content, and voluntary national standards would help create a coherent core of knowledge for American students. Whether this bid for national standards will fail, as previous bids have, is unclear. But this movement represents, in our view, a potentially large step forward for the rigor of American education at a critical time in our history.

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