The proverbial “perfect storm” is brewing in education—but it is a storm that has enormous potential for good. Draft guidelines for the U.S. Department of Education’s $4 billion Race to the Top blueprint, announced in July, stress teacher effectiveness, the use of data, and support for charter schools that demonstrate results. And a revised draft set of common-core standards, released to the public last week by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, promises to provide the foundation for substantial advances in assessment, curriculum, and student learning (“Revised Draft of ‘Common Core’ Standards Unveiled,” Sept. 21, 2009).

This is not a time for incremental change. We need to use this remarkable confluence of forces to increase dramatically the number of students in this country ready for college and careers, and to accelerate efforts to ensure that all students are on grade level. But getting the core standards right will be essential. And that will require new levels of design intelligence and political courage. In the past, standards-development processes have given us standards that are too vast and too vague to provide the focus required for students and teachers to achieve at high levels. In math, high-performing countries work harder than we do to focus their curricula. They know that more is not always better—nor is it even necessarily “higher.” In Singapore, one of the highest-performing countries in math, the Ministry of Education urges its schools to “Teach Less, Learn More.”

But we don’t have to go abroad to learn that we need to focus. Just listen to teachers in any state in the country. They will tell you that the standards they are given do not allow enough time to teach subjects to mastery. When teachers can’t cover everything deeply enough, students pass through the grades in an endless cycle of review and catch-up. We should listen to teachers and insist on a new generation of standards that enables excellent, flexible instruction.

Building a great set of standards will require principles of design that break from the past. The standards must be the following:

• Informed by evidence. Historically, standards have been created in a political sausage factory, in which the most important goal is to respect each individual committee member’s personal, cherished opinions. A breakthrough requires that standards be based not on politics, but on an objective analysis of the actual determinants of success in college and careers.
• Feasible for teachers to teach and students to master. We need to take much more seriously the limited time teachers and students have together to master academic material. Our students need more time for the dedicated practice that mastery requires. Yet when we write standards, we too often ignore the costs in terms of students’ and teachers’ time and resources.

• Clear and elegant, to foster engagement and innovation in assessment and curriculum. No test can be good unless it focuses on a core set of things most worth measuring. Standards full of jargon will not galvanize students, families, and teachers to immerse themselves in their work. Textbooks can only become slimmer and more useful if they cover less.

• Higher—not by adding more, but by demanding mastery of what matters. Given the pressures of international competition, it is urgent that we raise educational standards. But raising them shouldn’t mean asking students to learn less and less about more and more. Raising our standards should mean doing what high-performing countries do: demand deeper understanding of the core principles in each discipline.

• Dynamic, in that they can be revised based on additional evidence. Collecting ongoing evidence to validate and revise what is in the common core must be a critical part of the process. Student performance and outcomes will ultimately be the judge of whether we have set the levels of rigor in the right places and focused on the crucial content.

To be ready for the challenges of college and careers, our students need a flexible mastery of the fundamentals in each academic discipline. We will not prepare young people for the unpredictable economy of the future by driving them through an endless list of disconnected topics. To be ready to compete and to change jobs often, they will need to apply their knowledge to new, unexpected situations throughout their lives.

The explosion of media and technology has added remarkable opportunities for gaining and sharing knowledge, but it also has made it all the more important that students master the core skills of gathering and evaluating evidence. Reading and writing with independence and confidence will remain master arts in the information age. The good news is that, judging from the drafts released last week, the standards under development by the CCSSO and the NGA are on the right track. More than in the past, evidence has been brought to bear to determine what is truly important for students to master. It appears, for example, that the working group in mathematics has respected the data from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and other international comparisons that highlight the importance of focus, coherence, and rigor. And the best practices of high-performing countries are being used to inform the standards, with explanatory problems and other features being drawn from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan.

In the subjects under development, available evidence about what knowledge and skills are valued (and not valued) by postsecondary instructors has been weighed in the decision of what to include and, just as importantly, what to leave out. And while we need much more research in this area than exists today, the standards working groups appear to have used the data we do have to inform their deliberations. Getting the core standards right will require new levels of design intelligence and political courage.
In striving for focus, some tough choices about coverage have been made, and the result is substantially more elegant and focused than state standards today. We can all hope that in the K-12 back mapping, the working groups will continue to polish the draft standards to arrive at the diamond core of what students need most to succeed. But there is always a fear that the opposite will happen. It is unlikely, for example, that as the work of standards development goes forward anyone will ask that anything inessential be removed. Rather, they may demand the addition of everything they themselves personally regard as essential. And if we play the usual game, we will try to quiet the critics by giving in to their demands and making sure everybody’s favorite topic shows up in the final product.

But playing the standards game as it has always been played will betray the teachers and students who are ready for a next generation of standards that builds a true ladder to college readiness. Instead, let’s listen to teachers and students—the people doing the real work—and give them standards that signal what really matters, while leaving them with the flexibility to pursue learning in diverse ways. Standards are of course only the beginning. We also need far better assessments—assessments not only of teaching, but also for learning and guiding instruction. At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we are committed to supporting efforts to ensure that a base of excellent materials is available to teachers and students throughout the country to support their work and build their achievement.

Common standards could become the foundation for higher achievement for all students—a beacon that leads us through the more threatening storm of unmet potential and unfulfilled dreams. As the draft standards are discussed in the coming weeks and months, many people will be looking at what has been left out, without seeing the focus that has been put in. It is worth remembering then that beacons guide not by shining in all directions, but by focusing their light.

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