A new national conversation on standards?

The Center for Public Education
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What should children learn? The question is basic, broad, and contentious. Deciding what children should know and be able to do—setting standards for their education—interests everyone involved in education, from school board members to federal policymakers to every parent with a child enrolled in school.

So who gets to decide? Answering this question has been mainly left up to local school boards and, over the past fifteen years, individual states. But with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) coming up, other options—most notably, national standards—will be discussed.

Lots of different suggestions have been made: Some suggest that states adopt one set of national standards; others, that states work in geographic groups to develop common groups of standards; and still others suggest that standards be kept at the state and local level.

With so many options, it’s crucial that you understand the conversation. The following discussion identifies the principal arguments for and against each of these options. The point is not to evaluate the underlying research, but to identify the arguments behind each point of view. If you want to cut through all the shouting to the facts, read on.

The recent history behind standards
Standards are not new. Historically, they have been set by teachers, schools, school districts, and outside bodies. Over the past fifteen years, state standards have grown in prominence as their rigor has increased and more state testing and accountability has been adopted.

In recent decades, standards have been set at the state level in basic subjects—especially language arts, math, and science. Generally, their introduction has provided a common set of expectations for success in these subjects. As such, standards also serve to hold schools and school districts accountable, and identify schools and students that need additional attention.

Because state standards are developed outside of the school system, they carry a certain level of credibility with the public that locally developed standards might not.

The case for state standards
The case for—and against—state standards often revolves around the perception of their rigor, since they are not subject to a formal outside review or approval process.

Compared to the exclusive use of local standards, state standards—especially accompanied by accountability—are more likely to be higher caliber, provide more stability in educating children in a mobile society, result in curriculum coordination from grade level to grade level, and lead to a greater focus on student achievement. The No Child Left Behind Act has elevated state standards and pushed school districts to focus more attention on student achievement, especially for low-income and other students groups whose lagging achievement had been overlooked.

State standards can be rated. Organizations like the Fordham Institute and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) periodically review them according to these organizations’ own criteria. Achieve Inc. provides a benchmarking system by which states can compare their standards with model standards. It will also formally review state standards upon the state’s request. Although the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) is not intended to directly evaluate the content or rigor of state standards, student performance on NAEP does provide an indication of the quality of a state’s standards.

State standards also allow a measure of local control in education, where those determining
what students should learn are aware of local conditions, opinions, and needs that might affect the standards. To many, this philosophy of education is one of the most valuable parts of state standards.

Why not use “The Nation’s Report Card”?

Since NAEP already uses one set of standards for everyone across the country, there is increasing interest in expanding NAEP. This could mean expanding the number of subjects tested as well as the grade levels and number of districts involved.

Through NAEP, states gauge their performance in two ways. First, they can see how well their students do in comparison to other states. Second, through a tool developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), they can see where their own state’s threshold for a “proficient” score falls in comparison to NAEP’s scoring scale.

However, since NAEP is based on statewide sampling, it is limited in what it can show about a particular district. Not all students take the same test, so it’s not a “standardized” test at the student level. Because the data is collected this way, a team of experts decided that modifying NAEP so that it could measure achievement at the school and student level—a requirement of NCLB—would mean altering the test so drastically that its original favorable qualities would be lost. The frameworks used to create scoring scales, however, have been suggested as a starting point for developing national standards.

The case against state standards

While today’s state standards—which largely emanated from efforts in the 1990s—provide greater quality and higher academic expectations than the minimum competency standards of the 1970s, many states’ standards are being criticized as falling short in too many ways. Critics argue that:

States do not have enough incentive to be accountable for rigorous standards. While we know that some state standards are not as rigorous as NAEP, there is no mechanism that requires those states to raise their standards. Critics of state standards also charge that, with the increased accountability from NCLB, some states have watered down their standards. They also argue that many state standards and accountability systems have only had a minimal impact on raising student achievement.

State standards can be more rigorous at one grade than another. This, critics say, overstates poor performance in one grade and understates it in another. They also say standards can be more rigorous in one subject than another, skewing perception of how well a state is doing in a particular subject. But, the critics argue, since standards are confined to the state level, the public cannot really evaluate how students in their state are performing relative to other states.

Standards don’t affect instruction. Some (notably the AFT) criticize state standards for not affecting teaching. They say state standards are not written clearly enough for effective teaching, don’t align from grade to grade or within subjects, and aren’t aligned with standards for college admission.

These concerns do not necessarily apply to all states, and the criticisms do not imply that states can’t correct these problems themselves. But for many, the perceived flaws in states’ efforts make them turn to national standards.

Other policy variations on state standards proposed:

- Continue the current system, with each state developing its own standards and assessments.
- Provide federal funding to assist states to improve their standards and assessments.

For examples of the above arguments, see: Testimony of Kati Haycock before Congress (Sept. 2006), Education Trust; The Proficiency Illusion, Thomas B. Fordham Institute
The case for national standards

To overcome concerns about state standards, policymakers and researchers have expressed interest in having some sort of national standards. They argue that national standards will provide greater accountability by assuring that states won’t mask weaknesses by watering down the rigor of their standards.

They say also that a country as large, mobile, and internationally competitive as ours needs standards that define a high-quality education for students wherever they live. Also, more resources can be concentrated on developing high-quality national standards (and assessments) than at the state level.

To those wondering how this would happen, proponents for national standards suggest that they be created through a non-federal entity, supported by the government, and comprised of subject matter specialists and state/local representatives in order to avoid concerns over federal control of education. Proponents further argue that national standards can be designed that preserve local decision-making regarding the selection of curriculum, course materials, instructional methods, or educational strategies.


The case against national standards

Developing national standards would be politically difficult even when introduced voluntarily. Many argue that national standards are not well suited for a country as large, culturally diverse, and locally minded as ours. States, they say, have their own views on what students should know and be able to do and on how to grade student performance. Accommodating local culture and values could be difficult, especially in certain subjects. The effort in the 1990s to develop history standards was a disastrous case in point.

While policymakers might seek to smooth over difficulties by making national standards voluntary, others would ask whether the incentives to entice states to agree would effectively cancel that out. For example, conditioning federal ESEA funding or waiving elements of NCLB accountability for those who adopted national standards could be viewed as making national standards mandatory.

Critics view the safeguards proposed by national standards advocates with skepticism. They argue that if the federal government gives funding to one or even several bodies to develop national standards, it will only be a matter of time before it controls the process, with a national test likely to follow. They argue that local parents, school officials, and communities will have no meaningful voice to influence the standards. And although the educational industry (e.g., testing and curriculum companies), advocacy groups, businesses, and other special interests do influence state decisions, the concentration of those forces on one national entity could undermine the larger public interest.

Additionally, critics worry about the consequences of these potential pitfalls. If national standards are not developed well, the whole nation is affected instead of just one state. They also argue that a national process would shut down innovation among the states.

Finally, critics dispute the assertion that national standards will solve the rigor problems
perceived with state standards. While the creation of national standards could raise the expectations for states with weak standards, the political pressure from those lagging states not to set standards too high might lead to weaker standards overall. And they wonder if national standards will decrease the emphasis of crucial, but not tested, skills such as teamwork and character development.


Other policy variations on national standards proposed

- Establish national panels of experts to review the content of a state’s standards and assessment and make non-binding formal recommendations for improvement.
- Develop model national standards that states could adopt (or exceed) with incentives (not mandates) to do so.
- Provide incentives that effectively require states to adopt model national standards developed by panels of experts independent of the federal government.

Common standards among states

In an effort to get the benefits of both state and national approaches without some of the drawbacks, some are advocating for groups of states to voluntarily agree to common standards. Proponents say this would reduce the costs states carry in developing standards, attract more expertise to the process, and provide better comparisons among states. Those against this movement argue that, while it seeks a balance between state and national standards, it still removes the process further from local school districts.

For instance, in 2002, the Commissioners of Education in Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont formed the New England Compact. The Compact developed and implemented common standards (“grade-level expectations”) and state assessments based on those expectations.

Still others propose a different version, called “common core standards.” Rather than having to agree to everything, states would have common “core” standards—the core elements of good standards. States would then embed these core standards into their own sets of standards. Proponents say that this process allows them to know they have good standards while retaining more control. Critics point out that this process would not produce as much reduction of costs, comparison between states, or uniform rigor.

One example of the “common core” approach occurred recently. Sixteen states worked with the Council of Chief State School Officers and Achieve to adopt common core standards in English and math.

Individual states worked to determine what their high school graduates needed to know. They then decided that a standard belonged in the “common core” if more than 75 percent of the states in the group adopted it and if the standard was well-aligned with an already-established group of outcomes for college and workplace readiness.

However, this did not mean the standards were identical, or outlined a full curriculum in these subjects. Individual states could add standards, determine the level of specificity, or organize the standards in different ways.

These two examples illustrate the ideas behind the two approaches. Those arguing for one of these two approaches believe states can increase the rigor and alignment of their standards without federal involvement. They value state involvement and authority, and argue that this approach achieves the purpose of national standards while allowing states to tailor the curriculum.
to their own needs. They also cite increased student achievement from common standards.

Critics might question whether states that already have flawed standards will be able to improve upon them. Others will question whether voluntary adoption would be a quick and effective enough process to raise achievement. In all, the moderate appeal of this policy option would also be the drawback for those who feel a solution should be stronger in order to deliver benefits.

Other policy variations proposed
- Provide funding for states to pay the cost of developing and transitioning to common standards or assessments with other states.
- Provide incentives that effectively require states to develop common standards and assessments.

Which subjects?
No matter which approach you think has merit, a secondary facet of the discussion is “Which subjects will be involved in this debate?” Since one of the previous problems with national standards was the lack of agreement on certain subjects, some suggest focusing on only the basic subjects of English and math.

But who gets to decide what is basic? For instance, in the section above, the “common core standards” focused only on English and math. No Child Left Behind, however, defines basic subjects as the academic subjects of school—including history, science, and the arts.

Other questions to ask
Clearly, the issue of standards is complex. While this discussion identified some arguments, it did so simply as a starting place for conversation. When considering standards, you might want to think through the following questions:
- How much of the debate is about who develops standards? How much of it is about who develops the tests and accountability?
- Has the increased emphasis on standards-based reform focused too much attention on the subjects that standards are designed to measure to the exclusion of other important subjects or skills?
- Is testing driving standards, or are standards driving testing?
- Does the attention given to standards over-emphasize simply identifying weak performance?
- How will the debate on standards affect funding for new or existing programs?
- How would national standards affect students, teachers, and teaching?
- How would national standards affect local prerogatives in instruction? How do state standards, textbook publishers, and test publishers currently affect them?