'Education Standards' Are Not the Answer

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A growing bipartisan chorus is singing the praises of national education standards. Former officials of the Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush administrations have joined the choir, as have both of the major teachers' unions.

Cementing the coalition, Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) and Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.) have recently proposed a bill to create a national curriculum in reading and math. The bill's supporters rightly tell us that by the end of high school, American students have fallen behind their international peers. Dodd and Ehlers use that observation to conclude that we need such a curriculum "to compete in the global economy."

But how exactly would homogenizing our curriculum and testing make us more competitive? "National standards would help propel U.S. economic competitiveness, because they would allow the country to set expectations higher than those of our international competitors," write Rudy Crew and Paul Vallas, the superintendents of the Miami and Philadelphia school districts, in a recent Education Week commentary. This idea of higher standards has a certain appeal. In many other areas of life, higher standards are associated with better performance. It's much harder to qualify for a U.S. Olympic team than for a typical high school sports team -- and Olympic teams are demonstrably better. Japanese automakers generally set higher reliability standards in the 1970s than did American automakers, and they produced more reliable vehicles.

But sports and manufacturing are competitive fields, while public schooling currently is not. Standards advocates mistakenly assume that high external standards produce excellence, but in fact it is the competitive pursuit of excellence that produces high standards.

We understand this point implicitly in every field outside of education. We didn't progress from four-inch black-and-white cathode ray tubes to four-foot flat panels because the federal government raised television standards. Apple did not increase the capacity of its iPod from 5 to 80 gigabytes in five years because of some bureaucratic mandate. And the Soviet Union did not collapse because the targets for its five-year plans were insufficiently ambitious.

Progress and innovation in these and almost all other human endeavors have been driven by market incentives: consumer choice, competition among providers, the profit motive. The absence of these incentives -- as in the Soviet Union -- has led to economic decline and collapse. Not surprisingly, the link between standards and performance in public schooling is noticeably weaker than it is in other areas, because government schooling is a monopoly, not a market.

Existing federal education laws reaffirm the point that standards, in the absence of market forces, do not improve results. A 2006 Harvard University study by Jaekyung Lee found that the No Child Left Behind Act "did not have a significant impact on improving reading or math achievement," and "has not helped the nation and states significantly narrow the achievement gap."

The only industrialized nation the United States beats in 12th grade science is Italy, which has a national curriculum. Two nations that beat us at the 12th grade level in both mathematics and science, Canada and Australia, do not. While some nations with
national standards also do well -- Japan, for instance -- it does not follow that they do
well because of the standards.

National curriculum advocates are thus wrong on both theoretical and empirical
grounds. But it gets worse, because their recommendation would actually impede the
very forces that could improve American education.

Specialization and the division of labor are essential to the effectiveness of the
market. If all schools conformed to a single curriculum, it would drastically reduce their
ability to compete and thus their incentives to improve. Instead of a diverse menu of
schools specializing in fine arts, applied sciences, or international relations, families
would be offered a uniform educational gruel.

Michael Petrilli, a scholar at the Fordham Foundation, recognizes the role of
competition in education, but contends that national standards are necessary to facilitate
it. "In order for any market to work effectively," Petrilli claims, "consumers need good
information," and in his view, that information can only be delivered by a national system
of standards and tests.

Yet around the world, free education markets are already thriving with no such
standards in place. One such market exists in the United States: after-school tutoring.
Tutoring services like Sylvan Learning Systems (a rapidly growing U.S. company) and
Kumon (a Japanese firm with millions of students in scores of countries) have arisen
with no government involvement whatsoever. And Japanese and Americans alike
acknowledge the contribution these services have made to student achievement. Toshio
Sawada and Sachino Kobayashi of the Japanese National Institute of Educational
Research remarked that without their nation's multi-billion dollar tutoring industry, "the
[international] success of Japan in the area of education would be unthinkable."
Few American wonks and pundits realize that there is a vast body of international
academic literature comparing market and bureaucratic school systems, and that it
favors markets in academic achievement, efficiency, responsiveness to parents'
demands, and even the maintenance of physical facilities. As I noted in a 2004 review of
that literature, the statistically significant results for achievement and efficiency favor
markets by a 10 to one margin.

By contrast, there is no evidence that imposing government standards improves
the performance of true education markets. On the contrary, by placing all intellectual
eggs in the same basket, a single national curriculum would hobble competition and
magnify the damage done by every bad decision.

As Jared Diamond so compellingly argued in his Pulitzer Prize winning Guns,
Germs, and Steel, diversity is as important to the health of human societies as it is to the
survival of ecosystems. We need education diversity as much as we need biodiversity. A
dynamic, competitive system is better able to survive mishaps than a monolithic,
centralized one.

It is ironic that standards advocates exhort us to improve our schools in response
to competitive pressures from abroad, but then discount the ability of the same
competition and consumer choice to drive improvement at home. It is the competitive
pursuit of excellence spurred by market forces that drives up standards, not the other
way around. The sooner we realize that, the better off our children will be.

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the author of Market Education: The Unknown History. He blogs at Cato-at-
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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE
A key to this column in the April 6 edition of The Washington Post newspaper incorrectly described the
author’s argument. It should have said that market forces improve, not hurt, education standards.