Can we get to national standards, considering the pitfalls?

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My feet aren't frozen, but as the march toward national or "common" academic standards trudges through deepening snow, they're getting chilly. Evidence is mounting that those who take curricular content seriously may not like what we find at the end of this road, and I worry that America could be headed toward another painful bout of curriculum warfare.

Recall that the foremost arguments for national standards are that a big modern country on a shrinking, competitive globe needs a single set of minimum expectations for all its schools and kids, whether in South Dakota or South Carolina; that having fifty different sets fosters confusion, low standards and noncomparable data; and that the federal No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) has made a vexed situation worse. But that doesn't mean national standards are inevitably superior to what states (and others) have developed, and it's possible they won't turn out to be. So far, I've accumulated seven worries.

First, both teacher unions have now joined this quest. It felt okay when Randi Weingarten came out for national standards, considering that the American Federation of Teachers' positions on standards and curriculum (though not assessment and accountability) have been sound--sometimes downright inspiring--since Al Shanker's day. But I cannot be the only person whose heart sank when Dennis Van Roekel announced that the National Education Association was also joining the "partnership" previously consisting of governors, state school chiefs, Achieve, the Hunt Institute, and a couple of other serious groups. What really formed icicles on my toes was his declaration that this move is perfectly compatible with the NEA's adoration of "21st Century skills" and "comprehensive" standards that include "accountability for child well-being, facilities and supplies." (Who else remembers the brouhaha over "opportunity to learn standards" in the early '90s?)

Second, speaking of 21st Century skills, the more I learn about this woolly notion, the clearer it becomes that this infatuation is bad for liberal learning; a ploy to sidestep results-based accountability; somewhere between disingenuous and naïve regarding its impact on serious academic content; and both psychologically questionable and pedagogically unsound. (For a terrific exposition of these problems, see http://www.commoncore.org/pressreleases.php.) Yet I don't think the NEA is the only member of the "common standards" partnership that's smitten.

Third, some are also overly fond of PISA--that's the Paris-based OECD's international math/science/literacy testing program for fifteen year olds--and view it as the surest path to "international benchmarking" and multi-national comparisons. Yet Tom Loveless of the Brown Center at Brookings has recently unmasked PISA's ideological bias and misguided notions about what young people should know and be able to do.

Fourth, as revisions are made in Achieve's respected "American Diploma Project" (ADP) benchmarks--these are at the core of the common standards project--one hears reports of a major tussle over whether English should continue to include literature and list important literary works. (The present draft does an exemplary job of this. Go to http://www.achieve.org/node/948 and scroll down to A.1.4.)

Fifth, if the common standards enterprise remains confined, like NCLB (and ADP), to English and math, it may further narrow what's seriously taught in school--with a malign effect on states that have a decently rounded curriculum that gives due weight to science, history,
even art. (Picture what happens to history education in a state that joins a national project that wants no part of history.)

Sixth, suppose that the emerging standards are sound. Yet nobody is talking about common assessments to accompany them, at least not in this lifetime. But without an agreed-upon test and "cut points" for passing it (or, if you prefer, demonstrating "proficiency") these standards will have no traction in the real world of NCLB and discrepant state accountability systems.

Seventh, and maybe most troubling, is institutional instability. The United States of America in 2009 lacks a suitable place to house national standards and tests over the long haul. Who will "own" them? Who will be responsible for revising them? Correcting their errors? Ensuring that assessment results are reported in timely fashion? Nobody wants the Education Department to do this. There's reason to keep it separate from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and its governing board. Yet the awkward ad hoc "partnership" now assembling to pursue this process could fall apart tomorrow if key individuals retire, die or defect, if election results change the make up of participating organizations, if the money runs out, or if their working draft runs into political headwinds like the "voluntary national standards" of the early 90s. This is no way to run something as important as national academic standards for a big modern country.

Can this idea be salvaged? I sense that we ought not put all our eggs in one basket. Secretary Duncan and private funders should pay for several projects to develop different versions of "common standards"--and pay others to ponder new and potentially more durable institutional arrangements. This should be done on a fast track, with great transparency, and with the requirement that, once one or more sets of standards pass the laugh test, assessments must swiftly follow, complete with common "cut scores," maybe fixed (like NAEP) at several levels.

"21st Century skills" should be sidelined. History and science should be included. Yes, that makes it harder--there's the evolution issue, slavery, Reagan, Monica, Iraq, and a few other dicey issues to work through--but at least it would point us toward the development of educated people, not just kids with skills. And Uncle Sam should energize this process by signaling that nobody in Washington will move to fix NCLB's many shortcomings until sound common standards and tests--maybe a choice among several--exist and are ready to be used in NCLB 2.0.

The standards-development process should be transparent and participatory, especially when it comes to specifying "what's most important to know." Engage college professors and book reviewers who care about literature. Ask David McCullough to lead the history team, maybe teamed up with Henry Louis Gates. Place real mathematicians in charge of math standards and scientists in charge of science--but have their drafts vetted by consumers of every sort: practicing engineers, police chiefs, newspaper editors, and more. What history and civics does Bart Peterson or Tommy Thompson think kids need to know? What math does Warren Buffett recommend? What knowledge does E. D. Hirsch deem truly fundamental?

Use available tools and models to simplify and expedite this process. The U.S. doesn't need to start from scratch. Several states have fine standards. So does the Advanced Placement program. ADP is already in play. What can be borrowed or adapted from the SAT and ACT? Make the most of Lexiles, Quantiles, NAEP, NWEA's computer-adaptive testing program, and more. But don't pretend to prescribe the whole curriculum. What's common across the land, once turned into curriculum and lesson plans, should occupy maybe half the school day. Perhaps two-thirds. Leave it to states, districts, schools and teachers to augment this--and differ from each other. A common standard is the skeleton of learning, not all the flesh. It outlines the core skills and knowledge that young Americans need to acquire and should be accompanied by a reasonable assessment system to determine, at various grade levels, how well they've learned those things.

That's still worth doing. If we can figure out how.