Standards Aren't Enough

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While Americans spent the summer watching shouting matches over health care, quiet but historic progress was being made on another of President Barack Obama’s domestic-policy priorities: getting schools to ask more of their students so that they graduate better prepared for life and work.

In late September, a new draft of national end-of-high-school standards intended to demand of students a greater depth of understanding of math, reading, and writing was unveiled. A philosophically diverse validation committee of senior scholars and practitioners has been appointed to examine the evidence supporting the standards and to recommend revisions. The next step will be to write standards for each grade, starting in kindergarten. (“New Standards Draft Offers More Details,” Sept. 30, 2009.) But if the goal is—as it should be—to influence and inform teaching and learning, then standards, no matter what they say, are merely the starting point. Curricula, tests, textbooks, lesson plans, and teachers’ on-the-job training will all have to be revised to reinforce the standards. Only then will these new “common-core standards” serve as the organizing principle for U.S. public education.

Before anyone objects to a Washington takeover of the elementary school down the street, it’s important to note that the standards effort was initiated by two organizations of state leaders: the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Forty-eight states are participating in developing the standards. The standards are voluntary, however, and not even all of those states are likely to embrace them.

Nonetheless, the Obama administration will probably have leverage to nudge states to get on board. States will apply this winter for $4.35 billion in federal education money as part of the Race to the Top initiative that’s meant to encourage innovations, such as programs to turn around the most troubled schools. Even though the federal government did not develop these standards, only those states that embrace them are expected to be eligible to receive the money.

The idea of standards is not new. They’ve been an important element of the U.S. educational scene for more than 20 years, and every state has them. Current standards vary widely in rigor, specificity, and clarity. In some cases, they are encyclopedic lists of facts and skills, all treated as equally important. In others, standards are vague and general. Either way, they are not sufficiently coherent and focused at each grade level. And several studies have shown that the tests now used by states to measure student proficiency are often a grab bag of items only loosely matched to state standards. Countries such as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and the Czech Republic that score above the United States in international assessments of science and math provide teachers with much clearer guidance on the key ideas to be explored and mastered in each grade. In some high-performing countries, curriculum guidance is provided at the regional level, so curriculum coherence does not require a national mandate. Well-developed curriculum sequences ensure that students take on more-advanced topics as
they progress through school, thus building a deep understanding of how the topics relate to one another.

For this to occur in the United States, educators and policymakers in the states, or in groups of states, will need to flesh out the new standards with curricula that specify desired pathways through the subject matter that will lead to mastery of the standards. Scientists who study learning have gained insights about cognitive development that suggest the importance of building curricula based on sequences, or progressions, of increasingly sophisticated concepts and knowledge applications. To amplify the effect of the new standards, these insights should inform the work of designing model curricula, perhaps with educators from a number of states working together, so that for each subject area, there would be a few different approaches across the United States to choose from.

Assessments tied to the new common-core standards should be developed in tandem with these curricular models. We have learned over the past two decades what happens when tests are tied to standards in the absence of more specified curricula. Because tests measure performance on specific items intended to be examples of the knowledge and skill expectations set forth in standards, they are by their very nature more concrete than standards. Preferring concrete guidance, teachers make what is tested their de facto focus. The unfortunate result is that tests become the curriculum. And because the tests are filled with multiple-choice items that do not adequately reflect important higher levels of cognitive demand, instruction becomes less rich than it should be. More concrete guidance about the paths toward attainment of the standards—in the form of curriculum—would help improve the situation.

In addition to year-end summative assessments that measure student progress for accountability purposes, teachers need access to good diagnostic assessments that can inform decisions about how to adapt instruction to meet their students’ particular learning needs and stages of progress. Current “interim” or “benchmark” assessments that many states use do not meet this need because they are designed to predict end-of-year test scores, rather than to guide the details of teaching. Carefully designed instructional tasks that include suggestions for how to adapt teaching based on students’ responses would be far more useful. Teachers will also need preparation and professional development tied to new curriculum guides, and instructional materials will have to be redone to reflect the standards and the most effective progressions of learning.

The new federal money to states, including $350 million set aside specifically for the development of assessments tied to the new standards, will be used best if it helps states create the whole package of tools, all tied to the new standards: curricula, teacher training, instructional materials, and good assessments that give real-time insights into what students are understanding and where they are still struggling, while also providing a final reading on what they have learned.

The development of national, voluntary standards is an important development. But states have had standards for many years, and the results have been uneven. Now it’s time to take what’s been learned from that experience and make sure that this time around, the standards actually matter for teachers, students, and the country.

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