National Standards: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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Introduction

Educators in the United States continue to struggle with the disparity in academic achievement of their students and with the ever-increasing emphasis on meeting Adequate Yearly Progress, for No Child Left Behind. Looking at data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Education Trust concluded that, "By the time [minority students] reach grade 12, if they do so at all, minority students are about four years behind other young people" (National Governors Association, 2003, p. 2). From this struggle, the topic of national standards has risen to the forefront. National standards appear to be a solution to the inequities between individual state standards and a way to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. National standards could also provide educators with an opportunity to measure and compare the United States and other nations. However, common standards could mean state governments and local school boards, within local school districts, could lose control over the curriculum. If the adoption of national standards became reality, a national assessment would have to follow. This controversial issue has become relevant for not only teachers and administrators but for the entire country. The debate is not new; over 50 years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced a need for national goals (Carmichael, Wilson, Finn, Winkler, & Palmieri, 2009). In the 1990s, attempts at voluntary national standards and assessments were proposed but never materialized due to political pressure (Toch, 2009).

What is meant by the term 'standards'? This article will use the definition of the National Academy of Sciences for their workshop on Assessing the Role of K-12 Academic Standards, "generally used to refer to both content standards, which describe material that students should be expected to learn, and performance standards, which describe the level of proficiency or mastery expected of students…Most state standards specify both" (Beatty, 2008, p. 2). NCLB theoretically aligns state standardized assessments with that particular state's standards and thus, teachers are required to use them for instructional planning, especially as states release curriculum frameworks, becoming more and more specific about what concepts are being taught and how they will be assessed.

Much like current state standards, national standards could provide for each state specific guidelines on which to develop individual school district curricula in each content area. In their report *The State of State Standards*, Finn, Julian, and Petrilli (2006) claimed, although over half of states have replaced their standards and even more revised them, "state academic standards are no better in 2006 than they were six years earlier. And far too many of them are unsatisfactory" (p. 9). It is the authors' viewpoint that NCLB has not served to improve state

standards and may even encourage states to lower their level of proficiency on tests. Alignment of assessments to the state standards also remains an issue, especially for the classroom teachers who may be left to interpret poorly written curriculum. There are no indicators to support that national standards will lead to an increase of student achievement. "Much of the impetus behind national standards has little to do with evidence or any sort of inherent national-standards superiority…it's about No Child Left Behind" (McCluskey, 2009, para.11).

The difference is in who develops the standards. Many national teacher organizations that focus in particular content areas already have in place a set of national standards, such as mathematics or language arts, created by their national professional associations, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics for example. However, there is no mandate for the use of these national standards at this time, and they function more as suggestions for best practice in each subject area. In addition, there are standards for technology integration, standards for professional development, and standards for National Board Certified Teachers.

The concept of national standards has been in use in other countries for decades. In a report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the development of national standards in eleven other nations was examined (Schmidt, Houang, & Shakrani, 2009). While the United States is undoubtedly unique, there is much to learn from the challenges and successes of other nations. One aspect of the current national standards movement that must be resolved is who will be responsible for overseeing state implementation of these "common core" standards and from where the funding will come. For better or worse, the national standards movement in this country has reached the point of no return.

Recently, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers met with several other organizations, including ACT Inc. and the College Board, to compose a draft of national standards for English language arts and mathematics, the "common core." While this draft is still preliminary, the movement for national standards has become a reality. The released draft, titled *College and Career Ready*, has been both criticized and praised by varying groups. In addition, the website for the Common Core standards stated in the Frequently Asked Questions section, "Are these national standards? No. This initiative is driven by collective state action and states will voluntarily adopt the standards based on the timeline and context in their state" (NGA, CCSSO, 2009, p. 2). Despite these assurances, the first focus of Race to the Top, a federally funded, competitive grant program for states, is "adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace to compete in the global economy" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a, Program Description section). Although adoption of the standards are not technically mandatory, federal funding is clearly tied to their implementation. Thus the draft of these standards and the consequences of their adoption should be carefully evaluated.

Current National Standards Movement

At present, each state has its own set of standards, 'grade level expectations,' 'curriculum frameworks,' and a variety of other documents designed to aid in implementation of curriculum aligned to the standards; which are theoretically aligned with the state assessment. The time and expense to create the standards documents as well as develop and score the state assessments is

considerable. This, in fact, is what led New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, and later Maine in 2009, to band together to create the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), which includes both Grade Level Expectations and common assessments for all three states (Barton, 2009, p. 11). However, the Race to the Top federal grant competition does not allow consortiums to apply (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b) which may eliminate other attempts at state cooperation.

National standards for most content areas do exist as written by national teacher organizations, pioneered by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Even generating these voluntary standards has caused debate and controversy; as evident by the Congressional debate over history standards in 1990 (Barton, 2009, p. 30). Advanced Placement exams, given nationally, are another example of national tests, but these are high school focused content area assessments. However, all AP teachers receive a syllabus from the national organization with objectives to cover, and their students are assessed nationally with colleges accepting certain scores on these exams as credit for courses. Therefore, the success of this set of national assessments may rest with the motivation students have for performing well on the test rather than the design of the objectives and assessment itself. As opposed to NCLB mandated assessments, students are rewarded for high performance instead of punished for low scores on tests that may mean little to individual students.

The motivation for performance on standardized tests varies by state. In some states, students must earn certain scores before being promoted to the next grade level or before graduating from high school. Twenty-four states currently use high school exit exams to meet NCLB assessment requirements (Zhang, 2009). In others, there are only consequences for the teachers and schools for failure to improve. The impact of high stakes testing on students has been widely debated in the literature, and little evidence has found increased achievement when compared with similar standardized tests such as NAEP.

NAEP, or Nation's Report Card as it is commonly called, is a trusted assessment of American student's achievement across the country. The purpose of NAEP is to track student achievement trends longitudinally since its inception during the 1970s. However, not all students in the country take this assessment, only a representative sample. Only students in grades 4, 8, and 12 take these tests. The frameworks of the National Assessment Governing Board in the areas of mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. History (Center for Education Statistics, 2009) form the base for NAEP.

An argument in support of national standards and a national assessment would be the money and time saved for each individual state to develop standards, curriculum frameworks, grade level expectations, and assessments. However, the populations of each state vary and common national standards may not reflect this diversity. While national standards may allow for a more direct comparison from state to state, the varying demographics, funding, and resources available in different geographic regions may make comparisons unfair. Tests given at the end of a school year tell teachers little about the strengths and weaknesses of their particular students (Barton, 2009).

Many researchers have questioned the quality of each state's standards and the alignment of the assessments to the respective standards (Barton, 2009). State Departments of Education walk a fine line between seeking teacher input into standards and assessments and ensuring reliability and validity as defined by the psychometric community. A simple expansion of the list of standards may make all shareholders happy, making it virtually impossible for a classroom teacher to meet all of them in a single year. Plus, "the impact of curriculum on teaching or of teaching on learning is radically indirect, since it relies on the cooperation of teachers and students whose individual goals, urges, and capacities play a large and indeterminate role in shaping the outcome" (Larabee, 2004, p. 65). Curriculum that works in one state or school may not be as successful in another for a multitude of reasons; some quantifiable and some not.

No matter how many documents a state Department of Education produces, implementation of the curriculum occurs at the classroom level. If teachers are not implementing state curriculums now, why will national standards make any difference in the future? When students walk into a classroom without the prerequisite knowledge, teachers may be forced choose to vary from the mandated curriculum to meet student needs (Barton, 2009). Uncertified teachers may not be able to teach to the standards adequately, either because they lack content knowledge or pedagogical knowledge. Perhaps the focus should move from standards to the teachers and their training.

Standards based reform is also evident in preservice teacher education, and even these standards vary from state to state. While some states mandate accreditation by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), others have their own process. However, increasing costs for accreditation and decreasing budgets have led some teacher education programs to forego national accreditation altogether. The state qualifications for certifying teachers, which often involve a standardized test such as the PRAXIS, may not align with the national organization's (either NCATE or subject area) expectations for assessment at the program level. When so many standards exist, they may not align with each other, causing confusion and misdirection for teachers.

National standards for students must go hand in hand with standards both for training preservice teachers and for evaluating current teachers. Thus, national teacher certification might be another step on the journey to true common standards. Like the content area standards developed by national organizations such as NCTM, National Board Certification for teachers is "available but optional" (Barton, 2009, p. 28). This rigorous, expensive process involving portfolios and constructed response assessments (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, n.d.) aligned with standards for each content area and age level. Like common assessments for students, perhaps national standards could lead to a common, national assessment and process for teacher certification.

National Standards, Increased Standardization

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (2008) listed the United States as the number one country in the development of patents. This number one status validates American development in the skills of creativity and innovation. As the momentum to increase standardization develops by creating a national set of curriculum standards, the process of standardizing instruction within classrooms will increase. Teachers in the classroom will finally lose what little ability they had to

differentiate and meet individual needs; there will be a decrease in opportunities for our secondary students to exchange ideas, think critically and problem solve. This country was founded on the engagement of creative questioning and individualism so why would politicians want to increase the standardization of knowledge in a country that was founded on these principles? In the authors' experience, one size does not fit all in education.

Standardization began with President Bush's vision played out in the federal law of No Child Left Behind, the purpose of which was to implement high expectations and close the achievement gap for those who were non-achieving. A noble goal at best, it was the beginning of accountability and the denouncement of the phrase, fair does not mean equal. Teaching became focused on assessment not on instruction; the process of filling in a bubble test score sheet (disregarding the fact of cognitive ability or knowledge) and began the process of altering the paradigm of educational success. Those politicians outside the school were now acting as if they were inside the classroom by making requirements focused not on children but embedded in the political process and far away from the bell that rings on Monday morning.

The money to be made from standardizing curriculum nationally cannot be overlooked. Currently, textbook publishers align with each individual state standards and tests. However, one curriculum and one test would streamline this process. Some argue that this has occurred already:

> Although states prize their autonomy and flexibility in developing systems that will best serve their students, many nevertheless base much of their instruction on commercially available programs that have very little link with state standards. These programs are often design to provide so-called 'teacher-proof' curricula and instructional plans and thus do very little to develop the capacities of the teachers who use them or to push the state-specific education goals forward. (Beatty, 2008, p. 16)

The Center on Education Policy report acknowledged that a review of the longitudinal data of the federal law, No Child Left Behind, has spurred the increase of math and reading achievement in underachieving students (2007). However, the authors of this article question the origination of that growth. Students are closing the gap not from an increase in standardization but the paradigm shift to holding ourselves accountable and measuring what matters; accountability not standardization is the impetus for an increase in achievement. Teachers are beginning to use data in instructional planning and now have access to many different types of data related to student achievement, so their teaching is data driven. Technology has made it easier for instant results from assessments to be available inexpensively. Increases in student achievement cannot entirely be attributed to the implementation of high stakes testing.

Standardization and the creation of a national curriculum is developed under the auspices that all children can win the race at the same time. Holding American schools to the ideal that each child can win the race at the same time, in the same way, on the same day is unachievable. All children can learn but they are individuals who come to school with varying backgrounds and instructional foundations. Ruby Payne (1995) quotes Hodgkinson in her bestselling book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, "Low achievement is closely correlated with lack of resources and numerous studies have documented the correlation of low socioeconomic status and low achievement" (p. 87). Many students who are underperforming are children in poverty (Lips, 2006). Instead of putting funds into the creation of a national curriculum and increased

standardization, the focus should be shifting to providing those underlying foundational resources so students come to school better prepared to win the race along with the continual efforts to hold ourselves accountable for the learning of our students.

Globalization and Standardization

Thomas Friedman (2007) wrote that the world has now gone flat. Flat in the sense that through an increase of interconnectivity and a diffusion of boundaries (Scholte, 2005) the process of globalization is requiring "us to act" (p. 1). The national standards movement is the government's response the ever-increasing competition in knowledge we are sensing from other nations, particularly China. There is no doubt that globalization has leveled the playing field and increased competition with other countries. Keith Baker in his study that researched the "relationship between the results of the First International Mathematics Study and the 11 participating countries success in terms of national wealth, rate of growth, individual productivity, quality of life, livability, democracy and creativity 40 years later" (Zhao, 2009) found no correlation between these factors and student achievement. If the focus of the United States Department of Education is to increase student achievement that will result in a better economic future, the research does not support their current actions of moving to national standards.

In Linda Darling Hammond's recently published text *The Flat World and Education* (2010), she noted, "Education reform must be student-focused…to develop the potential and personalities of students. This student-focused spirit underlines the education and curriculum reforms, improvement to the learning environment and enhancement of teacher training" (p. 1). As the United States continues to move towards increased levels of standardization, other nations are moving in exactly the opposite direction. As we look to them for current effective methods of curriculum design and implementation, they are looking to us, the leaders in ideas. Only time will tell which nation has placed into practice the methods to increase student achievement.

The Future of National Standards

"States know that standards alone cannot propel the systems change we need…A common assessment system will include multiple forms of assessment so that what a student knows and can do, not the form of the assessment, determines performance" (NGA, CCSSO, 2009, p. 3). Common assessments could help alleviate the costs associated with each state writing their own test. A national test would theoretically be of higher quality than the variety of state tests currently in use. However, many questions remain unanswered about who would write the test, how it would be formatted, who would score the test and how quickly, when the test was offered, and if it would be multiple choice or constructed response.

One concern about the current group writing the common standards document is the representatives from The College Board and ACT. These companies could potentially make a large profit writing a national assessment or marketing an existing one for this purpose. However, the contracting of national tests to companies is nothing new, and perhaps the expertise in validity and reliability of these companies is needed.

Opinions of the draft national standards document are mixed. The National Council of Teachers of English has yet to endorse them, and the language arts standards seem to be more controversial than those of math, perhaps because of the nature of the subject area:

> The drafters have done a praiseworthy job of defining essential competencies in reading, writing, and speaking and listening for success in both college and the workplace… These skill-centric standards however, do not suffice to frame a complete English or language arts curriculum. Proper standards for English must also provide enough content guidance to help teachers instill not just useful skills, but also imagination, wonder, and a deep appreciation for our literary heritage. (Carmichael, et al., 2009, p. 1)

This same report, funded by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, suggests further recommendations for the mathematics content area:

> The draft covers most of the critical content and is coherent, organized, and clearly written. However, the standards are not explicit enough in how they address the arithmetic of rational numbers. Further, they do not set priorities high means that readers are unable to discern which standards should be given more or less attention than others. As a result, many standards that will contribute little to college readiness are given equal status with standards that are essential foundations. (Carmichael, et al., 2009, p.2)

Thus, the creators of these standards must continue to revise and involve a variety of stakeholders in this process. Perhaps a pilot program, with a small number of states, could be implemented to study what effect the national standards implementation had on schools and students, as well as on achievement. "Because everything (including curriculum, textbooks, development of assessments, language for reporting results to the public) flows from the standards, they need not only to be clearly written and concise, but also to reflect current understanding of how children learn" (Beatty, 2008, p. 6). Simply writing the standards is not enough. Standards are only a good as the paper they're written on if teachers and schools do not use them in the classroom.

Conclusion

As the discussion of National Standards continues to increase in national and state politics, teacher unions, and national content organizations and by administrators and teachers in the local school districts, American educators need to remain skeptical. The field of education has been known in the past for jumping on the latest school reform initiative without taking the much-needed time to complete research and focus on the underlying reasons for student's inability to academically achieve. However, in his book *The Trouble With Ed Schools*, David Labaree (2004) noted the difficulties of educational research, as well as the specific challenges professors of education face. "Educational researchers are able at best to make tentative and highly contingent claims that are difficult to sustain in the face of alternative claims by other researchers" (p. 65). Thus, often educators have little true "research-based" practice to rely on, since experimental studies are often not feasible or ethical in this field. Yet, educators must be able to collect valid data for their respective contexts to evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to improve student achievement.

Educators' novice ability to make data based decisions grounded in research has led them down too many paths and left students weary. National standards have the possibility of creating common outcomes on achievement and performance assessments; yet a variety of different types

of educational reforms are being considered. We must never forget that students are individuals with unique possibilities; moving towards an increase in national standardization might just be moving this country in a direction that impedes the development of these unique possibilities. Undoubtedly, educators are already overwhelmed with a long list of standards from various organizations. Will one more list of standards make the difference for students?

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