

TIME

Wednesday, Apr. 15, 2009

How to Raise the Standard in America's Schools

By Walter Isaacson

National standards have long been the third rail of education politics. The right chokes on the word *national*, with its implication that the feds will trample on the states' traditional authority over public schools. And the left chokes on the word *standards*, with the intimations of assessments and testing that accompany it. The result is a K-12 education system in the U.S. that is burdened by an incoherent jumble of state and local curriculum standards, assessment tools, tests, texts and teaching materials. Even worse, many states have bumbled into a race to the bottom as they define their local standards downward in order to pretend to satisfy federal demands by showing that their students are proficient.

It's time to take another look. Without national standards for what our students should learn, it will be hard for the U.S. to succeed in the 21st century economy. Today's wacky patchwork makes it difficult to assess which methods work best or how to hold teachers and schools accountable. Fortunately, there are

glimmers of hope that the politics surrounding national standards has become a little less contentious. A growing coalition of reformers — from civil rights activist Al Sharpton to Georgia Republican governor Sonny Perdue — believe that some form of common standards is necessary to achieve a wide array of other education reforms, including merit pay for good teachers and the expansion of the role of public charter schools. ([See pictures of inside a public boarding school.](#))

The idea of "common schools" that adopt the same curriculum and standards isn't new. It first arose in the 1840s, largely owing to the influence of the reformer Horace Mann. But the U.S. Constitution leaves public education to the states, and the states devolve much of the authority to local school districts, of which there are now more than 13,000 in the U.S. The Federal Government provides less than 9% of the funding for K-12 schools. That is why it has proved impossible thus far to create common curriculum standards nationwide. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush summoned the nation's governors to Charlottesville, Va., to attempt a standards-based approach to school reform. The result was only a vague endorsement of "voluntary national standards," which never gained much traction. In 1994, President Bill Clinton got federal money for standards-based reform, but the effort remained in the hands of the states, leading to a wildly varying hodgepodge of expectations for — as well as ideological battles over — math and English curriculums.

[The No Child Left Behind Act](#) pushed by President George W. Bush unintentionally exacerbated the problem. It required each state to ensure that its students achieve "universal proficiency" in reading and math — but allowed each to define what that meant. The result was that many states made their job easier by setting their bar lower. This race to the bottom resulted in a Lake Wobegon world where every state declared that its kids were better than average. Take the amazing case of Mississippi. According to the standards it set for itself, 89% of its fourth-graders were proficient or better in reading, making them the best in the nation. Yet according to the random sampling done every few years by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, a mere 18% of the state's fourth-graders were proficient, making them the worst in the nation. Even in Lake Wobegon that doesn't happen. Only in America. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, led by reformer Chester Finn Jr., has been analyzing state standards for more than a decade and concludes, "Two-thirds of U.S. children attend schools in states with mediocre standards or worse."

[See pictures of a diverse group of American teens.](#)

[See pictures of the college dorm's evolution.](#)

Everyone agrees that the existing standards aren't working; what has been lacking so far, on both sides of the ideological divide, is the political will to do anything about them. Bush and his reform-oriented Education Secretary, Margaret Spellings,

recognized the problem, but as a former governor, Bush was keenly attuned to the political problem of pushing for national standards. I remember listening to him at a White House lunch he hosted for a small group attending an Aspen Institute education forum. He challenged former Democratic governor Roy Romer of Colorado, who made a case for common standards. Bush agreed with the goal, but he said it was too politically explosive to make it worth pushing at the federal level.

And yet there has never been a better opportunity to do that. As a candidate, Barack Obama was ambiguous about his commitment to the education-reform agenda of standards, testing, accountability and greater choice. But such doubts were quelled by his pick for Education Secretary: [Arne Duncan](#), who was a cool and driven reformer as CEO of the Chicago public-school system and is also a basketball player from the South Side who knows how to move the ball. Duncan's position on common standards is clear: "If we accomplish one thing in the coming years, it should be to eliminate the extreme variation in standards across America," he says. "I know that talking about standards can make people nervous, but the notion that we have 50 different goalposts is absolutely ridiculous." ([Read "No Child Left Behind: Doomed to Fail?"](#))

Duncan has a new arrow in his quiver. Buried in the President's stimulus package is a \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" education fund that the Secretary can use to give incentives to states that

make "dramatic progress" in meeting goals that include improving standards. States that fail to give assurances that they will improve standards are at risk of losing education funding from other parts of the stimulus bill.

How to Build Better Standards The drive toward common national standards should begin, I think, with math and reading. Algebra should be the same for a kid in Albany, N.Y., as it is for one in Albuquerque, N.M., or for that matter in Beijing or Bangalore. (We can save for later the debate over whether that should be true for more subjective subjects like history.) These standards should define precisely what students are expected to know by the time they complete each grade and should be accompanied by tests to assess their level of proficiency. The process should be quasi-voluntary: states should not be forced to adopt the common standards, but they should be encouraged to do so through federal funding and public pressure. In states that shy away from holding their schools accountable to these standards, parents and business leaders should hold the elected leaders accountable.

These 21st century American Standards should be comparable to, and benchmarked against, the standards of other countries so that we can determine how globally competitive our nation's economy will be in the future. Forty years ago, the U.S. had the best graduation rates in the world. Now it ranks 18th. In math scores on international tests, the U.S. ranks 25th; in reading,

15th. As Obama said in his speech to Congress a few weeks ago, "This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that outreach us today will outcompete us tomorrow." We can already see the signs. Major drug companies such as Merck and Eli Lilly used to outsource much of their manufacturing to India and China; now they also outsource much of their research and engineering.

[See pictures of eighth-graders being recruited for college basketball.](#)

[See how children in your state test.](#)

The best standards are those that are clear and very specific. For fourth-grade reading, an example would be demonstrating the ability to distinguish between cause and effect and between fact and opinion in a selected text. For fourth-grade math, examples would include demonstrating the ability to calculate perimeters and volumes, multiply whole numbers, represent data on a graph, estimate computations and relate fractions to decimals. Specific common standards would allow textbook and curriculum developers to spend their research dollars achieving clear goals rather than producing various versions for different states. Just because the standards are national does not mean, thank goodness, that they need to be written by the Federal Government. Indeed, it's hard to imagine a more frightening sight than that of all 535 members of Congress grappling with a congregation of bureaucrats and voting on whether high school

graduates should or should not be required, for example, to be able to plot real and complex numbers as points on a plane. Even at the state level, there were times when standards became tangled in political debates, including a protracted "fuzzy math" dispute over whether students should be taught to estimate answers and understand concepts rather than memorize multiplication tables and master long division. When politicians and ideological posturers got out of the way, reasonable educators and experts resolved the dispute by deciding, sensibly, that those skills worked best in tandem.

Fortunately, there is already a process under way that could, if properly nurtured, take charge of writing common national standards. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) have been working with a nonprofit called Achieve Inc. In 2001, Achieve helped launch the American Diploma Project, which establishes curriculum standards that align with what a graduate will need to succeed in college, the military or a career. Gene Wilhoit, the executive director of CCSSO, hopes to kick this effort up a notch at a special meeting in Chicago on April 17 by announcing an agreement among 25 states to support an aggressive schedule to devise internationally benchmarked math and English standards for all grade levels. "I see standards as the essential foundation for all education reforms," he says.

These standards could build on the existing NAEP tests, which

currently are administered every few years to a representative sample of students around the country in grades 4, 8 and 12. This type of approach was endorsed by the Commission on No Child Left Behind, a bipartisan group led by former governors Tommy Thompson and Roy Barnes that was run by the Aspen Institute, where I work.

The Road to Reform Clear standards, testing and assessments would permit more experimentation by schools and individual teachers. After Hurricane Katrina, a surge of young and creative educators went to New Orleans, led by Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, the New Schools Venture Fund and successful charter operators like KIPP Academies. Now more than 60% of the students are in charters, and test scores are improving. For such a system of experimentation to work, there need to be clear standards and assessments so that parents and administrators can know which schools are successful. Indeed, the entire national debate about whether charter schools are good or bad could be defused (as Duncan did in Chicago) if both sides accept the obvious: good charter schools are good, bad charter schools are bad, and a system of common standards and assessment is needed to separate the wheat from the chaff.

[See how Michelle Rhee, Chancellor of Education, is tackling classroom challenges.](#)

[See pictures of teens and how they would vote.](#)

A national system of standards and testing would also permit the gathering of consistent data, down to the classroom level, so that we could finally get more rigorous evidence to answer some basic questions: Do smaller classrooms make a big difference, and in which situations? How beneficial is it to have a longer school day or year? It would also help resolve disputes about different teaching methods, like whether phonics or a whole-language approach to reading works best. In addition, we could more easily spot ineffective teachers, and they could be weeded out or offered training resources that have proved useful.

Wouldn't this arouse opposition from teachers or their unions? No, at least not from the teachers' groups that support serious reform. The American Federation of Teachers says clear standards would help ensure that teachers are effectively trained, objectively judged and provided with proven teaching tools and curriculums. "Common, coherent, grade-by-grade standards promote effective professional development," the union wrote in a 2008 report that criticized weak state standards. "A shared understanding of what students should know and be able to do enables the best kind of professional development: collegial efforts to share best practices." Randi Weingarten, the president of the union, argues that a national-standards approach would help students while still allowing teachers to be creative. "Abundant evidence suggests that common, rigorous standards lead to more students reaching higher levels of achievement," she wrote in a recent *Washington Post* Op-Ed piece. "Just as

different pianists can look at the same music and bring to it unique interpretations and flourishes, various teachers working from a common standard should be able to do the same."

Secretary Duncan has indicated that he will use the carrots and sticks in the stimulus bill to support voluntary efforts to write national standards and to prod states to adopt them. This process should involve advisory boards that represent employers, college admissions officers, military recruiters, teachers, education scholars and parents. It should also be ongoing, because the standards will have to evolve as the needs of the workplace and global economy do.

For example, I learned a lot of calculus, which hasn't proved that useful in my career. But I do remember being confronted at a Time Inc. meeting on digital strategy with the simple question of how many direct two-way links there were in a fully connected network of 50 nodes. It was a long time before any of us could figure out even how to begin figuring it out. Tomorrow's careers are likely to require more knowledge of networks, probabilities, statistics and risk analysis. That's why it would be useful to have the standards-setting body be advised by recruitment officers from the infotech, biotech, medical and, yes, financial sectors.

The U.S. will, believe it or not, eventually get out of the current financial crisis. Then it will face an even bigger challenge: creating a real economy that will be as internationally competitive in the 21st century as it was in the 20th century. All

of the recent bank bailouts and mortgage plans will, even if they succeed, build an economic foundation of bricks without straw — ready to crumble — if we don't create a productive economy again. That means creating a workforce that is educated well enough to produce more value per capita than other countries. This will be especially true in the 21st century economy, which promises to be based foremost on knowledge. And that is why the U.S. needs, particularly at this juncture, 21st century American standards for its schools.

Isaacson, a former managing editor of TIME, is president and CEO of the Aspen Institute and the author of, most recently, Einstein: His Life and Universe

[See how the recession is changing how Americans spend.](#)

[See pictures of college mascots.](#)

Click to Print

Find this article at:

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1891468,00.html>

Copyright © 2010 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#)|[Add TIME Headlines to your Site](#)|[Contact Us](#)|[Customer Service](#)