

Debunking the Case for National Standards (#)

Debunking the Case for National Standards One-Size-Fits-All Mandates and Their Dangers

By Alfie Kohn

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I keep thinking it can't get much worse, and then it does. Throughout the 1990s, one state after another adopted prescriptive education standards enforced by frequent standardized testing, often of the high-stakes variety. A top-down, get-tough movement to impose "accountability"—driven more by political than educational considerations—began to squeeze the life out of classrooms, doing the most damage in the poorest areas.

By the time the century ended, many of us thought we had hit bottom—until the floor gave way and we found ourselves in a basement we didn't know existed. I'm referring, of course, to what should have been called the Many Children Left Behind Act, which requires every state to test every student every year, judging students and schools almost exclusively by their scores on those tests, and hurting the schools that need the most help. Ludicrously unrealistic proficiency targets suggest that the law was actually intended to sabotage rather than improve public education.

Today we survey the wreckage. Talented teachers have abandoned the profession after having been turned into glorified test-prep technicians. Low-income teenagers have been forced out of school by do-or-die graduation exams. Countless inventive learning activities have been eliminated in favor of prefabricated lessons pegged to numbingly specific state standards.

And now we're informed that what we really need . . . is to standardize this whole operation from coast to coast.

Have we lost our minds? Because we're certainly in the process of losing our children's minds.

To politicians, corporate CEOs, or companies that produce standardized tests, this prescription may seem to make sense. (Notice that this is exactly the cast of characters leading the initiative for national standards.) But if you spend your days with real kids in real classrooms, you're more likely to find yourself wondering how much longer those kids—and the institution of public education—can survive this accountability fad.

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Let's be clear about the latest development. First, what they're trying to sell us are national standards. It may be politically expedient to insist that the effort isn't driven by the federal government, but if all, or nearly all, states end up adopting the same mandates, that distinction doesn't amount to much. Second, these core standards will inevitably be accompanied by a national standardized test. When asked, during an on-line chat last September, whether that was true, Dane Linn of the National Governors' Association (a key player in this initiative) didn't deny it. "Standards alone," he replied, "will not drive teaching and learning"—meaning, of course, the specific type of teaching and learning that the authorities require. Even if we took the advice of the late Harold Howe II, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, and made the standards "as vague as possible," a national test creates a de facto national curriculum, particularly if high stakes are attached.

Third, a relatively small group of experts will be designing standards, test questions, and curricula for the rest of us based on their personal assumptions about what it means to be well educated. The official Core Standards website tries to deny this, insisting that the items all teachers are going to have to teach will be "based on evidence" rather than reflecting "individual beliefs about what is important." It would be charitable to describe this claim as disingenuous. Evidence can tell us whether a certain method is effective for reaching a certain objective—for example, how instruction aligned to this standard will affect a score on that test. But the selection of the goal itself—what our children will be taught and tested on—unavoidably reflects values and beliefs. Should those of a single group of individuals determine what happens in every public school in the country?

Advocates of national standards tell us they want all students (by which they mean only American students) to attain excellence, no matter where (in our country) they happen to live. The problem is that excellence is being confused with entirely different attributes, such as uniformity, rigor, specificity, and victory.

Let's consider each in turn.

Are all kids entitled to a great education? Of course. But that doesn't mean all kids should get the same education. High standards don't require common standards. Uniformity is not the same thing as excellence—or equity. (In fact, one-size-fits-all demands may offer the illusion of fairness, setting back the cause of genuine equity.) To acknowledge these simple truths is to watch the rationale for national standards—or uniform state standards—collapse into a heap of intellectual rubble.

To be sure, excellence and uniformity might turn out to be empirically correlated even if they're theoretically distinct. But I know of no evidence that students in countries as diverse as ours with national standards or curricula engage in unusually deep thinking or are particularly excited about learning. Even standardized test results, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), provide no support for the nationalizers. On eighth-grade math and science tests, eight of the 10 top-scoring countries had centralized education systems, but so did nine of the 10 lowest-scoring countries in math and eight of the 10 lowest-scoring countries in science.

So if students don't benefit from uniformity, who does? Presumably corporations that sell curriculum materials and tests can reduce their costs if one text fits all. And then there are the policy makers who confuse doing well with beating others. If you're determined to evaluate students or schools in relative terms, it helps if they're all doing the same thing. But why would we want to turn learning into a competitive sport?

Apart from the fact that they're unnecessary, a key premise of national standards, as the University of Chicago's Zalman Usiskin observed, is that "our teachers cannot be trusted to make decisions about which curriculum is best for their schools." Moreover, uniformity doesn't just happen—and continue—on its own. To get everyone to apply the same standards, you need top-down control. What happens, then, to educators who disagree with some of the mandates, or with the premise that teaching should be broken into separate disciplines, or with the whole idea of national standards? What are the implications of accepting a system characterized by what Deborah Meier called "centralized power over ideas"?

I've written elsewhere about another error: equating harder with better and making a fetish of "rigorous" demands or tests whose primary virtue (if it's a virtue at all) is that they're really difficult. Read just about any brief for national standards and you'll witness this confusion in full bloom. A key selling point is that we're "raising the bar"—even though, as Voltaire reminded us, "That which is merely difficult gives no pleasure in the end." Nor does it enhance learning.

Then, too, there is a conflation of quality with specificity. If children—and communities—are different from one another, the only safe way to apply an identical standard to all of them is to operate at a high level of abstraction: "We will help all students to communicate effectively," for example. (Hence Howe's enduring wisdom about the need to keep things vague.) The more specific the standard, the more problematic it becomes to impose it on everyone. Pretty soon you're gratuitously defining some kids as failures, particularly if the new standards are broken down by grade level.

The reasonable-sounding adjectives used to defend an agenda of specificity—"focused," "coherent," "precise," "clear"—ought to make us nervous. If standards comprise narrowly defined facts and skills, then we have accepted a controversial model of education, one that consists of transmitting vast quantities of material to students, material that even the most successful may not remember, care about, or be able to use.

This is exactly what most state standards have already become and it's where national standards are heading (even if, in theory, they could be otherwise).

Specificity is what business groups and newspaper editorialists want and it's what very vocal defenders of "core knowledge" equate with good teaching. Specificity is a major criterion by which *Education Week* and conservative think tanks like the Thomas B. Fordham Institute evaluate standards documents. In any case, Achieve, Inc. and the National Governors Association probably won't need much convincing; they'll give us specific in spades.

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Finally, what's the purpose of demanding that every kid in every school in every state must be able to do the same thing in the same year, with teachers pressured to "align" their instruction to a master curriculum and a standardized test?

I once imagined a drinking game in which a few of those education reform papers from corporate groups and politicians were read aloud: You take a shot every time you hear "rigorous," "measurable," "accountable," "competitive," "world-class," "high(er) expectations," or "raising the bar." Within a few minutes, everyone would be so inebriated that they'd no longer be able to recall a time when discussions about schooling weren't studded with these macho managerial buzzwords.

But it took me awhile to figure out that not all jargon is meaningless. Those words actually have very real implications for what classrooms should look like and what education is (and isn't) all about. The goal clearly isn't to nourish children's curiosity, to help them fall in love with reading and thinking, to promote both the ability and the disposition to think critically, or to support a democratic society. Rather, a prescription for uniform, specific, rigorous standards is made to order for those whose chief concern is to pump up the American economy and make sure that we triumph over people who live in other countries.

If you read the FAQ page on the common core standards website, don't bother looking for words like "exploration," "intrinsic motivation," "developmentally appropriate," or "democracy." Instead, the very first sentence contains the phrase "success in the global economy," followed immediately by "America's competitive edge."

If these bright new digitally enhanced national standards are more economic than educational in their inspiration, more about winning than learning, devoted more to serving the interests of business than to meeting the needs of kids, then we've merely painted a 21st-century façade on a hoary, dreary model of school as employee training. Anyone who recoils from that vision should be doing everything possible to resist a proposal for national standards that embodies it.

Yes, we want excellent teaching and learning for all—although our emphasis should be less on *student achievement* (read: test scores) than on *students' achievements*. Offered a list of standards, we should scrutinize each one but also ask who came up with them and for what purpose. Is there room for discussion and disagreement—and not just by experts—regarding what, and how, we're teaching and how authentic our criteria are for judging success? Or is this a matter of "obey or else," with tests to enforce compliance?

The standards movement, sad to say, morphed long ago into a push for standardization. The last thing we need is more of the same.

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