Debunking the Case for National Standards (#)
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 move to impose “accountability”—driven more by political than educational concerns—to squeeze the life out of classrooms, doing the worst possible thing in the poorest schools. By the time the century ended, many of us 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 test scores, 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-prop technicians. Low-income teenagers have been forced out of school by do-or-die graduation exams. Even innovative learning activities have been eliminated in favor of pre-fabricated lessons pegged to numbingly specific state standards.

And now we’re informed that what we really need—and we’re standardizing this whole operation from coast to coast—is a “common core” of knowledge. How can anyone now believe we should be attacking the problem of learning with a hammer? Because we’re not attacking the problem of learning, but the hammer.

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. 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 Governor’s 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 late Harold Howe would 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 children on that test. But if you break the collection of test questions, or children will be asked on the test, which children will be measured? How does the standard reflect the beliefs of communities and families? Should any 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 a relentlessly narrow set of 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 the countries as diverse as ours would be more highly deep-thinking, critical thinkers, or particularly excited about learning. Even the most 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 science. Even when you test the 10 highest and 10 lowest performers 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 test 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 Zelman 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. The moment it happens, then, to educators who disagree with some of the mandates, or with the premise that teaching should be broken into exclusive disciplines, or with the ideal of national standards, or 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. (Although this is exactly how the standards movement morphed long ago into a push for standardization. The last thing we need is more of the same.) But then, too, there is a confusion of quality with specificity. If children—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 the necessity of developing instruction to a master curriculum and a test.)

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