Debunking the Case for National Standards (#)
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One-size-Fits-All Mandates and Their Dangers

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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 and corporate interest in the “bottom line” than by a desire to improve the quality of instruction in the schools—squeezed the life out of education in the poorest communities.

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 test scores, and hurting the schools that need the help the most. 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. The creative learning experiences that have been elimated in favor of prefabricated lessons pegged to humbly specific state standards.

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

So how did we get here? Because we’ve been chasing our tails in pursuit of learning. The force behind the standards movement, sad to say, morphed long ago into a push for standardization. The last thing we need is more of the same.

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 empirically possible” as the national test creates a defect national curricular, 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. To deny this, in the spirit of the National Core Standards, is to insist 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 test scores on that test. But the selection of the core knowledge that children will be tested on—let alone the collection of the specific things they will be expected to remember or to do, or the way they will be assessed—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.

All are kids entitled to a great education. Of course. But that doesn’t mean all students 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 would annually reach the same standards or curriculum—certainly not one-size-fits-all. Even if core standards are adopted, they might be designed to suit the particular interests of those who have the most money or the most power to define them. The reason is that the Common Core Standards, for example, are being designed by the chief executive officers of the College Board and the National Center for State Board of Educations etc., etc., etc.

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, you’ll use test scores to decide who gets additional resources and who has to do with less. (And don’t blame the test makers for pushing this; they’re merely doing what the clients want.)

Apart from the fact that they’re unnecessary, a key premise of national standards, as the University of Chicago’s Alan Cubin 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—continue or even own. To get everyone to apply the same standards, you have to control down the middle of the stage. That means, to educators who disagree with some of the mandates, or with the premise that teaching should be broken into separate disciplines, or with the idea of national standards, or with the 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 easy to administer and score, and that 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 confusion of quantity with quality. In schools—especially—standards are different from one another, the only safe way to apply an identical standard to all of them is to operate at a 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 we’re doing our students a disservice. Even if the new standards fail to bring down the kids as finely differentiated into grade levels.

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 counterfactual model of education, one that consists of transmitting vast quantities of material to students, material that even the most successful may never remember, care about, or be able to use.

This is exactly what most national 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.

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 prescribing curricula and instruction to a master curriculum and a 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,” “higher 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 can’t be all about. The goal clearly isn’t to nourish children’s curiosity, to help them fail 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 who do not have our standards. 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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