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 movement to impose “accountability”—driven more by political than educational considerations—to squeeze the life out of classrooms, doing the most damage in the poorest schools. By the time the twentieth 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 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. Educational reforms of the past generation have been emasculated in favor of prefabricated lessons pegged to unimaginably specific state standards.

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

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 a word or phrase like “accountability,” “frequent testing,” or “standards” is mentioned, or every time an argument is made about how much easier standardized tests are than “real” tests, or every time a law is referred to as a “test-score act.” I’d win hands down. Indeed, I can hardly go a day without reading another absurdity: “Success in the global economy,” followed immediately by “America’s students” or “children,” followed immediately by “accountability” or “proficiency.”

But it took me a while 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 the ability to think critically. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to equip them for “success in the global economy.” The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying.

The reasonable-sounding adjectives used to defend an agenda of specificity — “focused,” “coherent,” “precise,” “clear” – ought to make us nervous. If standards are as vague as possible, a national test creates a de facto national curriculum, particularly if high stakes are attached.

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 at all, 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, Dan Kimmell of the National Alliance of State Boards of Education (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 Brown, 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 idea that core standards will not define this, 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 content on which children will be tested on the test implicitly 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 high-scoring countries are diverse or unruly. It may have something to do with our teachers. The key to high and stable scores is a high level of literacy across the population. Low-income school districts have the lowest test scores, but the lowest test scores also tend to be the most diverse. The high level of literacy that is associated with higher test scores is likely to be the result of a high level of literacy across the population, not because all children are reading the same books or watching the same television programs.

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?

“Educators,” said the former U.S. Secretary of Education, “are among the most competitive people I know. And I think that’s great.” Even if that’s true, compounding the problem is the realization that the majority of us are among the most competitive people I know too. And I think that’s great. What if they’re all doing the same thing? But why would we want to turn learning into a competitive sport?

But we know that’s what most states are already doing and it’s where national standards are heading. Most states are already adopting “common core” standards. Those words actually have very real implications. If the standards are as specific as possible, the standards will affect a score on that test. But the selection of the content on which children will be tested on the test implies a coherent edge.

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). 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). 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). 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). 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). 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 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 someone used “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 a while 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 the ability to think critically. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to equip them for “success in the global economy.” The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying. The goal clearly isn’t to make schools safer or to reduce bullying.

If you read the FAQ page on the common core standards website, don’t bother looking for words like “exploration,” “innocent 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 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 recalls from that vision that doing something is possible without resist a proposal for national standards that embodies it. Yes, we want excellent teaching and learning–but not by reading, text book instead of 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 “baby 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.