

One-Size-Fits-All Education Doesn't Work

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By Alfie Kohn

People who call for national education standards may have either of two ideas in mind. Both are intuitively appealing, but neither survives closer scrutiny.

The first meaning of standards has to do with outcomes: Here's how well we expect students to do. Of course, all students deserve a quality education. But declaring that everyone must reach the same level is naïve at best, cynical at worst, in light of wildly unequal resources.

Consider the current accountability fad, with its callous "no excuses" rhetoric. It demands we set the bar higher for achievement, but fails to address underlying inequities. The idea is essentially to bully students and educators into better performance. A wry bumper sticker captures this model of school reform: "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

Worse, demands for tougher standards often assume that better just means harder. More difficult assignments and tests, which more students will fail, are supposed to represent an improvement. In fact, many schools in low-income neighborhoods have been transformed into test-prep centers. The quality goes down as the scores go up.

The other meaning of standards concerns content: Here's what everyone will be taught. Over the last decade, most states have drawn up frameworks and objectives to which all teachers are supposed to align their lessons. Rich and poor; urban, suburban, and rural: It's a one-size-fits-all education. Now some are arguing that this doesn't go far enough, that we need a national curriculum.

This prospect has raised hackles among those who value democracy in its fullest sense as well as among those who simply distrust the federal government.

Critics point out there is no evidence that a national curriculum would raise achievement. You may have read that eight of the 10 top-scoring countries on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study had centralized education systems. But you may not have read that nine of the 10 lowest scoring countries did, too.

And what if we go beyond test scores? There is no research to show – and considerable reason to doubt – that a curriculum even more standardized than what we currently have will help students to tackle controversial issues skillfully, think more creatively, love learning, participate actively in a democratic society, become moral and compassionate people, and so on.

On another front, those who list what every Nth grader should know have been challenged for emphasizing the literature, culture, and values of the dominant culture. Those who prefer the status quo, however unjust, and lack defensible reasons for doing so, have responded by simply labeling the critics "politically correct."

Other educators have added multicultural window dressing: If we stick Toni Morrison on the reading list alongside Mark Twain, one size really will fit all.

Unfortunately, as Harold Berlak, a former professor of education at Washington University, has pointed out, "Multiculturalism is not primarily about the content of the canon." It's about "who has the power to decide" and by what criteria. "A state-mandated multicultural curriculum is an oxymoron."

Educationally speaking, standards are even more problematic when three things are true. First, when they consist of lists of specific content, teachers must adopt a "bunch o' facts" model of teaching that discourages depth of understanding. Vast amounts of material are covered that even many successful students will not remember, care about, or be able to use. Thinking is messy, while standards documents are nothing if not orderly. When Harold Howe II, who was President Johnson's commissioner of education, was asked what national standards should be like if we had to have them, he summarized a lifetime of wisdom in four words: They should be "as vague as possible."

Second, meaningful education is compromised when standards are chosen on the basis of whether they lend themselves to measurement. Linda McNeil, who teaches education at Rice University, put it well:

"Measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning."

It's easier to quantify how many semicolons are used correctly in an essay than how many wonderful ideas it contains. Those who make a fetish of "specific, measurable standards" end up dumbing down the learning.

Finally, we should beware of standards that are top-down mandates. Current standards-based reform may well be the most undemocratic movement in the history of American education. Mandating uniform standards for the entire country will only make things worse.

One of the morals of this discussion is that talk of national standards must be informed by pedagogical insight and not just political principle. We shouldn't just argue about what knowledge all students ought to be taught. We should challenge the outdated model of instruction on which that question is based – namely, that students are empty receptacles into which knowledge is poured.

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