

Background

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Why National Standards Won't Fix American Education: Misalignment of Power and Incentives

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Abstract: American education needs to be fixed, but national standards and testing are not the way to do it. The problems that need fixing are too deeply ingrained in the power and incentive structure of the public education system, and the renewed focus on national standards threatens to distract from the fundamental issues. Besides, federal control over education has been growing since the 1960s as both standards and achievement have deteriorated. Heritage Foundation education policy experts Lindsey Burke and Jennifer Marshall explain why centralized standard-setting will likely result in the standardization of mediocrity, not excellence.

National education standards and assessments are getting renewed attention from the Obama Administration as the missing ingredient in American education reform. Proponents of national standards argue that establishing “fewer, higher, and clearer” benchmarks and aligned assessments will empower parents with information about what their children should know and which skills they should possess and that they will hold schools accountable for producing those results. National standards and testing, they say, will ensure that all children are ready for college or the workforce and will advance the educational standing of the United States.

On the one hand, such a critique of the *status quo* is well founded. Parental empowerment is essential and currently lacking. The monopoly that is the public education system must be more accountable to

Talking Points

- National standards and testing are unlikely to overcome the deficiencies of American elementary and secondary schooling, which are rooted in the public education system’s power and incentive structure.
- National standards would strengthen federal power over education while weakening schools’ direct accountability to parents and taxpayers.
- Centralized standard-setting will likely result in the standardization of mediocrity rather than establishing standards of excellence.
- While proponents of national standards point to the variation in state standards, the rigor and content of national standards will face pressure to scale down toward the mean among states, undercutting states with high quality standards.
- Federal policymakers should provide states with increased flexibility and freedom from red tape to make state leaders more accountable to parents and taxpayers. States should also strengthen standards, increase transparency about school performance, and allow parents to act on that information by choosing their children’s schools.

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parents and taxpayers. Too many students leave high school without basic knowledge or skills. American education should be more competitive, particularly given the amount of money that taxpayers invest.

On the other hand, national standards and testing are unlikely to overcome these deficiencies. These problems are too deeply ingrained in the power and incentive structure of the public education system. A national standards debate threatens to distract from these fundamental issues. Centralized standard-setting would force parents and other taxpayers to relinquish one of their most powerful tools for school improvement: control of the academic content, standards, and testing through their state and local policymakers. Moreover, it is unclear that national standards would establish a target of excellence rather than *standardization*, a uniform tendency toward mediocrity and information that is more useful to bureaucrats who distribute funding than it is to parents who are seeking to direct their children's education.

Common national standards and testing will not deliver on proponents' promises. Rather than addressing the misalignment of power and incentives from which many public education problems arise, national standards and testing would further complicate these same problems. An effort by the Clinton Administration to produce national standards and tests during the 1990s was roundly rejected because of strong opposition among Members of Congress, state leaders, and others.¹ This renewed push for common national standards and assessments should be similarly resisted.

Instead, federal policy can improve the alignment of power and incentives in public education by enhancing transparency of existing accountability tools and providing flexibility in program funding for states to do the same. State policy should advance systemic reforms that better align power

and incentives with educational outcomes, including enhanced accountability and parental empowerment through educational choice. By pursuing this combination of reforms, Americans can better address the core issues that continue to inhibit meaningful education reform.

From a "Common Core" to National Standards

The Obama Administration's current push for national education standards builds on an initiative led by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). In September 2009, the groups' Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) released college and career readiness standards for math and English language arts.² In March 2010, CCSSI published grade-by-grade benchmarks for each of these two subject areas.

From the beginning, proponents of the Common Core State Standards Initiative have maintained that the standards are voluntary and outside of the realm of the federal government. But federal funding has been linked to their adoption from the early stages. The February 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)—the "stimulus bill"—included \$4.35 billion in discretionary funding for the Secretary of Education, known as Race to the Top. One of the requirements for states to qualify for this competitive grant funding was to have signed on to the CCSSI. Failing to adopt common standards and assessments puts a state at a significant disadvantage in the Race to the Top competition.³

In the context of state budget shortfalls, the prospect of funding was enticing enough for most states to sign on to the common standards—sight unseen.⁴ Initially, only Texas and Alaska resisted. Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott stated that the common standards movement amounted to a "desire for a federal takeover of public educa-

1. Jennifer A. Marshall, "What Parents Need to Know About 'No Child Left Behind,'" *Family Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (March–April 2002).
2. Common Core State Standards Initiative, at <http://www.corestandards.org/> (May 6, 2010).
3. U.S. Department of Education, "Race to the Top Points System," at <http://www.edweek.org/media/racetopointssystem.pdf> (May 6, 2010).

tion.”⁵ Now, additional states, including Massachusetts, Iowa, Kansas, and Virginia, are expressing concerns about the common standards initiative.⁶

Meanwhile, the Obama Administration announced in February 2010 that it intends to make receipt of Title I funding contingent on the adoption of common standards. Nearly every school district participates in the \$14.5 billion Title I program, which provides federal funds for low-income students.⁷ Furthermore, the Obama Administration has announced a grant competition for the creation of common assessments among states that would replace state assessments.⁸

Federal pressure to adopt national standards and assessments has elicited concerns across the political spectrum. During a House Education and Labor Committee hearing, Representative Glen Thompson

(R-PA) observed that “the Common Core is being transformed from a voluntary, state-based initiative to a set of federal academic standards with corresponding federal tests.”⁹ National School Boards Association Executive Director Anne L. Bryant voiced similar concerns in a recent statement:

While the goal of high academic standards is laudable and school boards strongly support it, this amounts to an unnecessary overreach by the federal government to coerce states to adopt a particular approach or be shut out of future funding for key programs. . . . This new condition on funding for key federal programs also opens the door for the federal government to call for even more conditions, such as the use of national tests for accountability purposes.¹⁰

4. Catherine Gewertz, “States Can’t Pick and Choose Among Common Standards,” *Education Week*, February 2, 2010, at http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2010/02/states_cant_pick_and_choose_am.html (May 6, 2010).
5. Kate Alexander, “Embrace of ‘Common Standards’ by Obama Administration Is First Step to Losing Local Control, Scott Says,” *Austin American-Statesman*, December 3, 2009, at <http://www.statesman.com/news/content/region/legislature/stories/2009/12/03/1203scott.html> (May 6, 2010).
6. Massachusetts Education Secretary Paul Reville stated that “We are not going to endorse anything that is not at least as rigorous as our own standards.” See James Vaznis, “State Firm on School Quality: Will Reject US Standards If They Don’t Measure Up,” *The Boston Globe*, March 15, 2010, at http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/03/15/state_firm_on_school_quality/ (May 6, 2010). Iowa did not commit to the August 2010 deadline for adopting common standards in its Round 1 RTTT application and may not apply for Round 2 RTTT funding. Staci Hupp, “Iowa May Drop ‘Race to the Top’ School Reform Bid,” *The Des Moines Register*, April 8, 2010, at <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20100408/NEWS02/4080357/Iowa-may-drop-Race-to-the-Top-school-reform-bid> (May 6, 2010). The Kansas Board of Education voted 9 to 0 on April 13, 2010, not to apply for Round 2 of RTTT funding because “the federal criteria required more centralized control of public school education, which [the board] said is contrary to Kansas’ culture of local control.” Scott Rothschild, “Kansas Drops Out of ‘Race to the Top’ Education Competition,” *The Lawrence Journal-World*, April 13, 2010, at http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2010/apr/13/kansas-drops-out-race-top-education-competition/?kansas_legislature (May 6, 2010). Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell stated that, “While we support the development of internationally benchmarked targets, we do not have a desire to substitute the common core standards for our Standards of Learning.” Bob Stuart, “State: No-Go on Test Drive,” *Waynesboro News Virginian*, March 12, 2010, at http://www2.newsvirginian.com/wvn/news/state_regional/state_regional_govtpolitics/article/state_no-go_on_test_drive/53516/ (May 6, 2010).
7. “President Obama Calls for New Steps to Prepare Children for College and Careers,” YouTube, February 22, 2010, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKjkp724j6k> (May 6, 2010).
8. Catherine Gewertz, “Race to Top Rules Aim to Spur Shifts in Testing,” *Education Week*, April 19, 2010, at http://www.edweek.org/login.html?source=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/04/07/29assessment_ep.h29.html&destination=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/04/07/29assessment_ep.h29.html&levelId=1000 (May 6, 2010).
9. Press release, “Thompson Statement: Hearing on Improving Our Competitiveness: Common Core Education Standards,” U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor, December 8, 2009, at <http://republicans.edlabor.house.gov/PRArticle.aspx?NewsID=1391> (May 6, 2010).
10. Press release, “NSBA Raises Concerns Tying Title I Funding to Standards Development,” National School Boards Association, February 22, 2010, at http://vocuspr.vocus.com/vocuspr30/Newsroom/Query.aspx?SiteName=NSBANEW&Entity=PRASSET&SF_PRASSET_PRASSETID_EQ=113119&XSL=PressRelease&Cache=False (May 6, 2010).

Misconceptions About the Promise of National Standards and Testing

Advocates paint the national standards and testing movement as the key missing ingredient in K–12 education reform while dismissing concerns that this would lead to further misalignment of power and incentives in American education. The following are a few of the most frequently cited arguments in favor of national standards and tests:

- **Misconception #1: National standards and tests will make U.S. students more competitive with their global counterparts.** Proponents argue that national standards will make American students more competitive with their international peers. They point to international evaluation measures such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), in which American students rank in the middle of the performance distribution. Proponents note that countries that outperform the United States have national standards and that the U.S. needs national standards to move up in the ranking.¹¹

But the relationship between existence of standards and strong educational outcomes is not clear. While the countries that outperform the United States on international tests have national standards, so do most of those countries that score lower than the U.S.¹² In further defiance of the hypothetical rule, Canada handily outscores the United States on international exams but has no national standards.¹³ Even the relationship between the quality of state standards in the U.S. and academic performance is weak and inconsistent across subject areas.¹⁴

More careful attention is needed to understand the role that national standards play in other countries before asserting that national stan-

dards would add the same value in the United States. Alternatively, state standards and tests might be a closer analogy to standards and assessment systems in countries with populations the size of American states. There are limits to international comparisons in education given the size, diversity, and federal system of the United States.

- **Misconception #2: National standards are necessary so that parents can understand how their children’s academic achievement compares to that of other students across the country.** The CCSSI claims that “the common core state standards will enable participating states to work together to make expectations clear to parents, teachers, and the general public.”¹⁵ The case for national standards and testing, however, has neither addressed the question of why current tools are inadequate to inform parents about their children’s educational progress nor specified with much precision why Americans should expect the proposed system to improve the situation. Moreover, rather than making public schools more accountable to families, the new regime is likely to make them more responsive to the centralized scorekeeper. In this way, national standards and testing fail to address the critical problems of power and incentive structures in public education today.

What kind of information do parents need about their children’s educational performance? First, they need to know whether their children are mastering the curriculum content. State criterion-referenced tests, which measure a student’s mastery of the content outlined by state standards, currently supply this kind of information. Parents also need to know that when

11. William H. Schmidt, Richard Houang, and Sharif Shakrani, *International Lessons About National Standards*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 2009, at http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/20090826_International_Lessons_Report.pdf (May 6, 2010).
12. Neal McCluskey, “Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards,” *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* No. 661, February 17, 2010, at http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11217 (May 13, 2010).
13. Lance T. Izumi and Jason Clemens, “Learning from Canada’s Schools,” *The Washington Times*, February 23, 2010, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/feb/23/learning-from-canadas-schools/> (May 6, 2010).
14. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Liam Julian, and Michael J. Petrilli, *The State of State Standards 2006*, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, August 2006 at <http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/State%20of%20State%20Standrds2006FINAL.pdf> (May 6, 2010), p. 13.
15. Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Resources: FAQ,” March 2, 2010, at <http://www.corestandards.org> (May 13, 2010).

the state test determines that, for example, a child has mastered third-grade content, the child is keeping pace with third-grade students across the country. In other words, parents need to know how rigorous their state standards and tests are. To provide this information, some states also offer norm-referenced tests, which measure student achievement compared to other students nationally.

Another tool that can provide comparative information is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is administered to a sample of students in each state. In this way NAEP provides an external “audit” and common gauge on the quality of state standards and tests.

The meaningful information that parents and other taxpayers need is already available. The tools already exist to supply straightforward information on student, teacher, and school performance—sometimes referred to as report cards on the school system. All states are currently required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to create such report cards. Some states, such as Florida and Massachusetts, supply more detailed reporting and straightforward information than others. What has been missing in some other cases is transparency about that information. If access to information has been inadequate, that does not justify a national standards and testing regime. Rather, policies should insist on clear reporting of the essential data to parents and other taxpayers.

Public policy should also empower parents to act on that information. Providing information is important, but it does not go far enough to address the misalignment of power and incentives in public education. Parents not only need to know about their children’s educational standing, but also need the power to do something about it. In many states, parents lack any recourse to remove their children from underperforming schools.

If the relevant information to empower parents currently exists, does the U.S. need a new

national standards and testing regime? According to advocates of new national standards and testing, existing tests are inadequate. NAEP holds no sway over teachers and students because results are not reported by schools or students. The curriculum-based exams developed at great expense by states in recent years are unacceptable, they say, because differences among the tests make national comparisons difficult.

These arguments show the considerable difference that a new national standards and testing system would make: It would empower the federal government. National comparisons are valuable for those who make national decisions; a national exam that has influence over curricula is a useful tool for national policymakers. National standards and assessments would provide an infrastructure and yield information that lines up neatly for federal interventions.

In the years since significant federal interventions in local education began in 1965, federal policymakers have sought more of the type of information that would equip centralized direction of education in America. During the development of NAEP in the 1960s, officials at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare were eager to glean from the test results “more precise information on how well the nation’s schools are doing their job...to help Congress chart the future course of Federal school support.”¹⁶

“Federal school support” means centralized allocation of resources: In other words, “spread the wealth” goes to school. The kind of comprehensive, comparable data that a national test would supply is also a prerequisite for the liberal goal of creating an equal “opportunity to learn” and achieve to high standards through the equalization of resources among schools. Spending equalization, however, has not succeeded in raising student achievement, as the case of Kansas City shows.¹⁷

Despite the negative record, the Obama Administration’s “Blueprint for Reform” of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left

16. Jonathan Spivak, “Testing the Schools: A Controversial Program Is Begun to Assess U.S. Education,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 1965.

Behind) clearly aims for this goal, with numerous calls for “resource equity” among schools.¹⁸ In this way as well, national standards and testing would provide the kind of information that empowers national policymakers and bureaucrats more than parents and other taxpayers.

- **Misconception #3: National standards are necessary because state standards vary in quality.** Some states, such as Massachusetts, California, Indiana, and Virginia, have highly regarded standards. A number of other states have uneven quality of standards across subjects, and some are not up to par generally. Teachers union pressure, pervasive political correctness, and pedagogical and content disputes hamper the quality of state standards.

The variation in state standards is one of the most frequently cited reasons for adopting national standards and tests.¹⁹ But the same

pressures that detract from the quality of many state standards are likely to plague national standards as well. As a result, the rigor and content of national standards will tend to align with the mean among states, undercutting states with higher quality standards.²⁰

For example, the Obama Administration’s proposal would force Massachusetts to abandon its highly regarded state standards and sign on instead to a set of national standards that are well beneath the rigor and content of the current state standards.²¹ If it fails to do so, Massachusetts would stand to lose \$275 million a year in federal funding for Title I.²² For states like Massachusetts, the Obama Administration’s plan means facing the prospect of losing out on federal funding if they refuse to water down their standards.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan refers to the varying quality of state standards as “50

17. In 1985, the Kansas City, Missouri, School District was taken over by a federal district judge because it was not adequately desegregated. See Paul Ciotti, “Money and School Performance: Lessons from the Kansas City Desegregation Experiment,” *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* No. 298, March 16, 1998, at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-298.html> (May 6, 2010). A Missouri circuit court ruled in *Committee for Educational Equality v. State*, No. CV190-1371CC that the public-school funding system was unconstitutional and that children in poor as well as rich districts must receive the same educational opportunities. In response to the decision, the General Assembly passed the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, which was then signed into law. The Outstanding Schools Act increased funding equity among districts. See “Missouri Litigation,” National Access Network, Teachers College, Columbia University, November 2009, at http://www.schoolfunding.info/states/mo/lit_mo.php3#moco (May 13, 2010). Despite more than \$2 billion spent by state and local taxpayers to improve KCMSD, the district will close 28 of its 61 public schools in advance of the 2010–2011 school year due to a loss of 18,000 students within the past decade. Mismanagement by the school board, a \$50 million deficit, and high superintendent turnover have resulted in an exodus to higher-achieving public schools and charter schools outside of the district. See Susan Saulny, “Board’s Decision to Close 28 Kansas City Schools Follows Years of Inaction,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/12/us/12schools.html> (May 6, 2010).
18. U.S. Department of Education, “A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act,” at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/publicationtoc.html> (May 6, 2010).
19. Schmidt *et al.*, *International Lessons About National Standards*.
20. As education scholar Marcus Winters of the Manhattan Institute points out, “A rigorous, mandatory national standard is hard to imagine, because political pressure from poorly performing states would more than likely lead to a single, lax standard. That would result in an even worse outcome than the present patchwork system, which does allow for pockets of excellence like Massachusetts.” Marcus Winters, “Evolving National Standards: A Plan Without Political Fallout,” *Education Week*, August 17, 2009, at <http://www.edweek.org/login.html?source=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/17/01winters.h29.html&-destination=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/17/01winters.h29.html&-levelId=2100> (May 6, 2010). The Pacific Research Institute and the Pioneer Institute of Massachusetts have published a thorough critique of the substance of the draft common standards, comparing it to the superior Massachusetts standards. R. James Milgram and Sandra Stotsky, “Fair to Middling: A National Standards Progress Report,” Pioneer Institute *White Paper* No. 56, March 2010, at http://www.pacificresearch.org/docLib/20100402_FairtoMiddling.pdf (May 13, 2010).
21. *Ibid.*
22. U.S. Department of Education, “Fiscal Year 2008 Title I Grants to Local Educational Agencies—Massachusetts,” October 17, 2008, at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/titleif/08/massachusetts.pdf> (May 6, 2010).

different goal posts.”²³ That is a catchy phrase, but it begs the question of whether the national standards movement is more concerned with uniformity than it is with excellence. Uniform minimum-competency standards on a national level would provide a one-size-fits-all approach that would likely lead to decreased emphasis on advanced work and a generally dumbed-down curriculum.

Centralized standards and testing would eliminate the possibility of competitive pressure for increasing standards of excellence.

The Failure to Address Fundamental Problems in American Education

Contrary to the claims of proponents, the stubborn persistence of more fundamental problems in American education makes it unlikely that national standards and tests would substantially improve educational outcomes. Ultimately, reform strategies must address the fundamental power and incentive structures in public education and configure them in a way that is most likely to increase the quality of educational outcomes.

Currently, two major factors exert the most influence generally on public education and introduce motivations that can compete with the objective of improving student educational outcomes: teachers union power and funding incentives.

Teacher unions exert influence because of their mandatory dues-paying membership and contract-negotiating power. Their interests (including job security, salaries, and benefits) should be understood as distinct from student educational outcome objectives.

Funding incentives are a powerful motivator that is also distinct from the student learning objective. In particular, federal funding has had influence far beyond its 10 percent share of local school funding since the advent of systemic education reform in the 1990s.

Between 1965 and the early 1990s, the federal education role consisted in categorical education

programs, designed to address a specific issue (high-poverty schools, for instance) or population (such as non-English speakers). Beginning with Goals 2000 during the Clinton Administration, federal policy began to pursue a standards-based systemic reform agenda, expanding to stipulate criteria that have school- and system-wide influence, not just discrete programmatic application as is generally the case with categorical programs.

No Child Left Behind is a good example of the systemic influence of the federal funding incentive. In exchange for federal funding, NCLB required states to test at specific intervals (using state exams), with the requirement that all students be proficient in math, English, and science by 2014. States, districts, and schools must demonstrate adequate yearly progress toward that goal in order to continue to receive federal funding.

At face value, this appears to be a push for higher standards. In reality, some states have dumbed down their definition of proficiency on state tests in the interest of receiving federal funds. Federal funding is an incentive that can trump interest in actual progress on student outcomes. The two goals can and do diverge when power and incentives are misaligned.

Meanwhile, parents and students have a much weaker voice in the current power and incentive structure: They have neither the power to withhold funding nor collective bargaining authority. On the other hand, they have the most at stake in children’s ultimate educational success and, therefore, the greatest vested interest in quality outcomes for students. Positive student outcomes are more likely to result from the alignment of incentives of those with the most at stake in students’ educational outcomes.

National standards and tests do not fundamentally alter this misalignment between basic power and incentives in public education today. They will not produce the promised outcomes. More disturbingly, the initiative to create and implement national standards and tests is likely to detract further from

23. U.S. Department of Education, “Excerpts from Secretary Arne Duncan’s Remarks at the National Press Club,” May 29, 2009, at <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2009/06/excerpts-from-secretary-arne-duncan%E2%80%99s-remarks-at-the-national-press-club> (May 6, 2010).

the real reforms that would align the incentives and power in public education so that they lead to better outcomes.

But national standards and testing would not just fail to empower parents. National standards would force parents and taxpayers to surrender one of their most powerful tools for improving their schools: control of academic content, standards, and testing. Moreover, a national criterion-referenced test will inevitably lead to a national curriculum—a further misalignment of means and ends in education intended to equip self-governing citizens for liberty, and not a prospect most Americans would embrace.

When President Jimmy Carter was intrigued by a national test proposed by Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI) in 1977, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano warned that “[a]ny set of test questions that the federal government prescribed should surely be suspect as a first step toward a national curriculum. . . . In its most extreme form, national control of curriculum is a form of national control of ideas.”²⁴

What State Policymakers Should Do

Strengthen state-based accountability systems. Instead of signing on to common standards that will drive state curricula, state education leaders should strengthen state standards and tests. States should follow the example of models like Massachusetts or Virginia in creating solid standards and aligned assessments. State standards can also be strengthened by continually raising the bar on achievement. As students reach content proficiency, the proficiency bar should be raised to further challenge stu-

dents to meet the demands of college coursework and competitive careers.

States with outstanding standards and tests have taken great pains to ensure proper and precise learning sequencing. This is appropriate at the state level, where teacher certification and other integrated factors of a quality education system are determined.

The Bay State requires teachers to be proficient in all aspects of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and in all subject matter content, and it aligns teacher testing to state standards.²⁵ Mastery of general content knowledge and subject matter knowledge required by teachers helps to ensure that standards are aligned both horizontally, so that students learn content aligned by grade level, and vertically, to eliminate redundant content and verify subject mastery.²⁶ An initial criticism of the common core standards was that there were “grade-sequencing problems in some places. . . such as requiring a math skill in one grade level without prerequisite skills in the previous grade level.”²⁷

Provide school-performance information to parents and taxpayers. States should publish the standards along with cut scores (passing-grade thresholds for a particular test) and clear definitions of what it means for a student to be deemed proficient. States could publish this information in a *Consumer Reports*-type guide that is accessible to parents and taxpayers. At the university level, parents and students already have access to this type of information through independent reviewers such as the Princeton Review,²⁸ the College Board,²⁹ and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.³⁰

24. George F. Madaus and Thomas Kellaghan, “Examination Systems in the European Community: Implications for a National Examination System in the United States,” paper prepared for the Science, Education, and Transportation Program, Office of Technology Assessment, U.S. Congress, April 1991, p. 8, at http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/23/84/1d.pdf (May 13, 2010).

25. Jim Stergios, “MA & FL Should Get Together to Drive Ed Reform in US,” Pioneer Institute blog, April 23, 2010, at <http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/blog/news/ma-fl-should-get-together-to-drive-ed-reform-in-us> (May 6, 2010).

26. Jamie Gass and Grant Wynn, “Education Reform in Massachusetts: Aligning District Curricula with State Frameworks,” Pioneer Institute, November 2006, at http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/06_curriculum%20paper_final.pdf (May 6, 2010).

27. Catherine Gewertz, “New Critiques Urge Changes in Common Standards,” *Education Week*, January 28, 2010, at http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/01/28/20common_ep.h29.html (May 6, 2010).

28. “College Rankings,” Princeton Review, at <http://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings.aspx> (May 6, 2010).

It is critical that what it means to be proficient in a subject is defined clearly; determining student performance on assessments without a clear definition of proficiency is analogous to “reading a map without a scale.”³¹ In order to ensure that the public has a clear understanding of a state’s cut scores, the scores should be published for tested subjects with an explanation of how those scores were determined.

Empower parents to act on school-performance information. Ultimately, providing parents with clear information about school performance is useful only when parents can act on that information. Transparency is the first step. Empowering parents to hold schools accountable through school choice is the important next step to improve educational outcomes. Parents in Florida, for example, have access to high-quality information about their children’s school performance and, as a result, are able to make informed decisions about school enrollment.

Schools and districts in the Sunshine State are graded on a common-sense, straightforward A-to-F grading scale; parents understand that it is better to have a child in a school that has received an A than it is to have that child in a school that has received an F. Additionally, parents in Florida have access to education tax credits, private school choice for special-needs students, virtual education, charter schools, and public school choice. Transparency about school performance enables parents to be well informed; these many choices hold schools accountable to parents.³²

What Federal Policymakers Should Do

Permit state flexibility and autonomy in exchange for transparency. As the Obama Administration considers reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this year, federal

policymakers should pursue policies that will increase transparency in state accountability systems and improve accountability to parents. To those ends, policymakers should provide states with increased flexibility and freedom from federal red tape so that their focus is aligned not with the federal funding incentive or the demands of teachers unions, but with direct accountability to parents and students.

Conclusion

The Obama Administration’s recently released “blueprint” for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act creates strong pressure for states to sign on to the common standards initiative. The Administration is crafting both incentives (Race to the Top) and penalties (denied access to Title I funding) to promote adoption of national standards and tests.

National standards and assessments will not deliver on the promises made by proponents because they fail to address the fundamental misalignment of power and incentives in public education today; teachers union demands and federal funding incentives often compete with student learning objectives.

National standards will also continue the trend of an ever-expanding federal role in education. Decades of increased federal involvement, beginning with President Lyndon Johnson’s implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, have not led to comparable increases in academic achievement.

National standards are unlikely to make public schools accountable to families; rather, they are more likely to make schools responsive to Washington, D.C. Furthermore, a national accountability system would be a one-size-fits-all approach that

29. “Find the Right Colleges for You,” College Board, at <http://collegesearch.collegeboard.com/search/index.jsp> (May 6, 2010).

30. “Choosing the Right College,” Intercollegiate Studies Institute, at http://www.collegeguide.org/about_crc.aspx (May 6, 2010).

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tends toward mediocrity and standardization, undercutting the pockets of excellence that currently exist.

To extend these islands of excellence, public policy should better align power and incentives by strengthening state accountability systems, increas-

ing transparency about results, and empowering parents to act on that information.

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