

**STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION REFORM IN  
THE UNITED STATES SINCE “A NATION AT RISK”**

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June 1, 2009

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## Historical Background

The reform model of standards-based education emerged out of the sense of urgency generated by the seminal 1983 report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.” The report mentioned the word “standards” on numerous occasions.

Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, ¶ 26)

Later in the report, it reads as follows:

In contrast to the ideal of the Learning Society, however, we find that for too many people education means doing the minimum work necessary for the moment, then coasting through life on what may have been learned in its first quarter. But this should not surprise us because we tend to express our educational standards and expectations largely in terms of "minimum requirements." And where there should be a coherent continuum of learning, we have none, but instead an often incoherent, outdated patchwork quilt. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, ¶ 29)

Of course, “standards” is being used in this context in the everyday sense of the term as “high expectations” rather than in the technical sense that it has acquired in the field of educational policy. However, as educational professionals and policy makers began fleshing out a more precise meaning for the term, and how it could be practically applied as an operational reform model, the word began to take on the meaning and function we are familiar with today. While certain states—California, Vermont, and Maine, according to Olson (1995), and Kentucky, Vermont, California, Maryland, Delaware, and New York, according to Falk (2000)—and the mathematics community, according to Watt (2000), took on pioneering roles, the effort was in large part led by the governors, the federal government, and the national disciplinary organizations.

From the outset, a degree of partisan politics was involved in the process. President George H.W. Bush had campaigned to be the “education president.” Democrats, however, were reluctant to cede their traditional leadership on the issue to the Republicans. Just days before an education summit was convened in Charlottesville, Virginia, on September 27–28, 1989, by President Bush and the National Governors Association, Senate majority leader George Mitchell (D-ME) and House majority leader Richard Gephardt (D-MO) announced their own set of national education goals (Miller, 1989, ¶ 4). By the end of the event, President George H.W. Bush and the nation’s governors had agreed to set goals and create an annual reporting mechanism for education in the United States, with Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton playing a

leading role (Ravitch, 2000, p. 432). A few months later, President Bush announced these goals during his 1990 State of the Union address.

By the year 2000, every child must start ready to learn. The United States must increase the high school graduation rate to no less than 90 percent. And we are going to make sure our schools' diplomas mean something. In critical subjects, at fourth, eighth, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, we must assess our students' performance. By the year 2000, U.S. students must be the first in the world in math and science achievement. Every adult must be a skilled, literate worker, and citizen. Every school must offer the kind of disciplined environment that makes it possible for our kids to learn. And every school in America must be drug free. (Bush, 1990, ¶ 23–28)

In his speech, Bush also stressed the relationship between these goals and the goal of retaining economic competitiveness, one that would remain close throughout the evolution of the standards-based education reform model.

### **America 2000**

When the National Governors Association convened shortly thereafter on February 25, 1990, they adopted a modified version of the six national education goals and 21 additional new objectives. Many of these dealt with the resources needed to achieve the original six goals. The modified version, later codified in law by the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, stated that

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S. students will be the first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. (Harnischfeger, 1995, p. 107)

In July 1990, the President and the National Governors Association established the National Education Goals Panel to create annual report cards on progress made towards the achievement of these goals, to be chaired by Governor Roy Romer of Colorado. When speaking to the panel in 1991, President Bush said. "There are only a few moments in our lives when we are called upon to join a crusade, and I honestly believe this is one of them. We have a crisis in American education, and we've simply got to do something about it," (Bush, 1991, ¶ 4) Although national standards and assessments had not been established yet, they can be seen in

embryo in the goals articulated by President Bush and endorsed by the National Governors Association, particularly in goal three with its call for a demonstration of “competency.”

The work done at the Charlottesville education summit of 1989 and the National Governors Association meeting of 1990 laid the groundwork for an ambitious education improvement plan drafted by Bush’s secretary of education Lamar Alexander and the deputy secretary of education David Kearns, with the involvement of the prominent education reform advocate, Chester Finn (Miller, 1991b, ¶ 3; Kolb, 1998, p.142; Finn, 1993, pp. 247–256, 263–266). This strategy, announced by President Bush on April 18, 1991 (United States Department of Education, 1991, p. 49), was called “America 2000” and was to consist of four main components:

- [1] reform of existing schools through such initiatives as expanded school choice, voluntary national examinations, report cards on educational performance at all levels, and development of new standards for student performance;
- [2] development with business sector support of New American Schools, which would be model schools created without concern for the current constraints that affect the structure and content of schooling;
- [3] establishment of skill standards for the workforce and administration of diagnostic assessments to enhance workers’ current skills; and
- [4] designation of at least 535 communities as America 2000 Communities, selected because they embrace the education strategy and commit themselves to supporting a New American School. (Stedman, 1991, p 4)

The strategy called for the president and governors, in conjunction with the National Education Goals Panel, to set “New World Standards to be achieved in five core subject areas,” and then assess, report on, and incentivize progress towards these standards (Stedman, 1991, p. 7, 14). Under this plan, these standards would be voluntary and drawn up by some entity other than the federal government. States and school districts could then utilize these standards to craft their own. Although it was unclear who would draft the initial standards, in announcing the new initiative President Bush suggested a prominent role for the governors (United States Department of Education, 1991, p. 51).

Implementation of this ambitious plan—what President Bush called a “revolution”—quickly ran into political trouble (Miller, 1995d, ¶ 9). The right was more interested in school choice measures, and the left was still frustrated by conservative Republican moves that killed their preferred education reform bill in October 1990 (Kosar, 2005, p. 94), the Equity and Excellence in Education Implementation Act. After America 2000 was announced, Democrats offered a new education bill, S 2, which incorporated many elements of the previous Equity and Excellence in Education Implementation Act. What America 2000 and S 2 shared was a codification of the six national education goals. S 2 and its counterpart in the House of Representatives, HR 3320 both failed to include education standards or incorporate much of America 2000. House hearings on the measure and related topics repeated the mainstream Democratic position that educational achievement was primarily a matter of the socio-economic status of students’ families and the amount of resources available to schools. This reiterated the old tension between “equity” and “excellence” that dominated much of the reform debate in the

1980s. For the Democrats, enhancing student achievement was primarily a matter of getting more money to schools.

Sensing an unfavorable political climate in Congress, the Bush administration tried to implement America 2000 without legislation. They worked closely with the business community, who were asked to invest up to \$200 million in a “New American Schools Development Corporation.” This attempt to circumvent Congress set up a turf battle between Congress and the executive branch. House Education and Labor committee members testified to an appropriations committee that congressional approval would be needed to enact America 2000 (Miller, 1991a, ¶ 1). Several months later, Congress put language in an education bill prohibiting the administration from using any of its funding to enact America 2000's proposals, put in because, as Secretary Alexander contended, "To be blunt about it, some members of Congress are afraid of a national exam" (Miller, 1991c, ¶ 11). The struggle for power continued in a different form with dueling proposals for the creation of a national education advisory group. Secretary Alexander had been attempting to establish such a group under the auspices of the National Education Goals Panel, one that would focus on national standards and assessments. House Democrats responded with legislation that would create a similar entity, albeit one with a higher proportion of Democratic representation and considerably less sympathetic to standards and testing. The two branches of government were able to come to an understanding. On June 27, 1991, the Education Council Act was passed, creating the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, although Congressional Democrats remained suspicious of the very concept of standards. In fact, the act charged the council with examining “the desirability and feasibility of establishing national standards and testing in education,” with a report due on December 31, 1991 (United States Congress, 1991, p. 2–3).

The compromise did not resolve the partisan debate, however. House hearings continued to document Democratic distaste for the substance of America 2000, in spite of support for the initiative from traditional Democratic allies like teacher unions heads Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers and Keith Geiger of the National Education Association.

Educational organizations like the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National School Board Association were not in opposition to standards but were concerned that a national body dedicated to standards had the potential to circumvent the nation's traditional emphasis on local and state control over education.

The tensions, between equity and excellence, between federal and local control over education, simmered throughout 1991. At a June 1991 meeting chaired by Governor Romer, members agreed on the need for higher standards but were divided on who should develop and evaluate them. During this period, the traditional Democratic emphasis on equity emerged in deepening discussions of what would come to be known as “opportunity-to-learn” standards, essentially benchmarks for resource adequacy (Kosar, 2005, p. 100). The issues of school choice, greatly favored by the administration, proved divisive and interfered with efforts to achieve a compromise bill (Miller, 1992a, ¶ 1). That year, the National Education Goals Panel released its first report. Although it advocated strongly for national standards, it failed to prod Congress to further action, in spite of the panel and administration's efforts to broker a compromise (Stedman & Riddle, 1992, p. 4).

Meanwhile, the newly formed National Council on Education Standards and Testing was proceeding with its work as well. During a September 1991 meeting of the council, their standards task force chair, Marshall Smith, presented a paper proposing the establishment of content, performance, and delivery standards. The terminology and definitions of standards-based education were beginning to take shape.

Shortly after Smith read his brief, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing issued a highly anticipated report in support of national standards in January 1992. “Raising Standards for American Education” stated that

The council initially discussed standards and assessments as a way to help measure progress towards the National Education Goals but came to see the movement toward high standards as a means to help achieve the Goals. While mindful of the technical and political challenges, the Council concludes that national standards and a system of assessments are desirable and feasible mechanisms for raising expectations, revitalizing instruction, and rejuvenating educational reform efforts for all American schools and students. Thus, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing endorses the adoption of high national standards and the development of a system of assessments to measure attainment of those standards (National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992, p. 14).

According to the report, with the “absence of well-defined and demanding standards, education in the United States has gravitated toward de facto national minimum expectations” (p. 8). Therefore, national standards were described in the report as

critical to the nation in three primary ways: to promote educational equity, to preserve democracy and enhance the civic culture, and to improve economic competitiveness. Further, national education standards would help to provide an increasingly diverse and mobile population with shared values and knowledge (p. 9).

To allay stubborn fears of standards as a back door for enhanced federal control of education policy, the report stressed that the proposed national standards would be voluntary. It also proposed that a National Education Standards and Assessment Council be created to validate the work of states on standards and assessments. In keeping with the council’s sense of itself as advisory in nature, they did not want to engage with the controversial issue of who should draft the standards except to brush with broad strokes: “a wide array of developers” (p. 11). The report also noted a “fundamental shift of perspective among educators, policymakers, and the public from examining inputs and elements of the educational process to examining outcomes and results” (p. 14). Furthermore, although the report recommended “delivery standards” to assess resources and track equity, it was mute as to where this funding would come from.

The national testing component called for in the report came under immediate fire as a threat to equity and local control: “50 prominent educators and testing experts” issued a statement the same day the council’s report was released (Chira, 1992b, ¶ 1). Others feared

national testing would reproduce "the caste-like status of non-European groups in American society," in effect "blaming the victims" (Winfield & Woodard, 1992, ¶ 5). These attitudes carried forward into Congressional hearings in March 1992.

In its deliberations on the report, the House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education focused their critique on the idea of national testing, the lack of emphasis on delivery standards, and leaving their formulation to the very states that were often unable to provide adequate resources to schools. Some committee members cited a report from the Office of Technology Assessment that noted "the use of high-stakes tests has caused negative, unintended consequences in the past" (Miller, 1992b, ¶ 17). For all the fanfare with which the report was released and in spite of significant initial support, it wound up doing little to forward the stalled America 2000 agenda. Furthermore, with a presidential election looming that year, Democrats in Congress were ill inclined to negotiate any further with the executive branch, especially when these efforts continued to be embroiled in separate school choice issues and a proposed voucher program (Miller, 1992a, ¶ 1, 3).

Absent cooperation from Congress and with America 2000 and the "Raising Standards for American Education" report seemingly dead in the water, President Bush threatened to veto any education legislation that reached his desk. Only a Republican Senate filibuster saved him from the potential political embarrassment of rejecting an education bill during an election year. Few mourned its passing. As an aide for the House Education and Labor committee put it, "It's no secret that nobody's really enthusiastic about this bill" (Miller, 1992d, ¶ 13).

Towards the end of his administration, President Bush bypassed a recalcitrant Congress by awarding grants through the Department of Education (working with other agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation) directly to various groups for the development of "voluntary national standards in seven school subjects (science, history, geography, the arts, civics, foreign languages, and English)" which would be used "to describe what children should be expected to learn in every major academic subject. These standards were intended to create a coherent framework of academic expectations that could be used by teacher educators, textbook publishers, and test developers." (Ravitch, 2000, p. 432)

## **Goals 2000**

Incoming president (and former chair of the National Governors Association when it played a leading role in conceptualizing the national educational goals) Bill Clinton tried to re-energize standards-based education reform with three new initiatives. These plans—"Goals 2000, the Improving America's Schools Act, and voluntary national tests (VNT)"—bore many similarities to America 2000 (Kosar, 2005, p. 105).

Five short weeks after Clinton took office, Congress began to move on his education agenda. The Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources held a hearing on "examining the need to improve national education standards and job training opportunities," inviting testimony from the secretaries of education and labor, Richard Riley and Robert Reich (United

States Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, 1993, p. 2). The secretaries spoke of the need to adapt American education to a globalizing economy ever more dependent on technology and information, and in favor of the establishment of occupational and educational standards. This was yet another milestone on the way to an ever-increasingly intertwined relationship between standards-based education, business, “economic competitiveness,” and workforce development. Riley also discussed a proposal from Clinton for a voluntary program that would fund states to create their own standards, which would then in turn be certified by a new federal council. Clinton’s proposal would also create an “Opportunity-to-Learn Commission,” an evolution in the nomenclature of what had previously been called “school delivery standards.” This commission would be charged with the development of

voluntary standards to address such issues as: the capability of teachers to provide quality instruction to their areas; the extent to which teachers and administrators have continuing and ready access to the best knowledge about teaching and learning and how to make needed school changes, and the quality and availability of challenging curricula geared to meet world class standards (p. 14).

As Clinton and his officials began protracted political negotiations with Congress, the traditional battle lines of equity versus quality remained in place. Congress argued for equity and resources through strong advocacy of opportunity-to-learn standards, and the administration argued in favor of voluntary content and performance standards designed to bring depth and coherence to curriculum. After months of back and forth, President Clinton finally transmitted the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act” to Congress on April 21, 1993 (Clinton, 1993, ¶ 1). In summary, the bill was to do the following:

- [1] Set into law the six National Education Goals and establish a bipartisan National Education Goals Panel to report on progress toward achieving the goals;
- [2] Develop voluntary academic standards and assessments that are meaningful, challenging, and appropriate for all students through the National Education Standards and Improvement Council;
- [3] Identify the conditions of learning and teaching necessary to ensure that all students have the opportunity to meet high standards;
- [4] Establish a National Skill Standards Board to promote the development and adoption of occupational standards to ensure that American workers are among the best trained in the world;
- [5] Help States and local communities involve public officials, teachers, parents, students, and business leaders in designing and reforming schools; and
- [6] Increase flexibility for States and school districts by waiving regulations and other requirements that might impede reforms. (Clinton, 1993, ¶ 5–10)

By May 1993, both chambers had begun hearings on the measure, although they focused more on the job training component than on standards. Reauthorization of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was a bigger priority than standards to Representative William Ford, chair of the House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education. After Clinton called for “tough world-class academic and occupational standards for



all our children” in his 1994 State of the Union address (1994, ¶ 23), Congress finally sent a bill to conference committee in March 1994. The most contentious issues were opportunity-to-learn standards and abiding fears that the measure had the potential to significantly enhance federal control over education. In spite of these concerns, Goals 2000 was signed into law on March 31, 1994 (United States Department of Education, 2005, ¶ 11). However, in the process of reconciling so many disparate, conflicting viewpoints, “a very confused piece of legislation” was created, with many of its most significant provisions left voluntary to the states (Kosar, 2005, p. 132).

Given this laxity in quality control at the federal level, it is not surprising that by mid-1995, 47 states applied for funding under the measure and none were refused, even though “few developed adequate standards and assessments” (Kosar, 2005, p. 133). In a concession designed to placate those who feared that the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) might become a mechanism of control by the federal government over education, the pre-existing National Education Goals Panel was given considerable authority over the council. For example, it was the panel that would nominate members to the council. It was also the panel that would evaluate and approve or disapprove “criteria for the certification of State content standards, State student performance standards, State assessments, and State opportunity-to-learn standards,” as well as the “voluntary national content standards, voluntary national student performance standards, and voluntary national opportunity-to-learn standards” (United States Congress, 1994, ¶ 1). Since 12 of the panel’s 16 members were state officials (8 governors and 4 state legislators), they had little incentive to make certification standards so difficult that they might be setting up their states to fail (Kosar, 2005, p. 134). In this way, practical politics further diluted the “standards of standards.”

Furthermore, the law prohibited the use of National Education Standards and Improvement Council certification for high-stakes testing, such as for “graduation, grade promotion, or retention of students for a period of four years from the date of the Act,” although they would be free to do so after that (United States Congress, 1994). The status of opportunity-to-learn standards in the Act was deliberately contradictory in an effort to appease opposing liberal and anti-statist factions in Congress, which led to ongoing confusion and ambiguity about their status as well. The curious compromise in the implementation of the Act was that every participating state wound up submitting “plans clarifying how they would raise standards and fashion opportunity-to-learn standards, but never to seek NESIC approval for those standards” (Kosar, 2005, p. 135).

### **National Disciplinary Organizations Draft Voluntary National Standards**

In the autumn of 1994, two events further exposed the dramatic contradictions and challenges in the policy landscape of the emerging standards-based reform model. The first was the October 20, 1994, op-ed piece Lynne Cheney published in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “The End of History” (Cheney, 1994, p. A22). Her article precipitated a major controversy. Significant media attention was given to the history standards that had just been released by the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California at Los Angeles (one of the groups the Department of Education and others had contracted with to draft standards in core

curricular areas in the waning months of the Bush administration). The history standards reflected a position similar to that of the multicultural movement. They highlighted previously neglected women and people of color instead of continuing to valorize the more traditional roster of figures, typically white males. They also gave prominence to the significant shortcomings of American history, such as genocide, land theft, slavery, misogyny, and imperialism, topics rarely discussed in schools. The Senate even joined the debate, voting 99 to 1 to condemn them (Johnston & Diegmueller, 1995, ¶ 1).

This “negative” view of America was a very attractive target for the politicians who came to power in the “Republican revolution” of November 1994. Many of them had even campaigned on “culture war” issues. It gave many emboldened Republican hard-liners additional justification to attack the history standards, and much of the rest of Clinton’s overall education initiative as well. Again, the Republican critique centered largely on the perceived over-involvement of the federal government in education.

Despite persistent threats to abolish the Department of Education, by the time the Congress passed its next round of education measures in the Appropriations Act of 1996 in April, the department was funded at the same level as the previous year (Unites States Congress, 1996, pp. 230–238). The legislation also modified Goals 2000 by deleting the opportunity-to-learn standards and abolishing the NESIC before any members had even been appointed. Republican antipathy to the perceived over-involvement of the federal government in education can also be seen in their two year delay of a vote on the appointment of Marshall Smith, former chair of the standards task force of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing. This was in large part because of his association with standards. For their conservative base, the standards-based reform model remained a Trojan horse, a potentially nefarious ploy for the federalization of education. So abiding was their distrust that one policy analyst even went so far as to call it “an Orwellian exercise in government-approved truth” (Morrison, 1996, ¶ 8). Since the NESIC was abolished, “there was no organization to evaluate the drafts prepared by the groups that had been funded to write voluntary national standards, nor was there any other formal public review process” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 432).

As noted earlier, the first set of standards to emerge were the math standards, created by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics without federal resources. These standards grew out of the 1983 report by the Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology. Subsequent discussion of the matter at various conferences led the council to convene a Commission on Standards for School Mathematics in 1986 to begin drafting standards. These were finally released in March 1989 (Watt, 2000, pp. 4–5). They were well received initially, particularly as a welcome and definitive break from the discredited “new math.” Upon further scrutiny, however, and with an accumulation of experience as to how they played out in the classroom, many, especially parents, began to chafe. Their de-emphasis on correct answers and basic computational skills and a perceived over-reliance on calculators seemed an assault on basic numeracy. Frustrated parents in California “led by mathematicians and engineers” began to organize themselves under the name Mathematically Correct, using “the Internet to find like-minded mathematicians, teachers, and parents” beginning in 1995 (Ravitch, 2000, p. 440).

Curricular areas whose standards development did benefit from federal funding (and their date of release and who drafted them) include the following: the arts (March 1994; Consortium of National Arts Education Associations), civics and government (November 1994; Center for Civic Education), science (November 1995; National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine), foreign languages (January 1996; consortium of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and disciplinary associations), and English language arts (March 1996; National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association).

Curricular areas that issued standards without the aid of federal resources included health (May 1995; Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards), physical education (June 1995; National Association for Sport and Physical Education), and economics (January 1997; consortium of the National Council on Economic Education and disciplinary associations). (Watt, 2000, pp. 7–11) Among these, however, few received nearly as much publicity as the history and English language arts standards.

The English language arts standards have been called “an unmitigated disaster” lacking rigor, substance, “content and actual standards” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 437). In 1994, the Department of Education ceased funding the project. In spite of the loss of federal funding, the National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association continued their work on the English language arts standards (in conjunction with the Council of Chief State School Officers). These were released in March 1996 (Watt, 2000, p. 7). A primary complaint against the published standards was made against their call for students to “develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects” (National Council of Teachers of English & International Reading Association, 1996, ¶ 11). “In other words, the standards statement essentially says we should not hold students to any standards!” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 438). Others considered them more of a pedagogy than standards per se (p. 441).

### **A Movement Matures**

Another major piece of education legislation passed during the Clinton administration was “The Improving America's School Act,” signed into law on October 1994. It “required each state to develop state content and performance standards for mathematics and reading by the 1997–1998 school year and assessments by the 2000–2001 school year appropriate for all students, including the disadvantaged” (Watt, 2000, p. 13).

This stage in the development of education standards was marked by some curious contradictions. On the one hand, it was the culmination of a process that had begun as far back as 1983. The federal government’s Department of Education had invested over \$24 million in “the development of curriculum frameworks and content standards in 30 states” (Olson, 1995, ¶ 9). Standards enjoyed the support of Democratic and Republican administrations and governors, as well as key elements of the federal bureaucracy (Standards, 1995, ¶ 4). A wide variety of disciplinary organizations had either completed or were hard at work drafting subject matter standards, as were the states themselves. This was the situation by 1995.

Nearly all the states claim[ed] they have or are developing standards for what students should know and be able to do in the core academic disciplines. Forty-six states have applied for federal grants under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act . . . to develop content standards and a related system of assessments (Olson, 1995, ¶ 7).

In spite of all of this seeming support, serious questions were beginning to emerge as well.

Who should set standards and who has the right to say whether they are good enough? Are the proposed standards really for all children, from the gifted and talented to those with special needs? Will all students have access to the instruction and resources needed to achieve the standards? Will the standards dictate a national curriculum in a country that has a strong tradition of local control in education? What role, if any, should the federal government have played in developing standards? And are the emerging documents both politically balanced and academically rigorous? (Standards, 1995, ¶ 6).

Drafters had underestimated the difficulties inherent in crafting documents of such complexity as standards. It was unclear how well educational systems could utilize them. The voluntary national standards drafted by the national disciplinary organizations were under political attack from the right and left. States and districts chafed at what they saw as attempts to undermine long traditions of local control. The link to “better assessments, teacher training, new textbooks, and other resources to help students achieve the standards” was often absent or weak (Standards, 1995, ¶ 2). The definition of “standards,” nomenclature for comparable activities, and links (or lack thereof) “to statewide tests, professional development, and graduation requirements” varied widely among the states (Olson, 1995, ¶ 18).

In fact, so pervasive were the challenges facing this burgeoning reform model that *Education Week*, the leading newspaper of American K–12 education, saw fit to devote the entire April 12, 1995 issue to the subject. In spite of these challenges and resistance to the model by conservative Republicans who led their party’s takeover of Congress in 1994, the movement pressed forward, aided by a number of events.

These included the second National Education Summit convened in March 1996, the re-election of President Clinton in November 1996, the State of the Union address in February 1997, the third National Education Summit held in September 1999 and the fourth National Education Summit called in October 2001 (Watt, 2000, p. 12).

The second National Education Summit was held at IBM’s Pacific Palisade Conference Center, hosted by Louis Gerstner, CEO of IBM, CEOs of a number of blue chip American companies, and the National Governors Association. It also featured the participation of a number of leading conservative education thinkers (Horn, 2004, p. 23). Emerging from the summit was a preference for state- and locally-generated standards and enhanced consideration

of workforce development in drafting them. CEOs represented by the Business Roundtable kept up the pressure for workplace readiness. Some argued that the close participation of business in standards development socialized job training costs into public education (Horn, 2004, p. 28).

Another impetus for the survival of the reform model came with the multi-pronged efforts of Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) to calibrate, reconcile, and consolidate the widely varying state and local standards. As a part of this initiative, they examined “4,100 benchmarks distributed among 256 standards” to create an online database. (Kendall & Marzano, 1997, ¶ 41) Next, they engaged in a study designed to boil subject matter content standards down to certain key essentials. As a follow-up, they also “convened a National Dialogue on Standards-Based Education in April 2001 to give stakeholders a mechanism for meeting face-to-face and online to continue refining the dialogue regarding standards” (Watt 2000, p. 12).

Other organizations contributed to the ongoing process of refinement and enhanced consistency between the states as well. The Council for Basic Education published “a book presenting condensed, edited and commonly-formatted versions of the national standards” (Watt, 2000, p. 21). Business and the governors continued their long-standing support for standards by collaborating to establish another database of standards, as well as a methodology for their evaluation, through the Achieve Resource Center on Standards, Assessment, Accountability and Technology. Achieve, Inc. would go on to deepen business’ traditional support for standards and testing by co-sponsoring the National Education Summit on High Schools in 2005. Forty-five governors were in attendance, as well as numerous “CEOs and K–12 and post-secondary leaders.” A consensus emerged that schools were

not adequately preparing students for college and 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs. As a result of the Summit, 29 states joined with Achieve to form the American Diploma Project Network—a coalition of states committed to aligning high school standards, assessments, graduation requirements and accountability systems with the demands of college and the workplace. (Achieve, Inc., 2007, p. 2)

As of 2007, Achieve, Inc. reported that 12 states had aligned their high school standards with “college and workplace expectations,” 27 states were in the process of doing so, 5 states planned to do so, and 6 states did not plan to do so (Achieve Inc., 2007, p. 9).

There were other initiatives as well. For example, the Coalition for Goals 2000 tasked itself with “developing a set of self-guiding tools which school districts can use to develop their own academic standards based on national and state benchmarks” (Starr, 1998, ¶ 24), and “collaborated with the Education Leaders Council to create a results card for analysing the impact of state standards” (Watt, 2000, p. 12).

As the 1990s drew to a close, every state except Iowa had drafted standards.

The Department of Education conducted a review in 2000 to evaluate “the alignment of each state’s assessment system with its content and performance standards to ensure they met

requirements for funding Title 1 programs” (Watt, 2000, p. 13). After passage of Bush’s hallmark education legislation, No Child Left Behind, his education secretary Rod Paige convened a committee to revamp standards and assessments and receive public feedback. At the conclusion of this process, his department promulgated new regulations on the matter.

Among “the most ambitious” standards and assessment initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s was the New Standards Project. This national coalition teamed up “approximately 17 states and seven urban school districts, co-directed by Lauren Resnick of the Learning, Research, and Development Center of the University of Pittsburgh and Marc Tucker of the National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington, D.C.” (Spalding, 2000, p. 2) It strove to create a unified system of standards and performance assessment. Their initial portfolio-based assessment initiative proved too difficult to grade on a mass, standardized basis, although it had the unintended and positive impact of enhancing teacher professionalism in the process.

### **Defining and Evaluating Standards**

By the mid-1990s, people and organizations began formulating important characterizations of what they felt constituted quality standards. Education historian and prominent standards advocate Diane Ravitch saw three salient features: “they are clear and measurable; they focus on cognitive learning, not affective traits; and they are usually based on traditional academic disciplines” (Olson, 1995, ¶ 13).

In 1995, the National Academy of Education endorsed two guiding principles for standards:

- [1] Because there is not one best way to organize subject matter in a given field of study, rigorous national standards should not be restricted to one set of standards per subject area.
- [2] Content standards should embody a coherent, professionally defensible conception of how a field can be framed for purposes of instruction. They should not be an exhaustive, incoherent compendium of every group’s desired content. (McLaughlin, Shepard, & O’Day, 1995, p. xviii)

The formal body created by statute to address the issue, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, said that

- [1] Standards must reflect high expectations, not expectations of minimal competency.
- [2] Standards must provide focus and direction, not become a national curriculum.
- [3] Standards must be national, not federal.
- [4] Standards must be voluntary, not mandated by the federal government.
- [5] Standards must be dynamic, not static. (Ravitch, 1995b, p. 140)

These three representative descriptions of the characteristics of quality standards exhibit significant commonalities. There was far less accord, however, about their utility and actual impact on teaching and learning. Certainly, there have never been any shortage of critics. Some lambaste the “one-size-fits-all approach” (Ohanian, 1999). Others lament standards as an “autocratic, regimented throw-back to factory-model approaches to school, where students are forced to regurgitate expert-prescribed sets of facts or face failure” (Thompson, 1999, p. 46). Some see national standards and testing as key (Tucker & Coddling 1998), especially if they can be benchmarked against the work of other strong-performing countries with notably well-integrated education systems (Fitzgerald, 1979; Ravitch, 1995a; Achieve, Inc. 2007). Others oppose national standards and assessments (Darling-Hammond, 1994), or assert that nationally prominent textbooks imply de facto national standards (Apple, 1995). Some focus their attention on enhanced expectations of students (Hirsch, 1996), while others focus on enhanced learning (Alvarado, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997a, 1997b; Kohn, 1999; O’Neil & Tell, 1999; Resnick & Nolan, 1995; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Resnick & Resnick, 1991).

A perceived lack of concern for gender, race, and class differences worries a number of analysts (Berlak, 1995; Marzano & Kendall, 1996; Purpel, 1995; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1999; Horn, 2004). Others took the opposite tack and worried that the conventional stories and historic figures of America were being unduly neglected by the new standards, echoing Lynn Cheney’s trenchant critique of the initial history standards. Given so many diverging viewpoints, many have urged standards developers to focus on common values and learning objectives (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997b; Falk & Ort, 1998; Kohn, 1999). Furthermore, some see rigid, detailed, highly structured standards as a de-skilling of teachers’ intellectual labor and professional practice in pursuit of “teacher-proof” learning environments.

Although testing and accountability are an integral part of the standards-based education reform model as a whole, several aspects of it have come under fire. For example, the expense and technical challenges posed by creating valid and reliable tests often intimidate states and districts. Commonly, they revert back to default and test newly crafted standards with previously existing testing instruments, even if these instruments are not entirely appropriate for the new standards. This often undermines public trust, especially when the tests have high stakes consequences, such as grade promotion (Falk, 2000, pp. 90-91) or graduation. Another big concern is the harm that may be caused by privileging high stakes testing, particularly for grade promotion, over multiple, diverse, and simple means of assessment (International Reading Association, 1999; Koretz & Linn, 1996; Madaus, 1989; National Council on Education, Standards, and Testing, 1992; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997b). In fact, approximately half of the large urban school districts that link testing to grade promotion offer summer remedial classes. “In many of them (Chicago, Houston, Oakland, Denver, Washington, DC, and New York City, to name just a few) attendance” is required (Falk, 2000, p. 92). Students are not alone in feeling the pressure against low test scores. Depending on the performance of their schools, teachers and administrators can enjoy bonuses—or face sanctions or even dismissal. In some jurisdictions, schools can even be shut down or privatized.

In light of the personal stress and potential disruption to educational systems when standards are linked to high-stakes testing, it may not be surprising that states with milder

consequences for low test scores (like Maryland and Maine) often note more positive benefits from their standards than do states and districts which take a more punitive approach (Clotfeller & Ladd, 1996; Elmore & Fuhrmann, 1996; Elmore, Abelman & Fuhrman, 1996; Firestone, Mayrowetz & Fairman, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996).

One of the most common complaints is the potential risk posed to holistic, individualized, student-centered learning that can come from pressures to “teach to the test.” For example, an analysis of the assessment system in Kentucky (seen as a leader in standards) found it hard for teachers to resist “focus[ing] on whatever is thought to raise test scores rather than on instruction aimed at addressing individual student needs.” (Jones & Whitford, 1997, p. 277)

In the perennially tough battle for resources, administrators may not always be able to resist the temptation “to manipulate test results by changing the school’s student population or keeping certain students out of the testing pool” (Falk, 2000, p. 93; Clotfeller & Ladd 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Smith & Rottenberg, 1991). In some cases, this can even rise to the level of potentially criminal activity (Hoff, 1999, ¶ 30). Even President Bush’s education secretary Rod Paige came under severe scrutiny over exactly these types of allegations, regarding deceptive statistics.

Other oft-cited critiques of high-stakes tests include the potential they have to exacerbate pre-existing racial and class tensions, their perceived unfairness to those with limited English proficiency, and their tendency to commandeer the entire curriculum and foster investment in testing over learning (Falk 2000, pp. 93–99). Taken as a whole, these critiques led stakeholders in some states (like Texas, Ohio, and Massachusetts) to try and abolish their own high-stakes tests (Hoff, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future is on record saying that “research correlating teacher effort and experience with student results clearly demonstrates that focused teaching produces learning” (Falk, 2000, p. 100). The central question of the standards-based education reform model, then, is whether standards contribute significantly to focused teaching. Surely, they can’t do so by themselves. To think so is “folly” (Ohanian, 1999). Rather, they have to be considered in conjunction with

how we reorganize time, professional development of all staff (principals and central office staff, as well as teachers), distribution of resources, use of computers and distance learning, report cards, parent engagement, press coverage of education, state legislation, teacher preparation and licensure, and post secondary education. (Falk, 2000, pp. 101-102)

Some states’ standards are quite succinct. Others are detailed and voluminous. A perennial critique of this latter group of standards is the extraordinary amount of time it would take to systematically teach them. Some contended it would take “14 hour days” (Diegmüller,



1995, ¶ 65), “a 365-day year, at least a 12-hour school day, seven days a week” (Olson, 1995, ¶ 29), or even the amount of time it takes to acquire a master’s degree (Stoskopf, 2000, p. 38).

Standards clearly must be considered in coordination with the education system, broadly defined, as a whole. However, to maximize their utility for effective teaching and learning in the classroom, highly detailed standards would benefit from efforts to essentialize and clarify them.

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The education reform document, written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, came out in 1982 to a wave of publicity. The report determined that the system of education in the United States was failing to meet the needs of the competitive workforce, citing tanking SAT results, poor test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (considered the nation's report card) and sliding graduation rates. However, most in the world of education reform would agree that not much has changed since a "Nation at Risk" first came out. Standards and Expectations: The Commission stated that grades should be indicators of academic achievement. A Nation At Risk. All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. The educational dimensions of the risk before us have been amply documented in testimony received by the Commission. For example Education reform in the United States since the 1980s has been largely driven by the setting of academic standards for what students should know and be able to do. These standards can then be used to guide all other system components. The SBE (standards-based education) reform movement calls for clear, measurable standards for all school students. Rather than norm-referenced rankings, a standards-based system measures each student against the concrete standard. Curriculum, assessments, and