Are National Standards the Right Move?

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Deborah Meier

I'm for "standards" if we are talking about a flag held high to see where we are going. But as a euphemism for a K–12 curriculum, standards are a bad idea. Setting fixed standards for what students should learn means aiming either too low or too high—never on target for each individual learner.

Before we decide which methods work in moving learners forward, we have to at least discuss "to what ends?" Effective standards—of any kind—uphold both our purposes and our good taste. People quite reasonably disagree on purposes. Some people may be willing to sacrifice a lot for Purpose A but very little for Purpose B. A group may agree on 10 goals for a good writing course, for instance, but disagree if forced to cut back to five. And good taste? Many books eventually declared classics were at first turned down by publishers and slammed by critics.

Every time we try to fix goals for public schooling, we end up in the same fix as the Constitutional originalists (who assume the U.S. Constitution has one immutable meaning); we sacrifice flexibility for immutability.

It's a fact that we don't know how to teach math well to everyone. Maybe we never will. It might be fruitful to question the assumption that "everyone" must know advanced algebra (as opposed to, say, advanced musicianship). We should also ask what it will cost those who never "get" algebra—or some other core subject—if the trend continues to make mastering algebra a roadblock to further study. Why don't we remove the roadblock instead?

The one demand I'd like to make of U.S. schools is that they give young people the tools to lead a powerful public life: to be knowledgeable and thoughtful about democracy and the U.S. Constitution. After that, let's provide choices where we can without polarizing the democracy we are trying to nourish.

William H. Schmidt

Well-designed national standards are necessary to improve schooling in the United States. Without such standards to guide our fragmented system, we will continue to fail our children. Even the best U.S. students do not perform as highly as the students of top-performing nations; governors and state education leaders have come to recognize the importance of addressing this lack of competitiveness through national standards.

In the United States, we spend a great deal of time arguing about why we should not have national standards. It's more important to consider the consequences of our not having national standards. International research has shown that top-achieving countries have focused, coherent, and rigorous national standards. These three characteristics can only be achieved when there is a national center. In a highly fragmented system with shared decision making, in which states and even individual districts often establish their own standards, these qualities are almost impossible to achieve.

My argument is twofold. First, if we want to make our students more competitive internationally, both for their own sake and for the nation, then a move to national standards gives schooling the chance to
“deficiencies” instead of developing strengths. As a result, talents are suppressed and wither. Once a standard is established, it becomes a uniform measure that's used to include or exclude people.