



DOCUMENT REVIEWED: "Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Standards"

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PUBLISHER/THINK TANK: The Cato Institute

DOCUMENT RELEASE DATE: February 17, 2010

REVIEW DATE: April 21, 2010

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SUGGESTED CITATION:
Mathis, W. J. (2010). *Review of "Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Standards."* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved [date] from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-Behind-the-Curtain>

Summary of Review

President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have called for national "common core" curriculum standards. Some have argued that national standards are essential for reform, as they provide coherence, rigor, logic and organization. Others have contended they will narrow the curriculum, seize control from local districts and states, and distort the purposes of education. The Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey argues that national standards will have only limited, if any, effect. The report contends there is only a weak theoretical case in favor of national standards and that the structure of schooling might be the real problem. It concludes that market models are the best way to reform education. While providing a useful summary and critique of the research on national standards, the non-sequitur in the report (standards do not work; therefore the free market will) presents readers with a conclusion not supported by the report's evidence. Thus, the fundamental policy conclusions are not sustained.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

As the administration's directions on "Race to the Top" and the ESEA re-authorization become increasingly clear, it is evident that the push for national "common core" educational standards are a part of the federal education policy formula.¹ President Obama, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association have asserted that high national standards are necessary if we are to be internationally competitive. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has called for the adoption of these standards by states in order to receive federal funds as well as Race to the Top funds. Whether such standards will in fact lead to better schooling and educational outcomes is a paramount concern. Neal McCluskey's timely *Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Standards*, published by the Cato Institute, concludes that standards will not have those desired effects.²

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

The Cato Institute report acknowledges the face appeal of higher standards, yet tells us that the idea may not be quite so simple. First, agreement on national standards is no easy matter. Most importantly, the body of research supporting national standards is so weak that it does not justify a major policy shift in that direction. Even if national standards were adopted and implemented, the report raises the question of whether they would lead to the personal fulfillment or economic growth they promise.

Therefore, the report concludes, the national standards movement may be the opposite of what is needed. Instead of new regulations,

freedom from regulations is the answer. Cato recommends universal school choice, since "only a free market can produce the mix of high standards, accountability, and flexibility that is essential to achieving optimal education outcomes" (p. 1).

III. THE REPORT'S RATIONALE FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The report contends that the effect of state standards has been spotty, at best. It acknowledges the "competition in the global environment" rationale, the fragmented chaos of the current collection of highly varied state standards, and the incentives for states to set lower standards. All of these claims are driving forces behind the call for high, national standards. The author also summarizes the current national standards development effort being spearheaded by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).³ Using private contractors and testing companies, and funded by foundations (primarily Gates) as well as federal assessment money, a set of standards in reading and mathematics is now being refined after a public review period.

The Cato report illustrates the low level of state standards, using the common approach of comparing them to the benchmark levels on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). While acknowledging the need for standards to be "world-class," the report questions superficial assertions about a modern nation needing uniform standards, and it contends that the simple adoption of standards means nothing without the systems to design, implement and enforce these requirements. The author does examine Robert Costrell's work in modeling the effects

of uniform national standards (at a level lower than contemplated in the current NGA / CCSSO effort), but he dismisses that work as a theoretical exercise different from the real world.

The report then lists some political realities potentially standing in the way of reform. These include school board election cycles, administrators' associations, and a tortuous law-making process. The report devotes considerable attention to the assertion that teachers unions want "to keep standards low" (p. 5).

The largest portion of the policy brief (pp. 8-18) targets the research on the efficacy of standards as a reform tool (this research is reviewed in the following section). In short, the report states there is "paltry direct empirical evidence" and "thin indirect evidence" that national standards are an effective policy reform tool. The author lists a set of problems that stand in the way of successful implementation of national standards. Among these is an aversion to federal dictates, the questionable constitutionality of such an approach, whether tests have sufficient validity for such purposes, and negative effects on diversity. All of this leads to the conclusions that the use of national standards as a reform tool is unsupported by research, and that practical obstacles render the approach unworkable. After firmly slamming that door, the report turns to the question of what will work.

"The answer is to replace public *schooling*—in which government not only ensures that all children can access education, but also provides the schools—with true public *education*" (p. 18, italics in the original). The report continues, "Let education work as a free market, in which consumers purchase services and products according to their individual needs and desires, and suppliers compete through quality, specialization, price and innovation" (p. 18).

The report then offers a brief presentation of literature concerning empirical support for free-market solutions. Most of these references are from selected studies in foreign countries. The study also objects to defining education as merely test-based content and argues that education involves personal development and higher-order skills. Free-market solutions are presented in the report as a way of escaping the poisonous politics of standards-setting (since everybody picks their own), by-passing measurement problems and resolving equity. The report also suggests that standards would naturally evolve in a non-governance environment. Thus, the road to educational reform is not in ineffective national standards and regulation but in free-market deregulation.

IV. THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The report's research review begins with a reiteration of the current and relevant arguments in favor of national standards; it then presents the limited research evidence on the effectiveness of state or national standards and their effects on achievement scores. This research is limited in the number of studies as well as the size of any effects. The discourse on the negative effects of professional associations on standards and school structure, the suspicion of centralized power and other political barriers has acknowledged political weight in the minds of many.

The strength of the report is in the "paltry direct empirical evidence" section. The report points to evidence that the mere demand for high national standards does not cause achievement increases in and by themselves. It also points out the undesirability of uniform standards for individual student development and as well as an education system goal. The author acknowledges the strong opposition by many in the edu-

cation community.⁴ In addition, the report compares the presence or absence of national standards with high or low international test scores, concluding that there is no relationship between a nation's test scores and whether it has national standards.⁵ To his credit, the author mentions that such arguments are not causally linked.

Given the thin direct evidence, the report next examines indirect evidence. By this, the author refers to the use of standards and tests in the context of accountability schemes. Because standards and accountability are two separate policies, and because high-stakes accountability policies can have such powerful effects, the report accurately cautions that these are treacherous waters and conclusions are open to various interpretations. The report points to Amrein and Berliner's finding that standards-based programs did not lead to improved achievement, and it points as well to the volleys and counter-volleys in the academic exchange that followed. Carnoy and Loeb, Hanushek and Raymond, and Henry Braun are all referenced for their insights. Although a wider net could be thrown, the literature review faithfully captures a fairly sparse field. That is, there is not a strong body of evidence showing that high standards in the context of accountability systems have a pronounced impact.

The report then concludes that the answer lies in free market models. The literature review supporting this assertion is thin (a half page), and the sources used are limited.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODS

The report's review of the current political situation on national standards is succinct and generally fair. The arguments for national standards are accurately provided. The weak direct evidence in favor of national

standards is reported and the scarcity of relevant findings is noted. The indirect, weak and inconclusive evidence of the effectiveness of standards-based accountability systems is fairly presented, although others have interpreted these same studies in a light more favorable to accountability.

The obstacles to reform, while not being research-based, provide a balanced representation of the contending issues and problems facing national standards. The section noting that all matters of educational importance are not measured on standardized tests is a well-taken perspective.

The Achilles heel of the report is the leap to free-market solutions, which neither follows from the earlier analyses nor is independently supported by the evidence presented. This "support for educational freedom" section is quite short and weak. Out of 92 references in the main report, the author cites only four for this most vital point, and two of these are from Cato itself. The third is a blog and the fourth is the *Journal of Education Choice*. The sections contending that diversity, standards, and political issues will be resolved by school choice are oft-heard defenses for choice plans but reflect more opinion than grounded research. While most knowledgeable readers will understand and expect that a Cato report would advocate free-market policies, these arguments are couched as a research presentation and should therefore be held to research standards.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

As a critique of the national standards movement, the report serves a valuable purpose. The summary of the current political situation is generally accurate. The empirical evidence against standards is well-documented but, as the report explains, this

evidence is limited and contaminated by a host of inter-connected external variables.

The main conclusion (*since standards don't work, the free market will*), is simply an unsupported claim. As logic, it is the equivalent of saying that since elephants can't fly, frogs will. The weak following support is not enough to retrieve the point.

VII. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

For those wanting a quick review of the criticisms of national standards, the report is a useful resource. As regards the validity of the free-market conclusion, this cannot be sustained.

Notes and References

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- ² McCluskey, Neal (February 17, 2010). *Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Standards*. Policy Analysis 661. Washington DC: Cato Institute. Retrieved February 18, 2010, from http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11217
- ³ See, for example, *Common core state standards initiative*. Washington: Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved March 3, 2010, from http://www.ccsso.org/federal_programs/13286.cfm
- ⁴ See also Kohn, A (January 14, 2010) Debunking the case for national standards. *Education Week*. [29(17)]. Retrieved January 13, 2010, from <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek.national.htm>
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- ⁵ This is consistent with the work of others:
- Whitehurst, G. (October 14, 2009). *Don't forget curriculum*. Providence, RI: Brown Center letters on education#3. Retrieved February 11, 2010, from http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/1014/curricul_whitehurst.aspx
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The Think Tank Review Project is made possible by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.