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Whose Standards?

“The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.”

—*A Nation at Risk*, 1983

As a parent, it is bewildering and a little confusing to know whose side to take in the issue of standards. On the one side are the educators who question the need for so many standards, the possibility of bias within, and the use of the results. On the other side are business leaders and politicians who seem determined to standardize public education and to determine its effectiveness through high stakes testing. These same leaders are determined to compare schools through test results by state, county, and district, and even by teacher. How did we get to this gap in our beliefs about standards?

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THE HISTORY BEHIND SCHOOL STANDARDS

Ask any education reformer when the standards movement began and most will cite the year 1983 as being the birth of the standards explosion that we know today. Prior to the 1980s, schools were primarily concerned with identifying minimum standards, or the lowest level of achievement that was acceptable. State governments that participated in the minimum standards movement contracted with commercial testing companies to develop tests over the minimum competencies determined to be important by the states. This action led the way for the testing reforms with which we live today.

While it is true that education has gone through many reforms since the beginning of this nation, a universal trend toward state standards came out of the fears and concerns voiced in a frightening report called *A Nation at Risk*. The report (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) included bold statements in its conclusions about education:

If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems, which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

The report spread fear that the United States might not be able to keep up and compete with the global economy in the future.

From *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the following recommendations emerged:

- Graduation requirements should be strengthened so that all students establish a foundation in five new basics: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science.
- Schools and colleges should adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance.
- The amount of time students spend engaged in learning should be significantly increased.
- The teaching profession should be strengthened through higher standards for preparation and professional growth.

The *A Nation at Risk* report led the way for a new movement in education called the *effective schools movement*. Educators involved in this movement studied schools that seemed to be doing a good job in educating all children to see what, if anything, they were doing in common that made them successful. The research concluded that successful schools had several factors in common:

1. A safe and orderly environment. Not only did students feel physically safe but emotionally safe as well. There was a feeling of oneness, of being part of a team.
2. A principal that was a good leader. Not just in terms of management, but the principal was the *instructional* leader who modeled good instructional practices and who had high expectations for his or her faculty.
3. Parent involvement. Parents were welcome—not just during Public School Week—but anytime. Parents were considered partners in the educational process.
4. Academic emphasis. Academics came first above all else. These schools made it clear to students, staff, and parents that they were there for the teaching of kids first. This meant that coaches were teachers first, that everyone in the school was a part of the teaching process before they were a part of any other programs.

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5. High expectations for all students. For so long schools had operated under the old model of the bell curve. The bell curve assumes that a few students will do well, a few students will fail, and the majority will fall in the middle. For the first time, the belief was that all students should do well and that there was no room for failure. Also of importance was that for the first time, failure was blamed on the system (i.e., the methods and materials) rather than on the student. If a large percentage of a class was failing, the system had broken down (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Lezotte & Pepperl, 1999; Squires, Huitt, & Segars, 1983). From the effective schools movement, emphasis was placed on changing individual schools. Some states began to publish *school report cards* that indicated the school's test and other results (such as attendance averages and dropout rates) in terms of criteria set by the state. Common criteria included such things as student achievement results on state tests, student attendance, dropout rates, teacher demographics, and student socioeconomic status (Squires, 2005). These same criteria can be seen on state-published school report cards today. The major difference is that all schools are required by federal law to publish annual report cards to the public, and there are specified criteria as to what the report card will contain, at a minimum.

In September of 1989, the first education summit was held under the direction of President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors. The report contained six broad goals, which were later expanded to eight. This report was released under the title *The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners* (National Education Goals Panel, 1991). Of special significance to the standards movement was the mandate that education identify rigorous standards regarding what students should know and be able to do in core academic areas.

In 1989, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) led the way by publishing standards for mathematics.

Those standards became the underpinning of most of the math standards for the states. Other organizations followed NCTM by publishing their own content standards. According to research by Squires (2005), the following organizations developed standards in this order:

- 1993, Science
- 1994, Social Studies
- 1994, English and Language Arts

Figure 1.1 shows the documents and their resources that have become the basis for the standards that we have today.

The former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch is recognized as one of the architects of the standards movement. In her own words, Ravitch (1995) explains the rationale for standards:

Americans expect strict standards to govern construction of buildings, bridges, highways, and tunnels—shoddy work would put lives at risk. They expect stringent standards to protect their drinking water, the food they eat, and the air they breathe. . . . Standards are created because they improve the activity of life.

According to a report published by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL/Public Agenda, 2002) the first response to *A Nation at Risk* was to set more rigorous graduation requirements for schools. The results were below expectations, so an effort was made to address national goals and standards.

Moved by the urgency of the need to improve schools, President George H. W. Bush and the state governors met in Charlottesville, Virginia in September of 1989 to discuss solutions. The meeting, known as the Education Summit, produced six broad goals for education that were to be reached by the year 2000. Goal 3, which directly related to demonstrated

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Figure 1.1 National Standards*

Science	National Research Council. (1996). <i>National science education standards</i> . Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
Foreign Language	National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. (1996). <i>Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century</i> . Lawrence, KS: Allen Press.
History	National Center for History in the Schools. (1984). <i>National standards for history for grades K-4: Expanding children's world in time and space</i> . Los Angeles: Author. National Center for History in the Schools. (1994). <i>National standards for United States history: Exploring the American experience</i> . Los Angeles: Author. National Center for History in the Schools. (1994). <i>National standards for world history: Exploring paths to the present</i> . Los Angeles: Author. National Center for History in the Schools. (1996). <i>National standards for history: Basic edition</i> . Los Angeles: Author.
Arts	Consortium of National Arts Education Associations. (1994). <i>National standards for arts education: What every young American should know and be able to do in the arts</i> . Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference.
Health	Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards. (1995). <i>National health education standards: Achieving health literacy</i> . Reston, VA: Association for the Advancement of Health Education.
Civics	Center for Civic Education. (1994). <i>National standards for civics and government</i> . Calabasas, CA: Author.
Economics	National Council on Economic Education. (1996, August). <i>Content statements for state standards in economics, K-12</i> . Unpublished manuscript, New York.
Geography	Geography Education Standards Project. (1994). <i>Geography for life: National geography standards</i> . Washington, DC: National Geographic Research and Exploration.
Physical Education	National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (1995). <i>Moving into the future, national standards for physical education: A guide to content and assessment</i> . St. Louis, MO: Mosby.
Mathematics	National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (1989). <i>Curriculum and evaluation standards for school mathematics</i> . Reston, VA: Author.
Social Studies	National Council for the Social Studies. (1994). <i>Expectations of excellence: Curriculum standards for social studies</i> . Washington, DC: Author.

* See Marzano (2001) for further information.

competency of students, helped lead to the standards and testing that are a part of education today:

Goal 3: By the year 2000, American students will leave grades 4, 8 and 12 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 that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy. (National Education Goals Panel, 1991)

From this education summit, two groups were established to determine what types of standards should be set and how to assess them. The two groups were known as the National Education Goals Panel and the National Council on Education Standards and Testing.

According to Ravitch (2002), by the beginning of the twenty-first century, every state had established some type of standards-based reform in the major subject areas. In addition, almost every state had either created or purchased tests to determine whether its students were meeting the standards.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

With the reorganization and overhaul of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 by the George W. Bush administration in 2001, schools and their states have a new group of mandates to follow, more strenuous than any proposed to date. These laws, called No Child Left Behind, require every state to monitor its schools closely for success with all students and to prove (through collected data) the success or failure of schools. States are required to publish yearly an *annual state report card* that tells the public how successful they are in educating the state's children. An annual state report card contains the following:

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- Disaggregated student achievement results by performance level
- Comparison between annual objectives and actual performance for each student group
- Percentage of students not tested, disaggregated
- Two-year trend data by subject, by grade tested
- Graduation rates
- Performance of districts making adequate yearly progress, including the number and names of schools identified for school improvement
- Professional qualifications of teachers, percentage with provisional credentials, and percentage of classes not taught by highly qualified teachers, including comparison between high- and low-poverty schools

To date, 49 of the 50 states have identified academic standards for their state education systems. In addition, all 50 states now provide state testing of students to determine proficiency on those standards. At this writing, there is inconsistency in the penalties for demonstrated nonmastery of the standards from state to state. The purpose of developing standards is, of course, to bring “accountability” to education. According to Ravitch (2002), “Accountability meant that public officials were supposed to review the results of assessments and establish consequences for students, teachers, schools, or school systems.” Just what that accountability means varies from state to state. For students, accountability might be tied to graduation or to moving to the next grade level. For schools, accountability is often tied to funding and to ratings that are provided to the public. For teachers, it might be tied to merit pay or to evaluations. Discussing the findings of the Brookings 2002 study of education policy, Ravitch (2002) states, “In the midst of a national teacher shortage, there was virtually no interest expressed by policymakers or legislators in removing ineffective teachers.” One measure is constant; schools that consistently show poor test results stand in danger of losing federal funding. School districts are

required to test students in reading and mathematics each year in Grades 3–8, beginning in the school year 2005–2006. Science will be added to the testing by 2006–2007. In addition, schools that do not make adequate yearly progress over time run the risk of losing some of their student population as students are given the option of transferring to more successful schools.

Under current law, all public schools must demonstrate that 100 percent of their students test at proficient levels on statewide assessments by 2013–2014. In public dialogues conducted by the private, nonprofit group McREL, and reported by Bryan Goodwin (July 2003),

Supporters argue that NCLB will force schools to take the success of all students seriously and provide them all with opportunities for success; detractors argue that the law's mandated goals are unrealistic and could ultimately lead to thousands of schools, if not most, facing drastic sanctions, including state takeover or closure.

Not everyone has been happy about the new and more strenuous rules. The major factors that have separated the years from the nays are funding, testing, and the role of the federal government. Funding is an issue because a large portion of the funding for implementation went to developing tests in the first years of operation. Funding to adequately make the major changes necessary to heal the crippled education programs has not been forthcoming, leaving states to scramble for resources. As a matter of fact, states, for the most part, have lost funding in a drowning economy and are often just trying to stay afloat by using what funds they can get to fund existing programs—much less new ones. Rachel Tompkins, president of the Rural School and Community Trust, says,

We view it [No Child Left Behind] as having lofty goals and not enough resources to accomplish them. Particularly for the poorest, most rural school districts. I don't know how schools will be able to cope with the expense of these

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programs. There is some money to cover the cost of testing. But it's crunch time. There are increases in resources that are beneficial; it's just not enough. (Delisio, 2002)

The second major criticism is the increased amount of testing—especially for elementary-age students. Critics often dub the program “No child left untested.” Critics also warn that the test predominantly measures facts and not whether students can actually use knowledge in a real-world context.

The U.S. Department of Education answers its critics about high stakes testing by stating on their Web site (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb>):

It is important to measure a student's progress over time in the subjects taught so that teachers, school leaders and parents understand how well that student is achieving. Annual assessments allow teachers to compare student progress across time. They allow teachers to determine areas of strength and weakness in student understanding and in their own teaching. They also help teachers and administrators in evaluating curriculum choices. Annual assessments help identify problem areas for students and give teachers an idea of which students need extra help. A recent Education Trust report entitled *The Real Value of Teachers* affirms the importance of regular student assessment as a means of providing teachers with data to inform them not only about a student's progress, but also about their own teaching. Using data from state assessments gives schools a powerful tool to determine the needs of students, so teachers and administrators can work together to develop the appropriate professional development for teachers.

The highly acclaimed Web site for education, Achieve (<http://www.achieve.org.nsf>), makes a strong case:

In the absence of tests, judgments and decisions about schools and students still will be made. But they'll be made using best guesses, faddish ideas or a "bell curve" of student achievement. They'll be made using other measurements such as attendance rates, student satisfaction, or a particular favorite, because "that's the way we have always done things." Or they'll be made using different criteria from different teachers. None of these approaches tells anything about what students actually are learning or how well they are learning it.

To determine the importance of having standards, we might look at a part of education that does not have standards to see how it fares. Day care and early childhood programs operate without any standards in regard to what children should be learning. The results speak for themselves. Children from poverty, or who go to day care and early childhood programs that do little more than babysit, enter kindergarten and first grade already behind, and the gap widens for many of them throughout school.

Indeed, in its report *Leaving No Child Behind*, McREL/ Public Agenda (2002) says,

People who support [a focus on accountability and testing] say that before the advent of standards and standards-based accountability systems, parents and communities really had no way of knowing whether their schools were doing their jobs. Educators who wanted to improve the system did not have the information they needed to do so, while others who had become comfortable with the status quo had too little incentive to change.

The report goes on to say that parents interviewed believed that without standards, it becomes easier for kids to fall through the cracks since there may be a tendency to teach those students who are "easier" to teach and let the rest, "typically minority and poorer kids, fall behind or drop out"

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(McREL/Public Agenda, 2002). When schools are held accountable for all students, there is a greater emphasis on teaching the neediest of students.

Third, some groups, such as the American Association of School Administrators, have voiced unhappiness with the program because of the increased role of the federal government. American Association of School Administrators spokesman Bruce Hunter said,

We didn't oppose it but we said very loudly what we did not like about it. Our position largely had to do with federalism; education is a state and local matter. This enlarged the federal government's role to one that is unneeded and unnecessary.

When our forefathers put together the Constitution, they left out any mention of education. The Tenth Amendment to the Constitution says that anything not in the constitution is left up to the states. Thus education has always been a state function. No Child Left Behind not only governs how states and their schools will be held accountable but also goes a step further to place sanctions on those who do not meet the standards.

It is interesting to note that in the 2004 Gallup Poll (Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 2004), parents listed the lack of financial support for public schools as the number one problem in education. This is a change from years past when discipline and the use of drugs by students was the number one problem cited.

Proponents of keeping the accountability for schools at the local level argue that since communities are different, the needs of the students within them are different. These voices focus on the fact that parents want schools to be accountable to them, not federal and state entities. Those who oppose this view contend that we must have some standardization if we are going to offer the same high quality consistently for a mobile population. The McREL/Public Agenda study (2002) quotes those who would have us go back to each school maintaining separate control of accountability:

Romantic notions of local control and neighborhood schools have long been invoked to perpetuate inequities, racism, and substandard schools. If we do not apply the same standards to all kids in all schools, we will be relegating huge groups of kids—especially minority and impoverished children—to inadequate educations that will keep them from getting ahead in life.

HOW TO ACCESS THE STANDARDS FOR YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

The standards for each state can be accessed through the Internet by going to the state education Web site. Most state Web sites follow the same pattern: www.tea.state.tx.us.

As of this writing, all of the standards for each of the states can be accessed by going to a Web site devoted to that purpose: www.edstandards.org. Once you are into the Web site, the standards will be written something like the example provided below. This example (available at www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp) is for language arts in Grades 6–8.

Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.

1. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary passages and texts (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, myths, poems, fantasies, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, tall tales, supernatural tales).
2. Knows the defining characteristics of a variety of literary forms and genres (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, poems, fantasies, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, tall tales, supernatural tales).
3. Understands complex elements of plot development (e.g., cause-and-effect relationships, use of parallel episodes, and climax, development of conflict and resolution).

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The standard is, “Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.” This standard is found in Grades K–12. Under that standard are written the benchmarks for the specified grade level (in this case, Grades 6–8).

In Grade 1, this same standard looks something like this:

Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.

1. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary passages and texts (e.g., fairy tales, folktales, fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, fables, legends, nursery rhymes, picture books).
2. Knows the basic characteristics of familiar genres (e.g., picture books, fairy tales, nursery rhymes).
3. Knows setting, main characters, main events, sequence, and problems in stories.

Examining these two examples of the same standard but for very different ages, the following analysis may be made.

- At Grade 1, students should be exposed to a wide variety of literature types, including fairy tales, folktales, fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, fables, legends, nursery rhymes, and picture books. They need to know the characteristics of picture books, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes. In other words, what makes something a fairy tale or a nursery rhyme? They need to be able to identify what is being read as a nursery rhyme, a fairy tale, or simply a picture book (with or without words). At this point, they do not need to be able to identify the characteristics of a fable, a legend, a myth, and so forth—they are merely being exposed to these types of stories. They do need to know the meaning of the words *setting*, *main event*, *sequence*, and *problem* as they relate to stories and to be able to pick out those elements in a story. You might say to your

child, “Where did this story take place?” or “What is the story about?”

- By Grade 6, students should be able to identify when a piece of literature is fiction, nonfiction, a poem, a fantasy, a biography, an autobiography, science fiction, a tall tale, or supernatural. They also should be able to identify the elements of plot development at this stage. Ask your child, “How do you know that the story of Paul Bunyan is a tall tale and not a poem, fantasy, or science fiction story?”

As you can see, the benchmarks for standards should become more complex as we travel up the grade levels and they should build on each other. The benchmarks for Grade 1 are the underpinnings for the benchmarks for Grades 2 and 3 and so forth. This also explains one of the reasons why it is so important for children to know and understand the benchmarks for their grade level so that they will have the building blocks to understand the benchmarks for the next grade level. It also explains why students who have missed some of the basic understanding are struggling so hard in school—they lack the foundation for the new learning.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

As I stated earlier, the Constitution left education up to the states. However, the federal government controls the disbursement of federal dollars for programs through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It is this act that was overhauled in 2001 and thereafter became known as No Child Left Behind. Thus the federal government has taken a proactive role in seeing that those federal dollars have accountability behind them. Basically, the federal government has said that states will have standards and will test to those standards and that students will make adequate progress each year if they are going to continue to receive those funds.

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Each state has written its own standards and has contracted for commercial tests to measure whether students are learning the information required by the standards. There are no national standards that every state must live by at this time. McREL in Aurora, Colorado has studied the standards of each state and has put together a compendium of what the standards might look like if we combined the standards of all the states. A summary of that compendium can be seen on its Web site at <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium>.