

Inquiring Minds topic for 20 July 2012 –

Dick Rockstroh, Moderator

The Journal Report: Big Issues in Education – WSJ 22 June 2012

Should All U.S. Students Meet a Single Set of National Proficiency Standards?

The U.S. has a problem: Today's young Americans are falling behind their peers in other countries when it comes to academic performance. What makes the situation particularly concerning is research showing a close link between economic competitiveness and the knowledge and skills of a nation's workforce.

More Big Issues in Education

- Should Legacies Have an Edge in College Admissions?
- Do Too Many People Go to College?
- Should Tenure for Professors Be Abolished?
- Should Student Test Scores Be Used to Evaluate Teachers?
- Should More College Financial Aid Be Based on Need, Not Merit?

What's the solution?

One school of thought says the U.S. needs to set clear standards about what schools should teach and students should learn—and make it uniform throughout the country. These advocates say our decentralized approach to education isn't preparing students for the demanding challenges they will face in a global economy.

Others say be careful what you wish for. Proposing that all children meet the same academic standards, they say, is essentially proposing a nationalized system of education, where everyone is taught the same thing at the same time and in the same way. The best way to improve student performance, they argue, is to give schools the ability to experiment with different standards, assessments and curricula to see what does and doesn't work.

Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and chairman of the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education, argues in favor of national standards. Jay Greene, head of the department of education reform at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Ark., makes the case against national standards.

Yes: It Sets High Expectations

By Chester E. Finn Jr.

There is a reason big, modern countries care about education: Decades of experience and heaps of research have shown a close tie between the knowledge and skills of a nation's workforce and the productivity of that nation's economy.

CHESTER E. FINN JR.: Uniform standards will ensure that young people develop the skills they need to compete.

One way to ensure that young people develop the skills they need to compete globally is to set clear standards about what schools should teach and students should learn—and make these standards uniform across the land. Leaving such decisions to individual states, communities and schools is no longer serving the U.S. well.

We know from multiple sources that today's young Americans are falling behind their peers in other countries when it comes to academic performance. We also know that U.S. businesses are having trouble finding the talent they need within this country and, as a result, are outsourcing more and more of their work.

One major reason for this slipshod performance is the disorderly, dysfunctional way we've been handling academic standards for our primary- and secondary-school students. Yes, an effective education system also requires quality teachers, effective administrators and a hundred other vital elements. But getting the expectations right, and making them the same everywhere, is important and getting more so.

Rewarding Mediocrity

Every state has gone through the motions of developing standards in core subject areas such as reading, math and science, but few have done it with care and rigor. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, where I work, has been evaluating these state standards for 15 years, and our findings are grim. In science, the subject our reviewers most recently appraised, just 12 states and the District of Columbia earned A's or B's. More than twice that number have standards that deserve grades of D or F.

Uncle Sam is partly to blame for pressing in ways that reward low standards. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, for example, coerces states into deeming the maximum number of kids "proficient" on their tests, but leaves it up to the individual states to determine what score qualifies as passing.

Some argue that Washington could solve the problem by butting out. But the issues plaguing American education—low achievement, poor technical skills, too many dropouts, etc.—are nationwide, and so is the challenge of economic competitiveness. The federal government's screwy incentives are just part of the problem, and straightening them out needs to be part of a larger solution.

Perhaps most damaging to our international scores and economic competitiveness has been our reluctance to follow the example of nearly every other successful modern country and establish rigorous national standards for our schools and students. States, districts, schools and individuals would, of course, be free to surpass those expectations—but not to fall below them.

We need rigorous national standards because we live in a mobile society where a fourth-grader in Portland, Maine, may find herself in fifth grade in Portland, Ore., just as a high-school senior in Springfield, Ill., may enter college in Springfield, Mass. We need them because our employers increasingly span the entire country—and globe—and require a workforce that is both skilled and portable. This is no longer a country where children born in Cincinnati should expect to spend their entire lives there. They need to be ready for jobs in Nashville and San Diego, if not Singapore and São Paulo.

Yet our education system hasn't kept pace with these fundamental changes. It is still organized as if we were living in 1912.

Opponents contend that different youngsters need to learn different things in different ways, and that national standards will go too far in homogenizing curriculum and standardizing instruction. I would argue that good teachers, the imaginative use of technology and widening school choice will allow for ample individualization.

A First Step

Just as important, uniform standards don't need to originate in Washington. Indeed, 45 states have recently signaled they will shift over to new so-called Common Core standards for English and math developed by a consortium of governors and state-level school chiefs. (A similar project is now under way in science, with no federal involvement whatsoever.)

To be sure, much progress in education can be made through choice and competition. But decentralization also makes it easier for states and school districts to lower their expectations, pander to interest groups such as teacher unions and hide their own mediocrity.

In time, we'll be able to compare the achievement of the states that adopted the Common Core with those that chose to go it alone. But setting the right expectations is at least a first step in giving our entire K-12 education system the makeover it sorely needs.

Mr. Finn is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and chairman of the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

No: Let Progress Trickle Up

By Jay P. Greene

When it comes to education, one size doesn't fit all. Yet that is exactly the kind of system we would get if the U.S. required all students to meet a single set of national academic standards.

JAY P. GREENE: There is no consensus on what all students need to know.

Proposing that all children meet the same standards is essentially proposing a nationalized system of education. Some reformers may argue otherwise, but the truth is that standards drive testing, which in turn drives what material is covered, as well as how and when it is taught.

Such uniformity would only make sense if: 1) there was a single best way for all students to learn; 2) we knew what it was; 3) we could be sure the people running this nationalized education system would adopt that correct approach; and 4) they would remain in charge far into the future. But that isn't how things are. There is no consensus on what all students need to know. Different students can best be taught and assessed in different ways.

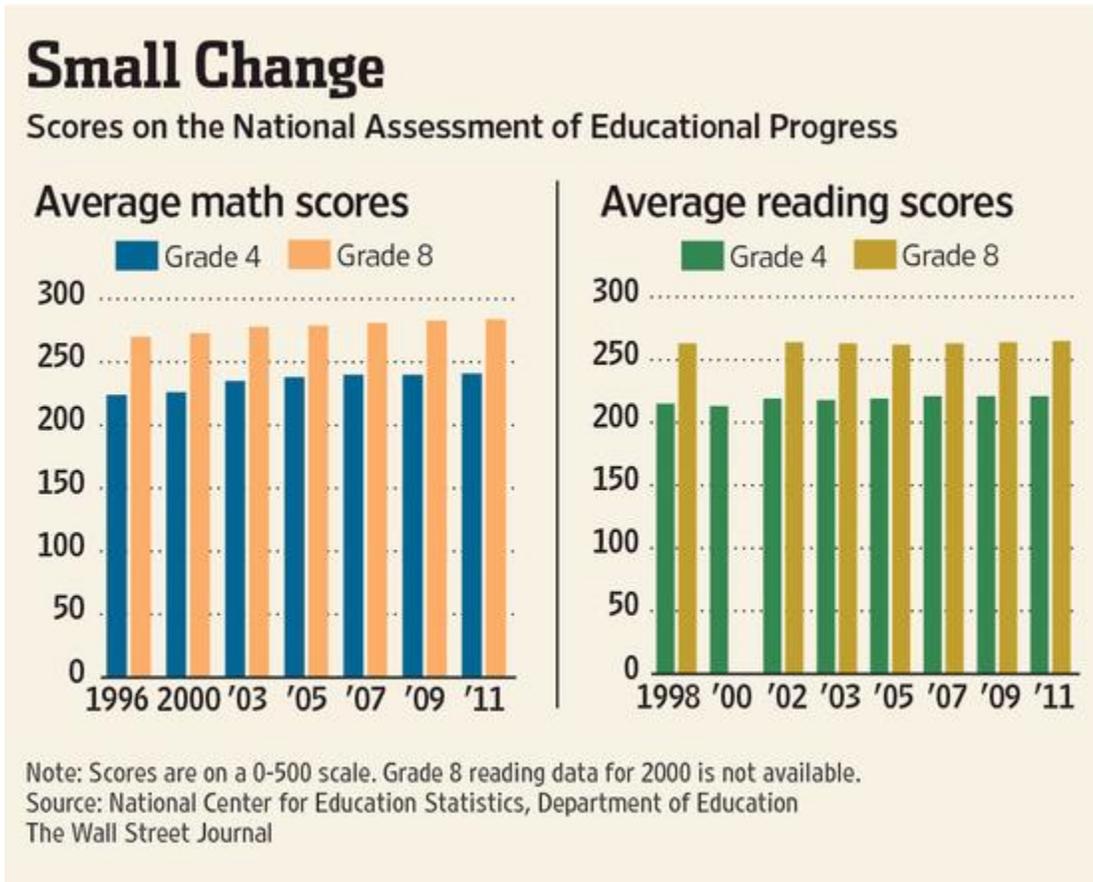
Who Has the Power?

Even if we could identify a single, best way to educate all children, who is to say the people controlling the nationalized education system would pursue those correct approaches? Reformers would do well to remember that they are politically weaker than teacher unions and other entrenched interests. Minority religions shouldn't favor building national churches because inevitably it won't be their gospel being preached.

A number of prominent reformers nevertheless seem determined to lay the foundations for this nationalized education church. What might be inspiring them to do so?

Some are convinced that national standards will be more rigorous than what most states and districts have today. Yet independent evaluations of a proposed set of national standards, known as Common Core, show that they are rather mediocre and significantly worse than those in several states.

Supporters say states, districts and individual schools would be free to surpass the national standards, just not fall below them. But testing would constrain what was taught and when. Say California wanted to maintain its more rigorous standard of covering algebra in eighth grade, rather than teaching it in ninth grade as required in Common Core. If national assessments aligned with Common Core call for children to be tested on their knowledge of algebra in ninth grade, California students who had already moved on to geometry would fare poorly being tested on material they hadn't covered for a year. States would be penalized with lower scores on the national test if they taught subjects at a different time and in a different manner than what Common Core requires.



It is also a mistake to believe that progress can only occur with a mandate from above. This ignores how advances historically were made in education. Consider this: A little more than a century ago, many communities didn't offer high-school education. Eighth-grade skills were considered sufficient. But over time, as local communities sought to attract residents and capital, they began offering higher-level schooling. Virtually every community in the U.S. ended up building high schools and over the years steadily raised the bar for graduation without any central authority ordering it.

Interestingly, this system of choice and competition resulted in a fair amount of uniformity across U.S. school systems. But because schools don't have to be completely uniform they can still experiment with different approaches and customize their efforts for the specific students they serve. It is that possibility of experimenting with different standards, assessments and curricula that allows us to learn about what does and doesn't work and make progress.

Where Is the Link?

Unfortunately, that progress largely stalled; student achievement has been flat for four decades. But this lack of progress wasn't caused by a lack of national standards. Instead, unionization of educators and the resulting imposition of uniformity and restraints on competition are largely to blame. Imposing even more uniformity with national standards will only compound that problem.

Countries with national standards generally don't have higher achievement. Canada and Australia are large, diverse countries like the U.S., with significantly stronger student performance as measured on international tests. Yet neither has national standards, tests or curricula. It is true that some high-achieving countries do have national standards—examples include Singapore and Finland—but these countries contain small homogeneous populations that might be more comparable to one of our states or large districts than to the U.S. as a whole. And many lower-achieving countries, such as Greece and Thailand, have national standards and curricula.

The way to improve our students' performance is to reinvigorate choice and competition, not stifle it. We should be as wary of central planning for our education system as we would for our economy.

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The Readers Weigh In: National Standards

Do WSJ.com readers think all U.S. students should have to meet a uniform set of national proficiency standards? Here's a sampling of comments from an advance poll.

YES

We live in a global world where the Internet, an American invention, has made borders based on knowledge moot. With this in mind, it makes little sense to impose artificial borders on proficiency tests. The Cold War is over. We no longer have real enemies. We do, however, have a lot of competitors. And many of them have national standards, often much higher than ours.

—*XrisP*

National standards don't mean federal control. What it means is that a student in Florida will be held to the same standard for graduation from high school as one in Hawaii. This is not a stand-alone solution, but rather part of a much more comprehensive reform to the failing system that exists today.

Even if we don't develop national standards, current standards should be increased. You don't end up with exceptional graduates when you only insist on mediocrity.

—*John C. Plantada*

Yes. And the means already exist: the SAT, ACT, etc. The trick is to reverse the movement to mediocrity in our education system.

—*James Smeader*

Yes, but only in the 3 "R's." We all need this basic education. Leave everything else up to the child's parents.

—*Leonard Maughan*

NO

National standards will be the death of education and the birth of powerful federal control of education and an even more powerful and wasteful Department of Education.

Nobody should trust government that much.

—*Vic Robertson*

I think every person in America should be able to read, write and do math to a minimum level, but it should then be left to each individual school or classroom to find the best way to meet these standards or better yet exceed them. Teach each student to their ability.

—*Gandalf*

No, national standards would always be dull late, and too hard to update. State standards aren't much better so leave it alone. A national education agency hasn't improved anything in 30 years; why would we trust national standards?

—*Josh V*

I am in graduate school in education and I'd have to disagree with the notion that all of our kids can learn the same things. It's absolutely unfair to students who immigrate.

—*M.P. Moeller*

No. Not everyone is equally proficient in all subjects. It'll further slow the brightest and stress those who struggle.

—*Ryan Nelson*

The best teachers of my life were those who taught with flexibility, not the ones who rigidly followed state requirements. They taught me invaluable lessons that were not written on the textbooks. And that knowledge will forever be embedded in my brain, while facts from textbooks are easily forgotten.

—*John Choo*

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