

Foreword

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Fordham’s very first publication, released in July 1997, was Sandra Stotsky’s *State English Standards*.¹ One of us wrote at the time:

Unlike earlier (and often controversial) efforts to set “national standards” for education, the discussion about standards that matters most—and that this report focuses on—is the discussion taking place at the state level. Constitutional responsibility for providing education rests with the states, and it is the states that (in most, though not all, cases) have finally begun to accept the obligation to set academic standards and develop tests and other assessments keyed to those standards.

In the thirteen years since, we returned several times to examine state standards—both in English language arts (ELA) and in math, science, U.S. history, world history, and geography. Mostly, these were exercises in disappointment, as we repeatedly found few states willing and able to set clear, rigorous, content-rich expectations for their students. By 2006, we were nearly ready to give up on the states²:

We’re left with a dilemma: the few jurisdictions that implement standards-based reform will see great results. Yet most states muck it up—and the situation hasn’t improved in at least six years. Pushing and prodding states to get their act together hasn’t worked...So what else? The only way to fundamentally solve this problem, as we see it, is to build on the success of states like Massachusetts and move to a system of national standards and tests.

We understand that national standards would face the same perils as state standards. If written by committee, or turned over to K-12 interest groups, they could turn out to be vague, politically correct, encyclopedic, and/or fuzzy. If linked with real consequences for schools, they could be pressured downward. They could even wind up doing more harm than good.

But if done right, they could finally put the entire country on the sturdy path of standards-based reform. And if great standards can be written in Sacramento or Indianapolis or Boston, perhaps they could be created in Washington, D.C.

Mirabile dictu, sometimes things *do* change in education—and not always at glacial speed. By the end of this summer, dozens of states are expected to replace their own standards with those promulgated by the Common Core State Standards Initiative. As longtime supporters of national standards and tests, we’re excited by the possibilities that this creates. But we’re wary, too, because, as we wrote four years ago, national standards could turn out to be just as bad as state standards. (In a few much-discussed episodes in the early 1990s, what passed for national standards turned out to be appalling.)

Now, however, we can replace such speculation with analysis. A live set of “common” standards is upon us for review, inspection, and possible adoption. And we can now compare those standards with the versions in place in the fifty states (and the District of Columbia). We can thereby assist state officials to determine whether their students might be better off under a K-12 education regime aligned with the common standards, or whether they may be wise to keep those they’ve already got—which is exactly what we do in these pages.

The centrality of standards...and their limitations

As we’ve argued for a dozen-plus years now, standards are the foundation upon which almost everything else rests—or should rest. They should guide state assessments and accountability systems; inform teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development; and give shape to curricula, textbooks, software programs, and more. Choose your metaphor: Standards are targets, or blueprints, or roadmaps. They set the destination: what we want our students to know and be able to do by the end of their K-12 experience, and the benchmarks they should reach along the way. If the standards are

vague, watered-down, or misguided, they can point our schools down perilous paths. If there are no standards worth following, there is no education destination worth reaching.

Yet everyone also knows that standards often end up like wallpaper. They sit there on a state website, available for download, but mostly they're ignored. Educators instead obsess about what's on the high-stakes test—and how much students actually have to know in order to pass—which becomes the *real* standard. After making the most superficial adjustments, textbook publishers assert that their wares are “aligned” with the standards. Ed schools simply ignore them.

So it's no great surprise that serious analysts, recently including the Brookings Institution's Russ Whitehurst, have found no link between the quality of state standards and actual student performance.³ That's because standards seldom get real traction on the ground. Adopting good standards is like having a goal for your cholesterol; it doesn't mean you will actually eat a healthy diet. Or like purchasing a treadmill; owning that machine only makes a difference if you tie on your sneakers and run.

But when great standards are combined with smart implementation, policy makers can move mountains. That's the lesson we take from Massachusetts, with its commendable expectations, well-designed assessments, tough-minded (yet humane) accountability system, rigorous entrance requirements for teachers, and “high-stakes” graduation requirements for students.⁴ It should surprise no one that the Bay State now tops the charts of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and math in both fourth and eighth grades, or that it's posted solid gains for its neediest students. Furthermore, when Massachusetts students took the international TIMSS exam in 2007, Bay State fourth graders scored among the world's elite in mathematics, behind only Singapore and Hong Kong and tied with Taiwan and Japan. So standards do matter—but only when implemented aggressively.

Yet the vast majority of states have failed even to adopt rigorous standards in the first place, much less take the actions that give them traction in thousands of classrooms. It's not just the “content standards” that our previous reports have found to be lacking, but also the “performance standards”: how much kids have to know and demonstrate in order to pass the test. In 2007, we published a groundbreaking study with the Northwest Evaluation Association, *The Proficiency Illusion*, which used a common metric to compare states' “proficiency” standards to one another.⁵

The results were more than disturbing: In some states, students could score below the tenth percentile nationally and still be considered “proficient.” In other states, meanwhile, they had to reach the seventy-seventh percentile to wear the same label. And this was just the tip of the iceberg; quoting ourselves again:

Those who care about strengthening U.S. K-12 education should be furious. There's all this testing—too much, surely—yet the testing enterprise is unbelievably slipshod. It's not just that results vary, but that they vary almost randomly, erratically, from place to place and grade to grade and year to year in ways that have little or nothing to do with true differences in pupil achievement. America is awash in achievement “data,” yet the truth about our educational performance is far from transparent and trustworthy. It may be smoke and mirrors. Gains (and slippages) may be illusory. Comparisons may be misleading. Apparent problems may be nonexistent or, at least, misstated. The testing infrastructure on which so many school reform efforts rest, and in which so much confidence has been vested, is unreliable—at best.

Moving toward national standards and tests entails risks, no doubt about it. But so does standing still.

Fordham's reviews: What's new in this report

Even though we took a five-year break from appraising state ELA and math standards, we haven't been idle. In 2007, we examined the curricular content of the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs to determine whether they deserve their “gold star” status. (For the most part, they do.) For that project, we revised the criteria we previously used to judge state standards. We revised them again last year for our landmark study, *Stars by Which to Navigate? Scanning National and International Education Standards in 2009*, in which we judged the content tested on the NAEP, TIMSS, and PISA exams.⁶ For that exercise, we wanted to be able to make comparisons across subject areas, as well as between test frameworks and standards documents. So we simplified, standardized, and strengthened our criteria. And those are the criteria, with a few more small tweaks, that we used for the present report. (They are available for your review in Appendix A.) They are—let's be clear about this—*not* the same as we used in examining state standards five years ago. But they're better. (See Appendix C for a brief summary of the 2005 criteria.)

For example, we can now make fairer and more precise comparisons between ELA and math. We can more easily compare state standards with the Common Core and with NAEP, PISA, and other test frameworks. The correspond-

ing downside is that comparisons over time become trickier. While the spirit and orientation of our criteria haven't changed, the details have. Readers should keep that in mind when presented with longitudinal data about the quality of state standards. (It also means that a handful of states received slightly different grades this year for standards that didn't actually change since 2005.)

Also new since 2005 are our reviewers. For ELA, Sheila Byrd Carmichael is this year's primary examiner. She has been a leading figure in the standards movement for almost two decades. She served as the deputy executive director of the California Academic Standards Commission and as founding director of the American Diploma Project. But she's hardly new to Fordham's efforts in this area, as she also penned the ELA reviews for our AP/IB report, and last year's *Stars by Which to Navigate* study.

Assisting Byrd were Elizabeth Haydel and Diana Senechal. Haydel has worked for numerous education organizations, including Achieve and the American Institutes for Research. No stranger to the standards movement, she assisted in drafting the *Ohio Academic Content Standards* in ELA and served as the project manager for Indiana University's Center for Innovation in Assessment. Senechal served on the English Language Arts Work Team for the Common Core State Standards Initiative after having taught English and theatre in New York City Public Schools. She holds a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Yale and has written extensively for *Education Week*, *American Educator*, and various education blogs.

Our math reviews this year were led by W. Stephen Wilson, professor of mathematics at Johns Hopkins University. He, too, is a Fordham veteran, having been part of our six-member math review team in 2005 as well as the math analyst for our *Stars* report. He has participated in numerous projects on standards, curricula, and textbooks. He received his Ph.D. in mathematics from M.I.T. and has published over sixty mathematics research papers in the field of algebraic topology. Wilson was joined by Gabrielle Martino, who has worked as an adjunct mathematics instructor, writer, and consultant. In 2009, she coauthored *Doing the Math*, a report comparing high school mathematics curricula and college expectations in Maryland. She received her Ph.D. in mathematics from Johns Hopkins University.

Shepherding this massive undertaking was Fordham's own Kathleen Porter-Magee, who had overseen our last standards reviews before heading off to serve as director of professional development and recruitment for the District of Columbia Catholic Schools. She went on to Achievement First, where she oversaw development of AF's nationally recognized system of interim assessments and managed professional development for the network's more than 500 teachers. Also providing much editorial assistance and methodological oversight was Amber Winkler, Fordham's research director, who holds a Ph.D. in education policy and evaluation from the University of Virginia and previously served as senior study director at Westat. She has published widely on education accountability, teacher quality, and technology, among other topics, and began her career as a high school English teacher.

The main takeaways

What's the state of state standards in 2010? And how does the Common Core compare?

The Common Core math standards earn a grade of A-minus while the Common Core ELA standards earn a B-plus, both solidly in the honors range. Neither is perfect. Both are very, very strong.

Indeed, the Common Core standards are clearer and more rigorous than the ELA and math standards presently used by the vast majority of states. Out of 102 comparisons—fifty-one jurisdictions times two subjects—we found the Common Core clearly superior seventy-six times.

But the story gets more complicated, because we also discovered that the present ELA standards of three jurisdictions—California, the District of Columbia, and Indiana—are clearly better than the Common Core. (To be precise, these ELA standards earned straight As, compared to the Common Core's B-plus.) Furthermore, the ELA standards of eleven other states are roughly equivalent in quality to the Common Core, or "too close to call." That means they earned grades of B, B-plus, or A-minus, in the same range as Common Core's B-plus. As for math, the current standards of eleven states plus the District of Columbia are roughly equivalent in quality to the Common Core, also "too close to call." That's because these state math standards earned grades of B-plus, A-minus, or A, in the same range as Common Core's A-minus.

Frankly this is more states in pretty good shape on the standards front than we expected.

What does this mean for the adoption decisions currently facing many states? In this report, we do not make recommendations. Much as we would love to see every state with high standards—as good as or better than the Common Core—and as many advantages as we see in America having a uniform set of core academic expectations for its students,

we're also aware that the quality of the standards—and the uniformity of the standards—is not the only factor that state educators and officials must ponder.

The several states with “clearly superior” ELA standards, plus the larger number of “too close to call” states in both ELA and math, face a bona fide quandary. There are plenty of benefits to signing on with Common Core, including potential savings from scale, the advantages of comparability, the expectation that forthcoming Common Core assessments will also be good, and the national resources that will be made available to teachers. (Of course, there's also the Race to the Top (RTT) money....) On the other hand, states with good standards of their own that have recently invested *beaucoup* bucks in teacher training and diagnostic assessments tied to those standards might have reason to pause, and wait and see how the Common Core effort plays out over the next few years.

But that's not all, at least not if the present move toward common standards is to be more than lip-service—a façade of “adoption” that conceals the same old teachers teaching the same old stuff and assessing it via the same old tests. Policy makers should also ask themselves:

- » Does the state (and its districts) have the political, organizational, and financial capacity to infuse new and different standards throughout its K-12 system—and all the other systems that connect to it?
- » If the new standards are indeed more demanding than the old, and assuming that these loftier expectations are mirrored by new assessments and definitions of “proficiency,” do state (and local) leaders have the intestinal fortitude to deal with the likeliest short-term consequence, namely a lot more kids *not* being promoted or graduated?
- » Does the state have the resolve—and the means—to do all this in ELA and math without short-changing the rest of what educated people must learn in school: science and history, obviously, but also the arts, civics, health, languages, and more?
- » How, if at all, will the state augment the Common Core with additional standards (or examples, reading lists, etc.) that it deems especially valuable? (CCSSI says that states may add up to 15 percent—a limit that we doubt anybody will actually enforce.)

States will do their kids no favor if they mess up this decision or just go through the motions of embracing new standards, maybe only long enough to qualify for RTT funding. In short order, everyone in those jurisdictions will recognize that this was a false messiah—and educators and voters alike will grow even more cynical about standards-based education reform.

And then there's Massachusetts

As for the singular case of Massachusetts, there we find the state that has led the nation in achievement gains over the past decade, thanks in large part to its excellent standards—and their serious implementation. (A similar case cannot be made for California or Indiana, where lackluster follow-through has left excellent standards without traction. And it's too early to know what impact D.C.'s standards, adopted just a few years ago, might be having in the nation's capital, though encouraging hints can be found in the latest NAEP results.)

We understand the position of the “MCAS stalwarts” in the Bay State: Why fix something that isn't broken? On the other hand, Massachusetts has a chance to play a key role in developing a new assessment pegged to the Common Core, which could result in even stronger achievement in the Bay State and better implementation of standards nationwide. We can't resolve this tension on Beacon Hill. But we can declare that the Common Core standards are in the same ballpark as those already on the books in Massachusetts. In some ways, they are stronger; in other ways they don't quite measure up. We note, too, that the recently drafted revisions of Massachusetts's decade-old state standards are, for the most part, even stronger than the version in use today.

What lies ahead?

Is this the end of the road for Fordham's work on state standards, considering that, within a few months, perhaps only a handful of states will have retained their own distinctive standards? Hardly. In the fall, we'll update and amplify our *Stars by Which to Navigate* report to include appraisals of *all* of the major national and international standards and testing frameworks across *all* major subjects. Early in 2011, we'll release an updated review of state standards in science and U.S. history. After all, the Common Core is currently only focused on ELA and math. And while these subjects are critical and foundational, they hardly embody all we want students to know and be able to do. (We're mindful of stirrings already underway with respect to “common” science standards.)

We're also busy on the "governance" front, contemplating the thorny issues that will determine the *long-term* viability of the Common Core endeavor. Simply stated: In 2020, who will be in charge of the multi-state standards-and-testing effort? What will they do? Who will pay for it?

These aren't just mundane questions of organizational ownership and budget. States considering the Common Core are legitimately concerned about how it will work tomorrow. Will those standards get dumbed down? Ratcheted up? Joined by curriculum? Will they reach from ELA and math into other subjects? Will universities take them seriously? Employers?

Critics and doubters are also eyeing governance, asking what will keep the Common Core from slipping under Uncle Sam's control, and fretful, too, that the loopiest of educationists will infiltrate until they are in control of academic expectations that will then drown in dubious fads like whole-language reading and "rain forest" math.

How this venture is governed (or misgoverned) in the future will do more than anything else to deter—or invite—such a fate. We've already published some excellent background papers to stir discussion about this critical topic.⁷ We've been querying experts for their wise counsel in this regard. And we'll be back with some of our own ideas in the fall. Stay tuned.

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