

Issue #4: Must states develop standards and assessments in additional subjects beyond English language arts and math?

Current Law and Background

Current law requires states to develop science standards and assessments for each grade span, though these assessments do not “count” in AYP determinations. And while many states have history/social studies standards in place (most of which are of mediocre quality or worse, according to a recent Fordham review⁵), few test that subject, and even fewer make use of the results in their accountability systems. These policies create perverse incentives for schools to ignore the teaching of science and history, and there’s some evidence that, in the elementary grades at least, time spent on these subjects is indeed getting squeezed out.⁶

Options

Option 4A: Maintain current law. For math and English language arts, grade-level standards and tests are required in grades three through eight (plus one test in high school); grade-span standards and tests are required for science (but the results on those tests do not count as part of NCLB accountability). There are no requirements for history/civics/geography standards or assessments.

| Pros | Cons |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further burdens states and districts, which already face the challenge of implementing new, more rigorous standards in English language arts and math; adding more requirements might impede existing efforts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains the perverse incentive for schools to ignore history and downplay science |

5 Sheldon M. Stern and Jeremy A. Stern, *The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2011), <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/the-state-of-state-us.html>.

6 Martin West, “Testing, Learning, and Teaching: The Effects of Test-based Accountability on Student Achievement and Instructional Time in Core Academic Subjects,” in *Beyond the Basics: Achieving a Liberal Education for All Children*, ed. Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Diane Ravitch (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007), 45–61, <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/beyondthebasics.html>.

Option 4B: Require states to develop grade-level science standards; for history (or history/civics/geography), require standards in at least three grade bands. Require annual testing in science and at least one test in history in each of the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

| Pros | Cons |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raises the profile of science and history and reduces the incentive for schools to ignore these subjects• Creates the opportunity for state accountability systems to incorporate the results from science and history exams | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Amounts to a new testing burden on states and districts at a time of strained resources• Might draw the federal government into controversial debates about the content of science and history standards |

The Reform Realism Position: Option 4B

Few would dispute that science and history should be valued parts of the school curriculum or that teachers, schools, and districts should be held accountable for improving student learning in these key areas, too. Thus, in the spirit of transparency—and to make the “tight” part of the “tight-loose” formula meaningful—we think it’s reasonable for federal leaders to mandate the expansion of testing in these critical subjects. “Common” standards for science are beginning to be developed (under the aegis of Achieve) and assessments will likely follow. There’s a risk in mandating the testing of history, of course, considering how weak are most states’ standards in this subject; but the additional importance assigned to the subject, and the additional attention to student performance in it, are apt to push states to strengthen their academic expectations for history, too.

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