

THE HILL

VOL. 16, NO. 82 TUESDAY, JULY 14, 2009 LARGEST CIRCULATION OF ANY CAPITOL HILL PUBLICATION

In education, standards aren't enough

by Douglas B. Reeves

There is a resurgence of interest for national academic standards, the common sense notion that at least in fields such as reading and mathematics, students across the land ought to have similar expectations and tests. After all, the idea of common curriculum and assessments has previously transcended not only state boundaries but national borders. The Cambridge International Examinations are used in more than 100 nations, and curricula from Canada, Great Britain and the United States are widely used around the world. What could possibly go wrong with national standards?

Based on the past two decades of experience with state standards, the answer is, quite a lot. Just 15 years ago 12 states established academic standards, and now 50 states have done so. What do we have to show for this effort? Not much. State standards vary widely in quality and specificity. They are accompanied by tests that are inconsistent, expensive, and rarely provide results in time that teachers can use them to improve student performance.

Before we repeat the mistakes of the past, leaders and policymakers should consider three cautions before they embrace the national standards movement: First, distinguish truth from political debate. Second, concentrate science resources of time, leadership and money on the most critical issues of national educational policy. Third, respond to the president's innovation imperative with ideas that have evidence-based impact on student achievement, and not with recycled three-ring binders from the last two decades.

- Education before politics. A commitment to standards requires that educators compare student performance to an objective requirement for performance, and not to other student. Student drivers, pilots and brain surgeons know the standards required of them, and they either meet

those standards or, upon failing to meet them, receive feedback that allows them to make another attempt that has a higher probability of success. Unfortunately, state attempts at academic standards have not been so clear and constructive.

In their zeal for rigor and specificity, some states established standards that would require more than twice the number of school days than are now on the calendar. Other states have standards that appear reasonable, but are disconnected from the tests that students must take and for which teachers and administrators are held accountable. Still other state standards have displaced science and history with religion and politics.

- High-impact strategies. After another decade of disappointing educational achievement, we don't need more three-ring binders of standards. We need results. Before creating a raft of jargon-filled standards documents, we should focus on educational strategies that have an immediate and measurable impact on student results and the nation's economic competitiveness. The three strategies that are consistently linked with dramatic reduction in failure rates, decreases in student suspension, increase in teacher morale, and—at a critical time in the present economy—saving parents' and taxpayers' money—are those strategies associated with reducing middle and high school failure rates.

There are no silver bullets in education, but there certainly is the platinum bouquet of effective teaching time and feedback. When the students most at risk of failure receive the best teachers (the opposite of the typical assignment policy now), when we double the time ordinarily required for literacy and math, and when we provide feedback that is accurate, fair, and timely,

then great things happen. Time and again, these three factors cut the ninth-grade failure rate in half, reduce suspensions by more than 60 percent and allow school systems to offer more electives and advanced courses for high achieving students. It helps everyone in the system, and it will generate the political capital necessary to sustain national standards and other essential reforms.

- Getting innovation right. President Obama has called for innovation, yet astonishingly he has been met with the spurious claims around the nation that we're already doing that." It is therefore time for the Implementation Audit, a three-part rigorous process that asks three questions: 1) What initiatives do we think are in place? 2) What is the range of implementation for each initiative? 3) What is the relationship of each initiative to student results? In the more than 2000

schools where we have conducted this sort of inquiry, we invariably find a Fibber McGee's closet of initiatives, many of which are launched with enthusiasm by states and districts, but remain unknown at the classroom and school level. The easiest budget cuts are those to initiatives that are not used.

I wish the national-standards advocates well. I only suggest that we learn the lessons of the past and not delude ourselves into thinking that the creation of documents will be a substitute for the politically difficult and profoundly challenging improvements in leadership, teaching and educational policy that are required for real reform. Standards are not enough.

*Reeves is the chairman of the Leadership and Learning Center (www.leadandlearn.com). The author of more than 20 books, his latest is *Leading Change in Your School* (2009).*

15 years ago 12 states established academic standards, and now 50 states have done so.