There can be little doubt that there is wide variation in the rigor and quality of state standards and assessments.

Moreover, it is clear that the vast majority of states have set their academic achievement bar far lower than federal standards, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) pegs its accountability mechanism to state test results, rather than NAEP, there is a natural incentive for states to maintain or even weaken their already-low standards. If this pattern of behavior persists, much of NCLB’s promised educational benefit will be lost.

BY JAMES A. PEYSER
One response to this disappointing reality has been a renewed call for nationalized standards and assessments. The concept of common standards for all American children has a definite appeal. After all, algebra is the same in Massachusetts as it is in Mississippi. More tellingly, in an era of labor mobility and global competition, our national economic well-being is threatened by the weakness of many state education systems. In other words, it matters to California employers that New Jersey’s academic standards are low.

Nevertheless, transforming NAEP (or its successor) into a mandatory national test to replace state assessments as the primary measure of school and student performance is a highly questionable proposition. Indeed, the whole enterprise sounds like a case study of being careful what you wish for; it is fraught with potential for producing a cure that is worse than the disease.

We’re from Washington and We’re Here to Help

Let me frame my comments by declaring that I am an NCLB supporter, albeit one who has a narrow view of the law’s virtues and a fairly jaundiced view of its most sweeping aspirations. In my opinion, NCLB’s greatest value is creating accountability for the allocation and use of federal funds with at least some connection to school performance and student outcomes.

At its most basic level, NCLB introduces the notion that federal money will continue to flow only if districts and states are actually able to demonstrate that they can run effective schools, not simply comply with rules and regulations. The only way to reliably evaluate such performance is through a system of standards and assessments. I’m sorry to say that most of the law’s other requirements (like “highly qualified” teachers) seem to me mostly symbolic and prone to creative (and wasteful) noncompliance or endless backsliding. The federal dollar itself is still just a small slice of the education funding pie (see Figure 1).

Equally important, we take the federal government’s limited constitutional role seriously. There are always good reasons for creating a single, national solution to the problems of the day, whether the problem is education, welfare, health care, housing, transportation, or economic development. In almost all these cases, federal policies and programs have had serious negative consequences that all too frequently offset their benefits, stemming at least in part from the conceit that complex human problems can be solved by getting a bunch of smart people together to craft an elegant solution.

Establishing a single set of national standards and assessments would effectively make the federal government the owner and operator of America’s public educa-

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**Little Leverage (Figure 1)**

Although the portion of public school revenue from the federal government has increased slightly over the past 13 years, state and local governments continue to carry more than 90 percent of the budget burden.

![Bar chart showing Source of Public School Revenue from 1990 to 2003](chart.png)

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "National Public Education Financial Survey"
The question on the table should not be whether or how to adopt national standards, but what problem are we trying to solve? There is a great deal of frustration, which I share, that state standards are inconsistent and that some states are making themselves look better than they really are by gaming the system. While that’s truly unfortunate, I think this controversy is ultimately a sideshow. The real issue is how to substantially raise the level of academic achievement.

My home state of Massachusetts is arguably an NCLB poster child. We have curricular standards that are highly regarded. We have assessments aligned with those standards and they are reasonably consistent with NAEP. And we have an accountability system that has led to at least a few cases of direct state intervention in underperforming schools and districts. Nevertheless, I would not pretend to say that we have yet figured out how to dramatically and persistently improve educational outcomes, especially for poor kids. Standards, assessments, and accountability are absolutely necessary, but they are not even close to sufficient. Creating great schools is infinitely more messy and contextual than creating a performance measurement system. Expending intellectual and political capital on nationalizing the yardstick is probably not as valuable as applying these scarce resources to building great schools.

For many states, moving to NAEP-based standards would clearly be a step in the right direction, at least in the long term. But making the transition by federal fiat would in all likelihood stop current progress in its tracks for all states, mine included. In Massachusetts, we have made measurable progress in performance, although in many cases these gains have been incremental and are beginning to level off. I’m convinced that much of the modest success we’ve enjoyed has been tied to the adoption of a statewide graduation requirement based on our 10th-grade MCAS test (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System), beginning with the class of 2003, not the result of a national standard or ethic. That graduation requirement set the passing standard at “needs improvement,” which is roughly equivalent to NAEP’s “basic” level. Now that we are seeing the vast majority of students get over this threshold, the current challenge is raising everyone’s sights toward proficiency. This will be as difficult a process as setting the graduation requirement in the first place, which was no walk in the park.

If we were all of a sudden to drop MCAS in favor of NAEP, or some other national test, I have no doubt that all forward momentum would stop as we attempted to bring our state laws and regulations in line with new federal requirements and as schools recalibrated their education programs to a slightly different set of standards and tests. The process would again get in the way of the substance. From where I sit, this interregnum would serve no higher purpose for the children of my state, and would be damaging to the current cohort of public school students, especially those entering the upper grades.

Carrots, Not Sticks

Finally, under the heading of unintended consequences, I am very fearful that placing sole responsibility for standard setting with the federal government could result in the worst of all possible worlds: national standards and assessments that embrace the conventional wisdom and social agendas of the education “experts” who staff our schools of education, teachers unions, and national associations. It’s naive to believe that the cloistered environment of the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), NAEP’s progenitor, can be sustained if the stakes are raised so high. Although the rhetoric has been dampened or driven underground, the curriculum wars are not yet over. In a different political context, one that is more hospitable to the “education establishment,” there should be no doubt that there would be enormous pressure to mold national standards and
assessments to fit that establishment’s worldview. Indeed, as Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch acknowledged recently in the Wall Street Journal, the Bush administration itself is already responding to the heat by turning a blind eye to stagnant NAEP results in order to showcase NCLB’s success and “to accommodate state pleas for flexibility.”

If we could adopt a constitutional amendment empowering Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, and their heirs to oversee the development and maintenance of national standards, I’d be willing to set aside my reservations and sign on the dotted line. But short of that unlikely occurrence, centralizing this much power in a single place creates far more risk of catastrophe than allowing 50 states to muddle along their more diverse paths.

Because of such concerns, I’m against pushing for mandatory national standards and assessments. Instead, I propose a more incremental approach, one that tries to create greater rigor within our current state-based systems, without ripping them up root and branch.

Specifically, I suggest adding NAEP performance as a factor in determining the allocation of federal funds. For example, if a district makes Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based on low state standards (relative to NAEP), it may lose some federal money or be ineligible for certain grant funds, even though it is not technically “in need of improvement” under NCLB.

To support this new system, DOE should fund the development of more-detailed curriculum frameworks (perhaps several different alternatives) and a national test-item bank for interim and annual assessments, all aligned to NAEP standards. States would be free to choose among these frameworks or stick with their own homegrown versions.

This approach might lead to more consistent standards over time, but it would do so gradually through incentives, rather than quickly through compulsion. It would also avoid (I hope) a distracting and potentially damaging political food fight on the nationalization of education standards. Instead of devoting scarce time, energy, and money to this sort of risky venture, I would prefer to expend these resources on developing effective strategies for turning around failing schools, accelerating the pace of new-school creation and replication, deepening the educator talent pool, and broadening parental choice.

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