Wonks love national standards. Politicians don’t.

Wonks love national standards for solving wonky problems, like the downward pressure on standards and the incomparability of states’ test results under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Wonks love the frisson of danger from embracing an idea that their ideological allies don’t like, whether they are conservatives committed to states’ rights or liberals troubled by inflexible standards. Finally, wonks love the fact that every past effort to establish national standards has crashed and burned. The implausibility is testimony to their (well, our) purity of heart.

Politicians are less interested in purity than in popularity. And they know recent history. When Bill Clinton proposed voluntary national testing in 1997, he drew opposition from both ends of the political spectrum, including the Eagle Forum, the Christian Coalition, the Congressional Black Caucus, and the National Education Association. Who can blame him for folding his cards? There is not a leader in Washington eager to go up against that diverse crowd.

BY ROBERT GORDON
Yet a few years later, a standards-based accountability system became the core component of NCLB. That law put standards and accountability at the center of education nationwide, even as it left the determination of standards to the discretion of the states. In important ways, NCLB made standards advocates victims of their own success. They won passage of the law by painting a sunny picture of a standards-based future, but at least for the moment, reality is cloudier. At a time when many activists are agitating to cut back the role of Washington in education, a politician aiming to expand it with national standards could seem naive or stupid.

An Entry Strategy
There is a way forward, however. Politicians are already taking modest steps toward national standards without creating a firestorm. Consider the recent work of the country’s governors. Although in principle they should be eager to defend state prerogatives, governors do not live in principle. They have to get the job done. Last year, at their national summit, 16 governors agreed to work with Achieve, Inc., a national nonprofit organization, on setting lofty standards for high-school graduation, increasing the rigor of high-school curricula and tests, and aligning standards and tests with the demands of work and college. Now 22 governors are involved. These states have begun quietly combining efforts and borrowing from each other. State pride is a reason to root for State U., not to waste scarce state money.

While the Achieve approach does not yet apply to earlier grades, quiet congressional action could. The reauthorization of No Child Left Behind will contain countless provisions initially known only to Hill staffers and lobbyists. Opponents of national standards can try to stir their armies over issues both large and small, but that may prove difficult if the proposals are framed in sufficiently sensible but obscure ways. For example, Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy recently introduced legislation that would require national rankings of state standards and assessments against the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). From the other side of the political spectrum, Harvard’s Caroline Hoxby, a member of the Hoover Institution’s Koret Task Force on K–12 Education, has also proposed benchmarking against NAEP, with the added wrinkle that states with tougher standards would receive extensions of the deadlines in NCLB.

Both approaches would lift standards and encourage national movement toward NAEP standards. Both also avoid the most controversial aspects of the Clinton efforts. Measures like those proposed by Kennedy and Hoxby don’t turn the Department of Education into a standard-setting body (to be known to critics as a “national school board”), and they don’t establish “national tests” beyond the highly respected ones we already have. It is difficult to see ordinary churchgoers and teachers mobilizing in protest against benchmarking, though tempests in the Hill teapot have begun over less.

As with Achieve’s efforts, the features that make the Kennedy and Hoxby approaches more viable also restrain their impacts. These initiatives would, for example, limit national benchmarking to the three grades tested by NAEP. And they would leave in place the crazy quilt of state tests. Any proposal to take on those aspects of the status quo—to extend national testing, for example, and strongly push it on states—would meet fierce opposition.
The Leadership Quotient

Yet it is wrong to imagine that the strange alliance that defeated standards in the nineties, from Phyllis Schlafly on the right to Maxine Waters on the left, would necessarily prevail in the new century. After all, most of the folks who opposed national standards also had grave misgivings about NCLB, but it became law. And it became law for one reason: a (then) popular president badly wanted it. That is no surprise. In America, presidents have unique power to initiate change. So the question is whether we can imagine leading national figures embracing national standards.

While political insiders often disparage national standards as a dry-as-dust technicality that won’t interest voters, voters themselves may take a different view. They see the new global demands for skills; they want their kids to be ready; and they may well be happy to see Washington seize responsibility for that readiness. In 1996, 87 percent of Americans said they supported a nationwide academic examination for high-school graduation. The NCLB backlash has grown since it was signed into law in 2002, but many polls have remained surprisingly favorable. In early 2004, a National Education Association (NEA) poll showed substantial, though not majority, support for expanding the federal education role to include national standards. Another 2004 poll showed that 59 percent of Americans supported increased federal oversight of public schools.

Yet good politicians don’t choose policies based on polls. They choose policies that fit into their own larger vision for the country. National standards will only find political support if they fit into such a vision.

In theory, it’s possible to imagine a Republican campaigning for national standards within a broadly conservative vision. In 2000, George W. Bush promoted education reform, including a strong federal role in education, as the best evidence of his “compassionate conservatism.” A natural successor in time of war could be “national-greatness conservatism,” first trumpeted in the Wall Street Journal nearly a decade ago by David Brooks and William Kristol.

Citing Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, Brooks and Kristol praised “limited but energetic” use of government in the service of American strength and individual initiative. At a time when America’s achievement on international tests falls somewhere between Cyprus and Hungary, it is possible to imagine an articulate conservative who demands that every red-blooded American pass a test as tough as France’s. The blow to states-rights principles from national standards could be softened with pledges to block-grant federal education spending and encourage competition through charter schools or school vouchers, along the lines described in the contribution from Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli in this issue (see “A New New Federalism,” p. 48). The business community, always friendly to national standards, would gobble it up. Of greater interest, some minority voters with kids in lousy schools might do the same.

In theory, Arizona senator John McCain could take this line. So too could Governor Mitt Romney, touting his own Massachusetts miracle of rising test scores and a tough graduation exam. But there is an enormous problem. The Republican base, so critical to the nominating process and so committed to local control, would hate it. In 2000, social conservatives accepted Bush’s ambitious education agenda because they wanted to win. Four years earlier, Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole had pledged to abolish the Education Department, but in polls, voters said they preferred Clinton’s ambitious federal education agenda to Dole’s plan by a margin of 30 percentage points. Four years later, with education near the top of voters’ agendas in 2000, social conservatives calculated that they could live with their

Much as a Republican might make national standards more palatable to his base by linking them to school choice, a Democrat will want to link national standards to a greater commitment to funding the means to achieve them.
nominee offering an ambitious federal plan of his own. And it was a smart calculation. As recounted in a new book on NCLB by Drew University political science professor Patrick McGuinn (No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965–2005), GOP pollster David Winston attributes Bush’s 2000 victory to his education agenda.

In 2008 it will be difficult for a Republican to make the case that electoral necessity requires a strong education agenda, much less national standards. Education has dropped as a public concern. The president’s success in reasserting a serious Republican claim to education means that for all of his party’s problems, lack of concern for schooling isn’t among them today. And no longer starved for power, the Republican base today seeks to return to first principles, which for them are not Lincoln and Roosevelt’s, but Goldwater and Reagan’s. That is why leading Republican candidates for president like Virginia senator George Allen now pepper their speeches with potshots at “federal education bureaucrats.” And at a time when front-runner John McCain is courting the religious right, he seems as likely to support home schooling as national standards.

Between a Rock and National Standards

Democrats have their own difficulties but should have an easier time. When it comes to national standards, their problem hasn’t been the “national,” but the “standards.” Civil rights groups have worried that minority students will not meet national standards in disproportionate numbers. And teacher organizations have never liked the idea of a government agency telling their members what to teach once the classroom door has closed. The lawsuits by the National Education Association and the bright-blue state of Connecticut show just how difficult it would be to unify the Democratic base around national standards.

But overcoming the opposition may not be as hard as it seems. Today, unlike in 1996, we already have the standards. And virtually all Democratic leaders have expressed their strong commitment to those standards. It is hard to go back.

More important, adding the “national” to the “standards” can become a vehicle for meeting many critics’ concerns. Democrats can assail the spending gaps, but recent research has revealed vast gaps both within districts, owing in part to the loopholes in Title I’s comparability requirement, and among states, resulting from states’ different resources and levels of effort. Today, a Democratic candidate could bring together the party’s wings by calling for a national commitment to high standards and the resources to meet them.

To be sure, putting national standards on the national agenda is one thing; making them law is another. A Republican president will have difficulty getting his party to put up the dollars or concede local control to the federal government. A Democrat will have to persuade union leaders to live with more serious standards in exchange for more money. But a new president from either party can move the agenda forward. Much will take place—within the National Governors’ Association or a House-Senate conference committee, for example. But it will require a national leader’s embrace for the biggest changes to happen. When a politician supports national standards with as much gusto as we wonks do, national standards will stand a fighting chance.

Robert Gordon works for the New York City Department of Education and is a nonresident senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. He worked for John Kerry and John Edwards on education issues during the 2004 presidential campaign. The views expressed are his own.