JOHN O'NEIL

Drive for National Standards Picking Up Steam

Several prominent groups would like to see national standards for student achievement established, but others warn such a move will do more harm than good.

A movement to create national standards for student achievement—linked to some form of national assessment—is presently picking up steam. But many educators, worried about the erosion of local control of the curriculum and limitations on teacher autonomy, aim to see it stopped dead in its tracks.

The call for schools to "raise standards" is by now a well-intentioned but tired cliché. Nonetheless, there is widespread concern that student achievement (as measured by such indicators as the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] and several international assessments) is, at best, marginal. U.S. 13-year-olds finished dead last of nine countries participating in a recent international mathematics assessment, for example, and fewer than 5 percent of this nation's 17-year-olds can demonstrate the ability to "synthesize and learn from specialized reading materials."[1] "Educational standards in this country are embarrassingly low," admits Daniel Koretz, an assessment expert with the RAND Corporation.

Some see as the culprit a system that fails to make clear what all students need to learn and whether, in fact, they learn it. Despite U.S. expenditures on

Photograph by Gary Kubat

A key factor behind the call for higher standards is the lack of preparedness of many of today's graduates for college and the work world

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elementary and secondary education of more than $200 billion last year, "the fact is that we can't say with any assurance what our students are learning or even what they should be learning," AT&T Chairman and CEO Robert Allen grumbled at a recent education conference sponsored by CBS. "The current arrangement is confused," adds Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. "Schools are held accountable for process, not outcomes, and every week they're held accountable for some new goal that someone dumps on them."

Now, with the nation's education goals established just last year and several new proposals for national tests circulating, some analysts say the U.S. is moving slowly but relentlessly toward developing national standards for student achievement. A confluence of forces plays a role in the march toward national standards, but several efforts have emerged over the past year or two as most pivotal:

- As part of a pilot project, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which establishes policy for NAEP, has begun to set performance standards for each of the three grade levels (4, 8, and 12) measured by NAEP. (NAEP conducts regular assessments of student achievement in reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, geography, and other subjects, testing a sample of students across the U.S. every few years.) Doing so means the "Nation's Report Card" will no longer merely report how well students at each grade level scored but how well, compared to standards agreed upon by a representative panel of experts.

"Up to now, NAEP has simply described 'what is,'" says Richard Boyd, the former state school superintendent of Mississippi who chairs NAGB. "With the setting of achievement levels, NAEP will move toward defining 'how well' students in these grades ought to be learning." Last fall, the NAGB brought together educators, business leaders, and others to set standards at three levels—basic, proficient, and advanced—for each of the three grades tested in the 1990 mathematics assessment. If the process proves successful, results of future assessments will be reported similarly.

- Progress toward achieving the nation's education goals, outlined last year by President Bush and the National Governors' Association, is being monitored by a panel composed primarily of governors and Administration officials. One of the goals is that by the year 2000, U.S. students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 "having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter" in English, math, science, history, and geography. At this writing, the monitoring panel had not yet decided how to report progress toward that goal, but it's certainly no accident the goal addresses grade levels currently tested by NAEP. If the panel chooses to use NAEP data and the new standards developed by the NAGB, some experts believe that could provide an added boost in the drive toward national achievement standards.

- The National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center recently received nearly $2.5 million from private foundations to develop a set of state-of-the-art student assessments linked to national standards. The Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, created by the national center, proposed such an effort last year.

The assessments would include performance examinations, projects, and portfolios—tasks designed to measure applications of skills and knowledge to real problems—and students completing them would accumulate evidence of their achievement over several years. Participation would be voluntary, but the backers of the multi-year initiative hope the experience of districts and states working to pilot the plan will prove its feasibility and eventually influence others to take part.

Although the assessment system is aimed at creating a national standard of excellence, proponents say the effort will not require a prescribed curriculum or a single common exam. Tests already used by local districts and states could be calibrated to the new national standards, and all students would not be required to take a single common exam.

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Few Incentives, Low Expectations

The convergence of national activities regarding student achievement and standards, some experts believe, reflects disillusionment that a decade of highly trumpeted school reforms still has not resulted in enough students' working harder or achieving better results. In fact, some say, college professors and employers—those who deal daily with the "products" of schools—are as alarmed as ever at the need for remedial classes and costly basic skills training.

A growing number of policymakers believe student achievement will not increase markedly until high standards are set and quality work by all students is expected and rewarded. Saying the high school diploma represents a test of endurance more than proof of a student's academic abilities, these critics say the current focus on "seat time" and minimum competence as reflected on standardized tests must be supplemented or replaced by better

indicators of the quality of students' accomplishments.

With colleges opening their doors, and their coffers, to marginally prepared pupils, and employers loathe to demand that job applicants complete a rigorous course of study or earn high marks, students "can do almost as little as they choose without doing harm to their prospects," says Tommy Tomlinson, a senior research associate with the U.S. Department of Education. "I think students aren't motivated because they know the grades they get don't matter... they have no effect on their economic future," adds Ira Magaziner, president of SJS, Inc., and chair of the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. "Having some standards that are meaningful and are recognized by all parties is an important first step" to better academic achievement.

Last year, the workforce commission reported the findings of its international study of schools and preparation for employment, focusing in particular on the non-college bound. Its conclusion: the U.S. is "the most overtested and underexamined nation in the world." Only the top students in the U.S. appear to be motivated by high grades or test scores; many find little incentive to take hard courses or earn high marks because they see no correlation between doing well in school and getting a better job. Compared to students in countries such as Germany, Denmark, or Japan, said *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*, the U.S. non-college bound are neither held accountable to high standards of performance nor guided into satisfactory careers.

According to the commission's plan, a "new educational performance standard," established nationally and comparable to standards in other nations, would be developed. Students would be expected to meet that standard by passing a series of performance assessments by age 16, demonstrating high ability in general school subjects as well as such abilities as critical thinking and working well in groups. Pupils meeting the standard would receive a "certificate of initial mastery" required for entrance into all forms of subsequent education.[2]

If the commission's work proceeds as expected, the grants to the National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh will be followed up by the announcement this month of a coalition of 20 or more states and districts interested in piloting the assessment project, Magaziner says.

Photograph by Susan Stein

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Needed: A Clearer Picture

Others stress that the establishment of national standards for student achievement is vital to monitoring the outcomes of schooling, from the individual child to the nation as a whole. "A lot of people are recognizing that we must re-gear to provide reliable information to parents on the educational progress of their own children and schools," says Chester Finn, Jr., a professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt University and a key Reagan-era education department official behind the effort to expand NAEP.

One issue bothering Finn (and others) is that despite widespread evidence from NAEP and other indicators that few U.S. students are achieving at high levels, parents and the general public do not seem unduly alarmed.[3] If high academic standards were established and the performance of individual students were measured against them, the argument goes, parents of failing students might be more inclined to press schools to find out why. And that might, in turn, increase pressure to marshall resources and energy to raise student achievement.

"It seems to me that we're not going to have the level of performance we need in American education until we have a way for Mr. and Mrs. Smith to see how well Johnny and Janet are doing or aren't doing," says Finn.

The present patchwork of local and state exams and norm-referenced national tests, experts point out, is woefully inadequate to accomplish this. Norm-referenced tests, for example, are prone to the type of shenanigans uncovered by John Jacob Cannell, the West Virginia physician who documented that even the most poorly achieving states report achievement test scores above the national average.[4] Such tests that compare students against each other rather than against a specific standard "make the standard a floating standard, which, in a sense, makes it no standard at all," says David Hornbeck, a Washington, D.C., attorney and former Maryland state school superintendent.

As a result, there is increasing pressure for the creation of national standards that reflect high expectations of students, as well as better ways to monitor progress toward them. Finn and others believe that filling in the gaps of the current information and monitoring system as it relates to student achievement is one of the most powerful and essential tasks at hand. "The system is not yet in place, and getting it in place is the biggest task of the next 10 years for American education," says Finn.

"We're in an important transition, to try to think nationally about what historically has been a local system with 83,000 schools, and we really don't have the mechanism in place," adds Boyer. "The kind of structure that we fill in to meet that need, I think, will shape American education for the next 20 to 30 years."

Not So Fast

While many voice rhetorical support for high standards for students, how-

ever, others are troubled by what they view as the movement's dependence on inadequate tests and the potential erosion of local control over curriculum and instruction. Trying to raise standards through the pressure of high-stakes testing is "a perfectly natural, if totally misguided, response to low standards," Koretz asserts.

Many protest that the increasingly aggressive national reform agenda on standards and assessment threatens local control. For example, the effort to set standards for NAEP exams runs on a parallel course with a pilot project to release NAEP scores on a state-by-state basis—the combined effect of which, some say, is to transform NAEP from a general indicator of educational health to an accountability tool, some believe. "One of the consequences of using NAEP as an accountability measure is that the 'high stakes' associated with accountability may influence states to change their curriculum emphasis so that they will perform better on the test," a draft paper by the U.S. Department of Education notes.[5]

Are the stakes being raised too high, too fast? A letter issued last year by the National Center for Fair and Open Testing and endorsed by 75 signatories (including national education associations such as ASCD) cited a lengthy list of potentially harmful byproducts of the expansion of NAEP. "The evidence is overwhelming that the more power attached to a test, the more control the test will have over curriculum and instruction," the letter asserts. "A national test with achievement goals and local comparisons will certainly become a powerful, perhaps controlling, influence on the curriculum."[6]

Boyer cautions that educators should set standards based on what is deemed most important for students to know and be able to do, not what is easiest to assess. "I only worry that we don't settle for . . . measuring that which matters least," he commented at the CBS education forum. Given the tendency of teachers to focus on what is tested, moreover, standards in only a few subjects might unduly narrow the range of what is taught.

Moreover, the idea of setting standards and making progress to higher education and top jobs dependent on test scores—common practice in

National Test Proposals Win Some Support

Escalating concern over low student achievement, coupled with a growing belief that each pupil needs to be able to aim for a national standard of performance, has some policymakers, business leaders, and educators favoring a national exam (or set of exams) for all students.

Many believe that in a nation that tests students to the tune of $900 million per year, the last thing U.S. education needs is more tests. The past few years have witnessed a wave of outcry against the alleged abuses of "high-stakes" tests, which critics say undermine curricular goals, narrowing the scope of what is taught and ignoring the importance of problem-solving and critical thinking skills. But others say the current system for tracking student achievement from the individual child to the nation at large has gaping holes—some of which might nicely be filled by a common exam.

One show of support for a national examination system is the work of the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. It recommends an "examination-based assessment system" under which students would have to earn a "certificate of initial mastery" by age 16 (or shortly thereafter) to continue on to college, professional or technical schools, or paying jobs.

Other fans of a national exam include Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who has proposed spending $200-300 million to begin developing a set of national exams in several subjects. And according to the 1989 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll, 73 percent of the American public support a common national exam for graduation, a figure that has risen from 50 percent when the question was first asked in 1958.

Moreover, the President's Education Policy Advisory Committee (PEPAC), a panel of business leaders and educators that advises President Bush, is looking into the feasibility of a national student assessment that would monitor not only the nation's educational health in general (currently, the role of the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP]), but also to inform parents about their children's progress and the performance of schools and districts. A variety of tests now exist that yield partial information about the achievement of individual students, their schools, and the nation as a whole, but no single test accomplishes all these objectives.

NAEP "doesn't tell you anything about how an individual student is doing; it just tells you that the system is broken," says Paul O'Neill, chief executive officer of the Aluminum Company of America and chairperson of PEPAC. "We know that we're not doing well, but we don't know how to intervene because we don't have a child-by-child test to tell" how each student fares against agreed-upon standards.

If attempted, a national test would surely have a sweeping impact on local curriculums, textbooks, and tests. "The test objectives developed for a national test of all students would soon become the objectives used to develop textbooks and teaching programs across the nation" and would represent "a de facto national agreement on what should be taught," according to a background paper by staff at the U.S. Department of Education, written for PEPAC's consideration.

While no concrete plan has emerged behind a national exam (let alone the requisite political and financial support), some are amazed that policymakers are even considering the topic, given the traditional sanctity of local control of schools. "I'm surprised that the education community, the business community, and the government are talking so openly about a national test," said Indiana school Superintendent H. Dean Evans, a member of PEPAC, who is ambivalent about the idea. "I doubt that could have happened even two or three years ago. It almost seems a foregone conclusion now that we're going to have one."

The concept of a national test has yet to move past the discussion stage, but the Education Department paper suggested a number of different paths. Possibilities include using NAEP tests more widely or equating them to state tests, endorsing an existing commercial test, crafting a new national exam, or continuing with the potpourri of commercial, district, state, and national tests currently in use. Such an exam need not be a federal undertaking, the paper said, but could be created and managed through private auspices or a chartered group.

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some other nations—also runs counter to U.S. philosophy. "We pride ourselves, as a nation, on giving second, third, and fourth chances," notes Marshall Smith, education dean at Stanford University.

Reflecting Consensus

But if assessments and standards are carefully tailored to reflect an emerging consensus on principles of sound learning, their influence on curriculum and teaching will be beneficial, argues Lauren Resnick, director of the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center and a key player in the workforce commission's assessment plan. "Assessments should be designed so that when teachers do the natural thing—that is, prepare their students to perform well—they exercise the kinds of abilities and develop the skills and knowledge that are the real goals of educational reform."[7]

Smith notes that national assessment is beginning to better reflect national consensus about curricular goals, citing the use of curriculum standards developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics to prepare the 1990 NAEP mathematics assessment. "For this to be at all useful, the efforts have to be synchronized, and they're beginning to be," he says. Others note that efforts are under way to broaden NAEP's assessment techniques (for example, by using more open-ended rather than only multiple-choice questions).

Some experts believe that concerns that the new initiatives regarding NAEP will unduly influence classroom practices are overstated. "I can see where NAEP could drive people's *impressions* of what the schools can do and what kids know, but whether it would drive the everyday classroom instruction is unlikely, given NAEP's current structure," says Stanford University's Michael Kirst, who served on a panel that recommended NAEP's expansion. "I don't quite see how NAEP would ever become a pupil-by-pupil test. And if it isn't, then it's always going to have a lot of problems driving all the actual day-to-day classroom practice. For national influences to really have an impact, national tests would have to be congruent with what is tested locally at the end of every semester or the end of every chapter, and it would have to be congruent with what kids think matters in their grades."

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More Questions than Answers

Although the issue of national standards is occupying an increasing number of policymakers and educators, most admit the current efforts represent only a fraction of the work needed. And even the limited steps taken thus far face an uncertain future.

For example, the panel created to monitor the national goals (composed of six governors, four Administration officials, and four non-voting members of Congress) has met with opposition over the group's composition. Efforts to create more broadly representative panels to oversee progress toward the national goals died in Congress last fall, but they may be revived this year. The pitched battle has raised questions about the credibility and leadership potential of the NGA/Administration panel, some observers believe. Further, the project to expand NAEP to yield state-by-state results—one piece of the effort to increase assessment reporting—is not certain to be extended into the future.

In a larger context, some educators scoff at the current fascination with tests and standards, given the overwhelming problems facing many of the nation's schools and the apparent lack of will to marshall resources to help fix them. ASCD Executive Director Gordon Cawelti, for example, believes that federal dollars are better spent on research and dissemination of practices and programs shown to be effective in raising student achievement. "Knowledge of lousy results is not a motivator," he says of the NAGB's plan to compare states' NAEP results.

Others warn, however, that with so much pressure building to raise student achievement to meet higher standards, educators need to help set them, not oppose them. "The big question faced by the education community is whether it plays an affirmative role in shaping the character of those standards . . . or whether it digs its heels in and resists," says Hornbeck.□

[1]See, for example, I.V.S. Mullis et al., (1990), *America's Challenge: Accelerating Academic Achievement*, (Princeton, N.J.: National Assessment of Educational Progress); A. E. Lapointe et al., (1989), *A World of Differences: An International Assessment of Mathematics and Science*, (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service).

[2]Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, (1990), *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*, (Rochester, N.Y.: National Center on Education and the Economy).

[3]The annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll of public attitudes toward education, for example, consistently finds the public giving schools good ratings, particularly schools local to the person surveyed.

[4]J. J. Cannell, (1987), *Nationally Normed Elementary Achievement Testing in America's Public Schools: How All Fifty States Are Above the National Average*, (Daniels, W.Va.: Friends for Education, Inc.).

[5]National Center for Education Statistics, (1990), "National Education Goals: Options for Measuring Student Achievement," (background paper prepared for the President's Education Policy Advisory Committee).

[6]National Center for Fair and Open Testing, (1990), open letter to the U.S. Congress, the Bush Administration, and the Nation's Governors.

[7]L. B. Resnick and D. P. Resnick, (October 1989), "Tests as Standards of Achievement in Schools," (essay prepared for the Educational Testing Service Conference).

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