

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Why Common Standards Won't Work

By **P.L. Thomas**

In 2010, with the blessing and encouragement of the nation's president and secretary of education, we are establishing "common-core standards" to address the historical claim that our public schools are failures. In the 1890s, a similar lament was voiced by the group known as the Committee of Ten:

"When college professors endeavor to teach chemistry, physics, botany, zoology, meteorology, or geology to persons of 18 or 20 years of age, they discover that in most instances new habits of observing, reflecting, and recording have to be painfully acquired by the students—habits which they should have acquired in early childhood."

Their solution? Almost exactly what the current common-standards pursuit offers us. In fact, the bureaucratic approach to schools—establish content, prescribe content, and measure student acquisition of that content—has been visited and revisited decade after decade for more than a century now. It has always failed, and always will.

This time around, we must use the creation of and debate about national standards to reject a failed solution for the ignored problems facing our schools—and our society.

Today's attempt at national standards, the recently released work of the **Common Core State Standards Initiative** in English language arts and mathematics that is being adopted separately by states, fails first because the standards are based on two flawed assumptions: that we somehow, in 2010, don't already know what to teach (we do and have for decades); and that somehow a standard body of learning matches what humans need and what a democracy that values human freedom wants (it doesn't match either).

Next, the standards further deprofessionalize teaching at the K-12 level. Chemistry professors in college do not need a set of standards to teach chemistry; part of the appropriate expectations for their job is to be scholars of their field and adept at teaching that body of knowledge. (In fact, a central problem we could address is that, at the K-12 level, we trivialize the need for teachers to be knowledgeable, and at the college level, we trivialize a professor's need to be skilled at teaching. Educators need both.)

Common standards also devolve into asking less, not more, of students, since they are invariably tied to the narrowest possible types of assessment.

**To standardize and prescribe**

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Some clichés have become clichés because they are true. The truism “Give a man a fish and he eats for the day; teach a man to fish and he eats forever” captures perfectly the flaw with a standards approach to education: Prescribed standards of learning are giving children fish, not teaching them to fish. **expectations is, in fact, to lower them.**

Standards-driven education removes decisions from teachers and students and renders classrooms lifeless and functional, devoid of the pleasure and personal value of learning, discovering, and coming to be.

Common standards also begin by assuming that the content is all that matters in learning. To create a standard body of knowledge is to codify that the students themselves do not matter—at least in any humane way. The standards movement envisions children as empty vessels to be filled by the prescribed knowledge chosen for them—certainly a counterproductive view of humans in a free society.

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A call for “higher standards” speaks to our human quest for improvement, but that call conflates “standard” with “expectation,” and the two terms are not synonymous in the way we need for improving education. Yes, we should have high expectations for teachers and students, but those expectations can never be and will never be any more “standard” than one human to the next. To standardize and prescribe expectations is, in fact, to lower them.

Offering some type of national standards as a solution for the failure of public education implies that a lack of standards exists, and that the supposed lack is somehow the cause of our educational problems.

And that central flaw is at the heart of what is most wrong about the new common-core standards, because the creation of those standards is drawing our attention away from the actual causes of educational problems.

A call for national standards ensures that we continue doing what is most wrong with our bureaucratic schools (establish-prescribe-measure) and that we persist in looking away from the largest cause of low student achievement: childhood poverty.

A call for national standards is a political veneer, a tragic waste of time and energy that would be better spent addressing real needs in the lives of children—safe homes, adequate and plentiful food, essential health care, and neighborhood schools that are not reflections of the neighborhoods where children live through no choice of their own.

Education is in no way short of a knowledge base. And even if it were, tinkering (yet again) at a standard core of knowledge while ignoring the dehumanizing practices in our schools, and the oppressive impact of poverty on the lives of children, is simply more fiddling while the futures of our children smolder over our shoulders and we look the other way.

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