



COMMISSION ON
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**Standards Recommendations:
High Standards for Every Student in Every State**

The quality and rigor of academic standards vary significantly from state to state. Independent reviews of state standards consistently show that their quality and rigor varies widely and, in most cases, are sub-par. A 2006 review of state standards gave states an overall grade of C-minus and found that two-thirds of U.S. students attend schools in states with standards in the C, D or F range (Finn et al. 2006). A separate review found that only one-third of states—18—had strong standards at every assessed grade level in every subject; remaining states still lacked strong standards in every grade. Overall, the standards were particularly weak in reading (AFT 2006).

Student performance on state assessments varies significantly from student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Researchers have compared state proficiency levels to those on NAEP and detailed how state results consistently exaggerate the percentage of students deemed proficient or above in reading and math compared with NAEP results (Fuller et al. 2006). In Tennessee, for instance, 88 percent of 4th graders scored at the proficient level or above on state tests in reading, while 27 percent performed at the proficient level or above on NAEP. Similarly, in Oklahoma, 86 percent of 4th graders are proficient on state tests, compared with 26 percent on NAEP.

Our nation's children are often left unprepared for life in a competitive global economy. It is a travesty for students to meet the expectations set out for them, only to need remediation in college or to be unable to land a job in their chosen career. Employers and college professors consistently say that expectations for students do not match what they need to succeed after high school—approximately 40 percent of high school graduates lack the literacy skills employers seek (Achieve 2005). The U.S. Department of Labor reports that two-thirds of new jobs over the next decade are expected to be filled by workers with at least some postsecondary education, and 87 percent of new high-wage jobs will require more than a high school diploma (U.S. DOL 2006). And international comparisons show that the level of performance of American students is consistently surpassed by that of students in other countries. In comparisons of 15-year-olds' reading literacy, U.S. students rank behind students in 11 other major nations (Lemke et al. 2004).

We must set the bar high for every student, in every state. High standards are at the core of a successful education system. If overall performance is to improve and achievement gaps are to close, schools must hold high expectations for all students—regardless of race, ethnicity, economic status or geographic location—and support students as they work to achieve to these challenging standards. We recommend the development of voluntary model national standards and assessments in reading or language arts, mathematics and science.

- These would be based on NAEP frameworks and aligned with college and workplace expectations.
- States could adopt the resulting national model standards and assessments as their own, build their own assessment instruments based on the national model standards frameworks, or continue to keep their existing or revamped standards and assessments as their standards and tests are compared to the national model standards.

- The U.S. Secretary of Education would issue periodic reports comparing the rigor of all state standards relative to the model national standards.

Aiming higher should be non-negotiable. We must not label our children as proficient while leaving them unprepared. We must raise the level of expectations for all American children.