
State Standards: Assessing Differences in Quality and Rigor and How They Impact NCLB

A Hearing at Lesley University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

August 31, 2006



COMMISSION ON
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND
THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
www.nclbcommission.org

Significant questions have been raised recently about whether state standards, which form the backbone of NCLB accountability systems, are rigorous and aligned with what students need to know to be ready for college and the workplace. Differences in the quality and rigor of states' tests and standards have fueled suggestions that some states have set their expectations low to avoid sanctions under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). These suggestions and various analyses of the quality and rigor of state standards and tests have confirmed that among the states there are very different levels of expectations for students.

Many theories have been advanced over how to best deal with the apparent lack of rigor in state standards. Some leading policy experts have called for the development of national standards as an effective way to remedy differences in states' expectations. Others have expressed concern about adopting national standards, favoring instead individual and collective state-led efforts to reduce unevenness in states' standards. Still others have suggested allowing aggressive reporting on the relative quality of states' standards, market demands and college entrance standards to drive improvement.

In response to broadly expressed concerns about states' lack of rigor and the inability to compare performance among states, the Commission on No Child Left Behind held a hearing in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to explore policy options for ensuring that NCLB brings about high expectations for all students. Witnesses at this hearing expressed strong opinions on how the relative quality of state standards affects students' readiness for college and the workplace and accountability under NCLB. To access the witnesses' testimonies and view a complete webcast of the proceedings, go to www.nclbcommission.org.

As it develops recommendations on these issues for the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB, the Commission will continue to consider information on this and other topics from a variety of sources, including testimony from witnesses and others through our series of public hearings, written comments sent to the Commission, quality research, and state, district and school performance data.

EMERGING ISSUES FROM TESTIMONY AT THE HEARING

- The quality and rigor of state standards, assessments and proficiency levels vary widely from state to state
- To avoid sanctions under NCLB, some states have set low standards and low “cut” (or passing) scores on their tests to raise the number of students who reach “proficiency”
- What students are expected to learn often does not match what they need to know to succeed in college and the workplace—state standards should be anchored in the real world demands students will face after high school
- There are many ways to encourage higher expectations and more consistency among states, including developing mandatory or voluntary national standards; encouraging states to join together and develop common standards, curriculum and assessments; increasing the transparency of state standards and comparing and reporting performance on state tests with results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
- Many believe that any attempt at creating a system of national standards should be done independently of the federal government and should be voluntary for states

The Current State of State Standards

State Standards

According to a recent report released by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, two-thirds of American schoolchildren will return to class this fall in states with what Fordham considers “mediocre” (or worse) expectations for student learning. The August 2006 report, *The State of State Standards 2006*, found that even though states have revised their standards in the NCLB era, most states have not made significant improvements in this area. The review gives an average grade of “C-minus” for state standards—the same average as in 2000. According to Fordham, 26 states earned a “D” or “F” grade overall, while 11 performed worse in 2006 than in 2000. Only three states—California, Indiana and Massachusetts—developed “A” standards for all subjects.

According to the Fordham report, there is a link between strong state standards and academic gains. Ten states made statistically significant progress on the percentage of students reaching proficiency in fourth grade reading on NAEP; nine of these states had at least a “C” from Fordham for their English/language arts standards.

The Fordham report is not an isolated analysis of this issue. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in its own evaluation of state standards and assessment systems, found that more than half of the more than 800 high-stakes state tests given to satisfy NCLB provisions do not appear to line up with states’ academic standards. In its July 2006 policy brief, the AFT said that only 11 states met the union’s criteria for strong content standards and tests that align with them. Meanwhile, according to the AFT, 20 states have “much work to do” strengthening and better aligning their standards (particularly in reading).

Student Academic Performance

Low state standards and misaligned tests have resulted in poor preparation for the nation’s students. “Numerous analyses have made one thing clear,” said Governor Roy Barnes, Co-Chair of the Commission, in his opening statement. “Students graduating high school on average are not ready for college and the workplace.”

NAEP is a nationwide assessment sample that is recognized as a key public check on relative student proficiency among the states. Comparing NAEP results to individual state test results shows a large achievement gap between the two types of assessments. In many states, 80 to 90 percent of students score at a proficient level of performance on state tests. In some of these same states, however, as low as 25 percent of students score at the proficient level or above on NAEP. For example, in Tennessee, 87 percent of fourth graders are proficient on the state test in math, compared with 28 percent proficient on NAEP. In Massachusetts, on the other hand, 40 percent of fourth graders are proficient on the state math test, compared with 41 percent on NAEP.

Numerous studies confirm American students’ lack of preparation. The American Diploma Project Network, operated by Achieve, Inc., found in a 2005 analysis of the 50 states that there is a consistently large gap between what high schools require and what college and employers demand. Recent ACT assessment results further show that although there is a short-term trend toward greater college readiness, more ACT test-takers still lack college-ready skills in math and science.

Further, international assessments of the performance of American students present a gloomy picture. U.S. 15-year-olds scored below the international average on the 2003 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures students’ ability to apply scientific and mathematical concepts and skills.

As Secretary Tommy Thompson, Co-Chair of the Commission, said in his opening remarks, “We must remain vigilant in assuring that NCLB truly results in high expectations for all children and in continuing to raise the bar for improving student achievement. We need to make sure that everyone who graduates from an American high school is prepared to succeed in higher education and in a challenging workplace.”

WHAT ARE STANDARDS?

Standards indicate what all students should know and be able to do at particular points in their schooling. A system of standards consists of two main components: content standards and performance standards. All states have both sets of standards in place.

Content standards spell out what all students are expected to learn. They outline the topics that should be taught and the grade levels at which they should be taught. Content standards are expected to guide instruction, test development and professional development. Teachers are expected to use content standards to prepare their curriculum for the year. Test developers are expected to match test items to standards to ensure they measure what students are expected to learn. And states, districts and private providers are expected to use content standards to enhance teacher knowledge and skills.

States have also developed standards for student performance in each subject area. In contrast to standards for *what* students are expected to know and be able to do, *performance standards* indicate *how well* students are expected to perform. In practice, states have set their performance standards to tests, which are supposed to measure how well students understand the standards. Using a variety of methods, states have set scores on tests that indicate various levels of performance—often “basic,” “proficient” and “advanced”—on the standards.

Because states’ tests and standards vary, their results are often difficult to compare. Also, states may have similar content standards but very different expectations for students’ levels of mastery. This discrepancy further complicates attempts to compare performance from state to state.

What Does NCLB Currently Require?

NCLB builds upon an effort to establish high-quality state standards that is more than two decades old. The 1994 Goals 2000 Act: Educate America awarded grants for the development of standards, while the 1994 authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act required states to put in place standards and tests in reading and mathematics at three grade levels.

NCLB continued this emphasis on state standards by requiring states to implement annual assessments, aligned with state standards, in reading and mathematics for grades 3-8 and at least once in grades 10-12 (seven grade levels). Beginning in the 2007-2008 school year, states must also assess students in science once in each of three grade spans: 3-5, 6-9 and 10-12. States are required to provide for participation of all students including those with disabilities and limited English proficiency (LEP).

NCLB also places consequences on schools that consistently do not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). AYP is a state-defined measurement of academic achievement that requires all students to reach a proficient level of performance by the 2013-2014 school year.

WITNESSES WHO TESTIFIED AT THE HEARING

Full witness testimony can be found by going to www.nclbcommission.org

- The Honorable Mitt Romney
Governor of Massachusetts
Boston, MA
- David Driscoll
Commissioner
Massachusetts Department of Education
Malden, MA
- Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
Washington, DC
- Antonia Cortese
Executive Vice President
American Federation of Teachers
Washington, DC
- Michael Cohen
President
Achieve, Inc.
Washington, DC
- Neal McCluskey
Education Policy Analyst
Cato Institute
Washington, DC
- Arthur Rothkopf
Senior Vice President and
Counselor to the President
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Washington, DC
- Brian Gong
Executive Director
The National Center for the
Improvement of Assessment
Dover, NH
- Susan Traiman
Director
Education and Workforce Policy
Business Roundtable
Washington, DC

Some Observations From Witnesses

The Commission’s hearing on the quality and rigor of state standards took place in Massachusetts, a state often praised for its high standards and student achievement. Last fall, Massachusetts’ fourth and eighth graders ranked number one in the nation in reading and tied for first in math on NAEP, making it the first state ever to place or tie for first on four NAEP exams in one year. Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney told the Commission that, while a great accomplishment, being number one among states is not enough: “We have to remain competitive in the world and right now we’re not.” According to Romney, “what our children become, our nation becomes. Dramatically raising the capacity of our kids is the most important thing we can do in improving the competitiveness of our country.”

Romney said the current state of American education is marked by what he called the “excellence gap”—our average and top students are falling behind international standards—and the “achievement gap”—the stark and alarming gap in proficiency between minority and disadvantaged children and their peers. The Governor noted that both gaps must be addressed to ensure that our children receive the education and preparation they deserve and that the United States remains the world’s political and economic superpower.

The other panelists echoed the Governor’s concern over the quality of education today and the implications it has for the future of our nation. David Driscoll, Commissioner of Education for Massachusetts, explained how some have urged him to lower the state’s standards. According to Driscoll, however, the state department of education has refused and will continue to do so. “Holding our students to high—but reasonable—standards is the right thing to do for our kids. Lower standards may mean better results on paper, but will ultimately mean that we short-change our children and their ability to compete and succeed in the global economy,” Driscoll said.

Chester E. Finn, Jr., President of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, noted that not all states are like Massachusetts. “With a handful of laudable exceptions, the academic standards in use in most states today range from mediocre to dreadful,” Finn said. He

added that if 100 percent of children are supposed to be proficient under NCLB, then the temptation for states is to “dumb down” their standards and begin a “race to the bottom.” According to Finn, there is evidence of this already happening.

Antonia Cortese, Executive Vice President of the AFT, added that in addition to low standards, there is also a disconnect between state standards and what is actually measured through state tests. “We’ve got to ensure that children’s academic performance is being judged by tests that match up to what the state has told teachers and parents it expects students to learn,” she said. According to Cortese, this happens only about 50 percent of the time and varies widely from state to state.

As for what students are expected to learn, Michael Cohen, President of Achieve, Inc., explained that these expectations must be anchored in the real-world demands students face after high school. “We found that no state had a system of standards, curriculum, graduation requirements and accountability that were well aligned with the demands of postsecondary education and work,” Cohen said. Arthur Rothkopf, Senior Vice President and Counselor to the President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, voiced the concerns of the business community, which, because of a failing education system, must “contend with job applicants who lack basic qualifications and employees who are ill suited for promotion because they lack basic reading and math skills.” Susan Traiman, Director of Public Policy at Business Roundtable, added that to the CEOs of leading global companies, the notion of 50 different state standards, assessments and definitions of proficiency is “absurd.”

So how do we respond to this disconnect between current standards and what is necessary to succeed in college and the workplace? Finn of the Fordham Foundation recommended moving toward some form of national standards and tests, and offered four different models of how it could be done, including allowing the federal government to create and enforce national standards; encouraging states to join together and develop common standards and assessments; and granting greater transparency to state standards and tests so they become more comparable to each other and to NAEP.

Brian Gong, Executive Director of the National Center for the Improvement of Assessment, recommended encouraging collaboration among states. “Don’t reinvent the wheel in every school, district and state,” Gong said, citing the American Diploma Project and the New England Common Assessment Program as examples of successful collaborations that resulted in common content standards. Cortese of the AFT echoed this call for collaboration and suggested offering grants through NCLB to volunteer groups of states to develop common academic standards, curriculum and tests. Traiman of Business Roundtable called for rewards for states that voluntarily increase the quality and rigor of their own standards and assessments.

On the other side of the spectrum was Neal McCluskey, Education Policy Analyst with the Cato Institute. Holding that “no government control of schooling can provide Americans the education they truly need or deserve,” McCluskey urged the Commission to reject arguments for national standards, claiming that national standards would worsen the trend of state standards failing to demand rigorous levels of achievement from our students. Instead he recommended using the marketplace to demand quality in standards and learning.

Some Witnesses' Recommendations for Improving NCLB

- Conduct a study of state accountability systems—including standards, curriculum and assessments—to ensure that the tests in use are of high quality; examine how state standards match up to each other and to the content frameworks that guide NAEP
- Through competitive grants, provide financial incentives to states to align high school standards, assessments, curriculum and graduation requirements with the demands of postsecondary education and work, and to align standards and tests in grades 3–8 with high school standards
- Reward states that voluntarily increase the quality and rigor of their standards, assessments and proficiency levels if the difference between state and NAEP results exceeds a specified percentage or if state results are increasing in comparison to NAEP results
- Move toward a system of national standards and tests, by:
 - Replacing the 50 state-level sets of standards and tests with one national set created and enforced by the federal government
 - Having non-government entities develop national standards, tests and accountability metrics, and providing incentives for states to use such a system
 - Encouraging states to join together and develop common standards, curriculum and tests
 - Make state standards and tests more transparent by making them easier to compare to one another and to NAEP
- Any attempt to develop mandatory or voluntary national standards must be conducted independently of the federal government

STUDENTS ATTENDING THE LUNCH PANEL

- Prospective Teachers Attending Lesley University (Cambridge, MA):
 - Jolene Zuk
 - Liana Mitman
 - Lauren Tiso
- Students From Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (Cambridge, MA):
 - Akshata Kadagathur
 - Lia Lenart
 - Samuel Gebru
 - Damian Vasquez
- Additional Attendees:
 - Ethan Hutt, Executive Director, Our Education

The Student Perspective on NCLB: Highlights From a Lunch Panel Discussion

After the hearing, Commissioners met with a group of high school students, a leader of an organization representing students and prospective teachers attending Lesley University. The students shared their perspectives on various NCLB provisions, ranging from standards to testing to highly qualified teacher requirements, and how these provisions affect them.

One participant explained that today's students are not restricted by geographic boundaries; they move from state to state and have friends across the country. According to the participant, it does not make sense to these children to be learning different lessons in school than their friends who live in another state. Another panel participant—a prospective teacher—noted the importance of sending teaching students into schools before they graduate to expose them to the realities of teaching and to help them discern whether teaching is the right career for them. She added that mentors for new teachers are crucial and that the law's highly qualified definition should include more than just content knowledge. Finally, a prospective teacher and mother of a public school child expressed concern over how long parents must wait to receive information about their child's performance on state tests.

For Further Discussion

The Commission is seeking further comments from interested individuals on these topics:

- How have your state's standards and assessments supported or hindered student achievement in your state or community?
- What successful strategies has your state or community used to properly prepare students for college and the workplace?
- In what ways do you think NCLB could be improved to help raise the quality and rigor of state standards and assessments?

Comments can be submitted to the Commission via email at nclbfeedback@aspeninstitute.org

About the Commission

The bipartisan, independent Commission on No Child Left Behind is examining the strengths and weaknesses of the No Child Left Behind Act and will make concrete and realistic recommendations to Congress, the Administration, state and local stakeholders, parents and the general public to ensure the law is an effective tool in spurring academic achievement and closing the achievement gap.

In seeking to accomplish its mission, the Commission is guided by these principles:

1. All children can learn and should be expected to reach high standards.
2. Accountability for public education systems in the United States must improve to enable students to excel.
3. The achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their non disadvantaged peers must be eliminated to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.
4. Education results for all students must improve in order for the United States to remain competitive in the global marketplace.
5. Parents have a right to expect their children to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. Teachers have the right to be treated like professionals, including access to sound working conditions and high quality preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities.
6. Education reform must be coupled with additional resources, but federal, state, and local resources must be used more efficiently and effectively to ensure results in return for the increased investment.

The Commission on No Child Left Behind is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Spencer Foundation. This document is published to communicate the results of the Commission's work. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in the Commission's documents are entirely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed in any manner to the donors.