



Looking Back to Accelerate Forward: Toward a Policy Paradigm that Advances Equity and Improvement

Executive Summary

Standards-based education has been the guiding principle behind policies impacting U.S. public schools for over three decades.

Now, however, after more than a year of educational disruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and amid a national conversation around systemic racism, we are at a critical juncture. This is a moment in which we should reflect on what we have been doing, evaluate how well it has worked—especially for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners—and decide what we want to do going forward to ensure all children receive the education they need to thrive in school and beyond. Prior to COVID-19 there was need for re-examination of education framework, and COVID-19 has drawn more attention to existing inequities and served as an accelerant for why more attention is warranted.

This paper looks back at 30 years of standards-based education, highlights student achievement trends, provides an analysis of stakeholder views, and offers recommendations for seizing this opportunity for disruptive change and innovation to improve U.S. schools.

Policymakers developed the standards-based education policy framework in the 1990s to improve education by bringing more coherence to K-12 schools in the form of clear and challenging academic standards for what students should know and be

able to do in each grade. Assessments of these standards were intended to ensure that schools and teachers were meeting the educational needs of students—especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities and English learners. Policymakers called for the pairing of these standards with aligned classroom resources, assessments, teacher training, and other instructional supports. However, the focus on coherence in the framework shifted over time toward a focus on accountability for student outcomes, with an emphasis on performance on end-of-year tests. That shift in policy has had a deep impact on schools and those closest to them.

It is widely agreed that one of the most important and beneficial outcomes of standards-based education, and the resulting accountability framework, has been the spotlight on inequitable achievement between groups of students such as Black, Hispanic, and Native American students and their white peers. The requirement that schools report disaggregated data by sub-groups related to student outcomes has been a cornerstone of the standards era. The policy, which civil-rights groups advocated for, shifted the focus toward how well schools were serving groups of students rather than allowing overall averages to mask pernicious educational inequities.

However, while standards-based education brought much-needed attention to the challenges facing our education system, it did not fully address them. We now have 30 years of data that

shows racial achievement gaps have narrowed modestly, and, since 2013, performance gains have generally been flat across the board in reading and math. Furthermore, there are large achievement gaps between students from low-income families and those from wealthier homes. Notably, the proportion of low-income students and students of color in public schools is growing, a trend likely to continue in the aftermath of the economic downturn associated with the global pandemic.

To better understand the perspective of diverse stakeholders around standards-based education, and better understand what they value about the current approach and what they want to change, we conducted research and analysis. This took the form of roundtable discussions, in-depth interviews with key players and those most impacted by education policies, a review of news coverage and public statements, analysis of public opinion research, and more.

While there is disagreement and nuance in opinions, the spotlight on previously hidden achievement gaps and the focus on coherence and clear academic standards earned widespread praise. However, many key stakeholders believe end-of-year assessments have taken on an outsized influence over teaching and learning without providing important instructional benefits. There is some agreement that the educational standards in place are generally too narrow and accountability policies and practices were more punitive than helpful and have led to unintended consequences. Many key stakeholders don't believe equity and systemic racism have been adequately addressed, and there is a growing belief that new policies should emphasize continuous improvement as critical lever to achieving equity outcomes. Continuous improvement is a problem-solving approach that identifies root causes of local problems, engages in iterative, evidence-informed testing, and uses progress-measures to guide and adapt implementation designs.

Based on our research and analysis, we lay out recommendations in this paper for moving forward with equity at the center of U.S. education policy. This means ensuring all students and families have the agency to prioritize and receive a high-quality education, culturally relevant academic experiences, and other important youth-development opportunities.

We propose convening a national listening and learning collaborative on the future of education policy with equity and continuous improvement as key areas of focus. This effort should engage top experts from research, practice, and

policy communities alongside parents, students, teachers, and community members closest to schools. Developing a new and improved framework for education in America will require strong leadership from a broad coalition and input from diverse communities.

The goal is to build on the progress we've made and create a vision and plan for ensuring we have an educational system that serves all students well and equitably. The collaborative should consider strategies to broaden the vision of youth development, build supports for equity, and bolster community engagement.

Some of the topics the collaborative would explore include:

- *Integrating the science of learning and development into K-12 instructional systems;*
- *Integrating continuous improvement to strengthen the implementation of evidence-based practices;*
- *Broadening youth development outcomes such as social-emotional learning and civic engagement;*
- *Understanding state and local policy constraints and enablers for achieving genuine equity of opportunities and outcomes*
- *How to design more culturally and linguistically responsive schools*
- *The need for co-developing education policy with key stakeholders*
- *How to ensure a new policy framework does not simply become a compliance exercise*
- *Effective approaches to assessment and accountability*
- *How to effectively integrate early childhood development as a focus*

As the nation considers how the pandemic has upended education and engages in vital conversations about race, justice, and equality, now is the ideal time to bring together stakeholders for dialogue about where schools go from here. There is an opportunity for broad dialogue and a will to strengthen the U.S. education system, so it provides all children with the strong foundation they need to lead successful lives.