



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on March 11, 2010

## Proposed National Uniform Academic Standards?

On Wednesday March 10, a panel of educators coordinated by governors and state school superintendents convened to propose national uniform academic standards. Since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, states moved to lower their standards to make it easier for students to pass exams in an effort to avoid penalties under the law. The proposed national standards are intended to counteract the effects of the NCLB and force states to raise their standards.



The quality of United States education ranges from low to mediocre to extremely high, varying by state and district. The proposed standards appear relatively high and would institute a new era of American education. Sam Dillon of the *New York Times* explains, “Under the proposed standards for English, for example, fifth graders would be expected to explain the differences between drama and prose, and to identify elements of drama like characters, dialogue, and stage directions.” Sadly, there are 8th graders who cannot accomplish these tasks. Perhaps most impressive is that the new standards encourage quality reading. For instance, high school freshman would be required to read Homer’s *The Odyssey*, middle school students would read *Little Women* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and 11th graders would read *Walden*.

Dillon also addresses the suggestions for the Math curriculum. “Seventh graders would study, among other math concepts, proportional relationships, operations with rational numbers and solutions for linear equations.”

If accepted, this proposal would prompt major changes across the country, including rewritten textbooks, teacher training, and the creation of new tests. One can assume this will be a costly process if implemented.

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Currently, the national standards are limited to English and Math.



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The uniform standards are ideal for President Obama's Race to the Top Initiative, which virtually makes teachers' salaries dependent on test scores. Under Race to the Top, states will be competing for a share of \$4 billion in school improvement money. Out of a possible 500 points states can earn for the money, 40 points are assigned to those who are willing to adopt new standards. As expected, President Obama immediately extended his full support for the national standards proposal.

Thus far, only Alaska and Texas have resisted the call for national standards. Texas Governor Rick Perry argued that Texans are the only ones who should determine what their children learn.

Last month, Kentucky was the first state to adopt the draft of the proposal and plans to train teachers this summer to implement the new standards in the fall. Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, and several others have initiated the adoption procedures, but because the process varies from state to state, it can take more than a year or as little as a few months to complete the process.

Proponents of the plan cite that the national standards do not impose an overwhelming amount of material, but instead are vertically aligned to create a foundation that will continually be built upon from year to year. Michael Cohen, an Education Department official from the Clinton Administration, acknowledges these strengths. "Students are asked to do progressively more challenging things, and although that may sound obvious, it's a real breakthrough."

Critics of the proposal are concerned about empowering the federal government with total control of education. StateUniversity.com explains, "Not only does the federal constitution confer no right to education, it does not even explicitly empower the U.S. Congress to legislate on the subject." Of course, the way around this is through Congress' authority to tax and spend for the general welfare. "Since federal grants to the states may be conditioned upon the state's adoption of certain legal and regulatory structures, the federal government has been able to exercise substantial authority over K-12 education policy."

Under President Bush's NCLB, the overwhelming task of determining what should entail the curriculum was left up to the states. The unfortunate unintended result was that most states simply lowered their standards to beef up their numbers.

Others are opposed to the national standards for different reasons. Educators in Massachusetts are concerned that the national standards may be a step down for Massachusetts' students. Jim Stergios of the Pioneer Institute, which helped revise Massachusetts state benchmarks in the 1990s complains, "Ours in Massachusetts are much higher, so why should we adopt these?" Stergios raises an interesting argument. Ideally, the proposed standards should be the minimum, and any state interested in going above and beyond the national standards should be encouraged to do so.

The problem is that many states do not compare to Massachusetts academically. In 2007, Massachusetts ranked number 2 out of the 50 states, according to the *Morgan Quitno Press*. On the other hand, states like Arizona, ranked 50, Nevada, ranked 49, or even states in the middle that seem to be stuck in a lull, like Florida, ranked 29, even New York, ranked 16, may stand to benefit from major changes like these.

State standards have been an issue for many educators and policy makers as far back as the 1980s. The varied standards were exemplified by Tennessee test-takers in 2005, when 87 percent scored at or above average on the state Math test, but only 21 percent scored at or above average on the federal Math test.

However, increased standards are not the only solution to the current issues in education. If students



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are not held accountable for the new standards, the current apathy present among the student population, and among their parents, will persist. As long as school administrations hesitate in holding students back, students will not be inspired to increase their effort, nor will parents be encouraged to provide academic support to their children. Educators should not continue to be the scapegoat for poor performance when they are confronted with student apathy and laziness, while their hands are tied by lack of administrative and parental support. High standards coupled with natural negative consequences such as retention, or being expelled when applicable, will hopefully inspire students and parents to rise to the occasion. The teachers are not the only items in the equation.

The bottom line seems to be that failure on the part of the states has empowered an already increasingly larger federal government.

*Photo: Texas Gov. Rick Perry said Texas is not going to compete for up to \$700 million in federal stimulus money for education: AP Images*



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