Teaching and learning are the primary function of every school. If states and communities have reached agreement on what students are to learn and teachers are to teach, then the “rules of the game” are known ahead of time, and schools can concentrate on student achievement. However, such agreement on academic standards does not always occur in the United States.

This is why, in the late 1980s, mathematics teachers started a process to identify what students should know and be able to do in mathematics. It is also the reason why California, Kentucky, Vermont, and several other states have agreed on state curriculum guidelines, or education standards, which outline what children should know and be able to do.

President Bush and the nation’s governors moved the debate to the national level in 1989 by agreeing on national goals for education. Later, the Bush Administration funded a group of educators in each academic subject area to develop agreements on what students should know and be able to do at different grade levels. The idea was that if the national organizations of history, geography, science, social science, civics, and art teachers could agree among themselves what should be mastered by students – much like the mathematics teachers did – then local communities and states could draw on these agreements in fashioning their own standards and curricula.

Federal Education Programs Designed to Assist Standards-Based Reform

In 1994, the congress passed legislation proposed by President Clinton, which built on President Bush’s and the governors’ work by providing assistance to communities and states that choose to raise their education standards. Three laws were enacted during 1994 which will assist states and communities to improve their schools. These acts are the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Goals 2000: Educate America Act

The Goals 2000 program provides funds to states and school districts which choose to carry out standards-based education reform activities. This voluntary program is designed to be broad and flexible in order to accommodate all states and communities which may be in various stages of implementing their standards-based education reform programs. For example, a state which has not yet begun the standards setting process may want to use Goals 2000 funds to convene a broadly representative group to begin drafting state standards, possibly using some of the national standards as models. A state further along in the process may want to use Goals 2000 funds to develop curriculum aligned with the state standards or to develop assessments that will chart student progress.
toward achieving the standards. Finally, a state may want to use the Federal assistance to provide professional development for teachers so that the curriculum and assessments may be effectively implemented.

The vast majority of funding that a state receives under Goals 2000 must be provided to school districts for either the development or the implementation of local reform plans, including the development of curriculum, or for professional development activities related to standards-based education reform activities.

**Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965**

The new Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is closely tied to the Goals 2000 program, and has been substantially revised to complement standards-based education reform activities. The largest program under this Act, the Title I program (formerly Chapter 1), assists school districts to provide additional educational services to children who are not achieving at their grade level.

Title I has been revised to fit into standards-based reform by requiring education standards for students served by Title I programs. States must also demonstrate that they have developed or will develop assessments to measure the progress of Title I children in achieving the state standards. Additionally, if a state has developed Goals 2000 standards or assessments, or has developed academic standards and assessments for all children under another mechanism, then those standards and assessments must be used for Title I students.

Other ESEA programs have also been revised to further assist states and school districts implementing standards-based education reform. For example, the Eisenhower Professional Development program is expanded beyond mathematics and science to cover all core academic subjects, thus enabling states and school districts to help teachers learn how to teach in a standards-based school. Additionally, Innovative Education Programs (formerly Chapter 2) funds may also be used to support statewide reform efforts consistent with Goals 2000.

**School-to-Work Opportunities Act**

Another initiative closely tied to the Goals 2000 program is the School-to-Work Opportunities Act. Through work-connected education, high school students can achieve state education standards. Such programs combine academics, career exploration, and training at a work-place, thereby giving a real-world relevance to a student’s education. This Act encourages states to establish these programs as an alternative way to raise student expectations and achievement.

Consistent with states standards, a student who successfully completes a school-to-work program may receive both a high school diploma (or its equivalency) and a recognized skill certificate or certificate recognizing the successful completion of one or two years of postsecondary study. Students will benefit from school-to-work programs because they will be able to move directly into good first jobs, and employers will benefit because they will have a pool of well-trained applicants from which to select employees.
Under this Act, all states are eligible to receive funds for their own school-to-work systems. Competitive grants will also be provided to local partnerships between businesses and the schools and to high-poverty areas.

**Flexibility for Accountability**

A major theme of all three of these acts is a focus on reducing Federal and State rules and regulations governing education and training programs in exchange for increased student achievement. Under Goals 2000, the School-to-Work Act and the new ESEA, the Secretary of Education is given extensive authority to waive statutory or regulatory requirements. Waivers may be granted if the Secretary determines that the rule or regulation makes it difficult for a state, school district, or school to carry out standards-based education reform or a school-to-work program. Waivers may also be granted if the Secretary determines that removing the requirement would result in increased student achievement or in providing better instruction to students. State educational agencies submitting waiver requests must also agree to waive similar state requirements. Additionally, the Secretary of Labor is given similar waiver authority under the School-to-Work program.

**Conclusion**

In short, the new Goals 2000 seeks to encourage educational reform based on high academic standards for all children, the revised ESEA aims at high academic standards and supplemental assistance for disadvantaged students, and the new School-to-Work Act links high academic standards to programs preparing students to enter the work place. Although these laws enjoyed some bi-partisan support in the last Congress, they are under challenge in the new Congress elected in November of 1994. These elections put the Republican party in control of both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate for the first time in 40 years.

Although it is too early to forecast what changes may occur in these Federal programs, the states have proceeded ahead in standards development:

- As of May 1994, 42 states had either adopted or were developing content standards and 30 states had either adopted or were developing performance standards; and
- As of January 1995, 42 states are receiving Goals 2000 grants.

Therefore, even if Federal education laws are changed, many states are likely to continue with this reform.