re national standards the way to improve public schools?

In March, President Obama told the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce: “Our curriculum for eighth-graders is two full years behind top-performing countries. That’s a prescription for economic decline. And I refuse to accept that America’s children cannot rise to this challenge. They can, and they must, and they will meet higher standards in our time.”

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in an address the same month to the Council of Great City Schools, pushed for more rigorous standards. “In far too many places, including my state of Illinois, we have been lying to children,” he said. “The idea of 50 states doing their own thing just doesn’t make sense. We have to raise the bar.”

Our new leaders are not the first to endorse more challenging standards, even national or common standards. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton both called for national standards and tests, and both failed. Could the third try be a charm?

Failed attempts

American public schools are holding their own, compared to the past, but many other countries are making greater progress in important aspects of educational attainment. This comparative decline, combined with a general feeling that the U.S. is not the economic power that it once was, is resulting in national leaders in government and business calling for major improvements in the schools.

In the early 1990s, the first President Bush sought national education standards and tests. As part of that effort, his administration submitted legislation to the Democratic Congress to fund experimental schools. Congress expanded that bill to include aid to teachers and other assistance. In the end, the late Sen. Jesse Helms and other Republican conservatives filibustered the bill, and it died.

By executive action, Bush funded the creation of national standards, a move that led to great controversy over the reading and history components. The U.S. Senate even passed by a 99-1 vote a resolution expressing disapproval of the history standards, with the resolution’s Republican sponsor, Sen. Slade Gorton of Washington, labeling them an “ideologically driven, anti-Western monument to politically correct caricature.” Thus, the attempt at national standards did not come to much.

In the mid-1990s, President Clinton pushed through legislation encouraging states to develop their own academic standards as well as tests to measure student achievement. In 1997, he proposed a national test to measure the nation’s progress, as each state took a somewhat different approach to its own standards and tests.

Having a national test assumes we have national academic standards, because agreement is first needed on what should be known before a test can be administered. Congress—this time controlled by Republicans—rebuffed Clinton by placing restrictions on the use of federal funds for any national test. Much of the opposition was rooted in a fear of federal control of education. Thus, the idea of a national test and related standards was killed a second time.

Why seek standards?

Now, in 2009, national or common standards again have been raised as a way to improve the schools. This time, the Obama administration’s advocacy is preceded by support for the concept from the nation’s governors and state school superintendents.

Since those groups are guardians of state control of education, their support is indeed significant. The concept is also sup-

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ported by some business groups, the American Federation of Teachers (the nation’s second-largest teachers union), the Council of Great City Schools, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Arguments for national standards are persuasive. Reading and math, the subjects most discussed, are fields of knowledge where we should have national agreement. But, for the last decade, the states have defined proficiency in each area quite differently.

As President Obama noted in his address to the Hispanic Chamber, the current system of 50 different sets of benchmarks “means fourth-grade readers in Mississippi are scoring nearly 70 points lower than students in Wyoming—and they’re getting the same grade.”

“Eight of our states are setting their standards so low that their students may end up on par with roughly the bottom 40 percent of the world,” Obama said. “That’s inexcusable. That’s why I’m calling on states that are setting their standards far below where they ought to be to stop lowballing expectations for our kids. The solution to low test scores is not lowering standards—it’s tougher, clearer standards.”

Compelling words, but two precautions must be heeded if this momentum is to result in a different fate for national standards than they met in 1992 and 1997.

The first precaution

First, we must have a full explanation of what adopting national or common standards means. The word “standards” implies greater rigor, and so when Obama advocates for them, he does so while appealing for higher student achievement. But, what he and others are really advocating are three interconnected items:

• National or common academic standards defining what students should know.
• National or common tests to determine whether they know that content.
• National or common cutoff scores that determine the level of mastery that is expected.

A full discussion of these three interconnected items is important because the adoption of national or common academic standards alone could lead to the same situation that Obama bemoans. In a nation of common standards, different states could decide to emphasize different aspects of the required content knowledge, with some opting for a greater level and others for less.

Without common tests, the same disparity would exist, with some states choosing to test more advanced portions of the content and others choosing to test simpler knowledge. Even with the same standards and tests, states could opt for different definitions of proficiency, if there were an absence of agreement on cutoff scores (the particular score used to determine proficiency).

Once it is understood that those three factors are integral to the concept of common or national standards, the conversation turns to another series of questions:

• Who decides on the academic content?
• Who determines which tests are to be used?
• Who sets the proper cutoff score? Is it the federal government, the governors as a group, or some combination of governors, business people, state school superintendents, and educators?
• Who appoints such a group?
• How can you form a credible group that represents a variety of opinions about academic subjects and types of tests, and still have agreements reached?
• Is there a guarantee that there will be agreement on high standards instead of “more realistic” objectives?

To have a good policy, all of those decisions must be made, and simple advocacy for more challenging or common standards does not do the trick.

The second precaution

The second precaution, which is political, grows out of the first. Two previous attempts at national standards and tests died when Congress showed opposition. The same could happen this time.

Even though Congress is controlled by Democrats, sentiments against testing and against federal control of schools are strong because of opposition to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Rep. George Miller (D-Cal.), chair of the House education committee, has called NCLB “the most tainted brand in America”—and he was one of the legislation’s prime sponsors.

Much of this opposition to NCLB is because it is test-driven accountability that too often leads to “teaching to the test” and to some narrowing of the curriculum to tested subjects. Could the same thing happen with national or common standards and tests?

It’s far more prudent for the Obama administration to let the sentiments for common standards come from state governors, state school superintendents, and others. Let them take the lead and flesh out the details of how to achieve a heightening of rigor in the public schools.

Some federal funds could be used to have states experiment with different approaches in defining content knowledge, what types of tests to use (as Duncan has proposed), where to place proficiency levels, and who should decide what they are. It is best for the federal government to be once removed, however.

President Obama is certainly bold in proposing national health care reform, national environmental controls, and now challenging education standards. He might want to let others lead on this part of school reform with a helpful federal assist, while he worries about those other pressing national needs.

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