

STATEWIDE ACADEMIC STANDARDS FOR AND ASSESSMENTS OF STUDENTS - BACKGROUND MEMORANDUM

Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 4042 directs the Legislative Council to study the feasibility and desirability of developing and implementing statewide academic standards for and assessments of elementary and high school students and a system of accountability at the school and school district level.

The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

The above-cited quote is taken from a 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education--*A Nation at Risk*. The report, which is viewed by many as the initiating event of the modern standards movement, prompted widespread concerns about the educational preparation of this country's youth. Reacting to the report and the concerns it raised, then-President Bush and the nation's governors met at the Charlottesville Education Summit and proceeded to establish six broad goals for education which were to be reached by the year 2000. Among the six goals were:

- That American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
- That American students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

The goals were again articulated in President Bush's 1990 State of the Union Address. In response, Congress established the National Education Goals Panel and the National Council on Education Standards and Testing and charged these two groups with addressing unprecedented questions such as: What is the subject matter to be addressed? What types of assessments should be used? What standards of performance should be set?

National subject matter organizations began to develop standards in their respective areas. By the mid-1990s, 48 states were involved in some level of standards development.

Americans . . . expect strict standards to govern construction of buildings, bridges, highways, and tunnels; shoddy work would put lives at risk. They expect stringent standards to

protect their drinking water, the food they eat, and the air they breathe . . . Standards are created because they improve the activity of life. *National Standards in American Education: A Citizens Guide* (1995).

Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch asserts that just as standards improve the daily lives of Americans, so too will they improve the effectiveness of American education. "Standards can improve achievement by clearly defining what is to be taught and what kind of performance is expected." *Id.* A number of recent surveys indicate that most Americans strongly support higher standards that are clear and specific. To date, however, no consensus has emerged with respect to what form standards should take nor how they should be used. The definitional confusion can be illustrated using the following three standards from the same document:

- Students use estimation to check the reasonableness of results.
- Students recognize and appreciate geometry in their world.
- Students use mathematics in other curriculum areas.

The first example describes a skill or an ability that a person might use to solve a real-life problem. When at the gas pump, a person might use estimation to determine whether the total generally squares with the price per gallon multiplied by the number of gallons pumped. The second example does not describe a commonly used skill. Not many day-to-day situations require an ability to recognize and appreciate geometry. The second example is more of a curricular goal--a perspective that a student might acquire as a consequence of successfully completing a study of mathematics. The third example is not a student knowledge or skill but rather a recommendation regarding the development of the curriculum to work in concert with mathematics instruction.

Any existing confusion or disagreement regarding the form and use of standards has not served to either slow the development and implementation of standards nor their inherent offshoots--assessments and accountability. Forty-eight states now test their students and 36 publish annual report cards. Nineteen states publicly rate the performance of all their schools or at least identify low-performing schools. Sixteen states have the power to close, take over, or overhaul chronically failing schools. Fourteen states provide monetary rewards for individual schools based on performance, and 19 states require students to pass state tests as a condition of high school graduation.

Discussions regarding assessments and accountability also have inherent challenges. What is the best way to measure student performance? Should a high school senior be denied a diploma if the student does not pass a state test? What should be done with a school that consistently fails to show improvement?

At least some observers divide states into two broad camps in their approaches to accountability: Those that think schools and students will improve if they are given enough resources, support, information, and encouragement; and those that think they need a substantial, external push. *Education Week*, January 11, 1999.

Texas epitomizes the hard-line approach. Schools and districts can receive cash awards for exemplary student performance but are subject to intervention and ultimately takeover if achievement falls below a minimum standard. High school students must pass state tests to graduate. Teacher preparation schools lose their accreditation if too many of their graduates fail teacher licensing exams. For the first time last year, an evaluation system linked teachers' appraisals to schoolwide test scores.

Connecticut relies on a more low-key approach. The state publishes report cards on every school and includes the schools' performances on statewide tests. It also gives grants to districts that have shown substantial progress over time. There are, however, no explicit sanctions for schools that fail to make progress. Connecticut has drafted new standards for teacher licensure, raised pay for beginning teachers, and financed a teacher mentoring program. Texas and Connecticut are two of six states whose fourth and eighth graders have shown recent improvements in their National Assessment of Educational Progress mathematics scores.

North Dakota has already developed curriculum standards for English language arts and mathematics. Standards for science, art, social studies, and health are expected to be completed by the fall of 1999 or early 2000. The next round of standards development is slated to address world languages, physical education, and technology. Performance standards have been developed for English language arts. The performance standards for mathematics are expected to be completed by the fall of 1999. Performance assessments have been completed for English language arts and for mathematics.

In North Dakota the use of standards is voluntary. A school district may opt to implement the state standards, to develop its own standards, or to proceed without any standards. However, despite the voluntary nature of existing standards, there is both constitutional and statutory authority for the development and implementation of standards at the state level. The Constitution of North Dakota Article VIII, Section 2, directs the Legislative Assembly to provide for a "uniform system of free public schools throughout the state" and Section 4 directs the Legislative Assembly to "take such other steps as may be necessary to prevent illiteracy" and "secure a reasonable degree of uniformity in course of study" The North Dakota Supreme Court has stated that the "Legislature, pursuant to constitutional authority, and excepting as restricted by constitutional limitations, possesses the power to regulate the educational system and public schools of this state and to prescribe the courses of study in such schools" (see *State ex rel. Langer v. Totten*, 175 N.W. 563 (1919)). The Legislative Assembly has delegated to the Superintendent of Public Instruction the duty to supervise the development of content standards and to supervise the assessment of students (see North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-02-04).