



## Education

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# Julia Steiny: New Common Core Standards are coming, but is testing really the answer to schools' failures?

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Brace yourselves, parents, because the Common Core Standards are coming at your child with surprising speed. And in a couple of years will also come a whole new slew of tests to make sure your kid has reached the new core standards.

All states already have statewide academic standards. And they have statewide assessments to test those standards. Is getting new ones our most pressing problem? If not, how did it come to pass that education's accountability systems are being retooled, again? It's a huge undertaking.

The last big retooling started in 2001 with the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act mandating all states to test all children in grades 3-8 and once in high school.

To make tests, you need standards, which is to say goals or benchmarks that kids should reach by a certain age or grade. For example, a Common Core Standard for social studies says that by the end of grade 8, a child should be fully ready to "analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic." Psychometricians develop tests so children can prove they can meet that standard.

In 2001, most states hadn't built data systems that could reliably report on how kids were doing academically. NCLB had the great virtue of shining light on the plight of kids previously ignored, the special needs and low-income students. The law's makers hoped that once schools' academic deficiencies were publicly exposed, schools would fix them. The implicit presumption was that publicly naming the laggard schools and districts would surely light a fire under a lazy, under-performing industry.

NCLB allowed states to create their own tests and standards, so states set wildly different standards. For example,

according to state standards, the kids in Mississippi are more proficient than kids in Massachusetts. But the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), a gold-standard test administered in every state, tells the opposite story. The high standards set in Massachusetts inspired or prodded schools to push their kids so that the state now routinely ranks best in the nation for both grades 4 and 8, in English and math. Poor Mississippi is always among the worst.

So standards do matter. Ambitions matter.

But even with the differing state standards, there's no problem identifying which schools and districts have academic problems. NCLB, NAEP and other efforts collect tons of data, if we care to analyze it. We didn't really need more. What we need are solutions to the problems the data find.

Educators look enviously abroad to the international tests on which American kids, especially the high school students, usually bomb. Those nations that outscore the American kids — Finland and Singapore are routinely cited — have national standards and national tests. Ah, so what America needs are national standards and tests. National tests would eliminate the state variations, especially the pathetically low standards, and would prod and inspire students to compete favorably with their international peers.

No one trusted the U.S. government to bring the states to consensus on national standards. So state-level chiefs of two agencies, the Council of Chief School Officers and the National Governors Association, took on the task so that the Common Core Standards would not be federal, but state-driven. Fueled with cash from the Gates Foundation, they hired experts to build standards based on those international tests that make American students look bad.

But then the story jumps to light speed. The feds, specifically Education Secretary Arne Duncan and the Department of Education, decided to give states extra points in the fierce competition for federal Race to the Top money. States quickly signed on. OK, so the feds didn't develop the Common Core, but they definitely put big gusts in its sails. And so, with the exception of Alaska, Texas and Virginia, states either have or are expected to adopt the new standards.

Now, let's stipulate that the new standards and tests will be much better than the old ones, though the subject is hotly debated. The education industry has gotten more sophisticated at building academic foundations. Judge for yourself at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

But here's the problem: After almost 10 years of NCLB, America's lowestperforming schools are more desperate than ever for radical intervention. Scores on the SAT, ACT and NAEP have largely been flat or slightly declining. Most painfully, the National Center on Education Statistics recently released data showing that the graduation rate actually went down in 2007-'08 (the most recent data), from 70 percent to 68 percent.

So while it's true that the other academic super-star countries have national standards, they also have many, if not all, of the following other supports:

- Intact and extended families that support socially healthy kids.
- Far lower rates of drug use, teen pregnancy, violence and poverty.
- Government-provided daycare and health care.

So might we be looking in the wrong place for solutions? Are we diagnosing the problem to death? Critique and blame are easy. Interventions and solutions are hard. We only have so much time, energy and money.

So to me, the Common Core initiative is starting to feel like NCLB on steroids.

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