

A Distraction from Real Education Reform

The emphasis on common standards is drawing attention away from bigger problems

By [ERIC HANUSHEK](#)

October 28, 2013

Policymakers and reform advocates alike have rallied around introducing a set of national content standards, suggesting that this will jump-start the stagnating achievement of U.S. students. As history clearly indicates, simply calling for students to know more is not the same as ensuring they will learn more. Discussions of the Common Core standards are actually sucking all of the air out of the room, distracting attention from any serious efforts to reform our schools.

To be sure, it is a real problem when students in one state learn very different things than those in other states, and in particular when many students lack the skills needed for our modern economy. We really do have a national labor market, implying that significant numbers of our population end up living and working in a state with different needs than the one where they were born and went to school. The presumption behind having national standards (whether voluntary or coerced) is that having a clearer and more consistent statement of learning objectives across states will tend to lessen the problem of students bringing heterogeneous skills to the labor market. However, the fundamental problem is lack of minimal skills and not the heterogeneity of skills per se.

[\[Read Mitchell Chester: Common Core Standards Tackle Gaps in the U.S. Education System\]](#)

We currently have very different standards across states, and experience from the states provides little support for the argument that simply declaring more clearly what we want children to learn will have much impact. Proponents of national standards point to Massachusetts: strong standards and top results. But California, a second state noted for its high learning standards, balances Massachusetts: strong standards and bottom results. In other words, what really matters is what is actually taught in the classroom. Just setting a different goal – even if backed by intensive professional development, new textbooks, etc. – has not historically had much influence as we look across state outcomes.

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The one possible complementary gain from the move to national standards is that the assessments of performance might become better. It is widely recognized that the current tests used to judge outcomes within individual states tend to be quite weak. If the new standards lead to better tests – something that might come out of the two testing consortia funded by the Department of Education – then we might have the basis for improved school policies. But that cannot be used as a primary justification for the Common Core standards.

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The continuing emphasis on Common Core is often interpreted as indicating that these standards are a really big deal in school reform. The data suggest otherwise. Indeed, moving to these new, untested tests may make it impossible to continue to hold schools accountable for the results. At the very least, it will lead to a halting of state accountability programs even though these programs have had a consistently positive impact on student performance.

One might interpret the emphasis on developing the Common Core curriculum as an effort to divert debate away from more intractable fights over bigger reform ideas like improved teacher evaluations, expanded school choice or enhanced accountability systems. While I support better learning standards, we cannot be distracted from more fundamental reform of our schools. The future economic well-being of the United States is entirely dependent on improving the academic achievement and skills of today's students, but Common Core will do little to ensure this.



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