

E Pluribus Unum?

Two longtime school reformers debate the merits of the national curriculum

The push for a national curriculum is gaining momentum as reformers press states to acknowledge “world class” benchmarks for student achievement. The topic had been dormant since Clinton-era efforts to promote “voluntary national standards” yielded little more than charges of political correctness. With No Child Left Behind now stirring concerns about disparate state assessments and sometimes incoherent state standards, has the time come for the new president and Congress to press forward on a national curriculum? Chester E. Finn Jr., *Education Next* senior editor and longtime champion of standards-based reform, says unequivocally “Yes!” and lays out his vision of what it should look like and how it should work. Deborah Meier, founder of New York City’s Central Park East Schools and author of *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*, is equally vehement in arguing “No!” while providing her own set of strategies for improving our nation’s schools.

EDUCATION NEXT: Should the United States have a national curriculum?

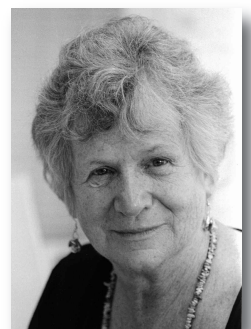
Chester Finn: Absolutely, positively yes, provided that we properly define “curriculum,” and ensure that the states’ participation remains voluntary. In the core subjects of English, math, science, and history (including geography and civics, never say

“social studies”), there is absolutely no reason why we ought not ask all young Americans to learn most of the same things while in the elementary and secondary grades. That doesn’t mean all teachers should follow identical lesson plans, that everybody needs to read the same poems and plays, or that a rigid “scope and sequence” should be clamped onto all schools and school systems. But the basic content of, say, 4th-grade

Education Next
talks to
CHESTER FINN
and
DEBORAH MEIER



CHESTER FINN



DEBORAH MEIER

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English or 6th-grade math or 8th-grade science should be the same from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon. And that content should be married to national standards of “proficiency” in these subjects at these grade levels, and joined to national exams by which we determine how well and by whom this is being accomplished.

The curriculum should cover grades K–12 and leave plenty of room for state, local, and building- and classroom-level variation and augmentation. Particularly in grades 11 and 12, it would make sense to offer (as high schools do today) some choice among courses in science, history, and English; one English class might focus on drama, another on creative writing. A charter or magnet school might specialize in art and music, while another concentrates on science and math, in addition to the academic core.

One way to picture the core is the “1,000 question” approach, which blends standards, curriculum, and assessment. Here’s a simple version: The testing body (perhaps a consortium of states, possibly a spin-off from the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP]) would publish—this is all totally transparent—maybe 1,000 possible exam questions dealing with, say, 7th-grade science. A generous portion would be open-response and deep-thought queries that probe a student’s ability to make sense of what he or she is learning, not just parrot it back or fill in bubbles. The national end-of-course exam in 7th-grade science would consist of a subset of those questions. Any student able to answer all 1,000 would likely get a perfect score on the exam.

But 1,000 is obviously too many to drill students on, so effective teaching of 7th-grade science would cover most if not all of the subject matter spanned by those questions. The teacher would be free to cover it however she likes—any sequence, any course structure, any instructional materials. If the state or school system or charter school wants to systematize this (and assist its teachers) by setting forth a scope and

sequence, textbooks, units, midcourse assessments, and such, that’s fine, too.

Obviously, the testing body needs to ensure that there’s a logical, sequential relationship between the 7th-grade science questions and the 8th-grade questions and so forth. Indeed, the questions would surely overlap in part—and would cumulate, over the 13 grades, to a solid science education.

That’s pretty much the way the best extant national curriculum works, at least through grade 8. Of course I’m thinking of the Core Knowledge Curriculum developed by University of Virginia professor and *Cultural Literacy* author E. D. Hirsch. (Alas, it doesn’t yet include the high school grades.) Hirsch says it’s supposed to occupy roughly half of the school day. That feels about right to me. Maybe even two-thirds.

The national curriculum would cover only content, not pedagogy or instruction. For that we depend on professionals, and we assume and expect that they will differ from one another in their skills, enthusiasms, preferences, and values. One school might rely heavily on “virtual” instruction, for example, making extensive use of Internet offerings and opportunities. Others may team teach several subjects via two or three teachers who like working together and whose subjects lend themselves to blending. Still others will resemble the traditional self-contained-classroom schools of yesteryear. This is as it should be. The United States has some 54 million schoolkids, 3 million teachers, and 100,000 schools. They differ in many ways and ought to. But today the absence of a common core is a critical handicap, particularly for the neediest kids, weakest teachers, and least advantaged schools. Equity demands that we rectify this.

Most successful modern nations have something akin to a national curriculum, whether explicitly or through their exam systems. Japan has “national curriculum standards” and insists that individual schools use them as the basis for planning what they will actually teach and how they teach it. Singapore publishes syllabi for each major course or subject, usually divided

between primary and secondary. England spells it all out in considerable detail, and France famously standardizes even its lesson plans. To my knowledge, no two nations do this in quite the same way—and some of the other “federal” countries, such as Australia and Canada, are still working on how to do it at all. In Canada, for example, several provincial education ministries have voluntarily joined together to develop “pan-Canadian” curricula, starting with science.

Rather than starting with a federal mandate, a consortium of states and private organizations (such as some combination of Achieve, the state school “chiefs,” and the governors) could develop the curricula and tests, ideally with initial support from major national foundations. States would then be free to join if they like. Possibly we’ll wind up with more than one consortium, and states would have choices among them. Picture the Southern Regional Education Board spearheading the second of these. Maybe the four small New England states that have already joined forces on testing will become the starting point for a third. (The Brits do something like this with their multiple testing bodies.) Uncle Sam’s role is to encourage movement in this direction, probably by giving states that join such consortia some breaks on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its successors, perhaps a bit more money, perhaps automatic approval of their standards and tests without further inspection or negotiation.

I don’t expect every state will join, at least not soon, so the federal government’s additional responsibility is to maintain NAEP as the external auditor of all states. We’ll find out over time whether kids in schools and states that join in the common curricula and exams do better (or worse) than in those that maintain their curricular independence.

Deborah Meier: I have five concerns with Chester Finn’s proposal for a national curriculum.

First, what’s (positively) special about the U.S.A. is that it doesn’t have an official line, above all, on ideological and intellectual

matters. This is part of our unusual history and reflects tolerance for diverse origins and beliefs. It has always been a struggle, never quite won, but it is a strength that is always tempting for us to abandon. Doing so would be at a cost we would someday rue.

Second, there is no way in which a federally approved curriculum can avoid the trap of selection bias—no matter who might design it. Even if I were to design my ideal history curriculum, whatever I decided to spend more time on or (God forbid) omit altogether will be influenced by my biases. The sources I require my students to be familiar with; the differences of opinion I tolerate versus those I feel compelled to correct; how I “simplify” without losing the most important truths—all these are fraught with inevitable biases. What I believe everyone must know may be different from what you believe. Do we vote on “the truth” and then put a camera in each classroom to ensure it’s carried out?

I truly cannot imagine how supporters of a federally approved curriculum solve these issues. It’s not merely political bias, mind you, but academic and intellectual views that may or may not have political implications. Historians at my graduate school differed on whether history was a science or a field of humanities, for example. So they offered both! Not an insignificant difference of opinion. Biologists and physicists may have different views about which science is more critical, and within each field there are controversies about the nature of science and which scientific ideas are more important.

A panel of righteous and well-educated people is not an answer. So, you might ask, are multiple bodies of righteous and well-educated people any better? Yes, because it leaves the door open for more controversy; offers escape hatches for unexpected views; and leaves contenders, alternatives, and authority in many hands.

Third, attempting to avoid bias by including everyone’s biases only generates more problems. Precisely in order to avoid charges of bias, the tendency of textbooks

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(and curricula and tests) is already to include snippets of all viewpoints, thus becoming long-winded and boring. The effort of the national science community a decade or so ago to outline what every 18-year-old should know about science was so extensive that it invited either rote memorization (in defiance of the heart of science instruction being recommended) or studying nothing but science in order to cover it all. The science teachers at my old high school admitted that they were only secure in their knowledge of one or at most two of the fields covered. What part of the fascinating study of mathematics is a “must” for 18-year-olds? What knowledge of music or art?

The focus on testing also has an interesting side effect: it makes it hard for wise educators to take advantage of the teachable moment in their concern to stick with the stuff that will appear on the test. For example, teachers should be able to use the recent election as a moment for understanding our political system or the financial crisis to examine how money and finance works.

My fourth problem is that any curriculum leads—as Finn acknowledges—to assessment issues. My colleague Diane Ravitch suggests we decouple the two ideas. I think, as Finn does, that the one inevitably follows the other. At that point the best intentions of a good curriculum come screeching to a halt. In reality, the test becomes the curriculum, and the scoring guide for the test becomes the bible.

Of course, we can do our best to develop tests that are more nuanced, that require strong written and oral exposition, opportunities to defend one’s ideas, to think critically and persuasively, etc. But it’s highly unlikely, almost utopian, to imagine we could do it on a national scale, and far more likely are precisely the kinds of assessment tools that undermine a strong education.

But my greatest concern is none of the above!

I’m concerned that all of this is a way to avoid a real conversation about the purposes of public education and then to acknowledge our ignorance about “ensuring” success. Our own children are worth

more than money can buy, but no parent can offer a guarantee.

Whether the first discussion might ever lead to a substantial consensus I don’t know. What math must we “all” know, and why? Like music, mathematics is a subject of beauty, as well as a practical study of import. But which aspects of math must we all—as citizens—have at our fingertips regardless of our vocational goals? In this debate not only experts in math must have a voice.

So, too, with debating what literature is indispensable. How tempting it is to add a little bit of everything to please all camps rather than engaging with a few works in great depth. The development of a “taste” for literature—fiction and nonfiction alike—is hardly something we’re good at teaching. Not to mention the dilemma about how to teach literacy of the new media that will constitute the bulk of the next generation’s “reading.”

Perhaps we can reach agreement that one purpose stands apart from the rest—that the indispensable core purpose of a public education system is that it prepares people for public life in a democracy, with all that this implies. But even that would be far from settling matters. How we define democracy, and what constitutes the intellectual underpinnings of a democracy are open to endless discourse. But it’s the “litmus” test.

I also know that the second question—how to make it work—is equally knotty and that no one has a monopoly on the right answers.

EN: What should be taught, in your view, and how will educators figure out effective ways to do this?

CF: If I were king, I’d probably install Core Knowledge in the primary and middle grades and the International Baccalaureate (IB) in high schools. I don’t think it’s any coincidence that the most highly respected high school courses in America today are Advanced Placement (AP) and IB courses, which have quite a lot of nationwide prescription as to their content. (It’s true that AP shuns a prescribed “syllabus,” but veteran AP teachers are clear as to what they must

cover in order to prepare their pupils for those exams—and the College Board isn't shy about clueing in new teachers.)

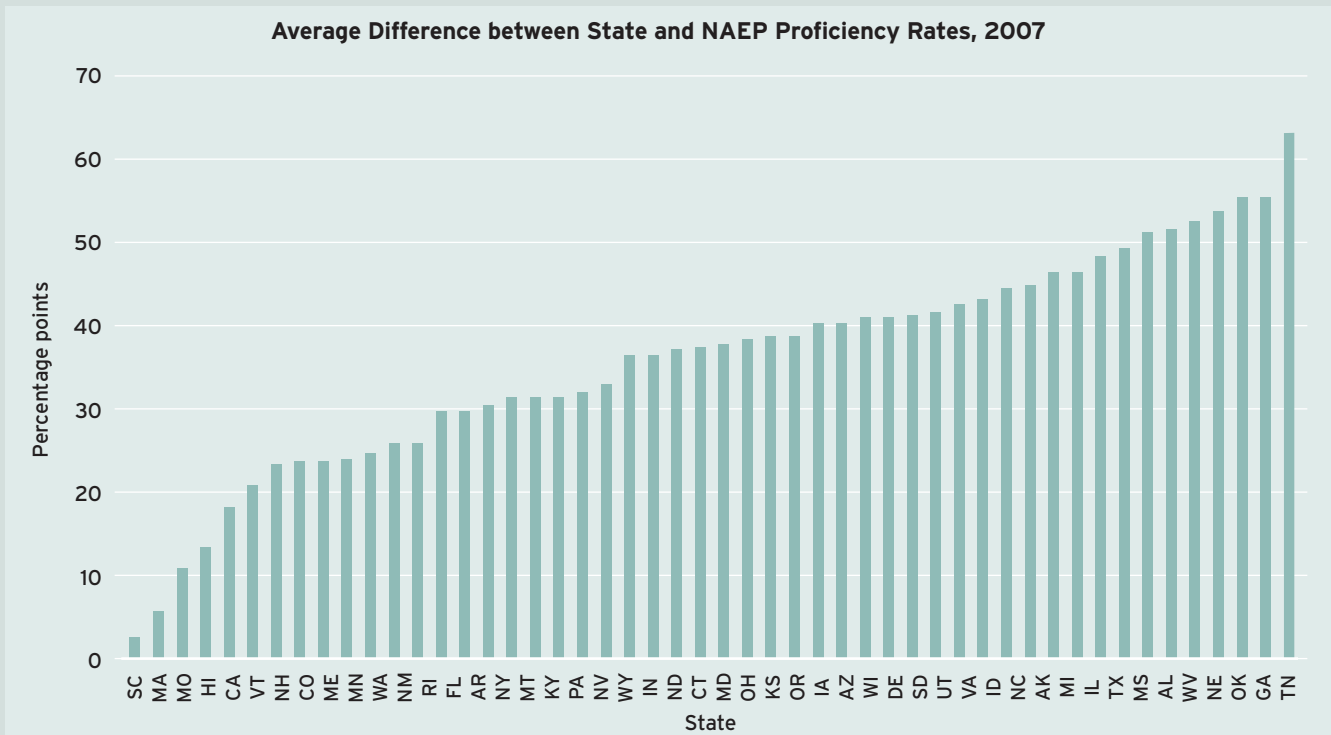
With these standards and assessments in place, the question reasonably arises, where do educators find the curricular materials that best help them tackle the standards? Some will develop their own or pull them off the Internet. I think we can be confident that major publishing companies will develop and market commercial versions. I'd favor staging a competition among prospective curriculum suppliers, maybe have a jury evaluate and grade their products. Perhaps then we could make all their products available to states, districts, and

schools, and let the market select among them. Wikipedia-style (or Zagat-style) open-source rating systems will enable product users to rate and comment on what works best in what circumstances. Having a national curriculum doesn't mean we need confine ourselves to just one option.

Textbook publishers (and their modern-day successors, such as virtual-curriculum developers) will align their products with the national standards rather than with the whims of California and Texas. (That assumes California and Texas join the multistate ventures, of course.) The total amount of testing should diminish and, if it doesn't, it will have to be better

All Over the Map (Figure 1)

Standards for proficiency in Massachusetts and South Carolina are nearly as rigorous as those established for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), while Tennessee and Georgia, for example, set the bar much lower for their students.



Note: The chart shows the difference between the percentage of students (4th and 8th grade) deemed proficient on the 2007 state tests (math and reading) and the percentage of students in those grades deemed proficient on the 2007 NAEP tests. The closer the value is to 0, the more similar were the results on the two sets of tests and the more rigorous the state's standards.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics; Individual state web sites and departments of education

*Five “habits of mind”
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academic disciplines:*

*(1) How do you know
what you know?*

*(2) Are there other
perspectives?*

*(3) Are there patterns
there?*

*(4) Could it be
otherwise?*

*(5) Why does it
matter?*

—DM

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aligned to the end-of-course expectations and exams that states will administer. Commercial tests such as the Stanford and Iowa may evolve into something more like formative assessments meant to assist teachers rather than be used for external accountability.

Teacher preparers and professional developers, and those who try to set standards for them (e.g., National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards), will need to take seriously the obligation to align their expectations for instructors with the common expectations for students. All this is mostly good—and, yes, a little bit risky, if the national standards go squishy or the national curriculum falls into the hands of zealots. That’s why it needs to stay voluntary, so any jurisdiction that can’t abide it need not stick with it.

A big grown-up country in the 21st century needs common (and ambitious!) curricular standards for all its children, at least in core subjects, and it needs common assessments, too. If we’ve learned anything from the NCLB experience (and its antecedent “Goals 2000” and “Improving America’s Schools” legislation), it’s that having these things vary from state to state produces mediocrity, cacophony, waste, duplication, and confusion (see Figure 1). Survey after survey makes clear that (if the question is asked correctly) parents favor national standards and tests. Instead of letting “That’s the first step toward a national curriculum” serve as a conversation stopper, let’s deploy it as a conversation starter. Let’s acknowledge that “curriculum,” loosely defined, is *supposed* to be aligned with standards and appraised by assessments.

Let me note, finally, that I’m unimpressed by Meier’s “habits of mind” alternative to content (see below). It’s wonderfully seductive, but the serious psychologists with whose work I’m acquainted (see, for example, “Reframing the Mind,” *check the facts*, Summer 2004) don’t put much stock in this Howard Gardner–originated proposition that youngsters can learn skills devoid of content. It’s the absence of essential core content from her view of schooling that lies at the heart of our curricular disagreement.

EN: What other options are there for bringing our nation’s public education system to a higher level?

DM: At the schools I led for nearly 40 years, as part of the work of the Coalition of Essential Schools, we spent a lot of time exploring the “why” questions and developing an approach that was aimed at answering them. This discussion was at the heart of the school’s existence and included all parties to it. Like Coalition founder Ted Sizer, we figured if we could grab hold of that, we’d see how much else we could teach and, more importantly, how everything we taught and did helped to reinforce “the essentials,” influencing not only our students’ hours in school (or doing homework), but every waking hour of their lives. We even saw misbehavior as an opening, an opportunity to teach such habits and not an obstacle to it.

We boiled it down to five “habits of mind” that we claimed (somewhat pompously) underlay all the academic disciplines as well as the mental and social disciplines needed for living in a complex modern society: (1) How do you know what you know? What’s the nature of your evidence? How credible is it? Compared to what? (2) Are there other perspectives? What affects our points of view? How otherwise might this be seen? (3) Are there patterns there? A sequence? A theory of cause and effect? (4) Could it be otherwise? What would happen if? Supposing that x had not happened? and (5) Who cares? Why does it matter? As you can see, they blend into each other and, in a way, just define a mind state of skepticism and informed empathy. It suggests having to take seriously the idea that one might be wrong, and so could others. We added “habits of work” like meeting deadlines and being on time and “habits of the heart” like caring about one’s impact on others.

We developed rubrics that spelled out specific formats in which students could demonstrate their proficiency in each discipline. The diploma from our high school rested on convincing an internal and external evaluation committee that the student met the standards set by the faculty. Students’

oral presentations and defenses were based on written essays and other performances in each of the major disciplines as well as subjects of the student's and faculty's choice.

Could the five habits of mind become a national curriculum? Democratic habits of the sort we laid out at Central Park East can be taught in the process of learning math with its powerful logical habits, its attentiveness to patterns, as well as its multiple approaches to getting "right answers." They can be taught in science, with its scrupulous attention to detail, specificity, and evidence, not to mention its humility in the face of the unknown. They can be taught in literature through our capacity to empathize with otherwise unacceptable protagonists, connecting us to people and worlds we otherwise would or could never choose. They can be taught in the way one handles discipline!

Isn't democratic culture best served if all citizens are accustomed to such habitual

ways of thinking, not just knowing how to do various things? I know how to do a lot of things—like putting my keys in the right compartment in my purse—that I don't practice, especially in times of stress. What would it mean to teach so well that we'd hang on to such "habits of mind" in times of stress? Are our five a fair representation of what democratic intellectual habits amount to? Fair questions.

A school community that holds itself to high standards must risk such everlasting debate among, at the very least, the adults in charge and ideally all members of the community. But nothing I've said works if it's simply adopted to try to "cover" the likely contents of a test with which ordinary teachers, families, and students cannot argue or differ. The habit of mind of "supposing that" is best learned from adults who are in a position to choose, revise, and rethink their own viewpoints in the presence of the young. ■

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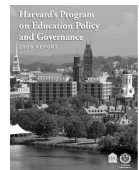
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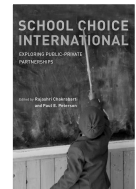
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Rajashri Chakrabarti and Paul E. Peterson, eds.
MIT Press, 2008

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