

An Assessment by
Hoover Institution's
Koret Task Force
on K-12 Education

American Education in 2030



**Standards and
Competitive Rigor**

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Today, in 2030, we benefit from K-12 schools in which academics are rigorous but not stultifyingly uniform. We have a half dozen national academic standards that schools and districts can choose from. Today's pluralism seems a natural evolution to us now—going all the way back to the federal push for state standards and accountability in President Bill Clinton's Improving America's School Act of 1994 and President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—and continuing to evolve in the aftermath of President Barack Obama's ill-fated project of creating one set of national standards. But that evolution might have been difficult to predict two decades ago.

Twenty years ago, in 2010, the American public was understandably worried that academic rigor in the public schools was in danger. But improving a public agency such as a school system had always been notoriously difficult. Whereas the strength of product or service in, say, the computer industry is determined by competitive pressures, a public school doesn't directly put prices on its services or face consumers who can make or break the enterprise.

American public schools are public agencies and creatures of the states, though operated at the district level by local superintendents chosen by elected local school boards. The national government has collected data about education since the 1860s and provided selective support to local school districts and, beginning in the 1960s, to schools with children from poor households.

Background

To understand what has happened during the last twenty years (2010-30) of school reform, we need to look at what led up to those decades. Reformers had tried, beginning in the 1980s until the first decade of the twenty-first century, four approaches to improving academic rigor:

- Traditional conservatives proposed agitating at the local level for a rigorous curriculum and battling against soft curricula and content-light teaching. At the same time, they tended to oppose all reform efforts at the state and, particularly, the national level.
- Liberals called for more money for the existing system.
- Those reformers who called for standards and accountability drew up lists at the state or national level of topics the students should know at each grade level and then had the students tested on the material. Those reformers hoped to spur rigorous teaching of academic topics through public scrutiny of schools' test results
- Those reformers who called for parental choice sought structural changes such as opportunity scholarships and deregulated public schools (charter schools) to rescue children from failing schools, empower parents, and apply competitive pressure on public schools to perform better (again, through the rigorous teaching of academics).

Conservatives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries spoke about the need to return education decision making to the local/district level. They had opposed Progressive Education from its inception; in the 1960s conservative California state superintendent Max Rafferty stressed phonics and “back to basics.”

Nonetheless, traditional conservatives were unable before 2010 to mount grassroots pressure for high-quality public schools. Conservatives episodically succeeded in toning down efforts to upend traditional culture and mandate learn-through-play teaching. But there were no significant, long-term conservative organizations promoting solid education at the district level.

Despite public opinion in favor of academic excellence that came to the fore in the aftermath of the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, there was no sustained grassroots, district- or state-level movement for content-rich academic curriculum in the period from the 1980s to end of the George W. Bush administration (2009). This is not to disparage either the phonics efforts of 1950s and 1990s or the solid math efforts of the 1970s and 1990s. But these were episodic, not sustained, efforts.

Adding to the problems of the proponents of content-rich curriculum, local school districts had been designed by Progressive-Era reformers in the early twentieth century (through off-year elections, nonpartisanship, and boundaries not coterminous with those of cities and towns) to block grassroots political influence.

Also, liberals were able to obtain, during the 1980s, 1990s, and the first decade of the 2000s, large increases in spending on the public schools both through extraordinary— and misguided—court rulings and through ordinary state budgetary processes. But all that money by itself did not notably improve academic achievement.

Proponents of vouchers and charter schools made some progress in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Charters expanded slowly, but the education establishment curtailed their growth via state caps and jealous local boards. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court deemed vouchers constitutional; vouchers then made their way into Milwaukee, Cleveland, and, briefly, Florida. But the Democratic-controlled U.S. Congress defunded Washington, D.C.’s voucher program—despite proof that it was successful, and the Obama administration went along (for political reasons) with this dashing of parents’ hopes. After that, any expansion of vouchers and tax credits stalled.

Recent History (2010-2030)

In the early years of the Obama administration, the standards-and-accountability movement divided: one part pursued national standards, the other, teacher quality and school turnarounds. The proponents of national standards found the existing state standards uneven in quality and hoped that tough national standards could be

combined with creative energy from the local states and districts under a regime of federal flexibility.

But the national standards promoted generic skills in English (with little relation to content knowledge), were too easy in math in the high school years (many states felt they weren't ready for Singapore-level rigor), and mandated Progressive Education teaching methods (because of Ed School influences and the ideologies of leaders of subject-matter groups). Many Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives bitterly opposed the national standards because of their entrenched progressivism and perceived violations of the constitutional principle of federalism. Those Republicans were particularly hostile to national educational standards because of bad feelings arising from the polarized fight over national medical care in 2009-10.

Some said that "there are dangers inherent in setting unitary national standards in subjects such as history and English, where people hold divergent views. Americans don't want a distant government agency settling historical debates and giving official sanction to certain ideas, values, and policies, where the issues are debatable."*

The Obama administration generated further tension by requiring word-for-word adoption of the hastily prepared national standards and disappointing standards-and-accountability reformers by relaxing performance expectations, deadlines, and other accountability measures. Critics called the new standards "command-and-control instead of accountability for results."

The hoped-for federal flexibility on operations did not come about because members of Congress wanted initiatives that they could claim credit for, needing categorical programs, red tape, and regulatory rules to ensure the persistence of these distinctive efforts.

The national standards reformers were unable to promote rigor in the standards because they didn't have the support of the entire standards-and-accountability movement, whereas the education establishment had plenty of forces to deploy on all fronts in its efforts to promote vagueness, laxness, and progressive teaching methods.

The proponents of teacher quality and school turnarounds said that national standards were a diversion from the hard work of narrowing achievement gaps by getting and retaining effective teachers, firing ineffective ones, and turning around low-performing schools. Those reformers were likewise weakened because they also didn't have the support of the entire standards-and-accountability movement, since some were concentrating on national standards..

Federally funded merit pay increases were proposed by the Obama administration and passed by Congress. But the bill Congress came to naught because

it mandated union approval. Meaningful merit pay did not revive as a policy proposal until the competitive days of the 2020s.

Three important developments in the first decade of the 2000s paved the way for the new competitive rigor that began in the 2020s and that we enjoy today:

- **Parent groups.** Foundations that had been supporting reforms such as mayoral control, alternative teacher credentialing, and challenging standards realized that parental involvement was a necessary complement to any effort aimed at student academic success. Parents' groups independent of the education establishment had, in the past, rarely been able to overcome their tendency to die out because nonmembers hoped to "free ride" on the members' efforts and money. But the example of the Los Angeles Parents' Union and its Parent Revolution, launched in 2006, showed that parents' organizing and demanding results could be successful. In the following years, significant national parent networks arose based on foundation money and increased parental belief in the necessity of high academic standards. The growth of the new groups was facilitated by low-cost organizing via the Internet.
- **New testing capacities.** In the first decade of the 2000s, computer adaptive testing began. It hit some snags because of the unevenness of computer access in schools and difficulties in meshing the grade-level focus of the federal requirements for state accountability programs in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. In subsequent years, however, computer access became widespread, and accountability began to focus on annual student growth on a trajectory to proficiency. Under those new conditions, computer adaptive testing thrived because it was precise, because the same test could be used for teaching purposes and for accountability, and because the test could be adjusted to the individual student's level of learning. Formative assessments on computers became pervasive, being offered by descendants of testing companies and textbook publishers. The new close relationship of curriculum and formative testing made old complaints about "teaching to the test" irrelevant: the tests now test what is taught.
- **New teaching materials.** With growth of instructional software in 1990s and 2000s, entrepreneurial publishers turned increasingly into "bundlers," pulling together lessons that had proven effective (including computer-adaptive formative tests) from a variety of media (print, software, and video) and weaving them into a package of coursework. Previous textbooks had often not been field-tested because of the demanding schedules of the textbook adoption cycles

in Texas and California, and teachers who devised their own lesson plans had no capacity for field-testing. But because the new instructional packages contained components that could last through future cycles and could be flexibly combined, field-testing was now both feasible and profitable. The new teaching modules paid special attention to effective teaching methods, with publishers emphasizing that lessons must be taught effectively if students were to learn and field-test results replicated.

Increasingly, researchers studied these bundles of lesson plans and associated teaching methods in randomized trials or by examining the results when two groups were shown to have equivalent scores on a pretest measure of their knowledge and skills. Objective, positive results on the effectiveness of teaching materials meant that all teachers could have access to lessons that had been proven to work.

Although many large publishers of tests remained in business, and some publishers who had not been in the testing business added that line of work, the new technologies facilitated large numbers of new entrants to the field of multimedia instructional materials. Most states with statewide adoption rules abandoned them because of the difficulty of managing the approval status of continuously updated, online textbooks.

New parent groups, new testing capacities, and new teaching materials changed the dynamic of public schooling in the 2020s. The presence of the parent groups meant that the push for rigorous standards was passionate and came from the bottom up, whereas previous state standards and the monolithic national standards effort had been subject to the shifting winds of politics. New testing capacities made it easier to have multiple standards that could be benchmarked to one another and to international achievement levels. The new capacities also overcame previous objections to standards and testing because of their one-size-fits-all inflexibility. Teaching materials that were modular and field-tested allowed made it easy to assemble curricula for multiple standards.

Whereas in the 2000s efforts to improve teacher quality had concentrated on recruiting graduates of Ivy League colleges or the equivalent, there just weren't enough such graduates to go around. The new variety of readily available, field-tested, detailed lesson plans for each academic topic, however, teachers who weren't recruited from elite colleges by Teach for America to achieve KIPP-level results. Although Teach for America teachers had almost always reinvented lesson plans, it was wasted effort. With the new proven lesson plans packaged into a course by publishers, all teachers had at hand the resources needed for their students to succeed.

The new technologies also allowed public schools to be differentiated into thematic "magnet schools." But many schools simply endeavored, in the new,

increasingly competitive environment, to provide standard course offerings using the best available teaching materials. Charter schools showed the way, and the proliferation of virtual schools in rural areas accelerated those changes.

An additional development in school finance further fueled rivalry for success. As more states adopted a “weighted student formula,” in which students with disabilities or weak educational backgrounds received more money, schools now began competing for such students. In earlier days, weighted student funding had often been a proposal attractive to those who had advocated money per se as the solution to school reform. But the new flexible environment meant that weighted funding increasingly appealed to reformers calling for parental choice as well as those calling for standards and accountability.

A Pluralism of Standards

After the ill-fated national standards effort of the Obama years, many states (especially in the Mountain States and the South) opted out of the proposed unitary national standards, complaining about vagueness, lack of academic rigor, compulsory Progressive Education features, and violations of state prerogatives under constitutional federalism.

Many advocates of educational excellence worried about duplicating the problems in math and reading seen in England and Wales after a national curriculum was adopted there in the 1990s. For their part, American educators complained about the inflexibility of unitary standards and the impediments they placed in the way of fine-tuning curriculum to meet local needs and deficiencies.

The failure of the monolithic national standards project led to a reunification of effort (now flowing in part through the parent groups) by the standards-and-accountability movement to push for rigorous standards, though now in multiple forms.

Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, and educational policy makers around the country began looking at alternatives. A half dozen rival national academic standards soon evolved from the bottom up out of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Core Knowledge, Common Core, the New Standards Project, state standards from the 1990s and 2000s, and other efforts. Some of these were private initiatives reminiscent of the role of the College Board in its early days.

Just as states now shied away from statewide textbook adoptions, they also became reluctant to mandate statewide academic standards. Instead, states called on public school districts to adhere to one of the half dozen national standards. Many states allowed such affiliation at the school level rather than the district level.

This choice of standards removed one longtime complaint about national and state standards: that they narrowed the curriculum. Now schools could choose a set of

standards that covered the topics they felt were vital. At the same time, rivalry among the standards for district and school affiliations ensured that all standards were world class in content and academic rigor.

The new operationally open but standards-based regime has many attractive features. The pervasive formative assessment comes in objective, computer-adaptive-test form. A variety of readily available, field-tested, detailed lesson plans for each academic topic allows all teachers to achieve KIPP-like results.

A few parents had become acutely aware of the need for academic rigor during the standards wars of the late 1990s and the debate over unitary national standards in the Obama years. But now, in the new flexible, competitive environment, districts and schools are marketing themselves on the basis of academic rigor, and a multitude of rigor-conscious parents are choosing accordingly.

The new regime is consistent with and grows naturally out of American values of pluralism, decentralism, and local control. America now has "Asian tiger" achievement and has dramatically narrowed achievement gaps, having dodged the bullet of weak, centrally imposed national standards.

*Cf. Diane Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), p. 19.

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