

The Hunt Institute's

BLUEPRINT

for Education Leadership

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Founded by Former Governor James B. Hunt, Jr. in 2001, the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy works with leaders to secure America's future through quality education. Working at the intersection of policy and politics, the Hunt Institute connects leaders with best strategies for developing and implementing policies and programs to improve public education.



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Welcome to the first issue of *Blueprint*, the policy primer of the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy. Each *Blueprint* will focus on a critical issue in education policy, highlighting key research for policymakers and prompting discussion of solutions within states and across the nation.

Over the past few years, Hunt Institute Executive Director Judith Rizzo and I have encountered a growing interest in the quality of state standards and concern over the extensive technical and political energy that is required to revise and update state standards every several years. State leaders are looking for ways to improve upon their current standards. Some have begun to wonder if it would be more efficient and effective to develop a common core of standards that states could choose to adopt.

This first issue of *Blueprint* focuses on the standards that states have adopted to delineate what students should know at each grade level of the K-12 system. Textbooks, teacher training, professional development, and assessments are built upon education standards. It is crucial that these standards establish a clearly understood path to college and workforce readiness in today's global marketplace.

To generate information that will help state leaders improve their standards and contribute to discussions about sharing standards among states, the Hunt Institute commissioned a study from the National Research Council of the National Academies. This issue summarizes the NRC's initial findings, which include:

1. Standards vary greatly in what they expect of students from state to state.
2. State standards are not consistently challenging between subjects or between grade levels.
3. Students are asked to study some of the same material year after year.

These and other data generated from the NRC work are discussed at length in this issue. The full report, *Assessing the Role of K-12 Academic Standards in States*, is available from the National Academies Press.

Findings from a second series of National Research Council meetings will be published in the months ahead. This report will focus on options for developing, and criteria for evaluating, common standards. Subsequent work with the National Research Council will investigate states' capacities to implement standards-based reform in a comprehensive and coordinated way.

We hope this resource proves valuable as you work to design, build, and shape education policies in your state, and we look forward to sharing future editions of *Blueprint* with you.

James B. Hunt, Jr.
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CONTEXT

Today we understand more than ever that a high school diploma is not a ticket to economic security. We know that in order to be successful in the 21st century, our students will also need to complete at least two years of postsecondary study. In addition, the workers of tomorrow will compete in a global marketplace. Workplace boundaries will not be limited by state, regional, or even national borders.

Current high school graduation data are alarming since a high school diploma and some postsecondary education have become a prerequisite for success in the market place. But ensuring that students earn a diploma is not sufficient to secure their or our nation’s economic future. The high school diploma must guarantee that a student is academically prepared for work and postsecondary education. Looking at the high numbers of students who require remediation to complete the most basic coursework in our community colleges and four-year institutions, we can see that too many high school diplomas do not carry that guarantee.

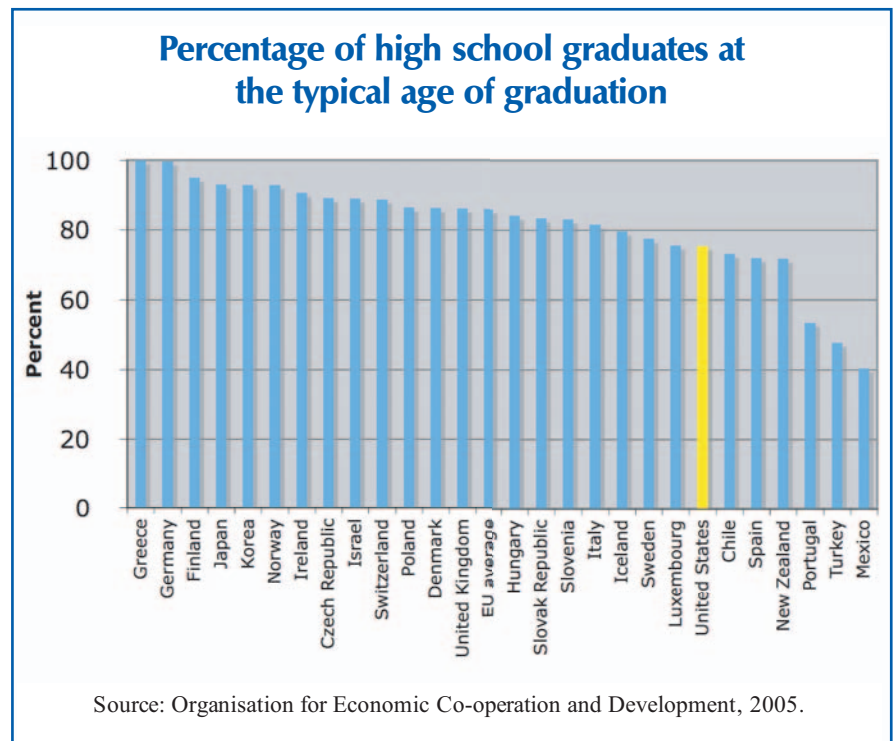
Many states are working to improve graduation rates, but to increase the value of the high school diploma, the real work begins much earlier. A sound foundation must be established in the early years if students are to succeed in high school and beyond.

High, rigorous standards are the foundation of a strong education system. Content standards specify the knowledge and skills that students need to acquire at each grade level. Although an essential cornerstone, standards in and of themselves are not sufficient to ensure that all students will achieve. Content standards must be supported by an aligned and clearly articulated system of curriculum, assessments, teacher preparation and professional development, textbook selection, and appropriate supports for students.

Many states began to develop and implement standards in response to *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983. That report, which warned that the nation faced a “rising tide of mediocrity” and was committing “unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament,” set into motion a movement toward the adoption of standards to guide teaching and learning. All 50 states now have grade level standards in reading, math, and science, as required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Each state goes through an exhaustive process to establish standards, select tests

that match those standards, and set acceptable levels of proficiency on the tests. Standards are not static – they need to reflect changing demands of the workplace, higher education, and our evolving knowledge about teaching and learning. To remain current, states engage in a cyclical review and revision of their standards and must update assessments, curriculum, and related policies accordingly. Most states repeat the cycle of standards revision every several years, usually employing a bottom-up process of convening committees and holding public hearings to gather input.



College freshman enrolled in remedial courses

Type of Institution	Number of entering freshman (in thousands)	Percent enrolled in reading, writing, or mathematics remedial courses
All institutions	2,396	28
Public 2-year colleges	992	42
Private 2-year colleges	58	24
Public 4-year colleges and universities	849	20
Private 4-year colleges and universities	497	12

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2004.

States take advantage of a number of resources to assist them in setting standards. Achieve Inc.'s American Diploma Project, ACT, and the College Board have each established benchmarks for college readiness. Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), a regional education laboratory, has developed a set of standards that draws from professional subject-area organizations and selected states. Through the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, business leaders have articulated key skills that students should develop to compete in today's global economy. To ensure comprehensiveness of standards, states incorporate elements from the above resources, review the standards of professional subject-area organizations and other states' standards to guide and check their own work, and may even review the standards of countries that perform well on international assessments.

States also have the opportunity to learn from one another through the Council

of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) State Collaboratives on Assessment and Student Standards and to better align their standards, curriculum, and assessments through CCSSO's Alignment Analysis. Three states – New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont – have pooled their resources and expertise to develop shared standards and assessments through the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). Increasing numbers of state P-12 leaders are working closely with their counterparts in higher education to ensure that their high school exit standards match college entrance standards.

Leaders in every state are struggling to meld these various sources of information into a coherent foundation for their own education system. This is exhaustive work that is repeated in 50 different cycles of revision across the country. The process requires resources – expertise, time, and money – and is often fraught with political overtones.

We now have 50 sets of state standards that differ in scope, clarity, comprehensiveness, and implementation. A number of organizations have conducted critical reviews of state standards. Among the most familiar are evaluations by American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Editorial Projects in Education, and the Fordham Foundation. Each of these evaluations gave high marks to standards that are clear, specific, and grounded in content, but have found that many state standards, despite significant effort and revision, remain wanting in these areas. AFT reports that only one state has adopted strong standards in all levels and subjects. Editorial Projects in Education found fewer than half of the states to have standards that are clear, specific, and grounded in content at every grade level. The Fordham Foundation concludes that taken as a whole, state academic standards are no better in 2006 than they were when evaluated six years earlier.

Common State Standards: A Possible Solution?

Given these realities, there is a growing interest in the concept of national or common state standards. It is almost universally agreed that the development of such standards should not be the purview of the federal government or the federal department of education. One idea is to use what we now know to be the demands of the workplace, college, and the global economy to create a set of standards that each state could adopt voluntarily to use as the basis for its work.

Some might say that we already have national standards. Indeed, most states look to the work of national organizations in math and science for examples to guide the development of their own standards. In effect, we do have a national test: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP is the only nationally representative assessment of what America's students know and can do. Often referred to as the nation's report card, NAEP reading and mathematics assessments are now required in every state. These test results are the only common measure that we have of how our students are doing academically.

This is not the first time in our history that the idea of national standards has arisen. In the 1990s, efforts to develop them fell victim to pedagogical arguments that became dubbed the "Reading Wars" and "Math Wars." And yet, the 2006 release of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' *Curriculum Focal Points* illustrates that mathematicians and math instructors have been able to move past such arguments to set priorities for learning. What is different about the current climate is that the momentum is coming from all sides of the political and education spectrum. Voices urging reconsideration of common state standards come from chief state school officers, conservative and progressive think tanks, school superintendents, governors, equity activists, and business.

Over the past two years, Governor Jim Hunt has received numerous requests to take a leadership role in examining the idea of common state standards. This derives from his many years leading education reform in both North Carolina and around the country. In response to these requests, the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy has enlisted the assistance of the prestigious National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies, established by Congress in 1863 to investigate, examine, and report upon any subject of science or art. The NRC formed a committee of scholars comprised of well-respected and experienced researchers to systematically review the current literature on state standards and identify gaps in research. The committee also commissioned reports and studies, which were reported out and discussed at a meeting in January 2008. During an intense two days, information and findings were further analyzed and debated by a

number of researchers, practitioners, elected officials, and representatives of both teacher and business organizations.

The Hunt Institute is partnering with Achieve Inc., the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Governors Association to explore the potential for a common core of rigorous, internationally benchmarked education standards. As the work of this partnership progresses, the Hunt Institute will contribute to the dialogue through its continuing work with the National Research Council.

Findings from a second series of National Research Council meetings, held in March, will soon be released. This report will focus on options for developing, and criteria for evaluating, common standards. Subsequent work with the National Research Council will illuminate issues of implementation – states' capacities to implement standards-based reform in a comprehensive and coordinated way.

This policy brief is intended to summarize and synthesize the committee's findings for leaders at all levels. The full report from the January meeting, *Assessing the Role of K-12 Academic Standards in States*, is available from the National Academies Press.

THE NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL'S FINDINGS

Six years after the release of *A Nation at Risk*, President George H.W. Bush called governors to an Education Summit that resulted in goals for academic achievement by 2000. Among these were goals to become "first in the world in mathematics and science achievement" and to ensure that all students master challenging subject matter. Though the nation fell short of such goals, the past quarter of a century has produced significant activity, even progress. There has been a shifting of focus from inputs into education systems to the outcomes for students. Interviews of state leaders, conducted by Diane Massell for the National Research Council, revealed greater attention to the academic performance of under-served students, as well as expectations that all students will rise to the challenge of meeting standards that are clear and rigorous.

Based on these interviews, Massell determined that standards-based reform is now the norm across the nation. But, the expectations and goals we set for our children, as defined by each of the 50 sets of state standards, remain far from consistent for all students. As mentioned earlier, Editorial Projects in Education's recent analysis determined that fewer than half of the states have implemented standards that are clear, specific, and grounded in content at all levels. Without clear standards on which to base instruction, teachers must make an educated guess at what students

The following chart lists the primary activities that each state must follow to set standards. It demonstrates the enormous work, effort and expertise involved. Many of the steps to set standards represent fixed costs for states regardless of the number of students a state serves.

Major Standards-Based Reform Activities

1. Standards-setting

- Developing and revising academic content standards
- Setting performance standards
- Disseminating standards and training

2. State Assessment

- Aligning assessment with standards
- Item development
- Test construction
- Test administration
- Test scoring
- Score reporting
- Technical review and validation of the system

3. State Accountability System

- Data system (student, school, district)
- Reporting (school, district)
- Identifying school status, monitoring progress
- Other accountability measures (process, etc.)

4. Rewards and Sanctions

- Rewards to successful/improving schools
- Sanctions for underperforming/failing districts, schools, or students
- Intervention for failing schools, districts
- Intervention for failing students

Source: Goertz (2008).

are expected to learn. The resulting variation at the district, school, and classroom levels means that not all students have a chance to learn all that they can and should. Though standards are only the first link in this chain of events, it is not surprising that gains in closing gaps have been relatively modest. Lack of clarity prevents standards documents from serving as an instructional guide for classroom teachers, a blueprint for textbook and test publishers, or a basis for teacher preparation programs

States and school districts can set a clear path for teachers and students by establishing fewer, clearer, and higher standards, benchmarked against workplace and postsecondary expectations and standards in high-performing nations. Massell's interviewees and participants in the National Research Council's meeting indicated that this is no small task. Efforts to set standards have led to heated debate in states and communities. Policymakers and educators often have different perspectives on the goals for standards-based reform, and researchers such as William Schmidt of Michigan State University have found that states typically rely on a consensus-building process to formulate their content standards. As items are added to achieve buy-in from many parties, standards documents grow to encompass an unwieldy number of subjects.

Many states indicate that they've based their standards on national benchmarking documents, such as the guidelines developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. However, research by Andrew Porter of the University of Pennsylvania revealed

that the content of standards varies significantly between states. A *de facto* national curriculum has not emanated from commonly-used benchmarking resources, and textbook and test publishers must wrestle these differences into products that can be adopted in multiple states. As a result, teachers often lack focused curricular materials on which to build their instructional plans.

Without clear guidelines from standards and textbooks, teachers turn to standardized tests to help them determine what to teach. This means states are essentially relying on their assessments as the default driver of standards-based reform, yet states are not investing heavily in these assessments. Thomas Toch of Education Sector has found that of the average \$8,000 spent per pupil annually, only one-half of one percent is used to build these tests.

The National Research Council's committee considered two types of standards, defined as follows:

Content standards: the material that students should be expected to learn

Performance standards: the level of proficiency or mastery expected of students

Porter's study also showed that content standards repeat as students progress from grade to grade. This means students continue to study lower level material rather than moving toward more complex content within a subject. Though some repetition is intentional to ensure that concepts and skills are mastered, William Schmidt has found that excessive repetition of lower level material prevents students from progressing to higher concepts and the analytical skills that are so essential for success in today's global economy.

In addition to the sequencing and clarity of content standards, states and districts also need to consider the rigor of their performance standards, as defined by the proficiency cut scores that they establish for assessments. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in comparing state and NAEP proficiency cut scores, found that most states set their own cut scores far below NAEP's proficiency level. Cut scores signal the acceptable level of learning in a state, and a lack of rigor in these performance standards has implications for instruction and learning in the classroom.

The NCES study also shows that performance standards vary significantly between states. Peggy Carr, the organization's Associate Commissioner, highlighted the cut scores of three contiguous states to illustrate this point. A student who moves between these states would be considered a proficient reader in one state, but would be placed in a remedial reading class upon moving to a neighboring

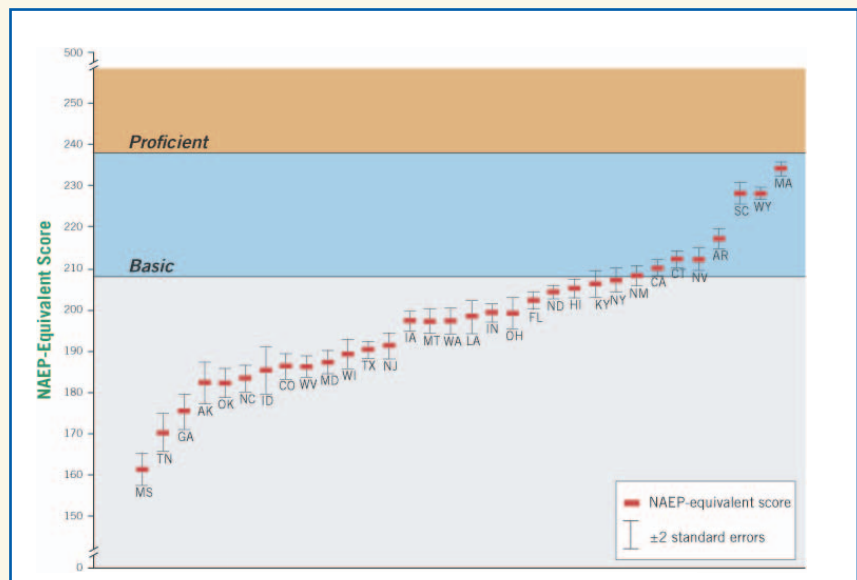
state. Such discrepancies cause confusion among students and parents.

Despite some claims that states are lowering their performance standards to avoid sanctions under No Child Left Behind, a study published by the Fordham Foundation and Northwest Evaluation Associates (NWEA) showed that states are not engaged in a "race to the bottom," but actually a "walk to the middle." Over time, states with high cut scores moderated their standards, while states with low cut scores raised theirs slightly. The overall trend in cut scores, while not as bleak as some may have imagined, does reiterate a lack of rigor in state performance standards.

The study by Fordham Foundation and NWEA also revealed that state performance standards are inconsistent between subjects and poorly calibrated from grade level to grade level. For example, cut scores in math were found to be set higher than cut scores in reading. In addition, the bar is set higher in eighth grade than third grade, even after adjusting for obvious differences in grade-level content. Eighth graders must earn much higher scores than third graders in order to be deemed proficient. Policymakers and educators need reliable data in order to draw accurate conclusions about student progress. Such inconsistencies in performance standards, between subjects or between grades, may lead state leaders to erroneous conclusions about student achievement.

Comparing State Performance Standards with the National Assessment of Educational Progress

This graph compares state cut scores with NAEP cut scores for 4th grade reading. Most states set their cut scores below NAEP's range for "basic" performance, and no state cut score is set within NAEP's range for "proficiency."



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2008).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The reality is that we have now, and have always had, excellent education standards and schooling in this country. The problem is they have only been available to some students. Many of our young people have benefited from Advanced Placement and honors courses; many students have attended excellent public and private schools. Some students have been fortunate enough to be raised in communities where excellent education is the norm. Too many others have not had this same opportunity. Others, either through the will of their parents, or their own motivation, have sought out and demanded education equal to the highest standards. Today, this opportunity must be available to **all** our students, regardless of their home and community circumstances. To offer students anything less would be a personal tragedy for them and an economic risk for our country.

Standards are not the magic bullet that will transform education and ensure that all our students are prepared for the new economy. But standards help state and local leaders, teachers, schools of education, and textbook and test publishers align their efforts to improve the educational experience of all students. Without high, clear, and rigorous standards, efforts in P-12 education lack direction and goals.

Leaders at every level share in the responsibility of ensuring that our schools are the very best and that all our students have the opportunity to learn at the highest levels. Some would argue that this is a moral obligation grounded in the very core of our Constitution. All agree that this is at least an economic and civic duty that will determine the future of our country.

State leaders can begin by asking some probing questions and by examining all the information available. The answers can provide a roadmap for further work and policy direction.

1. Do you know how the quality of your state standards stack up against standards in other states and high-performing countries?
2. Do you know how major organizations such as the American Federation of Teachers, and nonprofit organizations such as the Fordham Foundation, view your state standards?
3. Is it clear to you how the standards in your state are established? Do you know the strengths and weaknesses in that process? Is benchmarking against the strongest standards in the US and around the world central to that process?
4. Do your state standards provide educators with clear expectations for learning in each grade? If your standard-setting process has generated vague, unclear, or weak standards, do you have a sense of how this could happen? Is your standard-setting process hampered by disagreements among interest groups?
5. Where is your state in its "cycle" of standard setting? If your state just recently completed a re-write of standards or it's not timely to revise now, would you be willing to explore ideas about improvements that could be made in the interim?
6. Would setting clear, explicit, strong grade-by-grade standards in your state be a matter of very high priority to you? If yes, do you have a sense of a plan that you could implement to improve the standards, including building a coalition of other leaders, both within your state and in other states, to help achieve this result?

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