Resisting Educational Standards

We have increasingly held the view that education is a private good, which should serve the individual interests of educational consumers, rather than a public good, which should serve the broader public interest in producing competent citizens and productive workers, Mr. Labarre points out. And the last thing we think we need is a standards effort that equalizes educational achievement.

BY DAVID F. LABARRE

THE MATTER OF setting standards for American education is certainly quite visible these days, but much of what we hear about it is not very enlightening. The talk is frequently filled with ideological heat rather than with critical light, and the tone of the discussion is more of-

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ton nostalgic than realistic. In addition, the pitch in favor of standards is currently so strong that it may well leave a number of listeners wondering why such an obvious idea needed any reform at all. Un- derstood this is not, the effect to establish educational stan- dards has always been an uphill fight in this country.

In light of these circumstances, it is useful to examine why Americans have so vigorously resisted educational standards over the years. The history of such resis- tance suggests that there are three factors in particular that have made standards such a hard sell: a commitment to local control of schools, a commitment to expansion of educational opportunity, and a commit- ment to form over substance in the way we think about educational accomplish- ment. All three of these factors, which I treat below, can be traced in large part to our preference for one particular purpose of education: we have increasingly held the view that education is a private good, which should serve the individual interests of educational consumers, rather than a public good, which should serve the broader public interest in producing competent citizens and productive workers.

Preserving Local Control

First, consider our traditional commitment to preserving local control. The core issue here is the wide and deep strain of libertarian sentiment that lies at the heart of the American psyche. The urge to pre- serve individual liberty is a key to under- standing American society, and it is what defines our distinctive approach to politics, economics, and education. "Don't tell me what to do" has long been our national slogan. By it we mean in part that, government should keep off our backs — especially government that is removed from our local community. All you need to do is remember that this nation was born of an uprising against a colonial govern- ment that tried to impose modest taxes on it from afar.

In education, this sentiment came to be expressed as a staunch defense of local control of our schools. During most of the 19th century, the local school was the pri- mary unit of educational governance for most Americans. An individual commu- nity built a school, hired a teacher, raised money through local taxes and fees, and implemented education on its own terms. Outside help was neither offered nor wel- comed. This was the ultimate in local con- trol. Even in large cities, control of edu- cation tended to rest at the ward level.

Consider some numbers that suggest the radical degree of decentralization that has long characterized American educa- tion. It was not until 1937 that we started recording information about the number of individual school districts in the coun- try. In that year, which was some 40 years after the start of a massive effort by re- forms to consolidate districts into larger administrative units, there were about 120,000 individual school districts in the U.S. This meant that on average there were only two schools per district. Now, that is really local control. Even now, after con- solidation has continued for another 60 years, we still have about 15,000 separate school districts — each with primary con- trol over financing, staffing, and setting cur- riculum standards for our schools.

Certainly state governments have tak- en steps over the years to assert greater control over these matters in K-12 school- ing, and even the federal government has made tiny and tentative moves in this di- rection. But all these efforts have been un- dermined in the face of enormous resistance by local communities, which have vigor- ously fought to preserve the autonomy of their schools. A modest proposal by Presi- dent Clinton for vague and voluntary na- tional standards provoked strong opposi- tion in Congress and elsewhere. A variety of efforts on the part of states to introduce some forms of curriculum guidelines and to reinforce them with statewide testing have stirred up strong reactions at the lo- cal level. Reinforcing this local response to setting standards has been the resistli- ty toward government that has character- ized the politics of the last two decades. Increasingly, school officials have won office on a platform of being relentlessly anti-government. They see their primary job as an effort to protect local commu- nities' and individual citizens from the in- vasion of government control.

In light of this long history of opposition to government interference in local affairs, it is not surprising that efforts to set educational standards at the national or state levels have not proceeded very far. Standards are seen as an infringement of individual liberty, and efforts to impose them run into a classic American response: "Don't tell me what to do."

Expanding Educational Opportunity

Consider a second factor that has shaped American resistance to educational stan- dards: our long-standing American enthusiasm for expanding educational opportunity. The American track record in this respect is quite clear. In the last 200 years, school enrollments in the U.S. expanded faster than in any other country. Demand for edu- cational opportunity has simply been insatiable. As each level of education has started to fill up, the demand has grown for access to the next higher level. In the early 19th century, primary education was the subject of expansion. Pressure for ac- cess to education shifted to the grammar school later in the century, to the high school around 1900, and finally to the college and university today. For elected officials it has been political suicide to attempt to block or even slow this process — even when they can point to the huge fiscal burden imposed by this expansion.

Consider some numbers that capture the sheer size and speed of this expansion of educational opportunity. High school enrollments doubled every decade between 1850 and 1940, when high school atten- dance had become universal for American teenagers. Meanwhile, the enrollments in higher education have grown at a relatively steady rate of about 50% every decade, from about 1.3 million students in 1900 to about 1.3 million today. The result is that college attendance, like high school attendance, half a century ago, has become the normal expectation for American families. And as college enrollments have doubled every decade, mid-level college schools have been booming, so the pattern of expanding educational opportuni- ties shows no signs of letting up.

This trend has had one rather obvious consequence for educational standards. The push has clearly been to expand the qua- lity of access to schooling rather than to improve the quality of learning that goes on there. It is very hard to enhance qua- lity and quality of education simultaneously, but Americans have never really tried to do so. We have always been more inter- ested in making sure that our children re- ceive more years of education than higher-level diplomas than we ourselves received.
After all, credits and degrees are what have been so important in providing an entire to good jobs. Under these circumstances, who cares about what students learn in school or as long as school credentials continue to pay economic and social rewards to those who have acquired them?

Note that any effort to establish and enforce standards for teaching and learning in American education is likely to have the consequence of restricting access to the things that historically Americans have most wanted from their education system. Raising standards means making it harder for some students — maybe many students — to get good grades, get promoted, acquire a diploma, and gain entrance to college or graduate school. It has been firmly established over the years that to restrict access to education at any level is just plain un-American. And this is particularly true when the restriction falls on my children rather than on other people’s children. In this sense, the standards movement is standing in the face of a long history of easy access and modest requirements for academic performance, a history that threatens to run right over any reformer who blocks its path. If the American commitment to local control sends the standards movement the message “Don’t tell me what to do,” the commitment to expanding educational opportunity sends the parallel message, “Don’t get in my way.”

Consider another problem that the tradition of expanding opportunity poses for the standards movement. In this case, the problem is not a form of resistance but a kind of temptation — a temptation to approach the standards issue from a dangerously misleading historical perspective. The traditional American system of education has a distinctly nostalgic air to it. It often sounds as if we are piecing together a record of how our schools and students had to struggle to meet their academic standards. The big reason for not returning the standards from the good old days is that these standards will not do as much good at the beginning of the 21st century. For one reason, the standards from the old days are largely useless to us because the conditions that allowed schools to impose these standards no longer exist. We have the rapid expansion of educational opportunity to thank for this, and — all in all — thanks are probably in order here. For example, take the case of a leading 19th-century high school that I have studied in some depth. Central High School in Philadelphia was the only high school for boys in the nation's second-largest city. It enrolled 500 young men out of a city population of one million. To gain admission, students had to pass a grueling entrance examination and three-fourths of those admitted ended up flunking out before graduation. This was one rough school. In fact, Central could be the poster child for the standards movement — except that it is not clear that we can learn anything from this case that would actually help us today.

Central was an extremely attractive place to go, and everyone wanted to get in — in large part because it was the only one of its kind. Nowadays, however, everybody is required by law to attend high school, so students see enrollment as a burden — not a privilege. Eager volunteers have turned into reluctant draftees. At the same time, Central could pick its students from the top 2% of the school population, choosing those who were both better able and more willing to succeed in its demanding academic environment. And it could throw out anyone who could not or would not meet the school’s standard. Today, high schools have to accept all students within a particular geographical area, whatever their ability or attitude toward study. And these schools are not permitted to get rid of students simply because they don’t earn top grades. Why? Because we have decided that we want everyone to have a high school education and not just the privileged few.

Another aspect of the golden age that makes it of little use to us is this: the standards of yesteryear rewarded forms of learning that we don’t care much about these days. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, learning in American schools, for the most part, meant memorizing the text, and academic achievement meant students actually reciting the text back to the teacher, either orally or in writing. Recall that one of the most important technological innovations of the late 19th century was the introduction of the lecture to American classrooms, when a few daring teachers actually sought to explain the text in their own words. So students may have had to work hard, and academic success may have been difficult to attain. But it is not clear that students learned more. At least it is not clear that they learned more of the kinds of things that we tend to value today. For example, in the good old days students memorized the names of all the major rivers in the world; today we try to teach them something about how ecological systems work. Do we want to go back? I don’t think so.

Standards under the old system were easy to establish, in part because they applied to far fewer and in part because they were based on a narrow and mechanical notion of learning. The truly hard task is to establish standards that apply to the many rather than the few — without destroying the benefits that broad educational access has brought to this country — and to do so in a way that rewards forms of learning that are broadly useful for the kind of society that our graduates will enter.

Form over Substance

This discussion of local control and expanding educational opportunity leads us to a third major factor that has caused trouble for educational standards: America’s longstanding commitment to educational form over substance. By this I mean our system’s emphasis on measuring educational achievement through seat time and credentials rather than through academic performance. That is, we measure success by the amount of time we spend sitting in classrooms — placing ourselves at risk of getting an education — rather than by the amount of knowledge and skill that we actually acquire.

Now it easy sound strange to talk about a commitment to educational formalism, rather than perhaps treating this as an unintended consequence or a simple blind spot in our national vision of education. But I think that commitment is the right word because we are talking about one of the components of our system of education that is so basic and so visible that it helps define what is distinctive about that system in our own eyes and in the eyes of the world. Also, this commitment is so fervently defended by educators, students, and citizens alike that we cannot realistically think of it as a simple accident of history. We have consciously created an education system based on attaining formal markers of success — grades, credits, and degrees — rather than on acquiring substantive knowledge. And we proudly proclaim to the world the advantages of this system. But we do not always value form over substance in American education. In the 19th century, we measured educational success...
the nek so, were ap- phy sia a key to the ren- don - mas the en- cess through standardized performance tests of their knowledge of subject matter. Con- sider again the case of Philadelphia's Cen- tral High School. The only way to get in to this institution was to pass an exami- nation that was so difficult it eliminated the large majority of the students who took it.

However, this performance-based mod- el of achievement was to a powerful po- litical force — the emerging demand by educational consumers for broader access to the high school. And when standards came into conflict with educational oppor- tunity, standards lost in a rout. Under in- tense political pressure, the board of ed- ucation in Philadelphia first began to set high school admission quotas for the vari- ous grammar schools in the city rather than adhering to a single cut score on the entrance examination. Then the board be- gan sharply increasing the enrollment at Central. When this was still not enough to meet demand, the board started open- ing a series of new high schools. By 1912, Central High School was just one of many regional high schools in the city, which, like the others, had to admit anyone who had succeeded in graduating from gram- mar school and lived in the attendance area. In short, the examination was discarded, and in its place a system of admis- sion by diploma.

A similar process was also playing it- self out in colleges in the aim of the cen- tury. Like high schools, colleges had previ- ously tended to admit students by an ex- amination administered by the college it- self. But this practice had become unwork- able as the number of students seek- ing admission grew larger.

There were two obvious alternatives, both of which were pursued. One was to invent a general test across colleges that all prospective students could take, and, to this end, the College Entrance Examina- tion Board was created and began ad- ministering exams. The other was to start accepting a high school diploma as proof of qualification for admission. Both meth- ods have survived to the present day, but admission by diploma has become the dom- inant form. The College Board has con- tinued offering entrance examinations for prospective college students, but these tests quickly devolved into tests of “aptitude” rather than subject matter. Today’s SAT helps sort students by something similar to IQ, but it does nothing to measure how much students have learned in their high school courses. So form has also taken precedence over substance in college ad- missions.

Another event that helped make this change possible was the invention of the infamous Carnegie unit at the turn of the century — thanks to the collaboration of the Carnegie Foundation, the National Edu- cation Association, and the College Bowl. A Carnegie unit was defined as a quarter of the total high school instructional time for a student in a given year. The collab- orators established a standard of 14 Car- negie units across specified subjects (that is, 35 years of high school instruction in these subjects) as a prerequisite for col- lege admission. As a result of this inven- tion, the official measure of curriculum mastery became the amount of time stu- dents spent in class. It was no longer what they learned but how long they were sub- jected to the possibility of learning. This was a momentous step for American ed- ucation.

The implications of this change are clear. The Carnegie unit set the standard for much of what became distinctive about the American education system. This is a system that stresses attendance over per- formance, that encourages students to recog- nize the tokens of academic success rather than to demonstrate mastery of academic content. The Carnegie unit quickly evolved into the credit-hour system that is so funda- mental to our form of education today. Students who accumulate appropriate grades in a course earn credit for that course equal to the number of hours per week that it meets. Students who accumulate a fixed number of credit hours across appropri- ate curriculum categories earn a diploma. And this diploma then qualifies those stu- dents for entry into the next level of edu- cation or into a particular level of job.

What is so wonderful and so terrible about the credit-hour system is the way it easy access to education at the expense of competen- ce in subject matter. For peo- ple concerned about establishing and en- couraging curriculum standards in educa- tion, this system is a disaster. But its at- traction is clear. It effectively makes all courses functionally equivalent to all oth- ers because they are all measured in the same currency of credit hours. It also ef- fectively makes all institutions in a certain level functionally equivalent to all others because they all offer the same diplomas or degrees. All you need to do is accumu- late enough grades and credits and degrees — here, there, or anywhere — and you can present yourself as possessing the func- tional equivalent of an education.

Those who want to establish academic- ism standards are in many ways trying to roll back the tide of credentialism that has swept American education along for many, many years. To bring into this effort, standards reformers need to realize that they are attacking Americans' God-given right to the credits, and diploma of their choice. Seat time is an essential corollary to educational opportunity because it is pre- cisely what makes educational achieve- ment so easy for them. That, in turn, is what makes the system so hard to roll back; it is also what makes it so attractive to oth- ers around the world.

Consider this example from the Per- sian GoT. In the last few years, Kawaii has operated two parallel systems of sec- ondary education. Under the old system, students were promoted from grade to grade by passing examinations that test their un- derstanding of the subject matter they were taught that year, and they are admitted to the university only after passing a com- prehensive examination on the entire high school curriculum. The second system, in- troduced just a few years ago, allows stu- dents to be promoted on the basis of course grades, to graduate from high school on the basis of accumulating the proper number of credits, and to be admitted to the university on the basis of a high school diploma and grade-point average. Guess which system is the most popular with students. The American-style sys- tem, of course, because it makes it much easier for students to graduate from high school and gain admission to the univer- sity. It is also the same system whose grad- uates now find themselves struggling in vain to keep up with the intellectual de- mand of university study.

All this evidence suggests another slo- gan that helps define the reasons for re- sistance to educational standards in the U.S. today. It follows naturally from the first two I have suggested: "Don't make me learn, I'm trying to graduate."

Conflicting Goals for Education

I have pointed to the factors that have helped create an American system of ed- ucation that is highly resistant to educa-
tional standards, and now I would like to suggest an overall framework that helps make sense of this situation. Historically, Americans have been endowed mind about the purposes of public education. Consider three such purposes—democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. These goals have been in conflict over the years, and priorities have shifted over time from one to another and back again. Let me briefly point out the nature of each of these goals and their impact on education. Then I want to suggest how, from the perspective of these three goals, we can understand the reasons for chronic resistance to educational standards in this country and also why some ways of pursuing standards are more desirable than others.

One goal is democratic equality. From this perspective, the purpose of schooling is to produce competent citizens. The idea is that all of us as citizens need to be able to think critically, understand the way our society works, and have sufficient general knowledge to be able to make valid judgments about the essential issues in democratic political life (e.g., votes, judges, and so on). At the same time, democracies also require citizens whose social differences are modest enough that they can reach agreement about the policies shaping political and social life. Schools, from this angle, are the prime mechanism for providing a shared level of competence and a common set of social experiences and cultural understandings essential for an effective democracy. Much of what is most familiar and enduring in the American system of education can be traced to this goal: the neighborhood elementary school and the regional comprehensive high school, populated by students from the entire community; whole-class instruction and social promotion; the stress on general over specialized education; and the emphasis on inclusion over separation of students.

Another goal is social efficiency. From this point of view, the purpose of education is to teach citizens how to train productive workers. The idea is that economic growth requires workers with skills that are matched to particular occupations and roles. As a result, schools need to provide specialized kinds of learning for different workers in different sort of students according to predicted future careers, and then provide them with the specialized learning they need. Signs of the impact of this goal are all around us: in the stress on vocational programs in high schools and colleges, in the persistent practice of tracking and ability grouping, and in the prominent political rhetoric about education as investment in human capital.

The contrast between these two conceptions of education is striking. Should the schools prepare people for political or economic life? Provide general or specialized instruction? Promote similarity or difference? But despite these differences, the two goals are also strikingly similar in that they both see education as a public good. The nature of a public good is that it affects everyone in the community; you can’t escape it, even if you want to. In this case, everyone gains if a public school system produces competent citizens and productive workers, and everyone loses if it fails to do so. Thus includes people who do not have children in public school.

What is most distinctive about the third educational goal, social mobility, is that it construes education as a private good. If the first goal sees education from the viewpoint of the citizen and the second from that of the taxpayer or employer, the third takes the perspective of the individual consumer of education. From this angle, education exists because of what it can do for me or my children, not because of its benefits for democracy or the economy. And the historical track record on this point is clear: people who acquire more diplomas get better jobs. Educational credentials give individuals an advantage over competitors, and that advantage pays off handsomely, helping some to get ahead and others to stay ahead.

The key point is that if education is going to serve the goal of social mobility effectively, it has to provide some people with benefits that others do not get. As a private good, education benefits only the owner, serving as an investment in one’s future, not yours; in my children, not other people’s children. This calls for an educational system that focuses heavily on grading, sorting, and selecting students. Such a system needs to provide individuals with forms of social distinction that mark them off from the pack by such means as placing them in the top reading group, the gifted program, a higher curriculum track, or a more prestigious college.

The Roots of the Problem: Chronic Consumerism

This analysis of conflicting goals for American education can help us in our thinking about the problem of educational standards. It can help explain the longstanding and powerful resistance to standards, and it can also help explain why some approaches to establishing standards are quite different from others (if we consider which educational goals they are designed to advance).

The dominant influence of the goal of social mobility is behind the three forms of resistance to educational standards that I have identified above. In part, the impetus toward local control comes from a strong American political tradition that focuses on the defense of individual liberties. But the hostility toward standard-setting at the state or national level goes beyond a political defense of the local school board and town council. It also has a consumer dimension. As cautious consumers of education, we want to protect the value of the diplomas that our children acquire and to preserve the social advantages that education currently brings to them. We don’t want anyone to tell us what kind of education our children can get—not state governments or Congress, not state tests or national tests, and certainly not some organization of historians or math teachers. In particular, we don’t want any system of standards that might restrict access to the educational goods our children need in order to get ahead or stay ahead. Instead, we want a system like the current one, which allows our children to gain a competitive advantage over other people’s children.

The last thing we think we need is a standards effort that equalizes educational achievement and then—
leaders, who are worried about the economi-
cal consequences of inadequate education. The
difference between this perspective and the
determination of democratic equality is
striking. Standards for democratic equal-
ity focus on higher levels of shared knowl-
dge and skill, but standards for social ef-
ficiency focus on specialized training for
particular jobs. This means radically dif-
fferent standards, for example, for the work-
ers who assemble cars, for the engineers
who design them, and for the executives
who manage the process.

Despite these differences, however, these
two approaches to standards both treat ed-
ucation as a public good and so they both
see educational standards as a way to pro-
vide benefits to the public as a whole. The
aim is to enhance the competence of citi-
zens and the productivity of workers in
order to enrich the political and economi-
ic life of the larger community.

In this way the social mobility approach
to educational standards is strikingly dif-
f erent. The aim from this perspective is to
preserve the advantages and increase the
distinctions that arise from the way indi-
 viduals consumers currently work the edu-
cation system. Schooling is already or-
 ganized in a manner that enhances con-
tumer rights at the expense of public ben-
efits. We have always been better at sort-
ing students than at teaching them. A con-
nsumer-based approach to educational stan-
dards is one that stresses this sorting func-
tion, and all too many of the proposals
putting forward schools standards reflect
this bear mark. You can tell this kind of
approach from the others because it tends
to limit special ends not on improving
skills but on distinguishing winners from
losers. The focus is on labeling rather than
learning — giving gold stars to those who
pass through the promotional gates, who
get into the gifted program or the advanced
placement class, and who win a special
endorsement on their high school diploma.
And giving lumps of coal to those who
fail to make the grade in any of these ways.

This kind of consumerism is also what
leads us to misunderstand history and try to
establish standards by returning to the good
old days. As I pointed out earlier, the stan-
dards of yesteryear — to the extent that
they really were higher, which is doubt-
ful — were grounded in an education sys-
tem that was nothing like ours. At the high
school and college levels, this system could
afford to be highly selective and brutally
competitive because it served such a tiny
percentage of the population. Those push-
ing the consumer perspective within the
current standards movement would like to
more snug steps back in that direc-
tion to use more selectivity and greater
attrition would improve the competitive
position of their children — assuming, of
 course, that the bodies falling along the
wayside would be other people’s children.

Finally, a standards effort guided by
consumerism would not only elevate pri-
vate over public educational benefits but
would also reinforce an already pren-
ominant and devastatingly harmful tendency
in American education: the insatiable
 urge to value form over substance. From the
perspective of democratic equality or social
efficiency, the aim of the standards move-
 ment is to improve the quality of learning
in schools. But from the perspective of so-
cial mobility, the aim of standards is not to
improve learning but to make it a little
easier for everyone else to obtain the grades,
credit, and degrees that are the symbols of
academic success. The effect is to fur-
ther undermine education by turning it into
an ever more intense game of "how to suc-
cess in school without really learning."

However, I hope that this is not the pri-
mary sentiment of the people who are clos-
est to American education and know it
best. As citizens and educators, I trust that
people not put this consumeristic vi-
sion of educational standards, which is so
 harmful both to the quality of education
and to the quality of life in American so-
ciety.

1. National Center for Education Statistics, Digest
of Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: U.S. De-
partment of Education, 1995), Table 88.

2. Ibid., Table 5.

tury High School of Philadelphia, 1938-1939 (New

4. David F. Labaree, "Raising Standards in the
American High School: Why the Good Old Days
Are Not Much Help," in Idem, How to Succeed in
School Without Really Learning: The Credit Doli-
ploma Race in American Secondary Education.

5. Labaree, The Making of an American High
School.

6. Alvin Alman, "A Comparison of Alternative
Systems of Secondary Education in Kuwait," un-

7. The discussion in this section is based on the ar-
gument in my book, How to Succeed in School
Without Really Learning.

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