

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. Labaree points out. And the last thing we think we need is a standards effort that equalizes educational achievement.

BY DAVID F. LABAREE

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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ten 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 obviously needed and beneficial reform wasn't undertaken a long time ago. But the fact is that the effort to establish educational standards 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 resistance 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 commitment to *form over substance* in the way we think about educational accomplishment. 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 preserve individual liberty is a key to understanding 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 have meant in particular that government should keep off our backs — especially government that is far removed from our local community. All you need to do is remember that this nation was born of an uprising against a colonial government 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 primary unit of educational governance for most Americans. An individual community 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 welcomed. This was the ultimate in local control. Even in large cities, control of education tended to rest at the ward level.

Consider some numbers that suggest the radical degree of decentralization that has long characterized American education. It was not until 1937 that we started recording information about the number of individual school systems in the country. In that year, which was some 40 years after the start of a massive effort by reformers 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 consolidation has continued for another 60 years, we still have about 15,000 separate school districts — each with primary control over financing, staffing, and setting curriculum standards for our schools.¹

Certainly state governments have taken steps over the years to assert greater control over these matters in K-12 schooling, and even the federal government has made tiny and tentative moves in this direction. But all these efforts have been undertaken in the face of enormous resistance by local communities, which have vigorously fought to preserve the autonomy of their schools. A modest proposal by President Clinton for vague and voluntary national standards provoked strong opposition 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 local level. Reinforcing this local response to setting standards has been the hostility toward government that has characterized the politics of the last two decades. Increasingly, elected officials have won office on a platform of being relentlessly anti-government. They see their primary job as an effort to protect local communities and individual citizens from the intrusion 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 standards: our long-standing commitment to 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 educational 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 access to education shifted to the grammar school later in the century, to the high school around 1890, and finally to the college and university today. For elected officials it has been political suicide to attempt to block or even to slow this process — even though 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 1890 and 1940, when high school attendance had become universal for American teenagers. Meanwhile, over the whole course of the 20th century, enrollments in higher education have grown at a relatively steady rate of about 50% every decade, from about one-quarter million students in 1900 to about 15 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 started to level off in the 1990s, enrollments in graduate schools have been booming, so the pattern of expanding educational opportunity shows no signs of letting up.²

This trend has had one rather obvious consequence for educational standards. The push has clearly been to expand the quantity of access to schooling rather than to improve the quality of learning that goes on there. It is very hard to enhance quantity and quality of education simultaneously, but Americans have never really tried to do so. We have always been more intent on making sure that our children receive more years of education and higher-level diplomas than we ourselves received.

After all, credits and degrees are what have been so important in providing an entree to good jobs. Under these circumstances, who cares about what students learn in school 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. Much of the rhetoric of the standards movement has a distinctively nostalgic air to it. It often sounds as if we are pining for a return to a golden age, a time when schools were tough and students had to struggle to meet their academic standards.

The big reason for not returning to standards from the good old days is that these standards will not do us much good at the beginning of the 21st century. For one thing, 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.³ 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-quarters of those admitted ended up flunking out before graduation. This was one *tough* 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.⁴

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 as 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 successfully reciting the text back to the teacher, either orally or in writing. Recall that one of the stunning pedagogical 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 so few 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: Americans' 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 may 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 a component 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 one based on acquiring substantive knowledge. And we proudly proclaim to the world the advantages of this system.

But we did not always value form over substance in American education. In the 19th century, we measured educational suc-

cess through students' performance on tests of their knowledge of subject matter. Consider again the case of Philadelphia's Central High School. The only way to get into this institution was to pass an examination that was so difficult it eliminated the large majority of the students who took it.

However, this performance-based model of achievement ran into a powerful political force — the emerging demand by educational consumers for broader access to the high school. And when standards came into conflict with educational opportunity, standards lost in a rout. Under intense political pressure, the board of education in Philadelphia first began to set high school admission quotas for the various grammar schools in the city rather than adhering to a single cut score on the entrance examination. Then the board began sharply increasing the enrollment at Central. When this was still not enough to meet demand, the board started opening 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 grammar school and lived in the attendance area. In short, the examination was discarded, and in its place came a system of admission by diploma.⁵

A similar process was also playing itself out in colleges at the turn of the century. Like high schools, colleges had previously tended to admit students by an examination administered by the college itself. But this practice had become unworkable as the number of students seeking 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 Examination Board was created and began administering exams. The other was to start accepting a high school diploma as proof of qualification for admission. Both methods have survived to the present day, but admission by diploma has become the dominant form. The College Board has continued offering entrance examinations for prospective college students, but these tests quickly devolved into tests of "aptitude" rather than subject matter. Today's SAT I helps sort students by something similar to I.Q., 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 admissions.

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 Education Association, and the College Board. A Carnegie unit was defined as a quarter of the total high school instructional time for a student in a given year. The collaborators established a standard of 14 Carnegie units across specified subjects (that is, 3½ years of high school instruction in these subjects) as a prerequisite for college admission. As a result of this invention, the official measure of curriculum mastery became the amount of time students spent in class. It was no longer what they learned but how long they were subjected to the possibility of learning. This was a momentous step for American education.

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 performance, that encourages students to pursue 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 fundamental 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 appropriate curriculum categories earn a diploma. And this diploma then qualifies those students for entry into the next level of education or into a particular level of job.

What is so wonderful and so terrible about the credit-hour system is the way it eases access to education at the expense of competence in subject matter. For people concerned about establishing and enforcing curriculum standards in education, this system is a disaster. But its attractions are clear. It effectively makes all courses functionally equivalent to all others because they are all measured in the same currency of credit hours. It also effectively makes all institutions at a certain level functionally equivalent to all others because they all offer the same diplomas

or degrees. All you need to do is accumulate enough grades and credits and degrees — here, there, or anywhere — and you can present yourself as possessing the functional equivalent of an education.

Those who want to establish academic standards are in many ways trying to roll back the tide of credentialism that has swept American education along for many, many years. In launching into this effort, standards reformers need to realize that they are attacking Americans' God-given right to the credits and diplomas of their choice. Seat time is an essential corollary to educational opportunity because it is precisely what makes educational accomplishment so easy for us. That, in turn, is what makes the system so hard to roll back; it is also what makes it so attractive to others around the world.

Consider this example from the Persian Gulf. In the last few years, Kuwait has operated two parallel systems of secondary education. Under the old system, students are promoted from grade to grade by passing examinations that test their understanding of the subject matter they were taught that year, and they are admitted to the university only after passing a comprehensive examination on the entire high school curriculum. The second system, introduced just a few years ago, allows students 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 suddenly the most popular with students. The American-style system, of course, because it makes it much easier for students to graduate from high school and gain admission to the university. It is also the same system whose graduates now find themselves struggling in vain to keep up with the intellectual demands of university study.⁶

All this evidence suggests another slogan that helps define the reasons for resistance to educational standards in the U.S. Indeed, 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 three factors that have helped create an American system of education 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 of mixed 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 (as voters, jurors, 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 less to educate citizens than to train productive workers. The idea is that economic growth requires workers with skills that are matched to particular occupational roles. As a result, schools need to provide specialized kinds of learning for alternative career paths, sort 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. That 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.⁷ 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

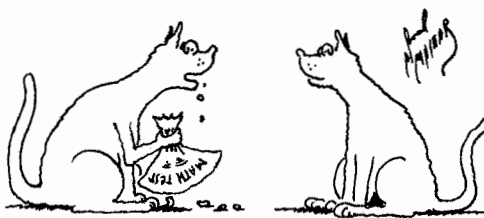
owner, serving as an investment in my future, not yours; in my children, not other people's children. This calls for an education system that focuses heavily on grading, sorting, and selecting students. Such a system needs to provide individuals with forms of social distinction that mark them off from 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 stands behind the three forms of resistance to educational standards that I have identified above. In part, the impulse 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 there-



"It tastes awful, but it's worth it to see the dog get in trouble."

fore puts my child and yours on an equal footing. As a result, we are deeply concerned that standards might force *learning* back into education. We don't want anything that will intrude on the current system of rewarding students with diplomas if they serve their time and sit long enough in the right classrooms. As consumers, we feel that schools have a sacred duty to offer our children the grades, credits, and degrees they want, without imposing performance tests or learning requirements that might interfere with this process of individual advancement.

I should also make one final point: consider for a moment the implications of this historical sketch for people who see standards as the reform we need in American education right now — in spite of all the factors working against their adoption. Efforts to establish standards will have vastly different consequences for education depending on which approach we take. A useful way to think about this issue is to examine what standards might look like if they emerged from one of the three goals for American education rather than another.

From the perspective of the goal of democratic equality, the point of standards is to raise the average cultural competence of American citizens and to reduce the radical cultural differences that now exist between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. This is the kind of argument we often hear from people like E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and from the various subject-matter groups that are now promoting standards. The idea is to provide all citizens with the capacities they need in order to carry out their political roles as voters and jurors. The idea is also to give everyone access to the same cultural resources, which will allow them to function as members of the same community, rather than to see themselves — as so many in our current society now do — as members of subgroups that are sharply divided by cultural, racial, and physical barriers.

From the perspective of the goal of social efficiency, the point of standards is to raise the level of human capital in American society. This means the standards should help prepare workers for the full array of jobs that make up the American economy by giving them the skills they need in order to carry out these jobs productively. It is the kind of argument we often hear from Presidents, governors, and corporate

leaders, who are worried about the economic consequences of inadequate education. The difference between this perspective and the pursuit of democratic equality is striking. Standards for democratic equality focus on higher levels of shared knowledge and skill, but standards for social efficiency focus on specialized training for particular jobs. This means radically different standards, for example, for the workers 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 education as a public good, and so they both see educational standards as a way to provide benefits to the public as a whole. The aim is to enhance the competence of citizens and the productivity of workers in order to enrich the political and economic life of the larger community.

In this way, the social mobility approach to educational standards is strikingly different. The aim from this perspective is to preserve the advantages and increase the distinctions that arise from the way individual consumers currently work the education system. Schooling is already organized in a manner that enhances consumer rights at the expense of public benefits. We have always been better at sorting students than at teaching them. A consumer-based approach to educational standards is one that stresses this sorting function, and all too many of the proposals floating around the standards movement bear this mark. You can tell this kind of approach from the others because it tends to put special emphasis 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 misread history and try to establish standards by returning to the good old days. As I pointed out earlier, the standards of yesteryear — to the extent that they really were higher, which is doubtful — were grounded in an education system 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 proportion of the population. Those pushing the consumer perspective within the current standards movement would like to move several steps back in that direction because 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 private over public educational benefits but would also reinforce an already prominent and devastatingly harmful tendency in American education: the tendency to value form over substance. From the perspective of democratic equality or social efficiency, the aim of the standards movement is to improve the quality of learning in schools. But from the perspective of social mobility, the aim of standards is not to improve learning but to make it a little harder for everyone else to obtain the grades, credits, and degrees that are the symbols of academic success. The effect is to further debase education by turning it into an ever more intense game of "how to succeed in school without really learning." However, I hope that this is not the primary sentiment of the people who are closest to American education and know it best. As citizens and educators, I trust that we will not pursue this consumerist vision of educational standards, which is so harmful both to the quality of education and to the quality of life in American society.

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

2. *Ibid.*, Table 3.

3. David F. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1939* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988).

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 Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 75-91.

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

6. Hend Almoian, "A Comparison of Alternative Systems of Secondary Education in Kuwait," unpublished paper, College of Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, 1998.

7. The discussion in this section is based on the argument in my recent book, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*. ■