



State boards seek a perfect balance on the seesaw between innovation and regulation.

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Standards-Based Reform: Everything Old Is New Again

While much about the direction of federal education policy and regulation is murky, one thing remains clear. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed the torch of educational leadership back to the states, giving them a broad range of authority they have not exercised for decades. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial called ESSA “the largest devolution of federal control to the states in a quarter-century” while the *New York Times* referred to it as “the end of an era in which the federal government aggressively policed public school performance, and returning control to states and local districts.”

What exactly does this shift mean for state boards of education? ESSA provides unparalleled responsibility and opportunity for all states—regardless of the scope of their state policy authority: responsibility for crafting a coherent set of state policies

to drive improvement of educational outcomes for all students and opportunity to craft a system that fosters local and school-level innovation and creativity.

There is a natural tension between regulation and innovation, but they are two sides of the proverbial coin. Good state education policy articulates rigorous educational outcomes and accountability measures focused on excellence and equity. It leaves much of the “how” to those closest to students in the classroom. How can regulation and innovation be wed in a unified, effective system? The answer lies in the foundational standards that mesh policy and practice into a symbiotic, reciprocal cycle of mutual improvement.

Therefore, the shift ESSA represents could foster greater innovation and effective instructional practice. At the same time, it gives state boards a tremendous opportunity to build a comprehensive

system of policies that ensures high levels of learning for all students. The key is fidelity to comprehensive, well-articulated standards that drive the development of both policy and practice.

Back to the Future

In many ways, ESSA harkens back to the future. The epicenter of innovation in education has always been at the state level. States have also been the vanguard of common educational standards from the earliest days of U.S. history. Standards-based education stretches back to colonial America and the new republic, emerging in its distinct modern form in the early 19th century.

Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson all envisioned an expansive role for the state in funding, planning, and developing a public education system to meet the needs of the emerging democratic, commercial republic. For example, Franklin proposed in 1749 that Pennsylvania establish a public academy for the education of adolescents. The 1780 Massachusetts Constitution, drafted by John Adams, included the first legal requirement for public education and directed the legislative and executive branches to maintain public schools because “wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, [is] necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties.” Similarly, Jefferson introduced “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” in the Virginia Assembly in 1779.

In the educational landscape of the new republic, reformers and state legislators used standards as a way to define and improve the curricula in public universities and then pushed them downward to private high schools to better prepare students for higher education. In his farewell address upon leaving office, President Washington urged establishment of public schools because “virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.” Because of citizens’ role in driving policymaking in a democracy, “it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened,” he added. Standards remained a powerful tool to express the country’s values and goals and to propel a more ambitious curriculum that would give all students the opportunity to advance toward higher education.

In his 2008 book, *Grading Education, Getting Education Right*, Richard Rothstein traces the history of American public education through significant changes in standards, which reflected the political and policy debates, as well as the social and economic conditions, of the times.¹ Rothstein argues that today’s narrow focus on achievement outcomes in English language arts, mathematics, and the sciences has compromised the system’s original focus on a holistic, broad set of goals: basic skills in reading, writing, math, science, and history; critical thinking and problem solving; appreciation of the arts and literature; preparation for skilled employment; social skills and work ethic; active citizenship and community responsibility; physical and emotional health; self-confidence; respect for others; and the ability to resist peer pressure.

Education reform remained firmly in the hands of local and state leaders until the mid-20th century, with expert advice from commissions, committees, and thought leaders primarily based in institutions of higher education. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson advanced and signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as part of his war on poverty. ESEA asserted a dramatic new federal role in education to ensure equity, and it reinforced standardized testing as a means to address achievement gaps for poor students. To ensure that schools would be accountable for their use of new federal funding to achieve the goals of ESEA, Congress required them to evaluate and report on the effectiveness of their efforts. During the rising Cold War tensions of the 1970s and 1980s, the federal government further stressed the importance of academic standards in mathematics and science.

As technological change transformed industries and occupations, fears of a decline in U.S. global economic competitiveness also drove the standards-based reform of the 1970s and 1980s. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, which provocatively attributed the economic decline to “a rising tide of mediocrity” in public education. Its call for reform centered on the development of national academic content standards.

In response to this influential report, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy issued *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* in 1986, a report that emerged from its convening of policymakers, educators, teachers’ associations, and business leaders.

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Figure 1. Standards-Based Leadership Framework



The requirement for standards and aligned assessments has been a feature of federal legislation since 1994.

It recommended strengthening standards in teaching, and it led to the creation of the National Board for the Professional Teaching Standards in 1987.

Governors and other state leaders were also taking the initiative. The 1986 meeting of the National Governors Association was devoted for the first time entirely to education, and the governors proposed holding educators accountable for results in student achievement, not inputs. A 1989 national Education Summit attended by the governors and President George H.W. Bush emphasized standards-based reform and culminated in *The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners*. The National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) was established in 1993 to develop bipartisan national standards and testing for K-12 education. While this effort was unsuccessful, the requirement for standards and aligned assessments has been a feature of federal legislation since 1994. Moreover, standards-based reform became firmly entrenched at the state level—particularly in California, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Texas—as well as through other national efforts in associations for education professions and academic content areas.²

Subsequent reauthorizations of ESEA, especially the No Child Left Behind Act, expanded the federal influence on states' educational systems.

It passed Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support in 2001 and was signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002.

The Pendulum Swings

With ESSA, the pendulum of education policy has swung back, and the levers of control are once again in the hands of states. State boards must now reaffirm what they value and make student learning the cornerstone of all their policy, strategic planning, and decision making. The only way they can do so is by establishing a comprehensive system of policies rooted in rigorous standards that knit policy and practice together. A well-articulated, agreed-upon system of standards can ensure equity of access and quality for all students while driving a comprehensive system of improvement for all schools.

But state boards must be strategic and intentional in the design process. In December 2014, NASBE introduced the Standards-Based Leadership Framework, in which all state education policies align to student learning standards and are designed for consistency across framework categories to create a coherent system (figure 1).³ The framework organizes policies into six categories: expectations, curriculum, materials, measures of effectiveness, accountability, and professional learning.

Figure 2. Standards-Based Strategic Planning



Within each, additional standards set expectations, define quality, and encourage innovation in schools and classrooms. A unified system of policies permits state boards to exercise their responsibilities without stifling local innovation and creativity.

If it is used strategically and faithfully, the framework can help state boards as they navigate ESSA implementation. For example, most state boards have authority over the standards for teacher preparation programs as well as licensing and certification regulations. As part of a state's ESSA plan, boards ought to ensure that these standards are both aligned to student learning standards and that they cohere with other policy areas.

But aligning the policy web is merely the first step. Once SBEs have aligned their policies, they must operationalize the system by continually revisiting, developing, refining, and extending it. This process becomes a way of planning, leading, and living as a board. A board's strategic planning begins with learning standards at the center and moves outward to corollary policies (figure 2). By this process of continuous improvement, the board guides ESSA implementation systematically and also leads by example.

Perhaps the most difficult part of operationalizing a standards-based system is decision making. The process is the obverse of strategic

planning. While planning begins with standards and moves toward actions that improve student achievement, decision making points back to the center: How does each choice the board makes serve the core mission? How does it ensure coherence to all parts of a state's ESSA plan?

ESSA's success will largely be judged by how well state boards implement it over the long term. Rushed implementation will fall flat. States must play the long game and keep the end in mind. Fast-forward to a time 10 to 15 years hence when Congress once again reauthorizes ESEA. Will Congress laud state boards as examples of strategic, thoughtful leadership that resulted in high levels of student achievement and vastly improved schools? What will state boards' legacy be when ESSA expires? If boards start with that end in mind, they will exemplify the proactive legacy leadership that will truly benefit students and schools. ■

¹Richard Rothstein et al., *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right* (Washington, D.C. and New York, N.Y.: Economic Policy Institute and Teachers College Press, 2008).

²Laura S. Hamilton et al., "Standards-Based Reform in the United States: History, Research, and Future Directions," paper commissioned by the Center on Education Policy (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2009).

³Robert Hull, "Leading a Standards-Based System: Aligning Policy to Standards," *Policy Update* 21, no. 3 (2014).

⁴These sets of standards and considerations for policy alignment are presented in a series of NASBE Policy Updates found here: <http://www.nasbe.org/policy-update/nasbe-standards-based-leadership-framework-a-policy-update-series/>.

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