

# Education Matters

September 2009

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation

## National Standards Gain Steam

### Governors' Support Rooted in Concerns over Competition

By David J. Hoff



National standards—once the untouchable “third rail” of American education policy—now have the backing of the nation’s governors, a growing number of education leaders, and the U.S. Secretary of Education.

The National Governors Association (NGA) last March adopted a policy statement endorsing a process to develop common academic standards by comparing student performance on international tests.

The governors join several education groups—the Council of the Great City Schools, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Federation of Teachers among them—in endorsing the idea that the nation should set a common definition of what students should know and be able to do.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said he wants the federal government to be a “catalyst” for the development of national standards, and wants to support the NGA and other groups working to set them.

“We want to get into this game... and I’m not leading this game,” Mr. Duncan said during an interview on C-SPAN. “There are many great governors out there who have been talking about this, and not just talking about this but working on this for a while.”

Despite the convergence of high-powered opinion in favor of national standards, the work of creating them and winning

public support will be difficult, one longtime advocate for such standards said.

“The United States does not have an obvious mechanism for doing them,” said Chester E. Finn, Jr., the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington-based think tank. “As a result, everything is improvisational and has drawbacks.”

While common standards have the support of some leading policymakers, some educators argue they would take another step toward nationalizing school policy and usurping teachers’ judgment of what to teach and how to teach it.

“What I’m mostly concerned about ... is doing on a national level what we’re doing too much of on the state and local levels,” said Deborah Meier, a former New York City principal and a senior scholar at New York University. (Ms. Meier contributes to the *Bridging Differences* blog on [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org).)

“We’re governing by distance authority,” she added.

#### Hot Topic

Proposals for such standards are now gathering support, unlike previous attempts to nationalize standards and testing.

During the term of President George H.W. Bush, the federal government made grants to groups of education experts to craft definitions of what students should know in several subjects.

The standards produced under the process by some groups came under harsh criticism, especially from conservatives such



## THE TRAIN HAS LEFT THE STATION

***“The agreement among governors and education policy leaders suggests to some observers that the development of national standards, in some form, is inevitable.”***

as Lynne Cheney. In 1993, Ms. Cheney, who had supported efforts for national standards as the chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, faulted the history standards for de-emphasizing important events and people in U.S. history.

Shortly thereafter, in a nonbinding resolution, the U.S. Senate criticized the proposed history standards.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton proposed creating national tests in 4th grade reading and 8th grade mathematics. Congress eventually blocked funding for the proposal.

After those experiences, President George W. Bush avoided national standards in proposing the No Child Left Behind Act, his signature education initiative. The NCLB law requires states to set their own standards and hold schools accountable based on whether students tested in grades 3-8 and one year in high school attain proficiency under them.

### States Seen as Inconsistent

The recent endorsements of national standards have emerged, in part, because critics say the patchwork of state standards under the NCLB Act sets inconsistent goals for reading and math. In those two subjects, supporters say, educators should be able to agree on common standards.

Governors also are arguing that they want to improve students' academic performance in an effort to ensure the nation's economic success.

“International benchmarking will move the American education system beyond comparing student performance against

peers in neighboring cities or states—it will shift the focus to the skills students need to compete with other students around the world,” the NGA policy statement says.

The Obama administration included a similar argument in its fiscal 2010 budget proposal released last week.

“Building on the [economic-stimulus law], the new administration will help states increase the rigor of their standards so they prepare students for success in college and a career,” the summary of the Education Department budget said.

The NGA statement was based on a December report, *Benchmarking for Success*, released by the NGA, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve, a nonprofit group organized by governors and business leaders that seeks to improve the quality of schools through more rigorous standards.

The agreement among governors and education policy leaders suggests to some observers that the development of national standards, in some form, is inevitable.

“The question is much more how it will happen,” said Bruno Manno, a senior program associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore and a political appointee at the U.S. Department of Education under the first President Bush. “Will it happen in a haphazard way, or will it happen in a thoughtful way?”

### National, Not Federal

While many of those questions remain unanswered, advocates for common standards agree on one thing: the federal government should not define the content of such standards.

“We don't want to federalize education,” Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman, a Republican, said shortly after the governors formally approved the new NGA position at their winter meeting in Washington. “We want states to improve their standards, and one way to look at that is through international benchmarking. It's got to be done through state and local governments.”

The combined effort of the NGA and the CCSSO would supplement Achieve's ongoing work with the American Diploma Project, in which thirty-four states are creating policies aimed at preparing all students for postsecondary education.

Part of the undertaking is setting standards for high school English and math. The Fordham Institute and the Education Trust, a Washington group that supports improvements in the education of low-income children, are partners in the diploma project.

In the December report, the NGA, the CCSSO, and Achieve outlined a process of comparing U.S. students' achievement on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) with that of students in high-achieving countries. The work would yield standards outlining what U.S. students should know and be able to do to match that performance, the policy statement says.

But policymakers shouldn't be relying on the content of PISA, according to Tom Loveless, a senior fellow for the Brown

Center on Education at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank.

In math, he said, PISA questions are more focused on applying general math principles in real-life situations than on algebra, geometry, and other mathematical material taught in high schools.

“There’s almost no higher-level mathematics in them,” said Mr. Loveless, who published a report recently that criticized PISA as being ideologically biased. (*PISA Called Inappropriate for U.S. Benchmarking*)

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, (TIMSS), another major test examining student performance across the world, assesses students in the 4th and 8th grades and lacks the challenging mathematical content expected of high school students, Mr. Loveless said.

“There’s nothing out there to benchmark high school achievement against internationally,” he said.

### Difficulties Ahead

Even with the growing support for the concept of national standards, putting them in place won’t be easy, said Mr. Finn, who served in the federal Education Department under President Ronald Reagan and has advocated national standards for more than two decades.

Congress isn’t yet on record supporting any effort or proposal to set such standards. And although language arts and mathematics may appear to be relatively easy subjects on which to find common ground, each field has experienced polarizing debates.

In beginning reading, the debate has been over whether to emphasize the decoding and other basic skills or to emphasize the development of reading habits. In math, educators and mathematicians disagree over whether to emphasize algorithms or conceptual knowledge.

“Saying you’re for [national standards] is almost the easy part,” said Mr. Finn. “There are 999 tough issues that will follow. I sort of feel like we’re nowhere near tackling them.” ■



*David J. Hoff is an associate editor for Education Week. He covers federal policy and school finance, as well as the states of Kentucky, New York, and Texas. This article first appeared in Education Week. Reprinted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education.*

## Minnesota Miracle with Math Turnaround: An Interview with Its Hero

*A good share of the credit for Minnesota’s very impressive showing on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) goes to Michigan State University professor William Schmidt.*

*His position as co-director of the Promoting Rigorous Outcomes in Mathematics and Science Education (PROM/SE) project has made him the “go to” guy whenever issues of international mathematics performance arise. National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) spoke to Professor Schmidt recently about his work with Minnesota.*

**NCTQ:** Only a handful of states have ever participated in TIMSS. What inspired Minnesota to take part in the 2007 TIMSS and why did its students do so well?

**Schmidt:** I’m not sure why, but Minnesota decided to participate in the original 1995 TIMSS. Results showed that performance of Minnesota students was about on the level of U.S. students as a whole—mediocre. That comparative information apparently inspired the years of reform efforts that have followed. Minnesota turned to us for help in both 1997 and 2003 when it was developing state mathematics standards. We helped them “benchmark”

their standards to international standards. By 2003 Minnesota standards had the international hallmarks of effectiveness: focus, coherence, and rigor. Now, twelve years after that original TIMSS experience, despite changes in leadership at the state Department of Education, stakeholders in the state are still on the same page.

**NCTQ:** What was done to make sure that teachers knew how to meet state standards in their instruction?

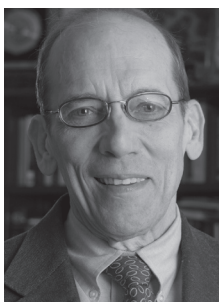
**Schmidt:** An organization called “SciMathMN”, a public-private partnership funded by the state, business groups, and foundations, became the bridge from these improved standards to actual classroom practices. Changes in instruction supported by SciMathMN have been dramatic: between 1995 and 2007 fourth grade teachers doubled the time they spent on the most important mathematics topics, while reducing the time spent on “other”

topics (which I call “clutter”) from 50 percent to only 4 percent. Likewise, eighth grade mathematics teachers quadrupled the time spent on algebra, while reducing the time spent on clutter from 33 percent to only 1 percent.

**NCTQ:** There’s increasing focus in discussions of education reform on the importance of improving teacher quality. How do you weigh the importance of teacher quality relative to curriculum issues when you think about education reform?

**Schmidt:** I don’t want to discount the importance of teacher quality, but the Minnesota example may illustrate how much difference any given group of teachers can make using a focused, coherent, and rigorous curriculum, provided efforts are made to bring them onboard. I’m known to get pretty impassioned about this topic, sermonizing with the enthusiasm of a Baptist preacher. There is nothing stopping other states from doing exactly as Minnesota has done to improve student performance in mathematics. I don’t want to steal anything from President Obama, but my message to states is “Yes you can!” ■

*Source—TQBulletin, a publication of National Council on Teacher Quality, www.nctq.org.*



Prof. William Schmidt

# Who Gets Thrown Overboard?

Is it time to retire the old adage “last hired, first fired”?

By Raegan Miller and Robin Chait



Editor’s Note—

*The information presented herein represents the opinions of the authors but not necessarily the opinion of the Association of American Educators.*

Every day, sometimes several times a day, the media report more rounds of layoffs at major American firms, from Microsoft to Caterpillar to Fidelity to Macy’s and beyond. But the private sector is not the only one hemorrhaging jobs in the current recession; school districts from coast to coast are letting go of employees, too. Indeed, saving “literally hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs” is one of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s primary arguments in support of the massive federal “stimulus” bill, which would provide over 100 billion dollars to local schools.

Duncan is right to worry about stem-

ming teacher layoffs, but there’s more to this problem than simple job-loss numbers. That’s because, as currently structured in most places—and locked into collective bargaining contracts, board policy, sometimes state law—such lay-offs can undermine not only the size but also the quality of the teacher work force, both immediately and well into the future. That’s because of which teachers are laid off and what signals this process sends to other educators and future candidates.

When a school district announces layoffs, often called a reduction in force (RIF), you know which teachers will get the axe: the newbies. It’s a vivid illustra-

tion of the “last-hired, first-fired” rule, often found in the public sector but rarely in the private. It’s designed to be objective, and administrators feel comfortable defending it. Its effect, however, is to protect seniority.

In public edu-

cation, in particular, it also avoids running afoul of tenure laws for, typically, none of the teachers selected for separation will

have been in the

district long enough to earn

that coveted employment status. Unfortunately, seniority and tenure have almost nothing to do with quality teaching—or with matching good teachers with needy kids, ensuring that critical subjects are ad-



equately staffed, etc. In general, teacher contracts or state law simply require that the number of years employed by that district determine who will stay and who will be let go. Teacher quality—the ability to foster successful learning in children—almost never enters the picture.

### Teacher Quality and Layoffs

Considering that teacher quality is the single most important school-based determinant of students' academic progress, it's essential to understand how layoffs affect it. In the short run, it may be a wash, since teachers with just one or two years of experience tend to be less effective than those with a few more years in the classroom. (Most research indicates that this "experience factor" tapers off within five years.) Dismissing novice teachers may actually improve the average level of skill of a district's teachers.

But sacking teachers from this group may also have a negative effect on average teacher quality, since some of the most energetic and positive teachers are those with little experience. For example, Teach For America members, who are carefully selected for their academic strength and their commitment to working in high-poverty schools, have been shown to be at least as effective as more experienced teachers.

And what about teachers who are new to their current district but have strong track records elsewhere? They are just as vulnerable to being laid off as hapless rookies.

### Seniority is King

The immediate effect of a RIF on the overall quality of a district's teaching force depends on the prevalence of particularly capable novices and highly effective veterans who lack tenure. But that's just the beginning. This method of laying teachers off also powerfully signals those considering a stint in public education that, when push comes to shove, what really matters is seniority. This signal, invariably amplified by local media interest



in layoff stories, makes it harder for districts to attract the kind of teachers they will need in the future—energetic, committed, and effective teachers who want to be rewarded for efficacy rather than the duration of their service.

Imaginative districts and determined

efforts to bring these data to bear on questions about teacher quality should be redoubled, especially when it comes to identifying chronically ineffective teachers.

### Effectiveness, not Seniority

Reliance on "last hired, first fired" rules highlights the inadequacies of the current human resource systems in public education and the need to rethink the teacher tenure process. Districts should work to ensure that only effective teachers get tenure and that effective younger instructors aren't sacrificed because of antiquated seniority rules. Today's economic cloud could even turn out to have a silver educational lining if states and districts use the current crisis to revamp their HR systems and ground rules. Just about everyone knows that would make for better education. The present confluence of budget stringency, on the one hand, and the press for stronger school performance, on the other hand, may be just what's needed to affect these important reforms. ■

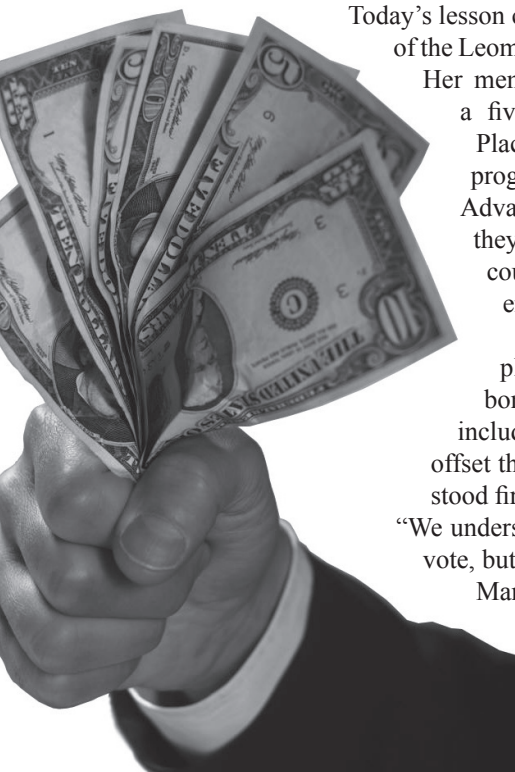
*Miller and Chait are Senior Education Policy Analysts at the Center for American Progress.*

**“And what about teachers who are new to their current district but have strong track records elsewhere?”**

leaders can find ways to maintain a high-quality teaching staff even when layoffs are unavoidable. Early retirement incentives, for example, can encourage tiring veteran teachers to make space for energetic newcomers. But seniority has to be addressed, too, whether by modifying the teacher contract and/or altering state law. When teachers must be let go, districts need the freedom, the wisdom, and the will to lay off the least effective. Mountains of student achievement data—much of it attributable to NCLB-induced annual testing—can be linked to teachers and can inform these decisions. Such data didn't exist during the last big wave of teacher layoffs during the recession of the early 1990s. But now that they are available,



## AP Students Take Back Seat to Union Demands Union boss explains “what a union is all about”



Today’s lesson comes courtesy of Bernadette Marso, president of the Leominster Education Association in Massachusetts.

Her members just voted down, by a 305-47 margin, a five-year, \$856,000 grant from the Advanced Placement Training and Award Program. The program, among other things, pays teachers of Advanced Placement courses bonus money “if they successfully recruit more students to take AP courses and if the students perform well on the end-of-the-year AP exam.”

Some district officials and parents complained about the union decision because the bonuses were just one part of the program, which includes professional development and a subsidy to offset the AP exam fee for the students. But the union stood firmly opposed.

“We understand that some people will not understand the vote, but we confronted this from a union perspective,”

Marso said. “We have a fair and equitable contract with the district, and to have a third party come in and start paying certain teachers more money than other hard-working teachers goes against what a union is all about.”

## Quote of the Month



“Hard working, dedicated teachers don’t need bureaucratic unions to improve communication with administrators. Indeed, involving the union with their pages and pages of lengthy, often in-

comprehensible contracts that have little to say about educating children obfuscates rather than clarifies the work of teachers. Teachers and administrators should focus on the important work of educating children and act like adults, not squabbling siblings.”

—Katherine K. Merseth, senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

## Reason Foundation’s New Weighted Student Formula

Much of our education funding is wasted on bureaucracy. The money never actually makes it into the classroom in the form of books, computers, supplies, or even salaries for better teachers. Weighted student formula changes that. Using weighted student formula’s decentralized system, education funds are attached to each student and the students can take that money directly to the public school of their choice.

At least fifteen major school districts have moved to this system of backpack funding. Reason Foundation’s new *Weighted Student Formula Yearbook* examines how the budgeting system is being implemented in each of these places and, based on the real-world data, offers a series of “best practices” that other districts and states can follow to improve the quality of their schools.

In places where parents have school choice and districts empower their principals and teachers, we are seeing increased learning and better test scores. The results from districts using student-based funding are very promising. Prior to 2008, less than half of Hartford, Connecticut’s education money made it to the classroom. Now, over 70 percent makes it there. As a result, the district’s schools posted the largest gains, over three times

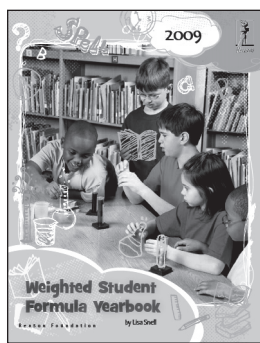
the average increase, on the state’s Mastery Tests in 2007-08.

San Francisco Unified School District has outperformed the comparable large school districts on the California Standards Tests for seven straight years. A greater percentage of San Francisco Unified students graduate from high school than almost any other large urban public school system in the country.

Oakland has produced the largest four-year gain among large urban districts on California’s Academic Performance Index since implementing results-based budgeting in 2004.

In 2008, Baltimore City Schools faced a \$76.9 million budget shortfall. But Superintendent Andres Alonso instituted weighted student formula. He identified \$165 million in budget cuts at the central office to eliminate the deficit and redistributed approximately \$88 million in central office funds to the schools. By the 2010 school year, Alonso will have cut 489 nonessential teaching jobs from the central office, redirecting 80 percent of the district’s operating budget to schools.

For more information, contact Lisa Snell, Director of Education & Child Welfare, Reason Foundation, [www.reason.org](http://www.reason.org).



## AAE Helps Teachers Win Scholarships

Western Governors University (WGU), with the support of the Association of American Educators (AAE), is pleased to announce that WGU will award two quarterly scholarships designed to help currently working K-12 teachers attend college—on their schedule.

### Educational Leadership Scholarship

A WGU-AAE Educational Leadership



## 9-11 Stories of Survival and Loss

### Commemorative Resources for High School Educators

Many teachers have commented that it is difficult to acknowledge the 9/11 anniversary in their classrooms; the anniversary comes at the beginning of the school year and it is hard to anticipate the range of emotions and feelings that this event will raise for students and teachers just getting to know each other. Yet helping young people to understand the events of history and recognize the impact of these events on today's world is one of the most important aspects of teaching.

The National September 11 Memorial Organization has created a video and support materials for use in secondary homeroom, history, or social studies class.

The eight-minute film offers first person accounts of the events and suggests some of the reasons why people all over the world observe moments of silence on September 11.

Download free resources at  
[www.national911memorial.org](http://www.national911memorial.org).

For more information, email  
[educators@sept11mm.org](mailto:educators@sept11mm.org).

Scholarship is valued up to \$5,000. The scholarship will be credited to your account at the rate of \$1,000 per six-month term. Teachers with a bachelor's degree and valid certification are qualified to apply. The scholarship is available to individuals interested in one of the following master's degrees:

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- M.Ed. in Learning and Technology
- M.Ed. in Measurement and Evaluation
- M.S. in Educational Leadership

### Classroom Excellence Scholarship

A WGU-AAE Classroom Excellence Scholarship is valued up to \$5,000. The scholarship will be credited to your account at the rate of \$1,000 per six-month term. Teachers with a bachelor's degree and valid certification are qualified to apply. The scholarship is available to individuals interested in one of the following master's degrees:

- M.A. in Mathematics Education
- M.A. in Science Education
- M.A. in English Language Learning/English as a Second Language (K-12)
- M.S. in Special Education (PK-12)

Western Governors University is the only accredited university in the United States offering online competency-based degree programs. The private, nonprofit university was founded and is supported by nineteen governors, as well as more than twenty leading corporations and foundations. The scholarship application deadline is October 15, 2009. For application details, visit [www.wgu.edu/aaescholarships](http://www.wgu.edu/aaescholarships). ■



## A New Teacher's Guide to the First Month of School

This great resource could be subtitled, "Things You Didn't Learn in Ed School!"

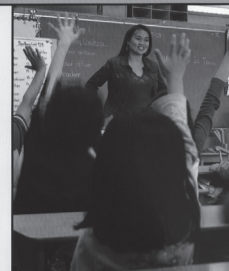
For elementary teachers entering the classroom for the first time, this updated version of a bestseller provides practical guidelines to help build a foundation for a successful first year. But it wouldn't hurt seasoned veterans to take a peek at this latest edition as well. This edition includes lesson plans and reproducible worksheets in English and Spanish.

## Keys to the Elementary Classroom

THIRD EDITION

A New Teacher's Guide to the First Month of School

Carrol Moran  
Judy Stobbe  
Wendy Baron  
Janette Miller  
Ellen Moir



Find it at [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com).



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