Case 69

New Standards Project


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**Background.** Education in the United States has, from the time of the nation’s founding onward, been characterized by decentralization and local control. School boards and teachers, like early Anti-Federalists, have bridled at the thought of distant federal policymakers telling them how to do their jobs. Increasingly, however, the American system of education—specifically pre-college public education—has also been frequently characterized by a policy known as social promotion: moving students up to the next grade level, and, ultimately, to graduation, regardless of whether or not they are actually learning at a pace commensurate to their progress. This habit is one of the primary phenomena that have been blamed for the decline of public education in the United States.

**Strategy.** In 1990, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched a new collaborative—the New Standards Project (NSP)—to promulgate a set of “best practices” and benchmarks of achievement that would help schools ensure that their students were, in fact, learning at grade level. The two foundations made initial grants to two not-for-profits dedicated to reform in American education: the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), and the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC), at the University of Pittsburgh. With these funds, the two organizations created New Standards, an education organization based in Washington, D.C.

New Standards set out to do research, examining education systems in countries with highly effective education and training systems, convening meetings of education experts, and collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders in public education. Based on its findings, the NSP then set out to design a set of national standards that could be tailored to guide teaching around the country. Final decisions on the standards were made by NSP’s Governing Board, which was composed of governors, state legislators, school superintendents, teachers, school board members, and representatives of a number of other constituencies. Working in mathematics, literacy, science, and applied learning, NSP set out to provide, to willing school district partners standards, assessment techniques, professional development, technical assistance, and quality control.

**Outcomes.** Throughout the 1990s, the perceived decline in public education led more and more groups to favor common standards, of the sort promoted by New Standards. President Clinton, for example, advocated national standards with clear benchmarks that would enable parents to compare their child’s progress to that of children in other school districts and states. This proposal foundered in Congress over concerns that such a move would threaten local authority. However, policymakers at the state and local levels were not all so ambivalent, and a number of communities began in the early and mid-1990s to work actively with New Standards on curricular reform. By 1995, New Standards had eighteen state and six district partners, collectively enrolling “nearly half the public school children in the United States.” In July of that year, Pew appropriated an additional $6 million to LRDC, and the MacArthur Foundation a further $2.3 million to the NCEE, “to continue work on [NSP].”

In December 1996, the New York City Schools Chancellor, Dr. Rudy Crew, announced a plan to adopt gradually the national standards disseminated by NSP. Announcing the move, Dr. Crew said, “I am proposing adoption of the standards developed by the New Standards project because they are the best available national standards, because teachers can use them, because they are based on common sense as well as academic excellence, and because they are ready now.” Crew’s proposal was approved by the Board of Education, making New York “the largest district to embrace the
standards.” Crew’s decision was largely welcomed within the New York educational community. Dianne Ravitch, a researcher at NYU, called it “a good strategy,” and the president of the United Parents Association, Ayo Harrington, enthused, “I say hallelujah. . . . It’s way past due.” Just thirteen months later, an article in the New York Times would declare:

Now, like skyscrapers being renovated using the same blueprint, hundreds of city schools like P.S. 158 are beginning to incorporate those academic standards—first in reading and writing, with math and science to follow—aligning their expectations of what students should learn and changing how that achievement is measured.”

Transition to the standards would not occur overnight, and certainly required major adjustment on the part of teachers and administrators. NSP had anticipated the extensive need for technical assistance and professional training that would be necessary, however, and teachers were guided in the transition by a 200-page document helping them develop assignments, grade consistently, and use NSP guidelines as a jumping off point for their own individual lesson plans. In addition, the schools sponsored workshops for parents to learn about the new standards and offer feedback. Around the county, this process was repeated as NSP standards were picked up—in whole or in part—by a number of communities, including Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Denver, and Boston.”

Impact. The debate over how much centralization is desirable in public education is still very much alive. But the need for some degree of uniformity, of expectations and evaluation, has gained significant traction in the public consciousness. The most visible sign of this is, of course, the No Child Left Behind Act. Passed by Congress with bipartisan support in 2001, the Act mandates common standards and rigorous measurement of progress toward specific educational goals. Both LRDC and NCEE continue to support education reform, and proponents of uniformity of education practices—of whom there are now many—continue to use and build on the work of the foundation-funded New Standards Project, an early leader in the movement.

Notes

1031. Ibid.
1034. Ibid.
1035. Ibid.
1037. Ibid.