



EPSSL | **EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY**
Education Policy Research Unit

DOCUMENT REVIEWED:	<u>“The State of State Standards 2006”</u>
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Summary of Review

The reviewed report assigns grades to the content standards of 49 states and the District of Columbia, on an A-F scale, and uses those grades as a basis for criticizing schools for lack of progress in improving standards. This review found no evidence supporting the validity of the grades and also found no evidence of a relationship to student academic performance, contrary to the report’s conclusions. The report’s claims in support of its grading practice were selectively data-mined and were seriously lacking in methodological rigor. Policymakers and educators would be ill-advised to base any decisions about policy or practice on the grades assigned by this report.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational standards have become a central issue in educational policy over the last several decades and have assumed particular importance with the passage and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Standards are divided into two types: *content* and *performance*. Content standards specify the knowledge and skills to be learned in a given subject area; performance standards specify the level of learning deemed sufficient, typically labeled as “proficient.”

Content and performance standards work in tandem in test-based accountability systems like NCLB. In theory, such systems “incentivize” educators to produce improved student learning by holding them accountable for improvement on performance standards, as measured by standardized tests. Performance standards must be “aligned” with content standards; content standards drive improvement in performance if they are sufficiently rigorous and provide guidance to educators by being clear, precise, and manageable in number.

The report under review, *The State of State Standards 2006*, rated each state’s “subject” (i.e., “content”) standards in U.S. History, English/language arts, mathematics, science, and world history, using an A-F scale. The report then compared those grades to earlier ratings from 2000. An accompanying document, *It Takes a Vision: How Three States Created Great Academic Standards*, provides a separate account of the development of the three state standards judged best: those of California, Massachusetts, and Indiana.

The report was produced by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which has “raising stan-

dards” and “strengthening accountability” at the forefront of its stated mission.¹ The authors of the report are Chester Finn, President of the Fordham Institute and Assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration; Michael J. Petrilli, Vice President for National Programs & Policy of the Fordham Institute; and Liam Julian, Associate Writer and Editor, also of the Fordham Institute. Joanne Jacobs, author of the accompanying document (“It Takes a Vision”), is a freelance writer and blogger.

II. THE REPORT’S FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The main report reaches two primary conclusions, while the ‘It Takes a Vision’ document offers a third:

1. Between 2000 (pre-NCLB) and 2006 there has been no overall progress in raising the quality of state content standards. Whereas some have gotten better, this is offset by the finding that others have gotten worse. The average grade in 2000, C-, remained the average grade in 2006.
2. Students in states with better content standards do better on performance standards.
3. Effective leadership on the part of office holders, representatives of business, and academic content experts, against often significant resistance, is required in order for states to develop good content standards.

III. THE REPORT’S RATIONALES FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

To support the first conclusion – that there has been no progress overall in raising the quality of content standards between 2000

and 2006 – the report compared the average letter grade Fordham Institute experts gave in 2000 with the average letter grade such experts gave in subsequent years, ending in 2006.

To support the second conclusion – that students in states with better content standards do better on performance standards – the report identified states that had made statistically significant gains in the percentage of students who attained proficiency in given subject areas of NAEP and then related this to the states' grades on the corresponding standards. Three examples are provided, one each from English/language arts, science, and mathematics.

To support the third conclusion – that effective leadership, against often significant resistance, is required in order for states to develop good content standards – case studies were provided documenting the development of content standards in the three states that Fordham judges to have the best standards: California, Massachusetts, and Indiana.

IV. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The text of the report refers to work by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), as well as Fordham's own previous work, but the report includes no citations. The report makes fleeting reference to the controversy surrounding testing and accountability regimens and again provides no citations. The report does not have a reference list.

The Fordham Institute exhibits a strong prior commitment to the centrality of education standards both in its mission statement and in the report under consideration (e.g., subject matter standards “are the foundation of standards-based reform, the dominant education policy strategy in America to-

day”...and...“exert enormous influence over what actually happens inside the classroom,” p. 6). By not including a meaningful discussion of the research literature, the report is able to simply assume that the “dominant education policy” is unproblematic. Research-based arguments on both sides question whether standards-based accountability regimes like NCLB improve student performance.² A rating or grading system like the one used in the report is based necessarily on a belief in a strong connection between the policy and an outcome goal that is accepted as beneficial. The issues of outcomes and of failing to address the research base are also important here because researchers must struggle with the fact that content standards are only one among many factors that might influence student (and teacher) performance.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODOLOGY

The accompanying document by Joanne Jacobs employs, in a broad sense of the term, a case-study methodology—an approach that, generally speaking, is both useful and defensible. However, the methodology that the report itself uses to support its conclusions is highly problematic.

States' grades were determined by raters who were deemed experts by the report's authors. How many raters were used and what their qualifications might be are not addressed in the text of the report. A number of individuals are mentioned in the acknowledgements, many of whom would appear to be employees of the Fordham Institute.

State standards are judged on the general basis of whether they are “clear, rigorous, and right-headed about content” (p. 6). A few slightly more specific subject area examples are provided from English, science,

