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The Rise of 21st Century Standards: What Do We Know About What Students Should Know? And What Does It Mean for Federal High School Reform?

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Over the last two decades, there has emerged a national consensus behind the concept of standards-based reform in education. This theory relies on (1) setting rigorous standards for student achievement, (2) measuring the extent to which those standards are achieved, and (3) providing sufficient opportunities and interventions for students and schools to achieve those standards. This strategy is now codified in federal education law, particularly in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Over the last several years, our nation has invested heavily in the measures of student achievement, including data, assessment, and accountability systems. But much less national attention has been given to the front-end question of what students should know (and to the further question of what investments it will take to ensure that students get there). It is true that all states have now set standards for student achievement in reading, math, and other core subjects, and that some states have set high standards. But it is not clear that these standards are uniformly connected to the larger goals of our educational system or to what students need to know to succeed.

As we enter the 21st century, we must take stock of where we are heading in this movement toward standards-based reform—so that we are not simply measuring our progress to nowhere. What do students need to know and to do? What does that mean for high school reform? And what does that mean for federal policy?

To begin to answer these questions, consider what we learn by examining the role of education in the 20th century. My grandfather, Herbert Palmer, was born 100 years ago—December 6, 1906—and passed away near the end of the century. He was educated in public schools in Middletown, Connecticut, and after graduating from high school was admitted to Wesleyan College as one of three local students accepted on scholarship each year. At the outset of the 20th century, Europe was the center of power. Great Britain and its colonies comprised a vast empire. Democracy was still a burgeoning concept. The world was still entering the industrial age. The United States was waking from its self-imposed isolationism. There was little technology in most people's lives—no phones, no radios, no cars, and no air travel. Most people in the world lived and died within 100 miles of where they were born.

During my grandfather's lifetime, profound changes occurred in nearly every dimension of life, accelerating exponentially to the present. These interrelated changes had a profound impact on the nature and role of education, which can be captured in three themes:

- *Innovation*. The 20th century saw rapid advancements in nearly all fields, particularly with regard to technology—from radio to television to computers and the internet; from telephones to cell phones to webcasts; from the automobile to the airplane, and from rockets to the space shuttle. These changes were hallmarks of the information age economy and changed the way we live and work. Just as the United States led in innovation, it led economically, through the rise of global capitalism and the fall of communism. This movement toward innovation has raised the bar for what knowledge and skills students need to succeed.
- *Globalization*. The 20th century saw the world shrink dramatically—with international air travel, international television coverage, international quasi-governmental institutions, the World Wide Web, and more. Students educated today must be ready to compete on a global scale.
- *Diversification*. The 20th century saw significant shifts in the demographics in our nation and our schools—from Brown v. Board of Education's promise of integration to the rise of immigration from Asia and Latin America. According to 2000 Census data, nearly every other child entering our public schools today is a student of color. Yet our schools often remain segregated by race and poverty, and significant achievement gaps persist.

Each of these themes continues to have profound implications for the nature and role of education in the 21st century, and for what our students should know. There is at least emerging agreement on several points:

- *The Vital Role of Education*. Education has never been more important to the success of individual students and our nation—economically, democratically, and morally. For example, according to a recent report from the College Board, a college graduate earns on average more than double a high school dropout, and this return on investment to education has been increasing for decades. The more one learns, the more one earns. And as our nation becomes more diverse, it becomes even more vital that we educate all students to high standards, across lines of race, ethnicity, income levels, geography, or other factors.
- *The Rising Bar*. Even as education is becoming more important, the bar is rising in terms of expectations. Innovation and globalization have led to a push for higher standards in terms of both content knowledge and higher-order thinking skills. According to a recent report from the Educational Testing Service, more than two-thirds of new jobs now require some form of postsecondary education, and that percentage is growing rapidly. This has led to recent efforts to more expressly define the core knowledge and skills that students need to succeed in college and work. For example, Achieve, Inc., as part of its American Diploma Project (ADP), has developed benchmarks for what all students need to know in reading/language arts and mathematics to succeed in postsecondary education and employment. Achieve found significant overlap in these areas. Further, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (a partnership of major businesses and education organizations) has developed a framework for the types of skills all students need, which fall into three broad categories: information and communication skills, thinking and problem solving skills, and interpersonal and self-directional skills. Numerous reports from the U.S. Department of Education and others confirm that taking a rigorous high school curriculum is the single greatest predictor of a student's matriculation and success in college, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income level.
- *The Current Gaps*. Yet even as we seek to raise the bar, substantial signs of underperformance and gaps in educational opportunity and achievement persist. For every 100 students in ninth grade today, fewer than seventy will graduate from high school on time, only forty will enroll immediately in college, and fewer than twenty will graduate from college within six years. These numbers are even lower for black and Hispanic students. Further, according to Achieve, as many as half of all students entering college will require at least one remedial course, and more than half of all employers report that high school graduates lack basic skills.

What does all of this mean for high school reform and for the role of the federal government? In order to frame further discussion, consider three current debates in national education reform, which are likely to be central issues in federal policy moving forward:

- *National Standards*. It is widely agreed that standards, including high school standards, need to be more rigorous for all students. Further, states have found (not surprisingly) that the knowledge and skills that high school graduates need to succeed in college and work in one state are closely aligned with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in another. Given our commitment to federalism, the notion of national standards has long been taboo; an effort to create even voluntary national standards in the mid-1990s suffered a political backlash. Yet more recently, the federal role in education has increased significantly and with bipartisan support, albeit with express prohibitions on the federal government setting content standards. Furthermore, groups of states have already been working together, particularly as part of the ADP, to align high school standards, assessments, and course requirements with college and work expectations. There has also recently been increased interest in using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as a national benchmark for student performance. Finally, several political and education leaders, including governors, mayors, and former federal officials, have called for national standards (and assessments). Given all of this, it is certainly ripe to consider whether federal law should create or develop incentives for establishing national standards. For example, federal law could promote work among states to align their standards with college and work expectations, and provide financial incentives for states that work together in this regard—along with greater flexibility for innovation in accountability and increased investment in data capacity.
- *Dual Language*. It is widely agreed that students today have a much greater need to know a foreign language and to be culturally literate. Yet there is still little focus on these skills as a core part of state standards. Federal law focuses on the obligation of states to provide services to English language learners, but there is little thinking of how to leverage our demographics to promote linguistic and cultural learning for all students. Given the potential advantages presented by our diversity in an interconnected world, it may be time to think about bilingual education in a new light—as an educational asset for all students, with the goal being that all students graduate from high school speaking at least two languages.
- *The Value of Diversity*. It is widely agreed that students today will need to learn how to be good citizens, employees, and leaders in our increasingly diverse, multicultural society. Yet the U.S. Supreme Court is considering two cases challenging the authority of local school boards to give limited consideration to race in student assignment, to promote the educational benefits of diversity for all students. The Bush administration recently filed briefs arguing against the school district policies—suggesting that the consideration of race is at odds with the Supreme Court's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* and that only race-neutral efforts are appropriate. But one must look no further than the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to know that sometimes you have to consider race to overcome it, and to ensure the best educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. As with the policies at issue before the Supreme Court, NCLB incorporates the limited consideration of race with regard to subgroup accountability to promote educational benefits, and would likely be subject to the same "strict scrutiny" under law. Given the state of our world, one can only hope that the federal government, or at least the Supreme Court, will recognize the value of diversity—for purposes of national security if not national cohesion. And it may be more than time to focus on how we can strengthen integration and diversity in education.

Early in the 20th century, following his graduation from college, my grandfather was admitted to Harvard Law School. Instead, he chose to help his younger brothers and sister complete college by accepting a job with Prudential Insurance, where he worked for the next 50 years. Today, U.S.

Senator Michael Enzi (chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee) often cites the statistic that a student graduating from college today will change jobs fourteen times in his or her lifetime, and most of those jobs haven't been invented yet. It is that world for which we must prepare our students and our nation to succeed and lead.

As we consider the issues of standards, high school reform, and the federal role, it is important to distinguish between substance and process. There is much we know about what we need to do to raise the bar. The bigger question is whether we have the political will and systems to do it.