



Standards in education shouldn't differ by state

GOVS. MITCHELL E. DANIELS AND JACK MARKELL • April 5, 2010

Thousands of athletes put in millions of hours of effort to make it to the Winter Olympics last month. Yet, despite the hard work of so many, when the closing ceremony finished, only a handful of competitors left Vancouver victoriously.

Across the world, another competition is upon us. The contest is academics, not athletics, and the stakes are not over medals but over which nations will lead the world's economy.

Our nation's schools need to be up for this challenge and must also be ready to draw a clear line between achievement and failure.

Over the last three decades, the United States has poured significant resources into public education with all too limited results, despite the efforts of talented educators across the country. We've got to insist on a better return on this investment. Unfortunately, our education system lacks the prerequisite of improvement: a consistent set of rules that yield accountability.

How can there be responsibility and accountability when each state sets its own definition of education success and its own rules? In this scenario, success is too often open to interpretation, constantly modified for political expediency, and tailored to meet each jurisdiction's agenda. This is the

equivalent of letting pole vaulters determine how high or low their bars are set.

Wildly varying academic standards in core areas like English and math can do harm beyond obscuring real academic deficiency. When standards are set too low, they can have the effect of limiting learning for failing to challenge adequately. In other cases, standards have become so numerous that teachers feel there isn't enough classroom time to cover each area with sufficient depth to assure student mastery.


We currently have a national test, the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), that is given to a sample of students in every state. Its findings are illuminating. While many states' data show that a large portion of students meet their state standards, NAEP reveals that only a small fraction are proficient, while other states show the opposite.

Fortunately, this disconnect is about to end.

The National Governors Association and the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) are leading an effort called the "Common Core Standards Initiative" to develop clear, rigorous standards for what should be learned in every public school in every state in the Union. This initiative combines the efforts of educators and states to tackle the difficult task of enacting clearer, higher standards in a coherent document that can actually be used to gauge success and guarantee that students graduate job- and college-ready.

Before becoming governors, we both spent most of our careers in the private sector, where global competition is a daily fact of life. We have studied the [educational programs](#) of countries around the globe that are making real progress and discovered each of their efforts share similar ingredients.

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Each uses consistent and clear standards to measure the success of local efforts, but retains critical flexibility on how those standards are met. The same should be true for the common core standards effort. Local districts need the flexibility to innovate and educate the best way they see fit, but they also need to know the rules and how their results will be measured -- how high the bar is.

In America, states introduce the concept of negative numbers in different grades. For example, South Dakota introduces negative numbers in grade 4, Arizona introduces them in grade 5, Indiana and Massachusetts introduce them in grade 6 and Minnesota introduces them in grade 7. The common core standards introduce negative numbers in grade 6, which is consistent with countries that score highly on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, an international math test.

Almost inevitably, there will be an attempt to weaken these standards. This must be resisted. There will be those who assert that American students can't meet the standards in place in other countries. This is an insult to our children.

The current effort around common core standards resembles the U.S. effort in the 1950s and 1960s to bolster education in math and science following the launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite. Back then, we recognized the growing competition we faced and responded. Today, we must do the same.

We must acknowledge that other nations are doing everything they can to make sure their children are more prepared than ours to succeed in the competition for great jobs.

These common core standards represent a significant achievement in helping to assure that all students receive a high-quality education.

The creation of these standards puts the rest of the world on notice that America knows the competition is on and is playing to win.

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