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Moving Beyond No Child Left Behind

States are being encouraged to adopt common school curricula and tests, an idea business leaders may applaud

By [Steve LeVine](#)

It's one of the most persistent gripes of American business: the shortage of skilled math and science graduates. Addressing that gap was one reason for the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind law. But with each state free to set its own standards, many simply dumbed down their tests.

Now the Obama Administration wants to create a set of stringent standards that students in all 50 states may someday have to meet. Education Secretary Arne Duncan hopes to jump-start the shift with a \$5 billion fund, known as the Race to the Top, to be split by states that voluntarily toughen requirements.

BROAD BACKING

Proposals such as Duncan's have won surprisingly wide support, from teachers' unions to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers. "Any state can give the same amount of tax money away to attract business," says NAM head John Engler. "The bottom line is how skillful your workforce is."

Duncan hasn't yet firmed up the criteria the states must meet, though he says he will lean toward the standards used in states that already have strong programs in place. That could favor the six states that have banded together to form a pilot program known as Tough Choices or Tough Times. Modeled after techniques developed in Singapore, Britain, and elsewhere, Tough Choices has attracted a diverse mix—liberal states such as Delaware and Massachusetts alongside conservative ones such as Utah and Arizona. If they win Duncan's backing, Tough Choices could form the core of his Race to the Top.

A visit to Kuumba Academy in Wilmington, Del., offers a glimpse at the changes that could bring. On a recent day, fourth- and fifth-graders raced through a "math sprint" of four dozen multiplication problems in 60 seconds, with a target of 100% accuracy. Since Kuumba adopted the program last fall, its fifth-graders have doubled their average score on a state test. Says Sondra M. Shippen, head of the eight-year-old charter school: "We don't have kids struggling with math anymore."

Both Duncan and the Tough Choices members steer carefully around the phrase "national education"—a political third rail in the U.S. because many local officials believe they should set their own curricula.

Yet that's clearly where the Administration is headed. Duncan wants to nudge the winning states toward agreeing on rigorous, shared curricula that could spread across the country. "The idea of 50 states doing their own thing I think is crazy," Duncan says. Race to the Top is a way "to say to a set of states, 'You lead the national conversation. You do this.'"

Getting effective national standards will be a fight, however. Science education could be particularly difficult as Duncan moves beyond the pilot stage, given the controversy over teaching evolution in places such as Texas and Nebraska. Neal P. McCluskey of the libertarian Cato Institute warns against thinking "that 50 government-imposed standards or one such standard is the key to effective reform."

Marvin N. Schoenhals, chairman of the Wilmington-based bank WSFS Financial, heads a group administering Tough Choices. He thinks its flexibility will win converts. "The curricula will be quite identical, but each state will probably tweak theirs," he says. By creating room for local distinctions, advocates of national standards have gotten further than expected. Now all they have to do is persuade everyone else.

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