

# Standards and Accountability

*Williamson M. Evers*

The idea seems simple enough. Set standards for what students should be learning, and then hold them and their teachers accountable for seeing that the learning actually takes place. So why, then, after years of various benchmarks and commissions and legislative agendas, are the standards and accountability programs in this country all too often mediocre and ineffective? Because they are the product of politics. Standards and accountability, like most of the contentious issues concerning public schools today, are caught between powerful and conflicting political forces—forces that hold sway even in the face of a clear and widespread desire to improve the public education that 89 percent of this nation’s children receive.

In the specific case of standards and accountability, two forces in particular are at play: resistance from the teachers’ unions and the rest of the education establishment (which includes school boards,

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superintendents, and principals) who often want to avoid being evaluated when it comes to whether their students are learning; and struggles between the progressive and traditionalist schools of thought as to what educational standards should look like, and, indeed, whether there should be any standards at all.

These conflicts, how they came to be, and how they have manifested themselves in states across the country, go a long way toward explaining why the current crop of standards-and-accountability programs have yielded such divergent programs and disappointing levels of progress so far. The modern standards-and-accountability movement can succeed only if it can move beyond these conflicts to practical ways of measuring student learning and using those measurements to reward and sanction students, teachers, and administrators.

#### A NATION AT RISK

This movement got its start in April of 1983, when a hard-hitting report entitled *A Nation at Risk* was released by a national education commission. This report showed that other countries were not only matching but exceeding America's level of educational achievement, and that, as a result, these countries were overcoming America's competitive edge in business, science, and engineering. "A rising tide of mediocrity" was eroding the quality of American schools and colleges, according to the report, and this mediocrity had come to prevail because Americans had lowered their expectations about their schools' performance.<sup>1</sup>

To remedy these low expectations, *A Nation at Risk* proposed establishing academic standards for America's schools as an important part of improving student performance.<sup>2</sup> As one prominent critic of standards and accountability has written, this "galvanized the fledgling accountability movement," giving it national prominence and momentum. "The impact of *A Nation at*

1. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), pp. 5–7.

2. See Recommendation B, *A Nation at Risk*, pp. 27–29.

*Risk*, even twenty years later, on the politics of American schools can't be overstated."<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that from the vantage point of 1983 and *A Nation at Risk*, many Americans undoubtedly believed that the public school system had once performed well and then had declined. Many a Baby Boomer probably felt that the public schools would be all right if they only returned to the way schools had been when they were young in the 1950s. The truth is, the early 1950s were the heyday of the most academically weak fad ever to sweep American education—"life adjustment," which filled the school curriculum with courses like "How to Get Along on a Date." In 1953, Fred M. Hechinger, the education reporter for the *New York Times*, said that in teachers' colleges across America, "too much stress on methods and the omission of real knowledge of subject matter are both an indication of shallowness and a boost to the trend of anti-intellectualism."<sup>4</sup>

"Life adjustment" went out of fashion, but omission of subject matter continued. In 1958, Arthur Bestor said that over half of the high schools in the United States offered no physics courses, and approximately a quarter offered neither physics nor chemistry. Similarly, no geometry was offered in about a quarter of the high schools. He cited U.S. Office of Education figures reporting that in 1900 close to 84 percent of high school students were taking science courses, whereas only 54 percent were doing so in 1958. In mathematics, the drop had been from 86 to 55 percent.<sup>5</sup> The 1950s were clearly not a Golden Age of school performance.

In fact, we need to go all the way back to the beginning of the last century to find one of the few periods in our history that might qualify as a Golden Age of standards (even though they were not explicitly cataloged in formal documents), because it is one of the few extended periods of time when expectations for student learn-

3. Peter Sacks, *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do to Change It* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1999), p. 77.

4. "The Fate of Pedagogues," *Saturday Review*, Dec. 12, 1953.

5. Arthur Bestor, "We Are Less Educated Than 50 Years Ago," *U.S. News & World Report*, Nov. 30, 1958.

ing were high—a time when so few people went on to college that high school diplomas were highly prized and taken seriously by local school districts.<sup>6</sup> Textbooks of the time were few in number, similar in content, and demanding in their lessons. Even the colleges of the time came together to demand that the curriculum of American public schools remain rigorous.

In 1892, the National Education Association (then a professional organization, not a labor union) named a panel whose members proposed that both college-bound and non-college-bound K–12 students alike receive the same college-preparatory liberal education. This “Committee of Ten” was headed by Charles William Eliot, then president of Harvard University, and included the U.S. Commissioner of Education, college presidents, professors and high school principals.<sup>7</sup> Their work led to the creation in 1900 of the College Entrance Examination Board, which published lists of recommended reading (including Shakespeare and Longfellow) for college-bound high school students and developed America’s first subject-matter content exams (which began in 1901). These privately produced exams set high-school achievement standards and encouraged similar academic preparation in high schools across the country.

Unfortunately, this idea of a liberal arts education for all slowly fell out of fashion after the first two decades of the twentieth century as the pervasive influence of “progressive” education began

6. Schooling for blacks and rural whites was often inadequate in this period. During much of following period of the twentieth century, the numbers who were educated and the time they spent in school expanded. But, at the same time, progressive ideology tended to reduce the quality of the curriculum.

7. This account of turn-of-the-century developments is based on Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963), pp. 329–32; Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 41–50; Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen’s Guide* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995), pp. 33–41; Paul Gagnon, “What Should Children Learn?” *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 276, no. 6 (Dec. 1995), pp. 65–78; I. L. Kandel, *American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 141, 179; Lawrence A. Uzzell, “Contradictions of Centralized Education,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 4, 1985. See also National Education Association, *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies; with the Reports of Conferences Arranged by the Committee* (New York: American Book Co., 1894).

to take hold. Since then, the story of American public schools has largely been the story of content-light education, with a couple of episodes of academic rigor here and there: most notably in the 1950s to the mid-1960s after the collapse of the “life adjustment” fad and in response to the launching of Sputnik; and another brief back-to-basics movement in the 1970s after the collapse of the progressive open-classrooms experiment.<sup>8</sup> Aside from these interludes, twentieth-century American education was dominated until *A Nation at Risk* by the anti-intellectual strain of progressive education that has generally neglected solid academic subject matter. In terms of what students have learned, the gaps and deficiencies revealed in the 1938 Carnegie Foundation report *The Student and His Knowledge* are just as troubling as those revealed in *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* almost fifty years later.<sup>9</sup>

#### POLITICS AND PLAYERS: ROADBLOCKS TO STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In the wake of *A Nation at Risk*, reformers sought to improve schools—as they had in the past—by varying and increasing the inputs: Spending was increased, textbooks and other teaching materials were revised, the number of academic class offerings was expanded, and graduation requirements were tightened.<sup>10</sup> But by the end of the 1980s, tinkering with inputs was still producing

8. On these events, see Ravitch, *Left Back*, pp. 361 (collapse of life adjustment), 399–402 (collapse of open classrooms), and 361–2 (launching of Sputnik).

9. William S. Learned and Ben D. Wood, *The Student and His Knowledge: A Report to the Carnegie Foundation on the Results of the High School and College Examinations of 1928, 1930, and 1932* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1938); Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

10. For a similar list, see Chester E. Finn Jr., “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Test?” in Diane Ravitch, ed., *Debating the Future of American Education: Do We Need National Standards and Assessments?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995), p. 124. See also *The Nation Responds: Recent Efforts to Improve Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, May 1984), pp. 15–16; Michael W. Kirst, *Who Controls Our Schools? American Values in Conflict* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Alumni Association, 1984), pp. 126–7.

lackluster school performance, at which point many school reformers reached the conclusion that wholesale systemic reform was necessary.

Some of them turned to vouchers, with the belief that replacing the existing public-school monopoly with a system of competing schools would lead to more effective schools. Others turned to accountability, which would require a testing system to measure student mastery of explicit curriculum standards—something state governments in America had never had before.

With rising public awareness of low-performing schools, both of these reform movements slowly started to gain public support and momentum—and it was this growing public sense that something was wrong with our schools, and a willingness to do something about it, that finally caught the attention of the teachers' unions and the rest of the education establishment. They began to acknowledge that perhaps there were public schools that were unsafe, where test scores were persistently low, where many students left school without graduating, and where many of those who did graduate could scarcely read or write. Vouchers, though, were anathema to the education potentates, as anything that took money out of the public schools' coffers naturally would be. Elevating educational standards, though, seemed to be something they could accept.

With the important players now accepting the principle that standards and accountability were needed, momentum continued to grow. By the early 1990s, many states had started taking steps to put statewide educational standards and testing into place. But this seemingly straightforward enterprise of setting standards and holding students and educators accountable for meeting them quickly ran into political difficulties that have continued to affect and shape the issue ever since, the two most significant being the strength of the education interest groups who resist accountability, and the dominance of the progressives' child-centered teaching ideology that is fundamentally opposed to the very idea of standards and accountability.

Before we discuss these competing interest groups and ideologies, though, it is important to point out one other key factor that

has stood in the way of effective standards and accountability efforts: the structure of our American system of public education.

### *Structure*

Public schools in this country are controlled at the local level. They are managed by a district superintendent, this superintendent answers to a locally elected board, and this board is elected by the minority of local voters who turn out for school board elections.<sup>11</sup> A public school's power base, in other words, rests at the local level, so there has been little inclination on its part to hand any control over to state or national authorities. This would include control over the academic subject matter being taught. Add to that the fact that schools receive most of their funding simply for having students in attendance, that their customers (parents) don't pay the full costs of operation, and the owners (citizen-taxpayers) cannot exercise ownership rights, and you see that—prior to the current accountability efforts—public schools faced few consequences if they failed in the job of educating their students.

We must also remember that educating their students has not been the sole focus of these schools. Like any public bureaucracy, local school systems have a tendency to look for ways not only to hold on to their existing budget and range of activities, but to expand them as well.<sup>12</sup> Schools are therefore endeavoring to provide sports and recreation, solve various public health problems, make peace in the battle of the sexes, reconcile the races, and eliminate adult illiteracy—as well as teach academic subject matter to children.<sup>13</sup> They are, in other words, spreading

11. Chaira R. Nappi, "Local Illusions," *Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Autumn 1999), p. 46.

12. Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).

13. Compare Peter Schrag: "Americans have asked the schools to acculturate our great waves of immigrants; teach practical skills to the boys who were destined for the local work force; train competent homemakers to marry them and make good citizens of them all; train safe drivers and combat the evils of drugs, alcohol and obesity; teach tolerance and warn about the dangers of AIDS and VD. We have given high schools the task of entertaining communities with Friday-night football games in the fall and with basketball games all winter long; we have made them the centers of adolescent social life, and, for lack of better

themselves thin, with academic content getting lost in the process.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the structure and funding of the public school system has provided no incentives for local authorities to adopt any accountability program that would compare their district with others—unless, of course, they thought their district was one of the few at the top. Comparisons hold too much potential for bad news, and bad news might result in political trouble or loss of control. It has therefore been in their interest to make sure there are no hard criteria by which it could be shown that their students were failing to learn, or that their teachers were failing to teach. Some districts have been willing to adopt diagnostic tests to help them with teaching, but most are reluctant to adopt tests that would clearly show comparative results.<sup>15</sup>

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alternatives, delivery points for meals, healthcare and other social services.” Schrag, “The Education of Diane Ravitch,” *The Nation*, vol. 271, no. 9 (Oct. 2, 2000), p. 34. Compare also John Bishop, “The Power of External Standards,” *American Educator*, Fall 1995, p. 14; Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler, *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education* (New York : Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 203; Kirst, *Who Controls?*, pp. 3, 153; Melville J. Homfled, “Schools for Everything,” *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 3 (March 1959), pp. 62–64; Kandel, *American Education in the Twentieth Century*, p. 22.

*A Nation at Risk* speaks of the “multitude of often conflicting demands” placed on America’s schools and colleges. They are regularly asked to solve “personal, social, and political problems” that the home and other institutions have been unable to solve. Such demands on America’s schools and colleges “exact an educational cost as well as a financial one.” p. 6.

For a social science analysis of the multiple missions of government agencies, see Peter H. Aranson, *American Government: Strategy and Choice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, 1981), pp. 456–457.

14. Diane Ravitch, a prominent advocate of standards, for example, argues that schools should concentrate on their most basic mission: the transmission of knowledge. Ravitch, *Left Back*, pp. 465–7. See also Kirst, *Who Controls?*, p. 17.

15. It is human nature to want to look as if you are doing a good job. Testing specialists have long been aware of the “Lake Wobegon Effect,” in which school officials juggle the figures (especially by making use of old norms) to make their district look “above average.” See John J. Cannell, “Nationally Normed Elementary Achievement Testing in America’s Public Schools: How All 50 States Are Above the National Average,” *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 1988), pp. 5–9. Officials tend to consider accountability

So, until the late 1980s, America's 15,000 local school districts held almost all of the responsibility for academic standards, and next to no accountability systems were in place either to set those standards or to see that they were achieved. This started to change for two reasons: the accountability movement continued to gain momentum and acceptance; and the relationship between states and local school districts started to change. Local school districts are now supporting themselves less and less off their own local tax base as states across the country have enacted expensive and wide-ranging educational programs—many of them in response to a growing demand for improved schools from their own constituents—while upping the state contribution to education funding at the same time. This means that in many states, the bulk of operating funds and most of the taxing and spending decisions pertaining to K–12 education now rests increasingly in the hands of state officials<sup>16</sup>—and these state officials, spurred on by taxpaying voters, are increasingly looking for more accountability from local schools and districts.

### *Interest Groups*

This, then, is the landscape where the struggle over standards and accountability is taking place. We must never forget that it is a political landscape: public schools are run by government, and government by necessity operates in the political world. In this world, school district officials, principals, and especially teachers are among the best organized and most influential groups in American politics. Accountability advocates, on the other hand, are a more diffuse group, including parent organizations, business groups, think tanks, and pro-reform legislators and governors.

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systems friendly that make them look good and unfriendly those that make them look bad.

16. Over 15 years ago, Michael W. Kirst wrote: “The most striking feature of state/local relations in the last 20 years has been the growth of state control over education.” In Kirst, “The Changing Balance in State and Local Power to Control Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 66, no. 3 (Nov. 1984), p. 190. See also Lawrence A. Uzzell, “Contradictions of Centralized Education,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 4, 1985.

This motley assortment has nevertheless been able to give the education establishment a run for the money when it comes to gaining public and legislative acceptance for setting academic standards and measuring achievement. The tug-of-war between the interest groups on both sides has and will continue to play a major role in what standards and accountability look like in our nation's public schools.

When it comes to government bureaucracies, "what gets measured, gets done," which is why accountability interest groups have insisted upon establishing high academic standards and measuring achievement against those standards. In this way, the standards movement hopes that accountability systems can do for the public schools at least some of what profit and loss does for commercial businesses, by rewarding what works and those who are productive, and sorting out what doesn't work and those who are not productive.

The powerful education establishment, of course, has little interest in being looked at or evaluated in this way, and they have developed various arguments about the appropriateness, form, and use of accountability benchmarks. These arguments have proved to be a potent tool for leaders of education interest groups as they maintain their professed support for standards while resisting effective accountability measures at almost every turn.<sup>17</sup>

One of these arguments is that it is wrong, in principle, to hold teachers accountable, that once teachers are credentialed, they should not have to worry about being scrutinized as to their effectiveness.<sup>18</sup> Progressive educator and accountability critic Susan Ohanian argues that no one should have the authority to tell an individual teacher what to do on curricular matters, that this re-

17. In 1988, North Carolina adopted a Testing Code of Ethics that said "test scores should never be used in formal teacher or principal evaluations." Sacks, p. 123.

18. During the nineteenth-century debate in America over public education, welfare-state advocate and sociologist Lester Frank Ward advocated governmental provision of schooling because it would shield teachers from accountability to parents:

The secret of the superiority of state over private education lies in the fact that in the former the teacher is responsible solely to society. As in private, so also in public education, the calling of a teacher is a profession, and his personal

sults in “deskilling” teachers and insinuating that they are “incapable” of making their own decisions.<sup>19</sup> Yet Ohanian leaves out one important consideration: many teachers are not content specialists, especially in elementary school, and in secondary school many of them teach outside of their fields. The upshot of Ohanian’s position would be a pedagogic sinecure at taxpayers’ expense. Certainly everybody would like a job in which you could do whatever you want, nobody could tell you what to do, and you have job tenure so no one could fire you—but it is unlikely that people in such jobs would be as effective and productive as they could be. Nor is it obvious that the important task of educating children should be organized this way.

Of course, when arguments fail, you can always fall back on raw political muscle, which education interest groups have done all too often in standards-and-accountability dust-ups. It is important to remember that the teachers unions devote most of their resources and energy to straightforward issues of pay, working conditions, and job security. That is where their constituents’ interests reside. So, while the teachers unions and other interest groups may say friendly and supportive things about standards and accountability, their actions deserve quite careful scrutiny.<sup>20</sup>

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success must depend upon his success in accomplishing the result which his employers desire accomplished. But the result desired by the state is a wholly different one from that desired by parents, guardians, and pupils. Of the latter he is happily independent.

*Dynamic Sociology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton, 1897), vol. 2, pp. 589–90.

19. Susan Ohanian, *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1999), p. 99. See also p. 140: “The proliferation of standards documents results in the deskilling and the deprofessionalization of teachers. How else are teachers to feel except helpless in the face of being told to *deliver* a curriculum that is invented by external authorities?” Actually, standards are only outlines of what, at least, should be in a curriculum. Teachers and others flesh out the full curriculum. In any case, actors are professionals and do not feel demeaned when asked to deliver material that is created by playwrights. (I am indebted to Ze’ev Wurman for this analogy.)

20. Sometimes representatives of teachers’ interests complain that standards are more difficult than they actually are. Bob Chase, the president of the NEA, told the delegates to his union’s annual meeting that some state standards are so high as to be “absurd,” claiming (wrongly) that California expects fifth-graders

For instance, the two largest teachers unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have both taken positions in favor of standards and accountability, yet they have focused their publicity efforts and political might on issues such as supporting the national certification of teachers and raising the standards for admission into the teaching profession.<sup>21</sup> The unions do this in the name of improving the quality of teaching, but their critics point out that it also has the effect of restricting entry into the profession and strengthening the unions' monopoly power—power they can therefore use, for example, to protect incompetent current teachers from ever getting fired. And the stronger the unions are, the better equipped they will be to continue opposing any teacher-accountability measures that have teeth.

The AFT, in fact, has gone out of its way in support of standards and accountability, consistently producing excellent material in support of both effective teaching practices and standards for student learning. But for all its promotion of high standards, the union has viewed accountability as something directed at the performance of students. Teachers weren't to be considered responsible if students weren't doing well. The late Albert Shanker, longtime president of the AFT, wrote the following passages about holding students accountable:

School reformers who are working to solve the problem of students' low achievement levels have come up with all sorts of new and creative things, but as long as students are given no reason to work, it is hard to see how any reform, however ingenious or creative, will achieve what is needed. The absence of stakes makes the whole system trivial. . . .

Stakes for kids go right to the heart of what motivates them to work

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to memorize the periodic table of the elements. Ann Bradley, "Union Heads Issue Standards Warnings," *Education Week*, July 12, 2000.

21. The certification process of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards uses no objective tests and is focused on the pedagogic practices of teachers, rather than the achievement of their students or the teachers' knowledge of the subject matter they teach. See Danielle Dunne Wilcox, "The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: Can It Live Up to Its Promise?" in Marci Kanstoroom and Chester E. Finn Jr., eds., *Better Teachers, Better Schools*

and learn. If you want someone to behave in a certain way, you connect that behavior with something the person wants. . . . [T]he last great experiment with a system [Soviet socialism] that dismissed incentives—and relied instead on the goodness of people’s instinct and motives—went down in flames. . . . And for most kids, unless they have to do it, they will not.<sup>22</sup>

The question that quickly comes to mind after reading this is: if this is true for students, why is it not also true for teachers and principals and school systems?

The answer, of course, is that it is. If students are to be held accountable for learning specific material, it only makes sense to hold those responsible for teaching them accountable as well.<sup>23</sup> And yet teacher accountability has been the sticking point time and again as states have attempted to establish valid standards and accountability frameworks, and regrettably this aspect of accountability has been watered down time and again in an effort to get the teachers and the rest of the education establishment on board. The teachers’ unions will accept or even promote high standards for student learning, testing of students, and rewards and sanctions for students based on test results. They do not, however, accept the same for their members. It is hardly surprising, then, that student achievement—which is crucially dependent on teacher effectiveness—continues to fall short across the country.

### *Rival Ideologies: Progressives versus Traditionalists*

Of course, the question of what those standards should be—or if there should be standards at all—has been no less contentious, batted around for the most part between proponents of the two principal approaches to teaching in this country: the progressives

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(Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, July 1999), pp. 163–97. I am indebted to Janet Nicholas for this reference.

22. Albert Shanker, “The Case for High Stakes and Real Consequences,” in Ravitch, *Debating the Future*, pp. 147, 149. Compare the AFT treatment of merit pay on the AFT web site: <http://www.aft.org/issues/meritpay/turmoil.html>; and AFT Resolution on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools, adopted July 1998, <http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa/guide/resolution.htm>.

23. Compare Tyce Palmaffy, “Are High School Exit Exams Fair?” *Investor’s Business Daily*, Jan. 20, 2000.

and the traditionalists.<sup>24</sup> Between these two ideologies lies a chasm of disagreement as to whether students should be tested, how often they should be tested, and what they should be tested on.

Progressives can trace their ideological genealogy back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century. Today, they dominate the education establishment: the faculties of the schools of education at American universities, the early childhood groups, and the professional associations of subject-matter specialists. Given the political and bureaucratic milieu of public education, it is not altogether surprising that progressive education has thrived. The historian and Shakespearean scholar A. L. Rowse describes the flavor of progressive education as “kindly, humane, fussy, bureaucratic, flat, insipid, like a minor civil servant’s dream, without energy or power, hazard or enterprise, the standards set by people who cannot write English, who have no poetry or vision or daring, without the capacity to love or hate.”<sup>25</sup>

Progressives believe in *discovery learning*. They contend that students truly learn only when they have “discovered” and applied knowledge and skills to solve problems.<sup>26</sup> Most progressives take a child-centered approach to discovery learning,<sup>27</sup> meaning that teachers should help their students, but the students’ interests

24. I am presenting “ideal types” of progressive and traditionalist teaching. I have, therefore, described them as systematic and coherent approaches to teaching. This helps to bring out the different implications of each for policy on standards and accountability. Actual teachers do not rely on one or the other exclusively and may combine elements from each.

25. Quoted in Robert Schuettinger, “Modern Education vs. Democracy,” *New Individualist Review* (University of Chicago chapter, Intercollegiate Society of Individualists), vol. 1, no. 1 (April 1961), p. 23.

26. Compare Marc S. Tucker and Judy B. Coddling, *Standards for Our Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 78. See also Williamson M. Evers, “From Progressive Education to Discovery Learning,” in Evers, ed., *What’s Gone Wrong in America’s Classrooms* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution, 1998).

27. Throughout the history of progressive education, the child-centered progressives have been more numerous than the intellectualist progressives. The intellectualist minority calls for discovery learning, but also believes that there is a culturally established body of knowledge that students need to learn. See Ravitch, *Left Back*, pp. 16, 190, 463; Evers.

should guide the content and direction of schoolwork.<sup>28</sup> Child-centered progressives do not believe there is a culturally established body of knowledge that students need to learn; therefore they oppose the idea of standards and accountability.

Susan Ohanian succinctly conveys the attitude of her fellow child-centered progressives toward standards-based instruction in this passage about her teaching practices:

The concept of kids and teachers “messaging about” [has] transformed my teacherliness more radically than any other pedagogical idea I’ve encountered. That’s what I do: Mess about. [Advocates of standards] seem intent on cramming the day so neither teachers nor children have thirty-three seconds left over for thinking, never mind messaging about.<sup>29</sup>

Ohanian also finds it outrageous that sixth-graders who take a nationally normed, commercially published achievement test are expected to be able to locate Idaho and Utah on a U.S. map, or know about Eli Whitney, or the Holocaust.<sup>30</sup> This is because progressives also believe in the doctrine of *developmental appropriateness*, which holds that each individual child goes at his or her own natural pace through a set of discrete learning stages.<sup>31</sup> These discrete stages are supposedly biological, internally hard-wired into children: there is the stage of sensory awareness (birth to age 2); a stage which prepares for awareness of concrete things (age 2 to age 7); a stage of concrete awareness (age 7 to age 11); and,

28. This approach was advocated by progressive educator William Heard Kilpatrick. For a criticism of child-centered progressive education, see Albert Lynd, *Quackery in the Public Schools* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), chap. 9, “The World of Professor Kilpatrick,” pp. 212–54.

29. Ohanian, *One Size*, p. 76.

30. Susan Ohanian, “News from the Test Resistance Trail,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 82, no. 5 (January 2001), see <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/koha0101.htm>.

31. See Evers, pp. 15–17; J. E. Stone, “Developmentalism: An Obscure but Pervasive Restriction on Educational Improvement,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 4, no. 8 (Apr. 21, 1996), <http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa/v4n8.html>; and E. D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 79–91.

finally, a stage for logical thinking (age 11 and older). In addition, children can only learn a limited amount at these various stages.

As is the case with child-centeredness, this idea of developmental appropriateness has serious consequences when it comes to setting academic standards. If every child learns at his or her own pace, how can you then set standards for a “typical” sixth-grader, or third-grader, or first-grader? If you are a progressive educator, the obvious answer is that you cannot. They will look at any proposed set of elementary-grade standards and say, “This is too much, too high, and too early.” According to Ohanian, the “hallmark” of standards advocates is “cramming ever more sophisticated information into ever younger children, whether they are ready or not.”<sup>32</sup>

The alternative to progressive education is traditional education, as modified by modern research findings. Adherents of this approach trace its lineage back to Aristotle and other ancient Greeks. Today, traditionalists are few and far between in the command posts of American primary and secondary education. The traditionalists are also not as well organized as the progressives, but there is an abundance of them among parents, state legislators, business leaders, and college professors who teach outside of schools of education.<sup>33</sup>

Traditionalists believe in systematic and sequential teacher-led instruction. Traditionalists point out that the progressives have no evidence proving that reliance on the discovery method boosts students’ achievement.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the existing evidence supports the

32. Ohanian, *One Size*, p. 72. See also pp. 90 (where the author maintains that fourth-graders are innately unfit to learn longitude and latitude), 94 (where the author maintains that twelfth-graders are likewise unfit to gain an in-depth understanding of the institutions of American government—“the people writing [the California State] history standards . . . gave no consideration at all to developmental appropriateness”).

33. On support for traditional instruction among members of the general public, see Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 1994).

34. John R. Anderson, Lynne M. Reder, and Herbert A. Simon, “Radical Constructivism and Cognitive Psychology,” in Diane Ravitch, ed., *Brookings Papers on Educational Policy, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998), p. 240.

efficacy of content-focused explicit teaching.<sup>35</sup> Traditionalists believe that there is a culturally established body of knowledge that students should learn; they believe that successful instruction involves lectures and book learning; and they believe that memorization, drills, and practice are effective learning tools.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, traditionalists do not accept the doctrine of developmental appropriateness. They point to psychological research that shows that learning develops along a continuum over the years of a student's life, not in discrete stages. In fact, the research finds this idea of stages or stair steps of learning—this idea so beloved of progressives—empirically unsound.<sup>37</sup>

Accepting or rejecting the tenets of “child centeredness” and “developmental appropriateness” has enormous consequences when it comes to standards and accountability. If a student indeed follows his or her own path of learning, it is impossible to set grade-level academic standards—which is one of the arguments used by progressive educators who are opposed to standards. If a child cannot learn something until he or she is developmentally “ready” to learn it, how can you hold the child responsible for knowing the material—indeed, how can you hold a teacher accountable for having taught it effectively? Again, the argument from the progressive side is that you cannot. Traditionalists, on the other hand, believe that there is body of knowledge and set of skills that children should learn and that they can learn if they put

35. See Jeanne S. Chall, *The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in the Classroom* (New York: Guildford Press, 2000); *Effective School Practices* (Association for Direct Instruction), vol. 15, no. 1 (Winter 1995–6, “Project Follow Through” special issue); Hirsch.

36. See, in the case of mathematics instruction, David C. Geary, *Children's Mathematical Development* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1994), pp. 74, 125, 269–70; Anderson et al., pp. 241, 249–50; Hung-Hsi Wu, “Basic Skills Versus Conceptual Understanding: A Bogus Dichotomy in Mathematics Education,” *American Educator*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Fall 1999).

37. Charles J. Brainerd, “The Stage Question in Cognitive-Developmental Theory,” *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 2 (June 1978), pp. 173–82, with commentaries by Thomas J. Berndt, pp. 183–84; John H. Flavell, p. 187; Annette Karmiloff-Smith, pp. 188–90; also Robert S. Siegler, *Children's Thinking*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 5–7, 55–58; Anderson et al., pp. 235, 251.

in the effort and are taught well. Hence, traditionalists believe that you can and should test each child to evaluate whether the child has learned the material and the teacher has taught it effectively.

These, then, are the two major battles shaping the standards and accountability debate in this country: (1) traditionalists who support standards versus progressives who do not; and (2) accountability advocates who want to hold both students and educators responsible for meeting academic standards versus powerful education interest groups who resist accountability measures that could adversely affect their members. Politics, of course, is not always this straightforward, and there have probably been as many variations on this political breakdown as there are states that have instituted standards and accountability. Two things, though, have remained consistent. Whenever accountability has come under consideration, the politically powerful interest groups (like teachers' unions or associations of school administrators) have weighed in. And whenever standards and testing have been considered, ideological groups have dominated the controversy.

#### IN THE STATES

In most states, standards and accountability remain a work-in-progress, so to get a better picture of how politics is affecting their implementation, let's take a look at four states: Massachusetts, where education interest groups are particularly strong; Virginia, where reaction against progressive education practices led to some of the toughest standards in the country; and Maryland and Texas, two states where political consensus on the issue has led to decidedly different results.<sup>38</sup>

##### *Massachusetts*

Massachusetts is a strong union state with a large contingent of progressive educators, so it should come as no surprise that there

38. Except as indicated, the information in the following state profiles comes from *Education Week*, Jan. 11, 2001 ("Quality Counts" special report) or from the author's personal knowledge.

are heated battles taking place in that state's standards-and-accountability effort between accountability advocates (including the Republican governor, pro-accountability state legislators, the governor-appointed State Board of Education, and pro-accountability elements in the inner-city education community) and a vocal anti-testing coalition. The issues? The high-stakes state tests given to students, state testing of prospective teachers, and check-ups on already hired teachers.

In 1993, Massachusetts passed an extensive education package that included a dramatic increase in funding for K–12 public education in exchange for a promise from the teachers unions to support accountability measures. The state set up the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), which tests students in grades 4, 8, and 10 in English and math. Starting in 2003, students have to pass the 10th-grade test in order to graduate from high school. As that 2003 deadline approaches, however, the state's NEA affiliate has decided that “no single test should be used to make these kinds of high-stakes decisions”<sup>39</sup>—though test defenders point out that students have five chances to pass the graduation test. The union does not like the fact that the accountability system does not employ teacher-graded measures of student performance, such as homework and class performance.<sup>40</sup> In 2000, the union ran a three-week \$600,000 ad campaign opposing the very test-based accountability system it had agreed to support in 1993. “Now that they have all the money,” Governor Paul Cellucci has said, “they are trying to renege on the agreement.”

In addition to the ad campaign, about 200 protesters—including students, teachers and other accountability critics—protested in Boston against the 10th-grade tests that are the

39. Frank Phillips, “Cellucci Blasts Teachers on Tests,” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 9, 2000; John Gehring, “Mass. Teachers Blast State Tests in New TV Ads,” *Education Week*, Nov. 22, 2000; “Blaming the Test,” editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 24, 2000.

40. Teachers often grade their own students more favorably than external examiners do. Tucker and Coddling (pp. 25–29) describe the difference between what their previous teachers said incoming high school students in Pasadena were ready to do in mathematics and what external examinations said they were ready to do.

linchpin of the state's accountability system. The union and the protesters are part of an anti-testing coalition that includes self-satisfied suburban school districts and progressive educators who oppose what they perceive as a deluge of testing that stifles teachers' creativity.<sup>41</sup>

The 1993 law also set forth plans for standards and accountability for prospective teachers. Starting in 1998, prospective teachers in Massachusetts faced reading, writing, and subject-matter exams. When the tests were first administered in April of that year, 59 percent of those who took them failed. The test included a dictation exercise to assess spelling skills, and it asked prospective teachers to define words like "abolish," "preposition," and "democracy."<sup>42</sup> In describing how test-takers did, the *Boston Globe* said: "Some of the . . . student answers shown to reporters yesterday illustrated a strikingly poor grasp of English grammar. Some sentences were missing verbs; in others, common words were misspelled or incorrectly defined."<sup>43</sup> The dismal results produced a national outcry and provided fodder for television-show comedians.

In the spring of 2000, the State Board of Education moved to test all math teachers from districts where a high percentage of students failed the math portion of the MCAS exam.<sup>44</sup> Both unions (the NEA and AFT affiliates) responded to this with a lawsuit, which is still pending. When the governor had earlier floated a plan for testing all current teachers, the unions responded with rallies in opposition to teacher-testing, and in support of smaller class sizes (i.e., more teachers), increasing base salaries for new teachers (i.e., more money for teachers), and devolving administrative decision making to principals and teachers (i.e., more

41. On the anti-MCAS alliance, see Georgia N. Alexakis, "Test Prep: What Bush Can Learn from a Tryout of School Reform in Massachusetts," *Washington Monthly*, March 2001.

42. Rachel Smolkin, "In Search of Competency, States Test Their Teachers," *Scripps-Howard News Service*, Mar. 28, 1999.

43. Quoted in William Raspberry, "A Problem with Would-Be Teachers," *Washington Post*, July 3, 1998.

44. Heidi B. Perlman, "Math Teachers Vow to Refuse to Take Pilot Test," *Associated Press*, July 6, 2000.

power for teachers).<sup>45</sup> “A proposal that engenders so much hostility [in] our teachers has some inherent problems,” said one state Democratic legislator.<sup>46</sup>

True, but are those problems with the tests or with the teachers’ implacable resistance to being subjected to them? The education interest groups in Massachusetts agreed to accountability measures in 1993. True to form, some of them have been resisting ever since.

### *Virginia*

Virginia has one of the most rigorous sets of standards in the country, standards that clearly and specifically spell out what children should learn in each grade.<sup>47</sup> These standards are as strong as they are and have a deliberate focus on content (specific learning expectations for children in specific grades) in large part because grassroots activists rejected the progressive and content-light education practices that dominated Virginia education in the early 1990s. This traditionalist backlash came to a head during the state’s 1993 governor’s race, to such an extent that the outgoing Democrat, Governor Doug Wilder (who was not a candidate), pulled the plug on a progressive state standards document (called the Common Core of Learning) that was being developed at the time. The Republican who won the governor’s race, George Allen, disavowed progressive education during the campaign, and one of his first acts as governor was to appoint a commission to start laying the groundwork for academic standards and testing in four core subjects.<sup>48</sup>

The commission’s recommendations had to be approved by the State Board of Education, which at the time included six Democrats (who usually align themselves with their staunch political

45. Darrell S. Pressley, “Educators Set to Rally Today as Cellucci Stands By Tests,” *Boston Herald*, June 16, 1999.

46. Pressley, “Educators Set to Rally.”

47. The author is indebted to Michelle Easton and Lil Tuttle for their insights on the Virginia situation.

48. “History of SOLs,” Parents and Students Supporting SOLs, <http://www-pass.sol.org/history/>.

supporters, the education interest groups) and three Republicans (who usually find their political support on the accountability side). But such was the strength of the accountability movement in Virginia at the time that conventional alignments took a back seat, and the Board adopted state tests in English, mathematics, science, and history. Virginia students today are tested in grades 3, 5, and 8. Results will be a factor (together with grades and other tests) in determining whether they are promoted to the next grade. Beginning in 2004, high school students will have to take tests in English, math, science, and history, and the results will determine whether they get a diploma. In 2007, schools where less than 70 percent of the students pass the exams risk losing their state accreditation. Students who fail the tests are able to retake them several times during the year.

Because content-light progressive education has been the fashion in Virginia, as it has throughout the country, and because schools did not teach the material listed in the standards, nearly every school in the state failed the tests in 1998 and 1999—the first two years they were given. And while the number of schools meeting state standards rose dramatically in 2000, that has failed to quell a new burgeoning opposition, this time from the teachers' unions and other education interest groups who complain the tests are too rigorous and too demanding. School principals in particular are protesting the tests, saying their schools' accreditation status shouldn't rely on student scores, and taking up the progressive argument that the state standards are too fact-driven and too reliant on memorization at the expense of critical thinking skills.

Virginia's educational standards emphasize content and facts, so it was perhaps inevitable that progressive forces would eventually call Virginia's state standards into question. Progressives, remember, emphasize child-directed schoolwork and discovery learning rather than academic subject matter. Perhaps just as inevitable should be the subsequent call for relaxing the state's tough accountability standards. As one former State Board member explains, "As 2004 comes closer [and high schoolers must pass tests

to receive their diplomas], there will be lots of nervous politicians,” on both sides of the aisle.<sup>49</sup>

And so the backsliding begins. There have been recent efforts in the Virginia state legislature to make the accountability system more flexible (or less rigorous, depending how you want to look at it). Union-allied legislators have proposed allowing high school students who fail the state tests to graduate, as long as they come close to passing the tests or as long as their school grades are acceptable. Other proposals would dilute the 2007 requirements to revoke a school’s accreditation if less than 70 percent of the school’s students pass the test. And instead of making student academic performance the fundamental basis of accreditation, proposed legislation would mix in other factors such as dropout rates, school attendance, and teacher training. Roger Gray, the president of the Richmond, Virginia, teachers’ union, has an even more radical solution, one that is popular with teachers throughout the state: keep the standards but throw out the graduation test.

So we see that even in a state where accountability advocates had a strong hand going in, the education interest groups and dogmatic progressives continue to try to chip away at what they see as overly rigorous standards-and-accountability requirements.

### *Maryland and Texas*

Unlike Massachusetts and Virginia, where intense political disagreements continue concerning both standards and accountability, Maryland and Texas have managed to achieve relative consensus on both. However, this consensus has affected education in each state quite differently.

Maryland, according to its state schools superintendent, has a “somewhat narrower . . . mainstream political spectrum” than many other states, which is her way of explaining why Maryland state policy on education has not changed all that much over the last decade.<sup>50</sup> The narrow spectrum may well have reduced the

49. Interview with Lil Tuttle.

50. Nancy S. Grasmick, “Looking Back at a Decade of Reform: The Maryland Standards Story,” in Terri Duggan and Madelyn Holmes, eds., *Closing the Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Basic Education, 2000), pp. 51–52.

opportunities for political challenges to policy and allowed the state educational bureaucracy to have a *carte blanche* on testing. Maryland has one of the oldest statewide testing systems in the country, created back in 1991 when progressive project-based tests were quite trendy. The test has no multiple-choice questions. Students must instead answer almost every question with a short or long written response that the test designers hope will show the students' skills in more than one subject area.<sup>51</sup> Grading is "holistic," which critics consider too subjective, and graders have the discretion to discount spelling and grammar errors. Maryland's "narrow political spectrum" has left this test in place for a decade. The test did come under scrutiny in 2000, when a research team sponsored by the Baltimore-based Abell Foundation criticized it for a myriad of factual errors, deficient coverage of academic content, and basing student scores more on writing style than on demonstrated knowledge of content.<sup>52</sup>

In truth, Maryland's test has never been strong, whereas its accountability system is: Maryland is one of the few states to replace teachers and principals in persistently failing schools, and it has contracted out the management of failing schools to private firms. Maryland provides an interesting twist on the states we have looked at so far, where we've usually had the proponents of comprehensive and detailed standards and tough accountability facing off against the progressive educators and those attempting to weaken accountability systems. In Maryland, the progressives were in charge of the standards and tests from the beginning and have controlled the tests for the duration—this may have made accepting accountability based on those progressive measures more palatable to the education establishment.

This twist may in fact owe much to the "somewhat narrow political spectrum" described above, which reduces controversy about education policy. This political consensus of leaders has easily deflected any efforts to revisit the state's standards and testing

51. Mike Bowler, "MSPAP Is Imperfect but Gets Passing Grade," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 19, 2000.

52. The author was the head of this research team.

program. This consensus may also have exacted a price, in that Maryland students' achievement levels on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have hovered at or below the national average during the last decade, although the state has a comparatively high average income.<sup>53</sup> The state recently upgraded its standards (though not to the level found in the top-performing countries), prompting some familiar reactions from both sides of the standards-and-accountability debate. Worried that students are ill-prepared, the Maryland state school board voted last summer to delay using new graduation tests as a prerequisite for a diploma until 2007. The scores, however, will appear on student transcripts starting in 2002, which has business groups applauding and the state's largest teachers union complaining that publicizing individual scores will only discourage students facing too-high expectations.

Texas, like Maryland, experienced a rare political consensus when it came to implementing its state standards-and-accountability measures, but unlike Maryland this consensus was borne of a unique set of circumstances rather than a narrow spectrum of opinion. At the outset of Texas's reform effort, educational interest groups (with the exception of the Texas affiliate of the AFT) strenuously opposed accountability. For several years, these experienced groups had the capacity to hamstring accountability in the legislature and to control the legislative agenda on the issue. The school-quality lobby, made up primarily of business interests, hung on and gradually won over public opinion. With backing of the general public came political support in the legislature. The accountability movement was successful because the state's influential business community organized a permanent, well-funded lobby and established public communications groups. Members of the business community took their concerns about the quality of Texas's workforce and their desire for more accountability in the schools to politicians and parents and turned public opinion into such a political juggernaut that change seemed inevitable. Not

53. There has been a recent improvement in the state's reading score for fourth-graders.

only did momentum for reform build, but opposition from the education establishment faded, perhaps because the state is unusual in having four rivalrous teachers unions. The state's AFT affiliate allied with the business community from the beginning in the quest for accountability.<sup>54</sup>

Since the business community was the driving force behind standards and accountability in Texas, it should come as no surprise that the state based its reforms on a basic lesson from the business world: teachers and schools will find effective ways to succeed if they are allowed to try new ways to do their job and are held accountable for their performance. During the 1990s, legislators delegated ever-increasing authority to the local level, while at the same time establishing state standards and tests to measure student performance. With these three key pieces in place, the state then started to rate schools based on their test results. In the words of Laurence Toenjes, an economist at the University of Houston, "the school districts and schools that historically haven't done too well are now getting exposed."<sup>55</sup>

It is this stringent rating and accountability system that has marked Texas's success so far—so much so that other states are now adding tests, creating or toughening school rating systems, and breaking down testing data by racial and ethnic subgroups, in the hope of seeing similar success in their own schools. In 1996, Texas fourth-graders finished in the top ten for math on the NAEP test, black fourth-graders scored higher in math on average in Texas than in any other state, and while wide racial disparities still exist in Texas, the gap is clearly narrowing.

Texas's accountability system will get even tougher in the next two years, when the state begins introducing new and more difficult tests that, starting with the class of 2005, students will be required to pass in order to graduate. Texas is also one of the few

54. Tyce Palmaffy, "The Gold Star State: How Texas Jumped to the Head of the Class in Elementary School Achievement," *Policy Review* (Heritage Foundation), no. 88 (March–April 1998).

55. Claudia Kolker, "Texas Offers Hard Lessons on School Accountability," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 14, 1999.

states where, as of 2003, students will have to pass tests to be promoted in certain grades.

The unique consensus in Texas does not mean there haven't been critics. Lawyers from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund filed a lawsuit in 1997 that argued the state's testing requirements were discriminatory, a suit that was subsequently dismissed. Other critics contend that the state's strict testing and rating system is narrowing teacher creativity in the classroom, a contention which is open to debate, and driving up the dropout rate, which is false.<sup>56</sup> For the time being, though, the state's educational establishment seems reconciled to—even supportive of—accountability. It remains to be seen whether tougher tests and tougher accountability measures will evoke resistance. For now at least, Texas—unlike Maryland—is not backing away from its tough accountability benchmarks, and it is seeing impressive improvements in student achievement as a result.<sup>57</sup>

#### THE CALIFORNIA STORY

In these four states, the political and ideological forces interested in standards and accountability produced four different results: Massachusetts, where the education interest groups remain powerful and are vigorously resisting accountability measures; Virginia, where a powerful coalition created some of the toughest standards in the nation but where accountability measures are now under siege from their opponents; Maryland, where political consensus has led to sluggish student achievement; and Texas, where political momentum and an active business community have led to an effective accountability system and higher student achievement, but where the advent of tougher testing could open

56. Lawrence A. Toenjes and A. Gary Dworkin, "Are Increasing Test Scores in Texas Really a Myth, or Is Haney's Myth a Myth?" University of Houston, unpublished MS, March 2001.

57. David Grissmer and Ann Flanagan, *Exploring Rapid Achievement Gains in North Carolina and Texas* (National Education Goals Panel, 1998); David Grissmer et al., *Improving Student Achievement: What NAEP Scores Tell Us* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000).

the door to political and ideological battles in the future. While all four states have seen some measures of success—Texas in particular, with its improved test scores—none of them can yet claim to have a system of standards and accountability that is firmly in place and no longer in need of important improvements.

California, on the other hand, is one state that is widely viewed as having one of the most promising standards-and-accountability systems in the nation. How did this happen in a state filled with progressive educators? Especially a state with extremely powerful interest groups and teachers' unions? And is the system really as solid as everyone seems to think it is?

To answer these questions, and to see how the different interest and ideological groups interacted, we are going to take a closer look at two specific education-policy battles in California and how they played out: the conflict over the current state mathematics standards and the conflict over the state accountability measures.

Before we can understand what happened in these two instances, though, it is important to understand what had taken place in California public education in the preceding years, primarily the fallout from the debacle of progressive education in the 1980s and early 1990s. The backlash inspired by this—and the backlash in California was even stronger than the one we have already described that took place in Virginia—has had an enormous effect on subsequent education reform efforts in the state, and on standards-and-accountability measures in particular.

“Debacle” may seem to be a rather strong word, but it is one that has been used repeatedly to describe what happened to California public schools under the influence of progressive educational philosophies such as “higher-order thinking” and “teaching the child, not the subject.”

The early 1980s was a good time for public education in California: A well-respected state superintendent, who wanted all schoolchildren to have a thorough liberal-arts education, was in office,<sup>58</sup> and student test scores were on the rise—which led to the

58. Bill Honig, State Superintendent of Public Instruction: “I ran on a platform of traditional education that anticipated most of [*A Nation at Risk*]'s eventual recommendations. . . . [T]here is a core of knowledge in the arts and sciences

state's being hailed as a pathfinder for the nation. And yet despite this success, by the late 1980s state education officials moved to embrace progressive-education nostrums.<sup>59</sup> In short, traditional learning was shunted aside for progressive education, and four years of solid academic improvement in the schools quickly reverted to falling or stagnant student achievement.

Under new state laws and curriculum guidelines, psychological empowerment and student self-esteem became core elements of teacher training and classroom teaching in California. Math teachers were informed their job was to facilitate discussion and guide exploration, not to teach math facts or how to get a correct, precise answer to a problem.<sup>60</sup> The new project-based test (the California Learning Assessment System or CLAS), in the words of Governor Pete Wilson's education secretary, "gave no individual scores, tested no basic skills, was related to a scale no one could explain, and never used the expertise of professional measurement experts."<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the most drastic shift was the adoption of "whole language" reading instruction in place of the traditional phonics method. Whole language is a philosophy whose adherents believe that children should learn to read "naturally" by guessing based on cues (like story-book illustrations) rather than by sounding out words, and also believe that not teaching or cor-

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that every member of society is entitled to encounter." Honig, *Last Chance for Our Children: How You Can Help to Save Our Schools* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1985), pp. 4, 7.

Honig also criticized two progressive methods: child-centered instruction and the "open classroom." At the time, he considered himself something of a sadder-but-wiser progressive and had by no means rejected many aspects of progressivism. For example, he concurred with progressives in opposing drill and practice.

59. Ben Boychuk, "The Decline of Academic Standards in California Education: The Story Behind the Student Testing Fiasco," *California Politics Briefings* (Claremont Institute), no. 1996-49 (March 15, 1996), p. 2, <http://www.claremont.org/gsp/gsp49.htm>.

60. John Agonida, "The New, New Math," *The Report Card* (Center for the Study of Popular Culture), July/August 1995, cited in Boychuk, p. 10.

61. Maureen DiMarco, "Measurement and Reform," in Evers, *What's Gone Wrong?* p. 158. For more on CLAS, see Boychuk; Michael W. Kirst and Christopher Mazzeo, "The Rise, Fall, and Rise of State Assessment in California: 1993-1996," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 78, no. 4 (1996), pp. 319-323; Peter Schrag, "The Days of School Daze," *Orange County Register*, Oct. 4, 1994.

recting spelling helps encourage children to become “natural” writers.<sup>62</sup>

After eight years of these progressive-education experiments, NAEP test results showed that the state’s fourth-graders were tied for last place with Louisiana in reading. In 1994, Governor Pete Wilson vetoed continued funding for the progressive, largely project-based CLAS tests, saying they were unreliable and could not give individual scores to students.

1995 marked a new beginning for the standards movement in California, one that would be heavily influenced by the debacle of progressive education and the outrage it inspired in a broad coalition of parents, business leaders, education reformers, and even many of the educators themselves. It is in this milieu—amid the detritus of failed progressive-education theories—that our two stories begin.

*The Struggle over Mathematics Standards:  
Progressives versus Traditionalists*

Mathematics content had been woefully watered down along with other academic subject matter during California’s years (1987 to 1995) of experimental progressive education. California bought heavily into the “new-new” math in the early 1990s, and by 1992 had released new state curriculum guidelines, expanding upon the so-called “bible” of new-new math, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards.<sup>63</sup>

California’s progressive guidelines set out to make sure students felt good about math, that they felt “mathematically empowered.”<sup>64</sup> This sense of empowerment would come from letting their

62. Charles Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can’t Read, Write, or Add* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 93, quoted in Boychuk, p. 3.

63. Leah Vukmir, “ $2 + 2 = 5$ : Fuzzy Math Invades Wisconsin Schools,” *Wisconsin Interest*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter 2001), pp. 9–12.

64. *Mathematics Framework for California Schools* (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1992). The progressives endeavored to make mathematics less challenging and hence make it easier for the bottom 20 percent of mathematics students. However, experience in top-performing countries shows that virtually all such students can learn challenging subjects like algebra.

natural curiosity guide them, by tackling real-world problems, and by inventing their own ideas about how to solve problems. It would not come from traditional means, like memorizing the multiplication tables, learning how to do long division, or mastering the quadratic formula. Teachers were encouraged to reinvent themselves as facilitators of learning on topics that students chose or uncovered in their discovery-learning projects.

Eventually groups of California parents—many of them from scientific backgrounds—started to take note of this new math, and they started to worry that their own children would never be able to succeed in professions like theirs with the anemic math skills they were acquiring in school. These parents started to organize, and they became a powerful voice when the state moved to revise state math standards in the mid-1990s.<sup>65</sup>

The debate over these new math standards pitted the hard-core progressive educators who still fervently believed in new-new math against those who believed in the more traditional methods of mathematics instruction. Those on the progressive side—who had written and backed the existing state curriculum guidelines and were determined to see progressive methods maintained—were found in many of the usual places: in the state mathematics teachers' organizations, the state Department of Education, the state schools of education, and on the state commission drafting the new standards.<sup>66</sup> The coalition on the traditionalist side, on the other hand, had some new blood, including a large contingent of university mathematics professors, and members of various parents' groups who came from all parts of the political spectrum. Of the four founding members of the largest of these groups—a parents' group called "Mathematically Correct"—three describe

65. For two excellent accounts of the controversy over the California mathematics standards, see Hung-His Wu, "The 1997 Mathematics Standards War in California," in Sandra Stotsky, ed., *What's at Stake in the K-12 Standards Wars* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 3–31; David Klein, "Big Business, Race, and Gender in Mathematics Reform," in Steven G. Krantz, *How to Teach Mathematics*, 2nd ed. (Providence, R.I.: American Mathematical Society, 1999), pp. 221–32.

66. The author was a member of the commission (the California State Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance Standards) that wrote the initial draft of the standards.

themselves as liberal Democrats, only one as a conservative Republican. One of the most actively involved mathematics professors is a member of the Green Party and voted for Ralph Nader in 2000, and he says “California’s mathematics policies [since 1997] and its direction are not motivated by conservative politics . . . [T]hey are motivated by a recognition that the policies of the past decade were deeply flawed from the point of view of mathematics itself.”<sup>67</sup>

So there was some crossing of political lines going on as California tackled the issue of new mathematics standards. Such crossing of lines was also evident in the state legislature in which Democrats and Republicans united to call for internationally competitive standards for the state’s public schools and to restore phonics-based reading instruction in the schools. It is in this context that one must consider the actions of perhaps the key player in this debate: the California State Board of Education, which by state law sets the policy for the state’s schools. Board members are appointed by the governor, who at that time was Republican Pete Wilson, the same governor who discontinued the ineffectual and largely project-based CLAS tests in 1994. Board members are also confirmed by the State Senate, which was controlled by the Democrats at the time. The State Board, then, had a membership with support from across the political spectrum, and at the outset of the mathematics-standards debate, a majority of the board supported the state’s 1992 progressive math-curriculum guidelines and undoubtedly looked forward to having new math standards that would be similar.

However, a few members of the State Board were convinced early in the process that the state had tilted too far in the progressive or new-new math direction. They had been convinced, in part, by the diverse assortment of professors, parents, and other grassroots organizers who effectively expressed their disgust at the condition of mathematics instruction in the state. Another spur to change also came in the form of the 1996 NAEP math test, which

67. David Klein, Professor of Mathematics, California State University–Northridge.

showed that more than half of California's fourth-graders scored below the basic proficiency level, and close to half of the eighth-graders had "below basic" math understanding. Overall, California fourth-graders ranked fourth-worst in the nation, tying with Mississippi, Guam, and the District of Columbia.<sup>68</sup>

In the end, the State Board of Education definitely moved away from the policy, prevalent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, of prescribing progressive teaching practices. It declined to endorse any particular school of thought on teaching practices. At the same time, the Board kept certain reasonable components of progressive education (like attention to conceptual understanding), while restoring the content knowledge that traditionalists had been calling for. A look at the debate surrounding some of the specific issues helps to clarify how this happened.

*Natural learning.* Those on the progressive side wanted to imbed in the state's new mathematics standards their idea that children should always learn things "naturally." For example, the progressive school of thought says that students should come to an understanding of quantity and develop their number sense naturally, not through explicit instruction, in which the teacher explains things directly to the students. The progressives also insist that students must discover their own techniques for mental mathematics, instead of being taught the simplest and most reliable ways to solve a problem. The State Board took account of the fact there are alternative methods of teaching, but edited the mathematics standards to remove the proposed sections that mandated the use of the progressive method of learning through discovery. The Board wanted to be clear about what students should know, but did not want to dictate how they should be taught. In their final form, the California mathematics standards are neutral about teaching methods. Teachers may use discovery learning, direct instruction, or other methods.

This neutrality on teaching methods may at first glance seem to be evasion on the part of the Board. But it is a reasonable resolution, in that it preserves local control and teacher flexibility, while

68. Vukmir, "2 + 2 = 5."

at the same time another part of the state reform effort—the state-wide testing and accountability program—is providing evidence as to which textbooks and teaching methods are the most effective.

*Problem-solving skills.* The proponents of progressivism wanted the state mathematics standards to specify exclusive reliance on problem-solving as the way to teach mathematics, and to say that students should learn generalized “problem-solving skills” in the abstract. This is because the progressive school of thought believes that teachers can develop and test a student’s capacity for critical thinking and problem solving that is detached from his or her knowledge of subject matter, e.g., they can “discover” how to solve a math problem without knowing the standard techniques for procedures like long division or dividing one fraction by another. The fact of the matter is students can think critically and solve problems only if they are operating from a base of acquired knowledge. A consensus of research psychologists holds that it is not possible to teach problem solving or develop critical thinking in a vacuum.<sup>69</sup> After edits from the State Board, the official California standards again are pedagogically neutral: They do not compel teachers to use only problem solving as an instruction method (which is the method the progressives wanted to be required), nor do they assume that students can learn generalized “problem-solving skills” without acquiring a knowledge of the subject matter (an assumption that is in line with the progressive way of thinking).<sup>70</sup>

*Traditional courses.* Progressives are uncomfortable with traditional courses in mathematics such as algebra and geometry. They would prefer that mathematics were presented as a series of problems and puzzles, to be grouped perhaps by themes, such as

69. Hirsch, p. 135–43. See also Anderson, pp. 251–52; Geary, chaps. 2–3.

70. Mathematicians have their own way of thinking about problem solving. To them, problem solving cannot be detached from content knowledge: (1) Analyzing the situation to see if it can be solved using mathematics; (2) Setting up a mathematical problem; (3) Solving the problem; and (4) Interpreting the solution. I am indebted to Paul J. Sally Jr. for this point. See also Geary, pp. 116–27; Wu, “Basic Skills.”

all problems having to do with automobile mechanics or all problems about cooking recipes.<sup>71</sup> So to get away from these traditional courses, the progressives in California proposed that the state mathematics standards direct schools to mix algebra and geometry together in an integrated curriculum.<sup>72</sup> The State Board disagreed. The official standards—again, pedagogically neutral—allow integrated courses or the standard course sequence of Algebra I, geometry, and Algebra II. Whichever sequence a school chooses to adopt, it must eventually cover the same topics. Allowing these options adds expensive complexity to the California testing system, yet it also gives flexibility to local school districts and preserves local control while retaining accountability.

*Calculators.* The progressive school of thought believes that students can come to true mathematical knowledge only via problem solving, not through memorization of multiplication tables or learning how to do long division. Progressives want to provide students with a simulated “real world” situation in which they feel empowered to solve problems, so it only makes sense that because some people in the real world use calculators, students should too when they are doing their schoolwork. Many influential progressives go so far as to insist that students should always be able to use calculators for their homework, classwork, and exams.<sup>73</sup> The California progressives proposed allowing students to use calculators on the statewide standards-based mathematics test. The traditionalists argued that reliance on calculators in elementary school reduces fluency with math facts and pointed out that students in

71. See, for example, Rick Billstein and Jim Williamson, *Middle School Math Thematics* series (Evanston, Ill.: McDougal Littell, 1999). I am indebted to Paul Clopton for this reference.

72. In addition, some people—progressives and traditionalists alike—have said they want to imitate the integrated courses in Japan and other top-performing countries. But California teachers are not prepared to teach the demanding mathematics courses found in Japan. At the time of the California mathematics-standards controversy, there were several existing and proposed programs that integrated some of the content of algebra and geometry, but that did not have the full content or rigor of the instructional programs in Japan.

73. See, for example, *California Mathematics Framework* (1992), p. 199.

the top-performing East Asian countries do not use calculators for schoolwork.<sup>74</sup> The Board of Education decided that no mathematics standard will be tested at the state level or at any grade using calculators, and they organized the standards so that students do not need calculators to master content material prior to the sixth grade. The Board's decision leaves discretionary power in the hands of districts and elementary school teachers.<sup>75</sup> It is up to them whether to allow students to use calculators for classroom work and homework, but districts and teachers know that if students are overly dependent on calculators, they are likely to perform poorly on the statewide nationally normed and standards-based tests, where calculator use is not allowed.

*Math facts and algorithms.* Progressive educators believe that memorizing math facts (like the multiplication tables) and learning reliable problem-solving techniques (standard algorithms) in advance robs students of the discovery experience. Therefore, the progressives in California did not want memorization of those facts and knowledge of certain standard algorithms traditionally taught in the United States (in particular, long division by multiple-digit divisors) included in the state mathematics standards.<sup>76</sup> The traditionalists argued that students need near-automaticity with math facts and algorithms in order to have the tools for basic

74. The U.S. government's report on the TIMSS data on fourth-grade mathematics states: "In six of the seven nations that outscore the U.S. in mathematics, teachers of 85 percent or more of the students report that students never use calculators in class." National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, *Pursuing Excellence: A Study of U.S. Fourth-Grade Mathematics and Science Achievement in International Context* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), <http://nces.ed.gov/timss/report/97255-2a.html#i>.

75. The 1999 California Mathematics Framework recommends that calculators should not play a major role in mathematics curriculum and instruction until students have completed fifth grade or until they have mastered basic skills and concepts. *Mathematics Framework for California Schools* (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1999), p. 225.

76. *Standard algorithms* should not be confused with *standards*. *Standard algorithms* are efficient, reliable operations for solving a certain sort of problem. *Content standards* catalog what students should know, and *performance standards* say how well they should know it. The issue is whether standard algorithms should be in state content standards.

mathematical understanding.<sup>77</sup> The official California mathematics standards, as edited by the State Board, do expect students to know the standard algorithms traditionally taught in the United States, including long division.<sup>78</sup>

*Final result.* During the drafting of the mathematics standards, the progressives tried to give privileged status to their favored discovery-learning techniques and to infuse the standards with their progressive doctrines. They failed in this endeavor. The California State Board of Education decided not to make progressive education the state's official way of teaching mathematics. The revised set of state mathematical standards that was adopted by the Board in December of 1997 is substantially neutral as to pedagogy, which allows different teaching methods to compete and to show their effectiveness in meeting the standards. It also clearly delineates the content students are expected to know and gives thorough coverage to math facts, algorithms, applications, mathematical reasoning, proof, and conceptual understanding.<sup>79</sup> While it opted for neutrality rather than outright rejection of progressive teaching doctrines, the Board did lay out a set of math standards that explicitly emphasizes the mastery of math facts and skills—an emphasis which traditionalists had sought as their highest priority for the state math standards.<sup>80</sup>

*The Struggle over Accountability:  
Self-Protection versus Scrutiny*

California's early embrace of progressive education has loosened considerably after years of dismal student performance and test scores. The state's current academic standards reflect this change in opinion. As we have seen with the mathematics standards de-

77. Wu, "Basic Skills."

78. For an excellent report on the importance of the standard U.S. algorithms, see *Second Report* from the Mathematical Association of America Task Force on the NCTM Standards, June 17, 1997. <http://www.maa.org/past/maanc-tm3.html>.

79. From kindergarten through grade 7, the California mathematics standards are organized on a grade-by-grade basis. After grade 7, the document lists topics by subject, e.g. geometry, rather than grade level.

80. Vukmir, "2 + 2 = 5."

scribed above, California's state standards in all academic subject matters today are more focused on skills and content rather than teaching methods, and they are being hailed as models for the nation.

California's accountability measures were a longer time in coming, but they too are now lauded as being among the best. How did they come to be? What are the political factors influencing their implementation? And are they really as laudable as they are supposed to be?

Following his refusal to continue the CLAS tests in 1994, Governor Wilson proposed a new program in 1997 designed to test and hold students accountable for learning the new state academic standards. Called the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program, this program uses an off-the-shelf commercial test (the Stanford Achievement Test, 9th ed.) along with questions based completely on the state's current academic standards; students are tested every year in grades 2–11; and individual scores are provided for each student.<sup>81</sup> As can be expected for any testing system that aims at accountability, this one did not come into existence without controversy.

The statewide association of principals and superintendents, as well as top officials in the California Department of Education, initially opposed the STAR program, as they opposed the entire concept of accountability through testing. After this stance proved to be politically untenable, they proposed diagnostic testing instead, which would provide teachers with some information about student weaknesses but would not provide individual scores that could be used for accountability purposes. If the state insisted on any incentives, sanctions or rankings, though, they wanted a matrix-sample test.<sup>82</sup> (In such a test a large number of questions are

81. Scores are also posted on the WorldWide Web by grade, school, district, and county.

82. For the outline of this plan, see Delaine Eastin, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, letter to State Senator Quentin L. Kopp, Aug. 1, 1997. Compare Mony Neill's proposal of accountability via project-based tests given to a sample of students. Neill, "What Is the Purpose of Assessment?" in Kathy Swope and Barbara Miner, eds., *Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Craze Won't Fix Our Schools* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Rethinking Schools, 2000), p. 103.

divided into subsets, and test-takers are divided into groups. Each group of test-takers is given only one of the subsets of questions.) A matrix-sample test would detect performance weaknesses at the district or school level, but E. D. Hirsch Jr. calls such a test “pseudo-accountability” because it produces a “no-fault diagnosis” that cannot pinpoint the failings of individual students or teachers. Since matrix tests do not yield scores for individual students, they do not create incentives for either students or teachers to improve their performance.<sup>83</sup>

As we have seen, such a strategy is not unique to the education establishment in California. In states across the country, teachers and administrators actively resist effective accountability measures, and diagnostic-only testing is just another way of accomplishing this.<sup>84</sup> Education interests in California and elsewhere continue to push for tests that supposedly aid in teaching practices but shy away from measuring student mastery of content and skills—which, of course, means they don’t measure the effectiveness of teachers either. As a group of California school officials put it—in the feel-good jargon of the education profession—they want to shift the focus of accountability from “judgment” to “continuous improvement” by establishing an accountability system that is “supportive, not punitive.”<sup>85</sup>

In spite of vigorous resistance, the anti-accountability forces lost this battle, the proposed matrix-sample test was never created, and the state launched the STAR system in 1998. Standards and accountability at last? Not quite. The existing California testing law carried with it a legal provision backed by the teachers’ unions

83. Hirsch, p. 193.

84. Rhea Borja, “From Diagnosis Then to Treatment Now; Standardized Tests Alter, Act as Catalyst,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Mar. 7, 1999. I am indebted to Doug McRae for his insights on this topic. See also Nancy S. Cole, “The Future of High-Stakes Testing,” speech, Stanford School of Education, Oct. 19, 2000, audiotape (available from Stanford School of Education Office of Communications and Special Projects). Cole is the immediate past president of the Educational Testing Service.

85. Task Force on Student Performance and School Accountability, Association of California School Administrators, “Special Report on Continuous Improvement Accountability System,” Nov. 1997, <http://222.acsa.org/publications/>.

that prohibits using results from standardized norm-referenced tests (like the Stanford-9 adopted in the STAR program) for decisions on hiring, firing, and promotion of teachers.<sup>86</sup> California still had no accountability measures in place.

Governor Gray Davis succeeded Governor Wilson in 1999, and armed with a nearly billion-dollar education package that includes monetary incentive rewards for schools and teachers, was finally able to get accountability components on the books and into the schools of California.<sup>87</sup> The package also includes provisions for student scholarships, peer review of teachers' performance, and voluntary state-subsidized improvement plans for low-performing schools. As currently constituted, California's system of standards, testing, and accountability is considered one of the best in the country.<sup>88</sup>

Yet the system has flaws worth noting. For instance, it can sometimes reward and sanction schools in ways that are not deserved. Low-performing California schools and high-performing schools alike have to meet the same goals of percentage growth in performance. This sounds fine in principle, but it means that a low-performing school that grows from a performance index rating of 300 to a rating of 325 (on a scale that ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1000) is held up as exemplary, while a high-performing school that starts at 750 and shows no growth is seen as a poor example.<sup>89</sup> This system of targets and rewards tends to magnify gains by low-performing schools and to downplay how

86. Local districts in California must evaluate their teachers' performance as it contributes toward district-adopted content standards (as distinguished from the state content standards, which the district may, if it wishes, adopt as its own). Districts may, if they wish, evaluate teachers based on student results on the statewide standards-based tests. California Education Code, Sec. 44662. I am indebted to Bill Lucia for this reference.

87. The California Teachers Association opposed the accountability plan because it focused "too much" on test results. Kolker, "Texas Offers Hard Lessons."

88. Chester E. Finn Jr. and Michael J. Petrilli, eds., *The State of the Standards, 2000* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation), p. 3.

89. The state has set a performance target for all schools of 800. The yearly growth goal is 5 percent of the difference between a school's current performance and the target.

far these schools still need to go in boosting their students' achievement. Undoubtedly, it was politically attractive to policymakers for just this reason.<sup>90</sup>

Another flaw in this accountability system is that the state has defined "low performing" as everything from just a little below average to absolutely the worst—and as the program exists today, the just-below-average schools seem to be getting most of the money. Schools must volunteer for the program, so the slightly-below-average schools apply for the money and make some minor adjustments. State officials can then lay claim to having improved a troubled school. The worst-performing schools, on the other hand, have for the most part simply declined to take part in the program. This may mean they don't get the subsidies their students so desperately need, but it means they won't get sanctioned either.<sup>91</sup> So the program is not only missing its proclaimed target group (failing schools) and rewarding a different group (near-average schools), but it will be almost politically impossible to refocus the reward structure in the future because it will mean taking money away from numerous near-average schools with large numbers of parents and teachers and principals who want to hang on to that money, and giving it to failing schools which are fewer in number and have less political clout.

California's accountability system has other features that are simply too new to evaluate, such as peer review of teachers, the reconstitution of failing schools, and a high school exit exam.<sup>92</sup> The bottom line is that the state has implemented first-rate content standards, it tests students on the mastery of those standards, it pays attention to objective measures of student achievement, and it rewards improvement and sanctions persistent failure. That means it should have one of the better accountability systems as well, right?

90. I am indebted to Bill Lucia and Janet Nicholas for these points.

91. Lance T. Izumi, "What Accountability?" *Capital Ideas* (Pacific Research Institute), vol. 5, no. 40 (Oct. 5, 2000).

92. For a discussion of the weaknesses of peer-review systems, see Myron Lieberman, *Teachers Evaluating Teachers: Peer Review and the New Unionism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998) (Studies in Social Philosophy & Policy, No. 20).

The problem is that, so far, no one loses. Local school districts have the option of ignoring state content standards. Yes, they have to test their students and report how well they measure up, but they are forbidden to use student results from a nationally normed test (which is what all districts in the state are now using to test students) to evaluate teachers. Whether districts use the normed tests or the state standards-based tests to evaluate students is completely up to the districts. Whether they use the student results on the standards-based tests to evaluate teachers is likewise up to them. California's accountability system is indeed one of the best in the country but that isn't saying much. It is also an accountability system that has been cushioned to soften any real repercussions that might come to those (especially the adults) who are supposedly being evaluated by it. And this comes close to accountability in name only, the kind of accountability system that education interest groups across the country are trying to have adopted: an accountability system that doesn't hold them accountable.<sup>93</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Setting standards and accountability measures for public education would seem to be a simple and straightforward enterprise: You set academic standards, and you hold students and teachers and schools accountable for meeting those standards. And yet the enterprise seems to be one that is continually swimming upstream—getting systems in place, trying to make them work, then backsliding again and again.

Almost all states now have some kind of standards and tests in place, which means the urgency of the issue may have diminished in some peoples' opinion. This is a mistake. Standards and accountability remain political issues. The well-organized and well-funded education interest groups remain adamantly opposed to

93. Rather few incompetent teachers have been fired by states based on the performance of the teachers' students on accountability tests. See "Ultimate Sanctions," *Education Week*, Jan. 11, 2001 ("Quality Counts 2001" special report), p. 84; Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, "N.C. Teachers Battle State over Firings," *Education Week*, Dec. 9, 1998.

having their members evaluated, which means they remain steadfastly opposed to accountability measures that sanction teachers and administrators. The progressive educators and their supporters continue to argue with traditionalists over what educational standards should look like and whether there should be any standards at all. These disputes are not going to go away, in fact they are likely to intensify in the years to come as student-performance benchmarks start to approach and accountability opponents renew their efforts to lower what constitutes a passing grade and to postpone any day of reckoning.

Not only will standards and accountability remain politically controversial, but they came into existence as products of the political process, which explains why their results around the country have been so diverse and in many cases disappointing. What are our children learning and how well are they learning it? This is still the question uppermost in the minds of accountability advocates—and it looks as if it is a question we are going to have to continue asking in the years to come.