

# *To Dream the Impossible Dream*

Four Approaches to National Standards  
and Tests for America's Schools



WITH

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## ■ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ■

For the first time in almost a decade, people are seriously weighing the value of instituting national standards and tests in American K-12 education. Yet despite many pervasive and commonsense reasons (explained below) to support such a reform, two large obstacles loom. The first is political: a winning coalition must be assembled, probably by a presidential contender—no small challenge, considering that the failed attempts of the 1990s to create national standards and tests left a bad taste in many politicians' mouths. The second obstacle is substantive: until policymakers can envision what a system of national standards and tests might look like, how it would work, and how its various logistical challenges might be addressed, this idea will remain just that. This report addresses the second obstacle and, in so doing, also helps with the political challenge. Once the key design issues are hammered out, it will be easier to tackle ideology and votes.

To gather input on how a system of national standards and tests might be designed, we queried a bipartisan selection of prominent experts. We knew that we would not agree with all of their views, nor would they agree with all of ours. But we certainly benefited from their varied and informed opinions and we're profoundly grateful for their cooperation—and their willingness to tackle this topic in public view. We asked them to answer a series of questions (see Appendix B) ranging from the macro—should the federal government design the tests—to the micro (e.g., ought the tests be given annually?). As we pondered their responses, certain patterns became clear. Within their excellent advice and good ideas are four distinct approaches to national standards and tests that we describe and appraise in the following pages:

1. **The Whole Enchilada.** This is the most direct and aggressive approach. The federal government would create and enforce national standards and assessments, replacing the fifty state-level sets of standards and tests we have now. The United States would move to a national accountability system for K-12 education.

2. **If You Build It, They Will Come.** This is a voluntary version of the first model. Uncle Sam would develop national standards, tests and accountability metrics, and provide incentives to states (such as additional money or fewer regulations) to opt into such a system. A variant would have a private group frame the standards. Either way, participation would be optional for states.
3. **Let's All Hold Hands.** Under this approach, states would be encouraged to join together to develop common standards and tests or, at the least, common test items. Uncle Sam might provide incentives for such collaboration, but that's it.
4. **Sunshine and Shame.** This model, the least ambitious, would make state standards and tests more transparent by making them easier to compare to one another and to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In this paper, we outline how each model might work in practice, and we evaluate the likelihood that each would:

- End the “race to the bottom”
- Result in rigorous standards rather than merely politically acceptable ones
- Expand Washington’s role in education
- Prove politically feasible.

**Figure 1: Four Approaches to National Standards and Tests**

Is it likely to...	End the Race to the Bottom?	Result in Rigorous Standards?	Expand the Federal Role?	Prove Politically Feasible?
The Whole Enchilada	Yes	Maybe	Yes	No
If You Build It, They Will Come	Probably	Yes	Maybe	Maybe
Let's All Hold Hands	Maybe	Probably	No	Maybe
Sunshine and Shame	Maybe	No	No	Yes

## ■ INTRODUCTION ■

It's no secret that we, at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, favor national standards and tests—provided they are done right. We believe they are needed now more than ever. But as policy analysts have begun seriously to debate the idea in recent months and a few politicians have begun (at least privately) to flirt with it, a sure conversation stopper kept getting in the way. Someone would ask, “So how exactly would this work in practice?” Tumbling from their lips would be five, ten, a dozen legitimate and important questions about the implementation of this basic idea. Who would write the standards? The federal government? Congress or the Department of Education? What would happen to state standards and tests? Which subjects would you test? How often? Who would deliver the results? How would this intersect with No Child Left Behind? And on and on. We quickly realized that for this idea to advance beyond the domain of wishful thinking and knee jerk reacting, someone would have to take a stab at answering such questions. This is our attempt.

Recent history illustrates the need to address these design problems. Mistakes can be costly. President George H.W. Bush watched his ambitious plan for national standards sink after his administration outsourced the job to professional organizations of educators such as the National Council of Teachers of English. President Bill Clinton found his “voluntary national tests” proposal lampooned by concerns over student privacy, overweening government involvement, and “fuzzy” math. If tomorrow’s political leaders are to tackle this topic, they will need a plan that’s fully baked.

We knew we could not flesh out these design issues alone, so we called upon a dozen eminent colleagues from left, right, and center. Some are scholars, others policymakers. Some support national standards and tests while others abhor the notion. All, however, are thoughtful, creative, and experienced policy entrepreneurs. And they did not disappoint—their lucid and insightful comments are found throughout this report. (Short biographies are available in Appendix A.)

We started by posing twelve important questions that one would have to answer if he or she were serious about actually implementing national standards and tests. (The questions are listed in Appendix B.) We sent these stumpers to our esteemed experts and solicited their responses. What we received surprised us. First, many of our colleagues showed themselves to be more skeptical about the project of national standards and tests than we—or even they—assumed they

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would be. Second, as we sifted through their answers, we noticed some patterns. Four distinct approaches to national standards and tests, rose to the surface, each with its own pluses and minuses. Fleshing out and evaluating this quartet of models became the purpose of this report:

1. **The Whole Enchilada.** This is the most direct and aggressive approach. The federal government would create and enforce national standards and assessments, replacing the fifty state-level sets of standards and tests we have now. The United States would move to a national accountability system for K-12 education.
2. **If You Build It, They Will Come.** This is a voluntary version of the first model. Uncle Sam would develop national standards, tests and accountability metrics, and provide incentives to states (such as additional money or fewer regulations) to opt into such a system. A variant would have a private group frame the standards. Either way, participation would be optional for states.

3. **Let's All Hold Hands.** Under this approach, states would be encouraged to join together to develop common standards and tests or, at the least, common test items. Uncle Sam might provide incentives for such collaboration, but that's it.
4. **Sunshine and Shame.** This model, the least ambitious, would make state standards and tests more transparent by making them easier to compare to one another and to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Drawing heavily on our expert contributors, we describe what each of these models might look like in practice, with particular reference to these three design elements:

- **Politics & Process.** Who sets the standards? What is their relationship to the federal government? How are they developed? How do educators and the public weigh in?
- **Scope.** How many subjects get tested? How frequently?
- **Consequences.** How do these standards interact with state accountability systems? Is anyone held accountable for the standards' rigor?

### *Why National Standards and Tests?*

Once this four-entree menu of options for policymakers took shape, we felt an obligation to provide an evaluation of each—a Zagat's review, if you will. What are their relative pros and cons?

Of course, this is a matter of values and judgment. Just as a food critic has her own biases (simple versus complex, classic versus cutting edge), so do we have our own policy preferences. We can cite plenty of reasons why one might support national standards and tests, but which do we find most compelling? In other words, which pressing problems do we think standards-based reform, and specifically national standards and tests, are needed to solve?

Let's start with standards-based reform. At a time when much of the No Child Left Behind debate centers around "teaching to the test," it's worth remembering why policymakers embarked on this reform agenda in the first place.

The first reason was educational: to create a more coherent and consistent educational experience for American children. Back in the day when teachers could simply close their doors and teach whatever they wanted, students faced a real risk of learning about dinosaurs every year and never encountering the solar system. Standards provided the opportunity for the system to map out a coherent curricu-

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lar plan grade-by-grade, ideally culminating in the knowledge and skills needed for success in higher education, the workplace, and our democratic polity. As E.D. Hirsch, Jr., has masterfully explained, this curricular coherence in the schools is especially critical for poor children, who are least likely to develop the "cultural literacy" at home that will allow them to compete in a meritocracy. Standards also allow educators to work collaboratively on curriculum, professional development and so forth, though, importantly, standards are not themselves the curriculum. Done right, they focus on the results to be achieved and leave room for individual schools and educators to figure out the best way to reach them.

The second reason was moral and political: where standards existed, they tended to be higher for affluent children and lower for those living in poverty and for children of color. Schools (and parents) in leafy suburbs pushed their students (at least their affluent students) to tackle rigorous Advanced Placement courses; meanwhile, poor urban districts made excuses for their pupils and seemed content with basic literacy (or just school completion). Statewide standards, measured by standardized tests and linked to meaningful accountability, were seen as the antidote to inequitable expectations.

The final reason was organizational: it was hoped that, by focusing on results, states could scrap myriad input-and-process regulations that sought to improve the schools through the force of coercion. One of the earliest advocates of this approach was the National Governors Association (NGA). Led by Tennessee's Lamar Alexander, it embarked in 1985 on a multi-year education reform initia-

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tive—most unusual for an outfit that traditionally changed priorities as often as it changed chairs, i.e. annually. The keystone event was the governors' release and endorsement, during their annual summer meeting in 1986, of an Alexander-inspired report called *Time for Results*.

The governors accepted the post-Coleman reasoning that, if stronger achievement is what's needed, policymakers should focus on the results they seek and how to extract these from the education system, willing or not. They introduced a conceptual quid-pro-quo that foreshadowed charter schools and other potent structural innovations. Experts call it “tight-loose” management: being demanding with regard to outcomes but relaxed about how those outcomes are produced. In Alexander's more homespun phrasing, the governors declared themselves ready for “some old-fashioned horse-trading. We'll regulate less, if schools and school districts will produce better results.”

We believe that although these arguments are still valid today, ultimately state standards and tests are inadequate to address four of America's greatest challenges:

1. Global competition.
2. A fragmented education marketplace.
3. The unwillingness of states to set and police their own rigorous standards.
4. An overweening federal government.

## *Global Competition*

The United States faces unprecedented competition from nations around the planet. If all of our young people are to succeed in the “flat” global economy of the 21st century, they will need to achieve to world-class standards.

Globalization, outsourcing, and the Internet have created a worldwide marketplace. Fifty years ago, students graduating from our public school system faced competition from peers in their own town or region. Today, American students must compete with children from India, China, and Brazil.

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*Most of the world’s nations align their education systems  
to a set of nationwide academic expectations.*

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Virtually all of the world’s advanced nations recognize this challenge and have aligned their educational systems with a uniform set of nationwide academic expectations or requirements. Yet, in the United States, we continue to pretend that math in Birmingham is different than math in Boston, much less Bangalore. We cannot afford the parochialism of our current system if we want to maintain our economic position in the world. Plus, the United States is no longer a country in which people are born, live their lives, and die in the same town or even the same state. Americans move frequently, and that means children move frequently, too. National standards and tests could ensure high expectations from sea to shining sea.

## *A fragmented education marketplace*

One of the promises of standards-based reform was that it would allow for, even demand, the development and alignment of powerful educational resources: stronger teacher preparation, content-rich professional development, multimedia curricular materials, etc. Yet the variability and mediocrity of state-by-state standards have made the fruition of this promise much more challenging. Take teacher training. While science teacher candidates in Ohio could conceivably be prepared to teach to Ohio’s science standards, many of them will leave

Ohio after graduation. The result? Teacher training stays at 30,000 feet rather than drilling down to specific content and concepts.

Or take curricular materials. While it's easy to imagine teachers using well-developed digital content in their classrooms instead of the shoddy textbooks available today, companies that could provide this content are hampered by the fractured educational marketplace that (understandably) demands alignment with state standards. Moving to national standards, and thus creating a national market, would create strong incentives for companies to invest in developing the successors to today's lackluster materials. Across all aspects of our educational system, common expectations would allow for a common conversation among educators and collaborative problem-solving.

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*We enjoy wireless Internet because the tech sector agreed to compete over services and content—not bicker over standards.*

*This could happen in education, too.*

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Of course, the problem of varying standards is not faced by our education system alone. Take the technology sector: at key moments the industry has coalesced around common standards in order to improve efficiency and facilitate innovation. For instance, people around the world enjoy wireless Internet access when they travel because the industry agreed on a common wireless technology protocol. Rather than bickering over standards, technology companies and other providers can compete over the services and content they offer customers. This could happen in education, too.

***The unwillingness of states to set and police their own rigorous standards***

The state standards movement has been in place for almost fifteen years. For almost ten of those years, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation have reviewed the quality of state standards. Most were mediocre-to-bad ten years ago, and most are mediocre-to-bad today. They are generally vague, politicized,

and awash in wrongheaded fads and nostrums. With a few exceptions, states have been incapable (or unwilling) to set clear, coherent standards, and develop tests with a rigorous definition of proficiency. By our lights, you can count on one hand the number of states with clear proficiency standards in reading and math and expectations even approaching those of the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

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*States face heavy pressure to define "proficiency" downward and make Swiss cheese out of NCLB's accountability provisions.*

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No Child Left Behind was supposed to improve on the situation, by taking the example of leading standards-based reform states such as Texas and North Carolina and applying their successful policies to the entire nation. But its designers made a critical mistake. Rather than settling on a common standard for school performance and allowing states and schools to meet that standard as they judged best, it developed a common timeline for achieving “universal proficiency” but allowed states to define “proficiency” in reading and math as they saw fit. The result: there is now heavy pressure on states to define “proficiency” downward and to make Swiss cheese out of NCLB’s accountability provisions. Already many states, in order to explain the discrepancy between their passing rates on state tests and their students’ performance on NAEP, are claiming that journalists and others should equate state “proficiency” with NAEP’s “basic” level. In other words, they are satisfied to get their students to “basic”—“proficiency” be damned. A system that allows such quibbling puts the entire standards-based-reform enterprise in peril.

### ***An overweening federal government.***

Finally, and counter-intuitively, we see national standards and tests as an opportunity to rein in the federal government. For forty years, Washington has sought to improve the nation’s schools by regulating what they do. To date, scant evidence exists that this strategy works.

Common standards and tests could allow Washington to back away from its top-down, regulatory approach and settle instead for clarifying the objectives to be achieved and measuring (and publicizing) whether states, schools, and students are in fact meeting them. Many think that national standards entail an increased federal role. We see it in precisely the opposite way—that a good set of national standards will lead to a reduced and focused federal role that is also better suited to Uncle Sam’s particular skill set.

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### ***Judging Each Approach***

With those biases and objectives in mind, we evaluate each model against the following criteria:

- Is it likely to end the “race to the bottom”? As noted above, because NCLB requires states to adopt standards and tests, get all students to proficiency by 2014, and hold schools accountable for the results, states face great pressure to lower their standards and ease the rigor of their tests. A few states have done this in plain view; we worry that many more are doing so behind closed doors via the many, many ways that expectations can surreptitiously be softened. So a critical question to ask of the four approaches to national standards and testing is whether they will halt any backsliding and lead to world-class standards suited to the demands of the 21st century.
  
- Is it likely to result in rigorous standards rather than merely politically acceptable ones? As explained above, the ugly truth about standards-based reform is that most of the academic standards in use today are slipshod. A reasonable concern, then, is whether any of these approaches to national standards and tests will be able to get it right when it comes to the content and rigor of the standards themselves.

- Is it likely to lead to an expanded federal role in education? In other words, can we set national standards and tests without federalizing the U.S. education system and thereby doing it a disservice? To what degree do these four approaches require a stronger role for Uncle Sam? Do they make it more or less likely that Congress will intervene in a larger swath of issues or that federal courts will mandate spending levels supposedly needed to achieve the standards?

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*National standards and tests may no longer be politically taboo.*

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- Is it likely to prove politically feasible? We offer our best judgment about the odds that any of these four approaches could survive the political minefield. Of course, some will argue that any version of national standards and tests are infeasible, even that this is a “third rail” type of political problem. We disagree and think this is the wrong reading of history. The evolution of bipartisan support for standards-based reform in American K-12 education can be traced from Charlottesville (1989) through the setting of national education goals (1990) to the National Assessment Governing Board’s establishing of “achievement levels” (early 1990s). And further to the composition of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (1991) and the National Education Goals Panel (1990) through the Goals 2000 and Improving America’s Schools Acts (1994) and through any number of education “summits” to the enactment in 2001 of NCLB itself. What went wrong in the early 1990s wasn’t the principle of national education standards; it was a misjudgment as to where and by whom these should be set. While one of us once said that “national testing is doomed because the right hates ‘national’ and the left hates ‘testing,’” we believe that times are a changing. Business leaders’ concerns about economic competitiveness and civil rights leaders’ (belated) embrace of testing as a tool to close the achievement gap indicate that national standards and tests may no longer be politically taboo.

## ■ MODEL #1 ■ THE WHOLE ENCHILADA

Is it likely to...	End the Race to the Bottom?	Result in Rigorous Standards?	Expand the Federal Role?	Prove Politically Feasible?
	Yes	Maybe	Yes	No

*Summary:* This is the most direct and aggressive approach. The federal government would create and enforce national standards and assessments, replacing the fifty state-level sets of standards and tests we have now. The United States would move to a national accountability system for K-12 education. Such a system would be the most straightforward and obvious, as well as the closest kin to what other countries do. It is what most people assume when they hear “national standards.”

### *Politics & Process*

While this is the purest model of national standards and tests, it is also the riskiest. How could the federal government manage to develop standards and tests without botching the job and politicizing the effort? **Bob Wise** recommends creation of an oversight board: “National standards could be established in a number of legitimate ways. For example, a balanced, representative, and independent body similar to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) could be formed to manage the process, with subcommittees appointed to develop the standards in each content area. Like NAGB, the body could be established and funded by Congress and staffed by professionals. However, Congress should not get involved in any of the work to set the standards; indeed, it should not even set parameters for the standards, and certainly should not approve or disapprove the standards.... No entity other than the federal government is likely to have the coordinating authority, funding, long-term commitment and legitimacy to initiate and sustain such a process.”

Yet not even a diverse appointed body like NAGB can work alone if the standards are to have buy-in and legitimacy. **Suzanne Tacheny** argues that, if “one

wants national standards that are required (i.e., to which public funding is in some way tied), then they have to be created and monitored through a public, democratic process.... the decision makers have to be clearly linked to elected officials and meetings must be open and noticed.” She stresses the necessity for a transparent and democratic development process: “the decisions have to be made in public with clear accountability through a democratic process in order for something like this to be credible and representative.”

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*How could the federal government develop standards and tests without botching the job? Answer: An oversight board. —Bob Wise*

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**Cynthia Brown** agrees: “The process needs to be a consensus-reaching one among experts familiar with and/or involved with setting the best state standards now in place. The National Governors Association (NGA) or Education Commission of the States (ECS) could sponsor the consensus building process much like CCSSO did with the NAEP frameworks. The sponsoring organization would be directed to call upon other organizations that study and rate state standards...or organizations that work with the states on standard development...to guide the identification of high quality state standards and recommend expert educators from K-12 and higher education” who are experienced with standards development. As for a direct federal role, Brown believes “Congress should not approve the standards.” Why? “Partisanship has rendered consensus in Congress a rarity and subjecting debate over the standards to wild political grandstanding would undermine any consensus reached on them.”

**Robert Gordon** writes that “We want national standards to be set by experts—in subject matters, in pedagogy, in the demands of the international economy. But we also need national standards to reflect a democratic process.”

**Mike Cohen** believes “Those who would promote national standards, or any standards these days, must make the case that they define essential skills in today’s world,

not that they are the received wisdom of a federal panel.” Why? Cohen contends that national standards “will draw legitimacy from being transparently anchored in [the] real world, and from their acceptance by postsecondary institutions.”

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*We want national standards to be set by experts—in subject matters, in pedagogy, in the demands of the international economy.*

—Robert Gordon

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**Frederick Hess** is “agnostic about the particular nature of the institutional arrangements. There are huge ups and downs to any degree of legislative oversight or board independence. Too much independence of elected officials, and we’ve got a bunch of technocrats and interest group representatives jostling to dictate what our kids are going to learn. Too little, and the exercise becomes a largely political football.”

### *Scope*

Once a process is set for developing national standards and tests, additional questions loom: who gets tested, what gets tested, and when? Who will make those decisions? **Bob Wise** writes, “Given that Congress has already identified the measurement of reading, math, and science as essential, these subjects seem to be a natural starting point. Additional subjects could be added over time if public opinion (and corresponding national policy) demands an expansion.” He continues: “Although it would not necessarily be disastrous to return to ‘grade span’ testing, the current requirement for testing in grades three through eight and once in high school does make it a bit harder to ‘game’ the system. In fact, this system may eventually allow states to use a more accurate ‘value added’ accountability system that moves every student to proficient levels by graduation rather than the grade span testing mechanism which often results in an ‘apples to oranges’ comparison of one cohort against another.”

Another contributor (who asked to remain anonymous) believes “State tests should not disappear. We should not advocate for the federal government to

nationalize the student testing industry.... Reading and math should be tested at the third–twelfth grades. Or, the high school tests could be lumped into a high-stakes exit exam of sorts.”

### *Consequences*

Once a system is in place, how will it interact with current state accountability systems? Will those systems continue to be used, or will they be washed away? Then who is held accountable, to what, and by whom?

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*Any such system needs to include some definition of proficiency, both for individuals and schools —Robert Gordon*

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**Robert Gordon** writes, “One can argue that once a transparent national standard and national testing regime exists, that system will provide adequate incentives for states to define proficiency in a serious way. One can further argue that in the context of such a regime, allowing variation in the weighting of different factors would allow for useful experimentation and refinement. And one can further argue that if the feds establish definitions of proficiency and AYP, they will screw it up.” Yet any such system “needs to include some definition of proficiency, both for individuals and for schools. Unless you lock that in, you risk not getting any of the results you are seeking. That said, the feds should have a ‘floor not a ceiling’ approach. If states want to do more, that’s great.”

**Bob Wise** puts forth several scenarios about how accountability could be achieved: “In order to make national standards and national tests meaningful, there must be a clear and unified understanding of what it means to have mastered these standards at the basic, proficient and advanced levels. If a commission or other standards and assessments body has been created, these ‘cut scores’ could be set by it. Another possibility would be to allow states to choose whether to use the national cut score or a different, state-established one for accountability purposes (knowing that pressure to use the national scores would likely start strong and grow stronger).

“Furthermore,” says Wise, “a nationally established cut score does not necessarily mean that every state would be expected to move to proficiency at the same pace. Indeed, given the variation in starting points among the states, there are bound to be variables in any formula measuring adequate yearly progress. National standards and tests would not in themselves require much change from NCLB as it is written (including maintaining the critical disaggregation requirements).

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*If Washington sets and enforces one common standard, states will have little opportunity to fudge their numbers or lower their standards.*

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“These national tests could become the major factor in making the determination of progress (as state tests are now),” Wise continues, “and the same formulas that set starting points and measures of annual progress could continue to be used. However, better policy would likely dictate that no single assessment (state or national) be used as the sole factor in making that determination. Instead, the reauthorization of NCLB could contemplate national standards, a national test, and additional measurable factors (i.e., graduation rates, attendance rates, college going rates, etc.), some of which might vary by state, to be used in determining whether a school, district or state has made adequate yearly progress.”

### *Is it likely to end the “race to the bottom”?*

The answer seems to be an obvious yes—if Washington sets and enforces one common standard, states will have little opportunity to fudge their numbers or lower their standards. Yet if the feds dumb down their own standards by, say, muddling the distinction between basic and proficient, the whole enterprise will have been for naught.

Still, even such a national performance measurement system would rely on the states to “pull the trigger” and actually hold schools accountable. This is no sure thing. As **Andrew Rotherham** noted, “Right now, NCLB is basically prodding

states to enforce their own standards. That's not working, so in terms of a race to the bottom or rigorous standards there is a real question about whether state enforcement will be politically feasible with external (non-state-developed) standards.”

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*No one is arguing for a federally run school system.  
It couldn't be done! —Cynthia Brown*

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Is it likely to result in rigorous standards rather than politically correct ones? The honest answer is: it depends. But there are ways to make a positive outcome more likely. **Bob Wise** comments: “Since the goal of national standards would be to ensure that all students are graduating from high school prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and work, the starting point for standards should be a common understanding of what institutions of higher education and employers expect from graduates.... Legislation creating such a commission or other body could name the organizations of entities invited to nominate commission members, who would be ‘appointed’ by the federal government (acting essentially as a rubber stamp to the nominations).... An analysis of the overlap among state standards and their rigor and relevance remain top level.”

But **Sandy Kress** is skeptical: “The process [of setting standards] will be hijacked by [interest] groups if the process is federal. I am much more confident about the work of Achieve/Fordham/EdTrust/et al.”

### *Is it likely to lead to an expanded federal role in education?*

Contributors agree that this option would inevitably expand the federal role in K-12 education. Although some believe that an expanded federal role may increase the public's skepticism of federal overreach. **Gene Hickok** writes, “I think there is a general discomfort with the national government—Congress, the executive branch, some bureaucratic organization—setting academic standards. And for good reason. Most people just don't think the government is ‘qualified’ to do this sort of thing.”

But **Cynthia Brown** thinks we can have national standards without a national education system: “The U.S. is too big to federalize the control of education. Voluntary national standards and a few national tests will move the country to greater uniformity in curriculum content at a higher quality level. No one is arguing for a federally run school system. It couldn’t be done! More centralized state systems of education might make sense however.”

### *Is it likely to prove politically feasible?*

Even the strongest supporters of this option agree that it is not politically feasible today. The consensus seems to be that a more incremental approach is likelier. This worries several commentators.

**Eli Broad**, for example, believes national standards are seminal to providing American students a high-quality education regardless of where they live. “Already,” he writes, “our international competitors have national systems in place that require a more rigorous curriculum than is currently offered in our country. Some form of academic content and proficiency standards are needed in the United States. Creating federally-developed national standards may be the only way to ensure the standards created are rigorous and universally implemented.” Yet Broad sees such an arrangement as unlikely, especially when “many in Congress and in State Legislatures” believe “that NCLB overreached and imposed many onerous regulatory burdens...”

**Sandy Kress** agrees about the importance of national standards: “I believe that exemplary national standards would be very useful....new conditions in our economy will make more rigorous standards desirable.” But he also “worr[ies] about federal standards and believe in any event that there is no will to do them.”

It’s also worth noting the immense opposition that national standards and tests will garner from testing companies which currently profit exorbitantly from developing tests for 50 individual states.

## ■ MODEL #2 ■

### IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

Is it likely to...	End the Race to the Bottom?	Result in Rigorous Standards?	Expand the Federal Role?	Prove Politically Feasible?
	Probably	Yes	Maybe	Maybe

*Summary:* This is a voluntary version of the first model. Uncle Sam would develop national standards, tests and accountability metrics, and provide incentives to states (such as additional money or fewer regulations) to opt into such a system. A variant would have a private group frame the standards. Either way, participation would be optional for states.

#### *Politics & Process*

Most contributors envisioned NAGB playing the standards-setting role. One analyst explained that this model could work because much is “already done by the National Assessment Governing Board for NAEP. The one place where NAEP is lacking is on a value-added or growth basis. Since it is designed for fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade testing schedules, it would need to be greatly expanded to make it more usable in a more longitudinal way.”

**Diane Ravitch** argues, however, that federal oversight may not be necessary for this model to work. She believes “it is possible or at least feasible to have national standards that are not run by the federal government.” Alternatively, as with the first model, NAGB or a similar body could be charged with setting the standards and developing the tests. She writes: “Any effort to develop solid national standards would enlist the participation of some of our best scholars. . . . Right now, the NAEP standards are among the best in the nation, at least in the subject areas that I am familiar with. Many of the state standards are vacuous and no one could draw upon them to develop tests, textbooks, etc. We have to do better, and we have to take the time to do it right.” On the whole, the standards-setting process would look much the same as for the first model. **Cynthia Brown** provides specifics (above) which are applicable here as well.

What incentives might entice states to participate? **Eli Broad** observes that money talks: “First, the traditional way in which the federal government has changed state and local school district policies is through the incentive provided by new federal education dollars. If federal standards were to be put in place, significant federal funds would be required in order to induce states to adopt the new standards....If the federal government moved to impose, rather than incentivize the adoption of, the standards on the states, it is likely there would be a significant legal battle over the constitutionality of such a policy.”

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*Many of the state standards are vacuous.... We have to do better, and we have to do it right. —Diane Ravitch*

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**Bob Wise** agrees: “Another scenario would create a situation in which states could be given the option (and perhaps an incentive) to decide to use national standards and assessments rather than their own. For example, states that decide to use the national standards and assessments paid for (developed and graded) by the federal government. The prospect of no longer having to invest significant state resources in a process of continually updating standards and assessments, and scoring thousands of assessments annually, might be the ‘carrot’ needed to help many states view a national option in a favorable light.”

### **Scope**

Who and what should be tested, and when? **Suzanne Tacheny** sticks with “a common core of reading and writing, mathematics, and science standards. The content for third grade reading or for Algebra I should be the same basic content no matter where one is in the country.... However, history is more complicated, so should remain entirely a state-by-state program of study. While there is a strong national interest in a common standard for history, there is equally strong argument for local and regional nuance.” Others, such as **Andrew Rotherham**, are even more wary of extending the range of testing. He favors “limiting national (and even state) testing to math and reading” because it will

“balance between subjects that lend themselves to large-scale standardized testing—both substantively and politically—and are essential foundations.” He’s “leery of seeing national testing expanding into a broad range of subjects” because it might “have a stifling effect.” **Frederick Hess** agrees. He prefers a national approach for reading and math but believes that, while states should be required to test in other subjects, they ought to develop their own standards in those subjects: “I think going national on math and reading makes sense, and doing it [in grades] 3–12 or whatnot is perfectly appropriate. I think states should be required to test in science, history, and writing, but that they should be free to devise their own standards on this front.”

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*National exams on math and reading makes sense....*

*State should test in science, history, and writing, but devise their own standards. —Frederick Hess*

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**Sandy Kress** prefers a broader range: “A good range of tests, whether state or national, ought to end up with a measure close to graduation that demonstrates readiness for college or a good job. In that regard, the ACT, SAT, or other standards-based exit or end of course exams that measure college readiness could be models. (The other tests at lower grades ought to be aligned so that student learning can be appropriately mapped to that end.)”

**Diane Ravitch** writes that standards and tests ought to start from where there’s the most consensus: “Let’s take math and science as starting points. We should have national standards in both subjects because there are already implicit international standards and our students fall way behind. If we had strong, clear, explicit national standards in those subjects, then teachers would know what they are expected to teach, textbooks would align their content to match the standards, tests would reflect the standards, and teacher education would embed those standards when preparing future teachers.... There is not a different kind of math or science in different parts of the city or state or nation.” She also believes that less is often more, writing that “if we had a serious and sus-

tained national conversation about what our kids need to know in math, science, history, literature, the arts, etc., then we would also need some oversight, some coordination from the top to make sure that the standards were reasonable as well as geared to high performance. When they are overwhelming in bulk, they can't be taken seriously. Then they are just a wish list.”

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*So long as national standards and tests are optional,  
the race to the bottom could continue.*

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### **Consequences**

As with the first model, some contributors envisioned a national approach to accountability with, for example, a common definition of Adequate Yearly Progress. If states opt to use the national standards and tests, they would also adopt this common AYP yardstick. **Mike Cohen**, for example, believes “future efforts to set standards, whether national or state, should pay attention to evidence establishing the ‘external validity’ of the standards.”

### ***Is it likely to end the “race to the bottom”?***

So long as national standards and tests are optional, the race to the bottom could continue. Especially if the standards-setters do an admirable job and create tough standards and tests, states may feel local pressure to shun them and instead stick with their own easier standards. On the other hand, with the right incentives, state policymakers may have the political cover they need to sign up for rigorous common standards.

Is it likely to result in rigorous standards rather than politically correct ones?

**Diane Ravitch** is clear-eyed about the challenge: “The hardest thing to persuade anyone to do is to leave something out [of the standards]. The consensus process is usually geared to pleasing everyone, so the log-rolling makes the ultimate document get bigger and bigger, to the point where it becomes unteachable.” The hope, though, is that the process is undertaken with care and politi-

cally correct drivel and self-interested groups are confronted head-on by those in charge of designing such standards and tests.

Still, the beauty of this approach is that the standards and tests will be developed and made public before any state is asked to implement them. And even then, participation is voluntary. Thus, if the process goes awry and problematic standards are created, states can simply ignore them. Those few states that cur-

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*The beauty of this approach is that standards and tests will be developed and made public before any state is asked to implement them.*

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rently have strong standards will be able to determine whether the national standards represent an improvement. **James Peyser** notes that states should be “free to choose among these [national] standards or stick with their own home-grown versions, but their funding levels could be adjusted based on NAEP performance/gains.”

### *Is it likely to lead to an expanded federal role in education?*

It might. **Andrew Rotherham** notes, “historically it’s been the federal government prodding the states to get their act together when it comes to underserved populations, especially minority children and youngsters with special needs. So some expansion of federal authority doesn’t cause most of us left-of-center to lose much sleep.”

**James Peyser** worries, however, “that if the feds establish one set of standards, they will be drawn deeper and deeper into the business of operating schools—most likely by issuing a set of ineffectual, burdensome edicts. It’s exactly the same pattern I see at the state level.”

### *Is it likely to prove politically feasible?*

Even though this model is voluntary, anything labeled “national standards” or “national testing” will face challenges. **Diane Ravitch** laments that “There are so many barriers, I hardly know where to begin. The commercial test-publishers are strongly opposed to national standards, unless they see a role for themselves in developing or selling the tests. They fear that national testing would spoil the testing market. I could imagine that good national standards would create lots of opportunities for people or companies to sell tutoring services, but that of course is not a reason to support standards! There of course is strong political opposition, based on fear that the standards will be taken over by ‘them’ (whomever you happen to disagree with). The left mistrusts the right, the right mistrusts the left. All of which is reasonable, unless it is possible to create a national entity with real integrity. Having been on the NAGB board, having seen so many people who were dedicated to the well-being of America’s children, I think it can be done. But I do not question how hard it will be.”

She continues: “After the next presidential election, the new president might make this a central goal, but there remains the question as to whether it should be national or federal. If such a program were to be launched, it would take 3-5 years to reach a point where it was ready to launch in American schools. Even though the need is critical, there is nonetheless great opposition (some people hate any kind of standards), great divisiveness (some will argue about which route or definition is better and which way to go), and some are just too complacent to see that there is a problem.”

Perhaps the most nagging question about the feasibility of this model is: if those states with weak standards today are unwilling to adopt the top-notch standards of other states, why tomorrow would they accept the rigorous national standards that this model hopes to produce?

## ■ MODEL #3 ■ LET'S ALL HOLD HANDS

Is it likely to...	End the Race to the Bottom?	Result in Rigorous Standards?	Expand the Federal Role?	Prove Politically Feasible?
	Maybe	Probably	No	Maybe

*Summary:* Under this approach, states would be encouraged to join together to develop common standards and tests or, at the least, common test items. Uncle Sam might provide incentives for such collaboration, but that's it.

### *Politics & Process*

In this model, who sets the standards becomes more ambiguous than in the previous two. States would work together to develop standards and tests but the actual organizations creating those essential items could vary. Several contributors mentioned the American Diploma Project and its high school graduation standards as promising models. The National Governors Association could also house such a project. And states in New England are already collaborating on common standards and tests.

**James Peyser** writes that “there should be multiple standards-setting organizations that are explicitly committed to NAEP as their assessment of choice. Each of these organizations would be rated on the basis of the NAEP-measured performance of the schools/districts/states adopting their standards. States would be free to choose among these standards or stick with their own home-grown versions, but their funding levels could be adjusted based on NAEP performance/gains [easier said than done].”

**Andrew Rotherham** explains how the federal government could help: “Politically, national standards will have to come from the bottom-up through interstate collaboration rather than imposition from the federal government,” but the “federal government should support such collaboration. The most readily available way is to offer enhanced matching grants through NCLB for states

that seek to work together, but there are other strategies as well. Substantively, standards that are set through collaboration and entered into voluntarily, rather than imposed, will likely prove more durable.”

Since the states have a poor track-record setting strong standards, how could a collaborative process be designed to result in a better outcome? **Michael Cohen** believes “the first order of business needs to be aligning any new standards with the demands of postsecondary education and work, though if done right this can also help propel a move to national standards.” He writes: “Simply put,

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*States would work together to develop standards and tests, but the organizations creating those items could vary.*

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today’s standards—as well as the national standards developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s—reflect a consensus among subject matter experts about what would be desirable or even important for young people to learn. They are not the result of a careful analysis of the work young people will do when they complete K-12 education, and the knowledge and skills essential for postsecondary success.” What role should the federal government play in attempting to reform standards? Cohen urges it to “stay out of the way.”

### **Scope**

Who and what gets tested, and when? The suggestions from our contributors resemble those for the first two models. By and large, the consensus is to start with “core” subjects like reading and math or math and science, and avoid the politically sensitive field of history. Most contributors also support NCLB’s annual testing regime and would continue it.

### **Consequences**

Just as states could be provided with incentives to develop common standards and tests, so too could they be encouraged to adopt a common definition of

Adequate Yearly Progress. At the very least, one would hope for a common “cut score” to define “proficiency.” The federal government could provide incentives, financial or otherwise, for states to adopt common definitions of AYP, or common “cut scores.” In the end, though, the decisions would fall to individual state governments which could, if they see fit, retain the accountability system they already had in place.

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*Any collaborative effort risks a quiet push toward  
"lowest common denominator" standards.*

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*Is it likely to end the “race to the bottom”?*

By working together, state policymakers might provide political cover for one another, keeping them from adopting low level standards. On the other hand, any collaborative effort risks a quiet push toward “lowest common denominator” standards. And, of course, this initiative will be entirely voluntary, so states may stick with the (low) standards and (easy) tests they already have. Yet, as **James Peyser** suggests in some detail below, increasing sunlight and transparency might create a “virtuous race to the top.”

Is it likely to result in rigorous standards rather than politically correct ones? With the right process, a multi-state effort could certainly result in decent standards, especially if states take **Michael Cohen’s** advice and focus on key knowledge and skills mandated by higher education and the workplace. But that’s no sure thing. Privately developed standards might fare better, as they could be developed outside the political process, yet the precedent of the professional organizations’ standards is not promising. Still, the governors succeeded last summer in creating fair and rigorous standards for measuring high school graduation rates; this spirit of cooperation could just as well be applied to academic standards.

### *Is it likely to lead to an expanded federal role in education?*

Respondents seem to agree that Model 3 would leave ample room for the federal government to create incentives but that federal intervention in the operation of the K-12 system would not necessarily increase. With respect to federal financial incentives alone, **James Peyser** warns, “The golden rule is pretty iron-clad: he who has the gold makes the rules.” **Frederick Hess** disagrees somewhat: “It’s possible for the feds to pay but not run it, but it would be hard to do.... The key is to construct the thing with appropriate lessons to the good and bad of analogous models.... The responsible body could make use of the American Diploma Project and other extant entities”

### *Is it likely to prove politically feasible?*

Our respondents agree that this model would have many supporters. As **Sandy Kress** wrote, “Voluntary, exemplary national standards with significant buy in—that’s the way to go.” One of its most promising aspects is that it requires no Congressional action, unless the feds want to provide incentives for states to work together. In fact, there are already some current efforts (like the American Diploma Project, the New England multi-state collaborative, and the governors’ project on common high school graduation measurements) that exemplify this approach.

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*This model would avoid the opposition of testing companies because it would not require a single national test.*

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Because this model would not necessitate a single national test, at least anytime soon, it would also avoid the opposition of testing companies that are making a lot of money off the current system. **Suzanne Tacheny** worries that a national test could create a test-making monopoly. “My only concern about the possible impact of national testing is that if one vendor wins the contract for a big national test, in the long run this would so cripple the others that we’d create a de facto national monopoly on testing. All innovation (in an industry that already resists it) would turn to sludge.”

## ■ MODEL #4 ■ SUNSHINE AND SHAME

Is it likely to...	End the Race to the Bottom?	Result in Rigorous Standards?	Expand the Federal Role?	Prove Politically Feasible?
	Maybe	No	No	Yes

*Summary:* This model, the least ambitious, would make state standards and tests more transparent by making them easier to compare to one another and to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

### *Politics & Process*

States would continue to set the standards and field their own tests. But the federal government would make it easier for educators, parents, and policymakers to gauge the relative rigor of state tests. For example, Senators Hillary Clinton, Edward Kennedy, and John Kerry recently introduced a bill (the new National Defense Education Act) that would, among other things, provide incentives and resources for states to create rigorous standards aligned to NAEP. According to Senator Kennedy, the bill “updates the nation’s report card—the National Assessment of Educational Progress—to ensure that it sets a national benchmark which is internationally competitive and is aligned with the demands of the 21st century global economy.”

While this approach signals the least change as compared to the other models, it would push states toward greater commonality. Though independent analysts—like Paul Peterson and Frederick M. Hess—have already compared state test results to NAEP in order to show their varying degrees of rigor, some of these new proposals would charge the government with doing such an analysis—and mandate that the states make more of their testing information transparent. Perhaps most importantly, this approach would require the state standards themselves to be aligned to NAEP or another benchmark, creating somewhat common expectations for learning throughout the land.

## Scope

The subjects and grades tested would not change from the status quo. **James Peyser** writes, “I’d basically stick with the current system—reading and math in grades 3–8, plus 10. Additional high school testing is complicated due to the wide variation in course taking patterns. Giving a single high school test aims either too low or too high for a large number of students—especially in math.”

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*States would continue to set the standards and field their tests, and the federal government would help educators and parents gauge their rigor.*

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## Consequences

What should happen to states that still set low standards? How can this system be used to encourage a “race to the top”? **James Peyser** has a few ideas: “I suggest (with much trepidation and uncertainty) keeping the current system, but adding NAEP performance as a factor in determining overall funding levels. For example, if a school/district/state makes AYP based on low standards (relative to NAEP), it may lose some federal money (or not receive “bonus” funds)—even though it is not “in need of improvement under NCLB.” As far as delivering results, he writes that it “should remain a state/district/school responsibility.” Thus, this approach doesn’t fundamentally change the NCLB machinery for accountability; all it does is make clearer to the public whether a state’s standards and test cut-offs are similar to NAEP’s.

## *Is it likely to end the “race to the bottom”?*

**James Peyser** suggests that it could. “Rate all standards on the basis of the NAEP performance of the schools/districts/states that use them. This rating process would no doubt need to be more complex than just straight averaging, but assuming big enough sample sizes, I’m sure a reasonably valid system could be developed. Combined with meaningful incentives for adopting NAEP-compatible standards, this should create a virtuous dynamic instead of a race to the bottom.”

Still, it is already possible to show which states set the “proficiency” bar low when compared to NAEP, yet this public information doesn’t seem to be pushing states to alter their behavior.

### *Is it likely to result in rigorous standards rather than politically correct ones?*

Probably not. Though greater sunshine and shame might push states to act tough when it comes to setting “cut scores” for the “proficient” level, it will do nothing to improve the quality of their academic content standards—which are mostly disreputable.

### *Is it likely to lead to an expanded federal role in education?*

**Andrew Rotherham** argues that “if states are voluntarily adopting standards it doesn’t necessarily follow that the feds must get involved in every aspect of school operations. But even assuming that standards are imposed, right now the big debate in federal education policy is about the tight-loose question and there is plenty of room for standards without unnecessarily entangling Washington in all those things....It’s possible to see a policy that is tight on results in, for instance, math and reading achievement, but very loose on how states organize their K-12 systems to achieve these goals.”

### *Is it likely to prove politically feasible?*

Yes. In fact, as mentioned above, three senators have already introduced a bill that embraces this model (though, they are all members of the same political party). As long as this approach avoids the “national standards” label, its adoption seems plausible. But that might also be a sign of its weakness: it is politically feasible precisely because it isn’t much of a departure from the status quo.

## ■ AFTERWORD ■ OUR PREFERENCE

The primary purpose of this report is to provide a menu to policymakers; any of these models would improve upon the situation we face today. Yet it would be disingenuous to pretend that we don't have a favorite entrée on this menu.

We think the most promising approach is a version of the second model, “If You Build It, They Will Come.” We would charge the National Assessment Governing Board with setting standards—in grades 3-12 in reading, math, and science, for starters—and developing world-class tests aligned with those standards and the underlying content frameworks. NAGB would build on existing NAEP frameworks and exams to develop a system of annual tests that would assess individual children in these three subjects in this expanded number of grades. (That's not as easy as it sounds; NAEP is currently a “matrix sample” test—no child actually takes the entire exam and no scores are computed for individual students or schools. Hence this assignment to NAGB is a very large one.) Neither Congress nor the Administration should play a role in approving the frameworks or performance standards.

We admit to some trepidation about using NAGB and NAEP for this role. On the one hand, they're working pretty well as a low-stakes external “audit” of state and national performances, and could be compromised by the changes and added burdens envisioned here. On the other hand, some responsible critics assert that NAEP's frameworks in certain subjects, especially math, are as unsatisfactory as those of most states. We also know that NAGB is not immune to politicians' demands to see test scores rise. For example, its recent emphasis on the “basic” NAEP level rather than “proficient” causes us concern. As long as NAGB members are appointed by the Administration in power, these risks will remain.

Yet NAGB has many strengths, too. It is a broadly representative and bipartisan body, with all key stakeholders represented. Its processes are relatively open and

transparent. It has not been timid about demonstrating its independence both of political masters and of education interest groups. Perhaps most important, it has experience setting standards and developing a national test—one that is highly regarded. While we might prefer California’s or Massachusetts’ standards to the NAEP frameworks, we appreciate that the NAEP is a reasonably good representation of a broad American consensus about what students should know and be able

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*Charge NAGB with setting standards and developing world-class tests aligned with those standards and the underlying content frameworks*

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to do, and it is certainly true that NAGB’s concept of “proficiency” is as rigorous and challenging as the 21st century demands. Were Congress to design a new standards-setting body and process from scratch, it would look a lot like NAGB and it would result in a test much like NAEP—but would take a long time to create the infrastructures and culture and working relationships that NAGB already has. Hence relying on NAGB and NAEP is the best way to hit the ground running.

The federal government should foot the bill for the development of the frameworks and tests and for implementation of the assessments. NAGB should continue to set “performance standards” (basic, proficient, and advanced) and begin to supply a national definition of Adequate Yearly Progress. (A value-added measure—or “growth model”—should be included in the metric.) NAGB should aim high, benchmarking U.S. standards against international norms, as well as the demands of higher education and the workplace. (The American Diploma Project’s standards might be helpful in this regard, at least for twelfth grade.) The feds should spend what it takes to create rigorous, state-of-the-art assessments (preferably web-based), as well as an information system capable of delivering the results securely and quickly to states, school districts, teachers, and parents. Thus, participating states would no longer manage their own NCLB system of tests and AYP determinations in reading, math and science, though they would be free to add assessments in other subjects.

Uncle Sam should then offer states a deal: if you opt into this system of national standards, tests, and accountability, we'll pay for it and you will earn regulatory relief. For example: participating states can ignore the “highly qualified teachers” mandate if they choose. After all, they are signing up for tougher accountability for results; they should earn greater flexibility around inputs and processes. In fact, we would get rid of virtually all federal mandates for states that participate, leading to a retooled federal role that truly concentrates on results rather than regulations.

If NAGB botches the job, states are free to turn down the deal. They would also be able to opt out of the plan at any time. The system is entirely voluntary. Still, we suspect that such a process would provide enough cover to state officials for many to participate willingly—without committing political suicide for “surrendering their responsibilities” to Washington.

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*We could get rid of virtually all federal mandates for states that participate, leading to a retooled federal role that truly concentrates on results rather than regulations*

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Is this a silver bullet? Of course not. Ample risk remains. The standards and tests could be wrong-headed but states might adopt them anyway. Alternatively, NAGB could do a bang-up job while local politics keeps virtually all states from participating. (And yes, this approach closely resembles the final version of President Clinton’s “voluntary national tests,” which were strangled in their cradle.) Still, we believe this approach is the most likely to end the race to the bottom and lead to rigorous standards while avoiding an unhealthy expansion of the federal role in education. And with the right leadership (presidential contenders, we mean you!), we could even imagine such a plan passing Congress. There’s the recipe. Now let’s get cooking.

## ■ APPENDIX A ■

### BIOGRAPHIES OF CONTRIBUTORS

*Eli Broad* is the founder of The Broad Foundation, which seeks to improve urban K-12 education through better governance, management, labor relations, and competition. Mr. Broad is founder-chairman of two Fortune 500 companies, SunAmerica Inc. and KB Home, which he built from the ground up over a five-decade career in business.

*Cynthia Brown* is director of education policy at the Center for American Progress. She serves as Chair of both the Institute for Responsive Education and American Youth Policy Forum Boards of Directors and on the Boards of Directors of the Hyde Leadership Public Charter School and the National Association for Teen Fitness and Exercise. She has spent over 35 years working in a variety of professional positions addressing high-quality, equitable public education, including an appointment by President Carter as the first assistant secretary for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education (1980).

*Michael Cohen* is president of Achieve, Inc. and co-chair of the Aspen Education and Society Program at the Aspen Institute. He served in the Clinton Administration for eight years, holding various positions: assistant secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, senior advisor on Education Reform to the Secretary of Education, and special assistant to the President for Education Policy. He has also served as director of the National Alliance for Restructuring Education at the National Center on Education and the Economy and as the education program director for the National Governors Association.

*Robert Gordon* is senior counselor to the chancellor in the New York City Department of Education, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, and a non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution. He served as the domestic policy director for the Kerry-Edwards campaign and in the Clinton White House as an aide to the National Economic Council and the Office for National Service.

*Frederick Hess* is director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of several books on education reform. He is also executive editor of *Education Next*, a journal of research and opinion on education policy published by the Hoover Institution. Hess is known for his work on a diverse range of educational issues including urban education, accountability, charter schooling and school vouchers, educational politics, teacher and administrative licensure, local governance, competition, and school improvement.

*Eugene Hickok* served as deputy U.S. secretary of education in President George W. Bush's first term. Prior to his appointment, Dr. Hickok was Pennsylvania's Secretary of Education and also served on the boards of trustees of Pennsylvania's four state-related universities, and on the State System of Higher Education's Board of Governors.

*Sandy Kress* is an attorney at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer Feld & LLP in Austin, Texas, focusing on public law and policy at the state and national levels. From 2001-2002, he served as senior education advisor to President George W. Bush. He previously served as president of the board of trustees of the Dallas Independent School District.

*James Peyser* is a partner with NewSchools Venture Fund and serves as chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education and of the Educational Management Audit Council. Mr. Peyser has also served as education advisor to governors Mitt Romney and Jane Swift. Mr. Peyser worked for close to eight years as executive director of Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, and has served as under secretary of Education and Special Assistant to Governor William Weld for Charter Schools. He is a member of the board of overseers of WGBH and is a former member of the board of directors of Boston Partners in Education. He also serves on the policy board of the National Council on Teacher Quality.

*Diane Ravitch* is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a member of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. She is a research professor at New York

University, a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a member of the board of the New America Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Education, and the Society of American Historians. From 1997–2004, she was a member of the National Assessment Governing Board. Ravitch served as an assistant secretary for educational research and improvement and as a counselor to the U.S. Department of Education in the first Bush administration. She is a former professor of history and education at Columbia University's Teachers College and a former adviser to Poland's Ministry of Education.

*Andrew Rotherham* is co-founder and co-director of Education Sector, an independent national education policy think tank. In 1998, Rotherham launched the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute, which he directed until 2005, and focused on improving teacher quality, public school choice, special education, and modernizing the federal role in education. Rotherham previously served as special assistant to the president for domestic policy during the Clinton Administration.

*Suzanne Tacheny* is currently an education writer and consultant and is a Senior Associate with Cross & Joftus, LLC. She serves on California's P-16 Council and the Boards of Directors for WestEd and the Consortium for Children. She is a former member of the California State Board of Education where she led California's implementation of assessment and NCLB. She was the executive director of California Business for Education Excellence and founded the CBEF Foundation. She has served as a staff consultant to the Los Angeles Unified School District's Task Force on Accountability and participated in the development of accountability legislation for California.

*Bob Wise* is the former Governor of West Virginia and currently serves as president of the Alliance for Excellent Education. He has advised the U.S. Department of Education, and serves on advisory committees for the Campaign for Educational Equity and Editorial Projects in Education (EPE), among others. Governor Wise served for 18 years in the U.S. House of Representatives and was a member of the Democratic Party Leadership team for several terms.

## ■ APPENDIX B ■

### 12 QUESTIONS ASKED OF CONTRIBUTORS

#### *The Federal Role*

1. Who should set the standards? What relation, if any, should that body have to the federal government? (For instance, should Congress approve the standards?) To the National Assessment Governing Board? Are there ways to create “national” but not “federal” standards? Through the American Diploma Project and/or other extant “national” standard-setters?
2. If the national standards and tests are related to the federal government, what does that imply for the federal role in education? Will it inevitably grow larger? Won't it necessitate a stronger federal role in teacher credentialing, funding, etc.? Is this a good thing? If not, how can we set national standards without federalizing control of education?
3. If not a project of the federal government, from where will the “national standards” draw their legitimacy? Their financing? Can Washington pay for the project but not run it?

#### *Making National Standards and Tests Matter*

4. Should there be uniform national definitions of “proficiency” and Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind? In other words, should all public schools in the country be held to the same standard under the federal law, and measured primarily (or perhaps entirely) by these national tests? Should we have one national accountability system for K-12 education?
5. Which subjects should be tested? At which grades? Should state tests disappear—at least in the subjects and grades with a national test?

6. What should be the relation of a national test to college entrance exams like the SAT/ACT? Should these disappear? Should all colleges and universities use the results of this new national test for their admissions and placement decisions?

### *Ensuring Good Standards and Tests*

7. Should NAEP be converted into a national test (at the district, building and/or pupil level)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of that approach? If not NAEP, is there any current vehicle that could be adapted for that purpose?
8. How should the standards-setting process be designed to ensure that it isn't hijacked by special interests inside and outside the education profession? What lessons can be drawn from the early 1990's round of voluntary national standard setting by "professional" organizations? From the experience of the states?
9. How should the standards-setting process be designed to ensure that the resulting standards are, and remain, of high quality and rigorous and not the "lowest common denominator"? How can the best state standards be used to inform these national standards? Who, exactly, should be on the standards-setting commission? Who should appoint it? Oversee it?
10. How should the "cut scores" for defining "proficient" be set? By whom? Should "proficient" be accompanied by lower and higher cut-scores (e.g. "basic", "advanced")?

## *Logistical Considerations*

11. Should the tests be computer-adaptive? If not, what form should they take?  
How can they be designed to measure student performance accurately—even for those students several years below or above grade level?
  
12. Who should deliver the results to parents, teachers, principals, etc.? Should there be a national database of student achievement results?



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