

ISSUES IN BRIEF

on behalf of Greater Phoenix Leadership

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Academic Standards in Arizona

Purpose and Introduction

The purpose of this brief report is to present a balanced look at current issues surrounding the education reform known as “academic standards.” Prepared by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at the request of Greater Phoenix Leadership, the information contained in this report is intended for a business audience. It does not advocate any particular stance or make policy recommendations, but rather presents a platform from which the business community might choose a position. The report is organized around four areas of interest: (1) the national context for academic standards, (2) facts regarding Arizona’s standards, (3) the pros and cons of academic standards, and (4) specific issues and positions in the national business community related to academic standards.

The National Move Toward Academic Standards

The 1983 report “A Nation at Risk,” sparked an intense round of educational debate when it publicized the dismal performance of U.S. high school students compared to students in other industrialized countries. While many reform efforts were spawned from this debate, most federal efforts in the last five years have focused on establishing high academic standards for all American K-12 students.

Initial attempts to create national standards proved disappointing, quickly dissolving into political and ethical battles over content and balance. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s reformers pushed through two important pieces of federal legislation: “Goals 2000: Educate America Act,” and “Improving America’s Schools Act.” These laws offered funding to states and school districts for the purpose of enacting strong academic standards and reforms that help students become more competitive academically. Also in the early 1990s, Arizona began developing public policies regarding academic standards through the Arizona Essential Skills standards and the Arizona Student Achievement Program. While Arizona’s current standards are substantially different, they have drawn on some of the Essential Skills.

At present, nearly all states and the District of Columbia have developed academic standards in at least one “core” subject area (commonly considered to be math, science, language arts, history, and geography). Most states, including Arizona, are testing or beginning to test against their standards as a requirement for graduation. But a closer look reveals that the various states’ standards are not equally robust or demanding. A recent evaluation of state standards by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (a national educational reform research organization) concluded that many standards documents contain too much vague language to materially affect educational practices, curriculum, or student achievement. Arizona’s standards, however, received an average grade of B+, the highest rating among all states in the Fordham study.

Regardless of their quality, however, standards represent just one part of an overall reform effort. California, for example, established strong academic standards a decade ago, quickly experienced gains in student test scores, then recently saw those gains slip. Now the state is enacting new reforms to help maintain initial gains.

Not surprisingly, most education experts consider academic standards the framework for educational reform, not the end itself. They generally agree that, in addition to strong standards, school systems must continually align their curriculum to the standards, develop teaching methods and materials to support the standards, carefully test student skills based on the standards, remediate students who fail the tests, and receive overall education support from families, communities, government, and business.

Facts on Arizona Academic Standards and AIMS Tests

Arizona Academic Standards...

- tell students, parents, and educators what students should know, and when they should know it, for grades K-12.
- are currently available for language arts, mathematics, science, the arts, health, foreign language, technology, and workplace skills—social studies standards are under development
- were established at the direction of Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction Lisa Graham Keegan and the Arizona State Board of Education beginning in 1995
- were developed by subject-area design teams comprised of five teachers, two parents, a school administrator, two students, and a community member
- draw from standards adopted by other states
- were subject to a review process that included public hearings
- were distributed to schools as they were adopted by the State Board of Education, beginning in 1996
- have received high grades and praise from Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and *Time* magazine
- may be viewed at the website for Arizona Department of Education: www.ade.state.az.us or can be obtained from ADE by calling (602) 542-6236

- will be assessed by the AIMS (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards) tests

AIMS Tests...

- fulfill a 1995 state law requiring graduating public high school students to pass a competency test, beginning with the class of 2001—this year's sophomores
- currently are available for language arts (reading and writing) and math—science will be added in 1-3 years, social studies after that
- were piloted with high school juniors and seniors in Spring and Fall 1998 to refine and choose questions for the actual test
- give high school students five chances to pass—once as sophomores, twice each as juniors and seniors
- require that all sections be passed, but previously passed sections do not have to be repeated
- will have passing scores set by Spring of 1999 when the first actual testing is done
- must be passed in English for high school graduation—a Spanish language test will be available as an alternative for elementary school students
- will be required for charter school students, but not for private school and home-schooled students
- will be administered to grades 3, 5, and 8 beginning in Spring 2000, but will not be enforced for grade-level promotion
- are being developed by NCS (National Computer Systems) and CTB/McGraw-Hill in conjunction with the Arizona Assessment Advisory Committee, which is composed of educators and community members
- will have results included on each school's report card

The Pros And Cons Of Academic Standards

Proponents and critics argue many points for and against academic standards. Keeping in mind that many of these points have not been objectively researched and validated, the following list presents some of the most popular arguments.

Proponents of Arizona Academic Standards (and the AIMS tests) say...

- **Standards set high expectations for all schools across the state.** Universal expectations will lead to academic equity for students in all school districts regardless of size or location.
- **Standards create a curriculum framework for teachers, students, and parents.** Standards make it clear to everyone the subject content to be learned, and when it must be learned.
- **Standards reduce the negative effects of student mobility by ensuring academic continuity across all schools.** With statewide standards in place, students will be able to move anywhere in Arizona and receive the core knowledge they need to graduate.
- **Setting standards is an appropriate role for the State Board of Education.** Constitutionally, the state is responsible for K-12 education. Thus, the State Board can and should set policies designed to be consistent across all districts, including core curriculum. But while the content of these core subjects is governed by state standards, the teaching methods are left up to local districts, as are decisions regarding content for the remaining 40-50 percent of a school's curriculum.
- **Standards testing offers a practical system of accountability for schools and students.** With a common core curriculum, and a clear test to assess how much has been learned, all schools can be measured against an objective scale of student achievement.
- **Standards can guide teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities.** Standards will help colleges understand what students must know and, therefore, what new teachers will be required to teach and what they need to know to get a job.
- **Standards-based graduation requirements guarantee the quality of diplomas.** Tough graduation standards assure employers that high school graduates come to work with a basic set of skills in core subjects such as math, science, and English. This will improve the prospect that students will be prepared for jobs of the future.
- **Standards form the first step in improving public education.** Without consistent, high standards, other reform efforts will fail.

Critics of Arizona Academic Standards (and the AIMS tests) say...

- **State and national standards usurp local control.** Local school districts should govern what is taught in their public schools, not the state or federal government.
- **Standards are too high.** Arizona's standards are geared more toward high-achieving college-bound students than "average" students entering the work force. Unless the standards are lowered, average students will be denied a diploma and, thus, the opportunity to get a good job.
- **The move toward standards has been rushed.** School districts must realign their entire curriculum to the new academic standards, and the AIMS assessment should be thoroughly field-tested and revised before it is implemented. If the implementation process is pushed ahead too fast, it will create unnecessary confusion and resistance to standards.
- **The new standards should not be applied retroactively.** Today's sophomores must pass the AIMS test in order to graduate, though they have not had the benefit of a standards-based curriculum throughout their school careers. Instead, the standards-based graduation requirement should be phased in with those students now entering kindergarten.
- **Standards testing wastes time and money.** A high school student taking the high school AIMS test five times loses valuable hours of instructional time. Remediation for failing students costs financially-strapped school districts. Unless several days are added to the school calendar and new money is allocated for remediation programs, schools will be unable to help struggling students pass the graduation test.
- **Standards testing harms urban poor and minority students, students with limited English proficiency, and isolated rural students.** Urban poor and minority students, those who speak English as a second language, and isolated rural students often test poorly because they do not have the advantages of other students. All three groups will disproportionately fail AIMS and be denied diplomas.
- **One-size-fits-all academic standards do not accommodate students with unique needs.** Students in special education, those who are recognized as slow learners but are working at their potential, and

students with exceptional gifts in one area—such as math or music—but not in others, such as language arts or science will be harmed by being held to an inflexible standard. They should have an appeals process available to them.

- **High school students should not be held to standards when elementary schools students are not.** Elementary school standards will not be enforced by a graduation test, which may allow some students to enter high school without basic skills. High schools cannot be expected to teach these students the advanced concepts necessary to pass AIMS without a proper academic foundation.

Business Positions on Academic Standards

Many business groups across the country support state and/or national academic standards for public schools.

Why? U.S. businesses report a shortage of skilled workers, and most blame a lack of academic competence among workers. While not every high school graduate needs to become an astrophysicist, a great many are needed to become managers, work group leaders, technicians, service representatives, mechanics, and fill a host of other positions that require a strong academic base, critical thinking skills, solid logic, and good communication.

These skills are lacking in the current U.S. labor pool, according to business leaders. Recent surveys of typical businesses, large and small, revealed that many entry-level jobs required skills in math, science, or communication far exceeding those of average high school graduates, and even beyond the abilities of most college-bound students. These were “typical” jobs—not the kind only associated with high tech industry.

Business leaders say that they want to see a higher quality product emerge from public education. They are concerned that the nation’s economy could become hamstrung by shortages of qualified workers unless immigration restrictions are loosened, or American high school graduates enter the work force with higher skills. To achieve the latter, many businesses promote rigorous academic standards because they believe these standards will help align education with the needs of business, and make the hiring and training of workers more effective and predictable.

Three prominent organizations—Business Roundtable, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and National Alliance of Business—have organized a campaign aimed at encouraging the business community to take standards-friendly actions.

These prominent business organizations suggest that business people:

- let schools know the specific knowledge and skills demanded by employers
- help educators and policymakers set tough academic standards
- support assessment of students and school systems based on those standards
- hold schools accountable for results, with rewards for success and consequences for failure
- make a state’s academic standards an important factor in location decisions
- direct their education philanthropy toward raising academic standards
- use high school transcripts in hiring decisions

High school transcripts are the focus of another nationwide campaign, this one led by a business partnership called the Business Coalition for Education Reform (BCER), which is composed of 12 national business groups. BCER reports that using high school transcripts in the hiring process not only helps employers weed out students with bad attendance and poor attitudes, but also provides teachers with greater leverage in the classroom, and gives students greater motivation to perform well in school. BCER’s campaign aligns with the academic standards movement in that strong state standards are needed to create uniform transcripts that can be easily compared from school to school. BCER offers tips to businesses in a document, “Hiring Smart: An Employer’s Guide to Using School Records.”

While most education organizations, including public schools and teachers unions, also support strong academic standards and testing, many schools will be hard-pressed to respond quickly and effectively without an increase in their capacity to serve students. For example, schools will need to provide remediation to students who fail standards-based tests, and some teachers will need professional guidance and new curriculum materials to address standards.

Based on current research, businesses that support academic standards often take the following positions and/or engage in the following activities:

- publicly state the value to business of high academic standards
- support a “stay-the-course” policy on standards to eliminate whipsawing of educational reforms
- provide or fund tutoring programs during the summer and after-school for schools that can’t afford them (examples: “Financial Wizards,” a John Hancock Financial Services program that organizes its actuaries into elementary school math tutors; also, a reading program initiated by Appleton, Wisconsin businesses that organizes employees to read to low income students during summer)
- fund professional development for existing teachers to help them adapt to a standards-based curriculum
- support alignment of college teacher preparation programs with state academic standards
- provide rewards for schools that succeed and help for schools that fail
- fund technical assistance for schools that are ineligible for federal funding aimed at assisting underachieving, low-income students
- support better explanation of test results so they are consistent and meaningful to teachers, school districts, and businesses alike

References for further information:

Arizona Academic Standards, Arizona Department of Education, 1998, Phoenix, AZ. Telephone: (602)542-5057 (various documents available)

The State of State Standards, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1998, Washington, D.C. To order: (888)823-7474

“State Strategies for Building Local Capacity: Addressing the Needs of Standards-Based Reform,” Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1998, Philadelphia, PA. Telephone: (215) 573-0700

Website: “Making Academics Count,” Business Coalition for Education Reform, <http://www.bcer.org/macc/>

Website: “A System of High Standards,” American Federation of Teachers, <http://www.aft.org/higstan.html>

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