**National School Standards, at Last**

The countries that have left the United States behind in math and science education have one thing in common: They offer the same high education standards — often the same curriculum — from one end of the nation to the other. The United States relies on a generally mediocre patchwork of standards that vary, not just from state to state, but often from district to district. A child’s education depends primarily on ZIP code.

That could eventually change if the states adopt the new rigorous standards proposed last week by the National Governors Association and a group representing state school superintendents. The proposal lays out clear, ambitious goals for what children should learn year to year and could change curriculums, tests and teacher training.

The standards, based on intensive research, reflect what students must know to succeed at college and to find good jobs in the 21st century. They are internationally benchmarked, which means that they emulate the expectations of high-performing school systems abroad. **This is not a call for a national curriculum. Rather, the proposed standards set out the skills that children should learn from kindergarten through high school. The proposals are writing-intensive and vertically aligned, building in complexity each year. The goal is to develop strong reasoning skills earlier than is now customary.**

By fifth grade, for example, students would be required to write essays in which they introduce, support and defend opinions, using specific facts and details. And by 12th grade, students would be expected to solve problems or answer questions by conducting focused research projects — and display skills generally associated today with the first year of college.

The quest for stronger, more coherent standards dates back to the iconic “Nation at Risk” report of 1983, which warned that “a rising tide of
mediocrity” was jeopardizing the country’s future. The problem of weak standards became vividly apparent after Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which required the states to document student progress with annual tests in exchange for federal aid. Most states that reported stronger performance on their own weak tests did far worse on the more rigorous federal test. This showed that American children were performing far more poorly in reading and math than state education officials wanted the public to know.

As recently as the early 1990s, national standards were viewed with suspicion in much of the country. Attitudes began to change as governors saw that poor schooling had crippled a significant part of the work force, turned state colleges into remedial institutions and disadvantaged the states in the global market. The proposed standards were developed in a collaboration among 48 states and the District of Columbia, suggesting that national opinion, once bitterly divided on this question, has begun to coalesce. But it will take more than new standards to rebuild the schools. The same states and organizations that cooperated on the standards need to cooperate on a new and innovative curriculum. The notoriously troubled colleges of education need to prepare teachers who can teach the skills students will need. And sophisticated tests must be created so that we can measure results. The new standards provide an excellent starting point for the task of remaking public schooling in the United States.