

**TESTIMONY OF ALBERT SHANKER  
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BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON LABOR & HUMAN RESOURCES  
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On behalf of the 750,000 members of the American Federation of Teachers, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this distinguished committee to address the issue of national standards and testing in American education.

As recently as a few years ago, anyone who even dared to talk about national standards and a national examination system for U.S. schools would have been considered a radical or risk-loving person. Sure, that's the way they do it in most other industrialized countries, he would have heard, and, sure, their students achieve at a much higher level than ours. But the education systems in those countries are under the control of their central governments, and the idea of our federal government dictating what children learn in local schools is out of the question.

Now, however, we are beginning to understand something that Senator Pell understood some time ago when he first proposed national exams: We pay a heavy price for our fragmented system -- or non-system -- of education standards and testing. And now, too, we also are beginning to understand that there are ways of building a national system of standards and examinations in a typically American way that would not involve federal control over our schools.

Why should we be so eager for national standards and examinations? Exactly what difference do they make in an education system -- and, ultimately, in what children learn?

National standards in education mean that there is agreement about what students ought to know and be able to do and, often, about the age or grade at which they should be able to accomplish these goals. Exams based on these standards mean that at any given time, an educator could tell a parent and the public, "Here is what we expect of youngsters in mathematics or biology or composition, and here is how you'll know if our students achieved these goals and how our schools are doing." National education standards and examinations therefore go hand in hand. They allow students and schools to know what's expected of them, and they give parents and the public a clear means to understand what our students and schools are supposed to be doing and whether or not they are succeeding. And that is the hallmark of a comprehensible and fair accountability system, which is something we very much need and have never managed to produce to anyone's satisfaction.

Moreover, most countries that link together national education standards and examinations for students reap the additional benefit of ensuring a better-prepared teaching force because, once you achieve consensus on standards and examinations for students, you have an answer to the question of how to train teachers and assess teachers: Teachers have to be able to teach the content embodied by the national education standards, and they have to know the various ideas and strategies for teaching that content to the diverse youngsters who make up our schools.

In the U.S., we have no such agreement about what students are supposed to learn, the tests used to assess their knowledge and skills, and what we expect our prospective teachers to know and be able to do. Each of our 15,000 school districts and 50 states has some rights in these areas, and, arguably, so does the federal government and the tens of thousands of individual schools in this nation.

One result is now-you-see-them, now-you-don't standards that tend to be set to the lowest common denominator. Another result is a bewildering, fragmented, fractious non-system of education where some children might not be exposed to, say, science until secondary school, when it's too late, and where a child moving to another district in the state, let alone another state, could easily feel as if he's just enrolled in a school in a foreign country. And this in a nation that values equal educational opportunity, whose people move more often than in any other country in the world and whose future depends on being able to meet or exceed world-class education standards! Put another way, while our lack of clear and high standards, and the examinations to support them, may not be wholly responsible for the fact that the performance of our education system is among the lowest in the advanced industrialized world, it is a significant part of the story.

Let's take the example of how other countries test students and how we do it. In most countries with national standards, tests usually consist of writing essays or solving problems based on what the students are supposed to know. And when youngsters, with the help of their teachers, prepare for these exams and review

questions that were on previous exams, it's a worthwhile educational experience. Writing an essay on the causes of World War I or presenting the arguments for and against imperialism is a good exercise in learning substance and in learning how to organize your thoughts. And the quality of the essay really shows how well the student has mastered the material. Countries that also use performance assessments have even more to go on.

But in the U.S., we primarily use standardized, multiple-choice tests and use them to test little bits of knowledge that are not directly related to the curriculum. (In fact, because curriculums vary by state and by school districts within states and even by schools, companies that design standardized, multiple-choice tests are encouraged to and pride themselves on divorcing their tests from the curriculum.) Since curriculum-free tests are supposed to be kept in the dark, going over questions from previous tests is almost like cheating. It's also a waste of time. Whatever little bits of information the kids do learn have no context, so they'll be forgotten in a hurry. Moreover, parents looking at their children's test results or someone reading averages scores in the newspaper will have no idea what they represent in terms of what the students know or can do. And we have no way of knowing -- or at least no one much seems to care -- if a school got high scores because it put kids through low-level, multiple-choice-type teaching all year long or because it ignored the pressure to prepare for the tests this way and really educated them. Nor can we tell if low scores mean a lousy school or one that was covering concepts and skills that weren't captured in the test.

Or consider the effect of our lack of education standards on teacher education. When there are no standards for what we want students to know and be able to do, it's certainly hard to agree on what teachers need to know and be able to do. And because their students will end up teaching in many different school districts and many different states, each of which have different curricula, colleges and universities can't train teachers on the basis of the curriculum they are going to teach, or assess them on how well they know it. It's little wonder that teacher education is floundering and that most teachers say their training was not helpful in preparing them to teach.

The question is, is it possible to develop a national system of education standards and examinations without the federal government actually doing it? Can we reap the benefits of such a system without incurring the risk of federal control of our schools? I believe the answer to both questions is yes. In fact, there is already evidence that this can be done.

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the Mathematical Sciences Education Board have already put together national standards for mathematics that have won widespread support and that are likely to lead to efforts to develop exams based on these standards. The American Association for the Advancement of Science is far along on its Project 2061, which promises to do the same for science. Teachers and scholars in each field need to follow the lead of these groups and get together to define, with input from the public, what American students ought to know and be able to do. This does not mean devising a single curriculum that

prescribes precisely what everybody will learn and how. Nor does it mean developing a single make-or-break test. It means devising curriculum frameworks that reflect the standards we wish students to meet but whose precise content can be set by states, districts, schools and teachers. And it means developing model exams that embody those standards and that students and teachers prepare for naturally as part of the process of teaching and learning.

This process is just beginning, but it looks promising. If it succeeds, we'll have the strength of a national system of standards and examinations without surrendering the freedom to make important choices on the state and local and school levels. And we'll have a revolutionary development in American education carried out in a uniquely American way, a way that is consistent with the values underlying our non-federal school governance system -- through the voluntary effort of professional groups and states and, I hope, with federal support.

The time could not be better to encourage this effort. For the first time since the question has been asked on surveys, a majority of the American public favors the idea of national education standards and examinations. For the first time in the history of our nation -- a nation whose public education system is central to the strength of its democracy and economy -- we have a set of national education goals. These goals were the product of an Education Summit between the President and the nation's governors, and they have been widely endorsed.

We must now take the next logical and necessary steps. What do these goals actually mean? How can we mobilize our students and

schools to achieve them? How will we know if we are making progress toward achieving them? Surely a large part of the answer is to develop a national system of education standards and examinations.