

TESTIMONY OF ALBERT SHANKER
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TO THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Albert Shanker, president of the 875,000 members of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). I appreciate this invitation to speak to you about education standards. This issue has been a central preoccupation of mine, and I am proud to say that the AFT has been an ardent advocate of the movement to establish clear and rigorous academic standards for what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education. I believe that standards are the lever for turning around the mediocre performance of our education system, both public and private, and that this is a vital national interest. So let me be blunt about my views:

If Congress shoots down a federal role in the effort to establish voluntary national and state academic standards that are benchmarked to the most competitive in the world, it will destroy the standards movement in all but name only.

It will not be an affirmation of our tradition of state responsibility for and local control of education; it will be a rejection of the explicit request for help on standards most of our states and districts have made and a repudiation of the historic national interest in education.

It will not be a vote of confidence that Americans' ingenuity will enable us to reach the national education goals on our own; it will be tantamount to repealing those goals.

It will not be a rejection of standardization; it will be a rejection of models of excellence.

It will not save money; it will ensure that this nation is unable to compete in the new global economy.

It will not satisfy the public's interest; in fact, polls over the last few years show that the overwhelming majority of Americans favor national standards in education, to the extent even of wanting a national curriculum.

In short, if Congress removes the federal partner from the federal/state/local partnership that Democrats and Republicans together crafted to reconcile the urgent need for education standards with the American tradition of education governance, it will not be simply enacting a change; it will be resisting change and legislating mediocrity.

Why We Need Academic Standards

The subject of what students should know and be able to do is about as basic to education policy and practice as one can get. Every one of the advanced industrial democracies with which we compete has grade-by-grade national or regional curriculum frameworks, and in so doing makes clear its expectations for students, school staff, textbooks and other instructional material, and the professional preparation of prospective teachers. We do not. Every one of these nations also administers student tests that are based on its content standards, that complement curriculum and instruction and that students can study for and have strong incentives to do so; their class and test performance during their school careers will determine

whether they go to college and whether they get a good job at good wages. We do none of these things.

If American students performed at high levels, we would say that our way of doing things is right and what the rest of the industrialized democracies do does not work. But that is not the case. I won't belabor you with statistics you've heard before, so suffice it to say that on every international comparison our students are outperformed. (The exception to this is reading, where we are about average.) We are not doing worse than we did before, at least not by any robust measure. For example, performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which has been administered for 25 years, is about the same as it was in 1970, with a dip and a recovery between then and now. And African-American and Hispanic student achievement has improved greatly over this period. But doing the same or even better by the criterion of 1970 means little because 1970 performance levels were low to begin with and the rest of the world has considerably outstripped our students.

Why is that? One explanation is our high incidence of childhood poverty, higher than any in the developed world. This explanation has been borne out by research: On our own tests and in international comparisons, poverty accounts for a great deal of the variation in scores. However, poverty does not explain why more advantaged American students do not, on average, attain high levels of performance -- and why American students, who on the whole are still more advantaged than students in competitor nations, are nonetheless outperformed by students in those nations. And poverty does not explain why non-public schools, which select their students and

have a relatively advantaged student body, have such a low percentage of students in the top levels of NAEP, or why, once you control for family background, public and non-public school achievement is at about the same mediocre level.

If you were in a business and not doing well, you'd look at what your successful competitors were doing for clues. None of our competitors (with the exception of England, which is in worse educational shape than we are in) has a school board in every school or other forms of radical decentralization or charter schools or private management of its public schools or any of the other untested reforms du jour we routinely embrace as panaceas. And none of them uses choice or competition as an instrument of school improvement. What they all have is clear and rigorous academic standards for students -- in fact, curriculum frameworks -- and education systems whose every part, from governance to funding, textbooks to tests, principals to teachers, operates within that academic framework.

This is plain common sense. No business or organization could successfully operate without knowing clearly what its product was supposed to be (or getting conflicting messages about it), what quality standards it must meet and how to measure whether or not it is meeting its goals. And yet, up until recently, this is how our education system has been asked to operate. It is a wonder we have done as well as we have. It is no wonder we have been doing so poorly.

Where Did the Standards Movement Come From?

There has lately been an effort to portray the standards movement in general and Goals 2000: Educate America Act in particular as creatures of the “education establishment” and the Democratic party. This is revisionist history. If you look at A Nation at Risk, brought out in 1983 under the Reagan administration, you’ll see in it an unequivocal call for clear and rigorous academic standards. And if you remember, most of the education establishment did not exactly warm to the report.

Many things were done in the name of A Nation at Risk, but few of them followed up on the report’s central message about standards. It took until 1989, when George Bush was President and Bill Clinton the governor of Arkansas and a leading member of the National Governors’ Association (NGA), for the standards movement to begin. In that year, Bush gathered the nation’s governors at an historic Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, and united them in an unprecedented agreement to establish national education goals. There was also agreement that without a national strategy for reaching the goals, we would never achieve them.

The six national education goals were formally adopted in January 1990 by the NGA and President Bush, who launched an America 2000 initiative to encourage broad buy-in to the goals. A few months later, the President and governors created the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) to bring further attention to the goals and to monitor progress toward meeting them. But as NEGP realized, that was easier said than done. Goal 3, for example, said: “By the year 2000, American students will leave grades 4, 8 and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government,

economics, arts, history and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.” But what were our standards for competency? What did challenging subject matter consist of? What was the relevant content in the vast fields of English, math, science, history...? How could we know whether we were making progress toward meeting that goal without addressing these questions? How would students and schools know what was expected of them?

As NEGP observed, “Creating a world-class education system means finding out what students actually know and can do. But determining this is not so simple. The kind of information needed goes beyond traditional methods of testing and reporting. We need to specify our expectations for student performance, making sure that they are high enough to match the highest levels in the world, and we need to determine how many students meet these expectations.” NEGP then went on to recommend the establishment of such standards, “along with a voluntary national system of examinations (not a single national test) to tell us whether or not the standards are being met.” (The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners, National Education Goals Panel, Washington, D.C., 1991.)

In June 1991, Congress authorized a bipartisan National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST, on which I served) to advise the public about whether national education standards should and can be established and whether, “while respecting state and local control of education, an appropriate system of voluntary

national tests or examinations should and can be established.” (P.L. 102-62) (Note: Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander went much farther than this by proposing federal tests, New American Achievement tests, that would be produced even before the issue of national standards had been settled.)

NCEST’s report was released in January 1992, and it said yes to the two main questions posed by Congress. As co-chairs Governor Carroll Campbell (Republican, South Carolina) and Governor Roy Romer (Democrat, Colorado) stated in their introduction, “We believe this report is an important contribution in moving the Nation toward the adoption of high national education standards for all students and a voluntary, linked system of assessments.... Through its deliberations, the Council found that the absence of explicit national standards keyed to world-class levels of performance severely hampers our ability to monitor the Nation’s progress toward the National Education Goals.”

NCEST further stipulated that the standards be national and not federal and that buy-in ought to be at the discretion of the states rather than federally mandated; that the standards must reflect high expectations and provide focus and direction but not become a national curriculum; and that standards must be dynamic rather than fixed forever. NCEST further recommended a national system of assessments, composed of individual student assessments and large-scale sample assessments, such as NAEP. Such a national system, the report said, must consist of multiple methods of measuring progress and not a single test, and it must be voluntary. Eventually, however, NCEST continued, assessments “could be used for such high-stakes purposes

as high school graduation, college admission, continuing education, and certification for employment” and by states and localities “as the basis for system accountability.”

Although NCEST did not want the federal government to mandate or directly develop either standards or assessments, it concluded that some mechanism for coordination and quality control was necessary. It therefore recommended that the original NEGP be reconfigured to be more politically representative and that the new NEGP appoint a National Education Standards and Assessment Council to certify standards and the assessments based on them as world class. No one dissented from this recommendation about a federal role in certifying standards and the assessments based on them as world class (or on any other recommendation), no one including members of the Bush administration -- Lynne Cheney, Chester Finn, David Kearns and Roger Porter -- or Senators Jeff Bingaman and Orrin Hatch or Representatives William Goodling and Dale Kildee. Yet it is this bipartisan recommendation that is now threatening Goals 2000 and the progress of the standards movement.

Goals 2000: Educate America Act

Six years and a lot of hard, bipartisan work by Congress, the business community and educators went into Goals 2000, which in the main encourages states to develop challenging academic standards for students. Goals 2000 is an invitation, not a mandate, and 44 states have already accepted that invitation. Moreover, Goals 2000 was explicitly designed to give maximum flexibility to the states in developing their standards and reform plans. And it gives the same flexibility to local districts in

determining how students will meet standards. In fact, Goals 2000 is the least prescriptive federal education law devised. Recent efforts to portray it as intruding a heavy federal hand into our tradition of state and local control of education are seriously misguided.

National Education Standards and Improvement Council

By all accounts, the sticking point on Goals 2000 is the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC). NESIC is supposed to work together with the National Education Goals Panel to establish criteria for certifying standards as internationally competitive and then review and certify standards that are voluntarily submitted to them. National standards may be voluntarily submitted by professional or other organizations, and states may also voluntarily submit their standards for review and certification based on international comparisons.

If NESIC threatens the progress of Goals 2000 and our incipient standards movement, then I say let's dispense with NESIC. But states and other entities have asked for and need the opportunity to have the academic standards they develop benchmarked to the best in the world, and they should not be expected to do that on their own. I would say that more strongly: They cannot do that on their own. As evidence, I would present the vague and largely non-academic standards many states have been producing. As evidence, I would cite the fact that this has happened despite the existence of a few decent state and other standards that states and localities beginning their standards effort did not consult. And as evidence, I would cite the fact that no state, not even the ones most advanced on the standards effort, has yet attempted to look at international standards; in fact, I think the AFT has done more work in this area than any state.

To be sure, some of these sets of state standards have come in for criticism from within their respective states, as well as support. But both the criticism and support seem to be no more than matters of opinion or ideology; there are precious few people in the nation, let alone within a state, that know what world-class standards look like and what students are really capable of doing. Until that knowledge is widespread, the quality of a state's or any other entity's standards will be no more than a matter of opinion. And that's just not good enough. It is essential to have some representative, knowledgeable and independent body to enable them and the public at large to assess objectively the quality and rigor of the standards. This is clearly, and urgently, in the national interest, and when the national interest is at issue, a federal role is fit and appropriate.

There is another, practical reason for reaffirming the basic purpose of a NESIC, albeit in a different form, and for carrying on the indirect federal role in national standards. As the original, bipartisan National Education Goals Panel and the bipartisan National Council on Education Standards and Testing recognized shortly after the national education goals were adopted, the national education goals are useless if there are no recognized national academic standards that meet internationally competitive criteria to enable us to measure progress toward achievement of the goals. Witness, for example, the cobbled if valiant way the current National Education Goals Panel has had to report on our progress toward meeting the goals. And without such recognized standards (and a body capable of recognizing them as world class), how will states and other entities know whether their own standards are competitive enough to

enable their students to achieve the goals? And without such standards, how will teachers know what is expected of them, students know what is required of them and parents know how to judge their children's progress? How will the public ever get a comprehensible picture of how their tax dollars are supposed to be spent and with what educational results? And how will we ever have a sane accountability system for students and schools?

The question, or rather the fear, has been raised that any alternative to NESIC that nonetheless develops criteria for world-class standards and issues reviews of voluntarily submitted standards according to these criteria would bear the taint of a "national school board" if it involved any federal role, no matter how indirect. I understand the fear but urge that it be met with forceful leadership. Judging from the public's overwhelming support of national standards, to the extent of favoring a national curriculum, there is nothing to fear from the public.

In conclusion, let me say in the strongest possible terms, reaffirm your support for Goals 2000, the standards movement and the national education goals. Parents, teachers and the public are strongly behind this movement. Certainly business is. We have been searching long and hard for how the national interest in having students reach higher achievement levels can be pursued in a way that is both forward looking and respectful of the American tradition in education: local control, state responsibility and federal help. Goals 2000 is that vehicle. It is incumbent upon all of us to settle quickly any controversy and allow the standards movement to go forward.