

The Case For A National Curriculum

Educational reform is an issue that can spark heated debate, and within that debate there is the issue of whether or not we, in the United States, should have a national curriculum. What does that term mean? “A national curriculum is a set of educational standards devised by a central government to be implemented in government-funded schools” (“What is a,” paragraph 1). As the cries for accountability increase within the halls of our government, the concept of a national curriculum makes sense.

A national curriculum offers many advantages, such as:

1. All teaching would be consistent and balanced.
2. There would be no knowledge gaps from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school and from high school to college.
3. Students that move frequently due to parents in the military or for other reasons will not have to relearn material or be behind when moving from state to state.
4. Allows state by state comparison because all of the standards would be the same.
5. Would allow for teachers to teach in different states because the qualifications would be the same across the board

6. Would allow for the department of education to see where the weak academic spots are in the country.

("Pros and cons," 2011).

In an effort to highlight the advantages let us focus on – “students that move frequently...” (“Pros and cons,” 2011). In our society, which is becoming increasingly mobile, there would be a distinct advantage for families if there were a national curriculum. Knowing that what is expected in one school district in one state will be the same as in another school district in another state will greatly benefit the student. When a student transfers they will be able to fit right in and will not have to either catch up or figure out how far ahead they are and thus need to be put on a different path. This consistency will also benefit students moving between districts in the same state because not every state’s set of standards has the result of creating the same set of expectations for every school within that state.

In our depressed economy, we are seeing more families moving in search of work and thus transferring their children from one school district to another. We also know that “high pupil turnover and absenteeism are associated with depressed levels of performance” (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 1996). As a society we should be eliminating the barriers to success in school not creating additional ones. Student transfers are a fact of life in school and a national curriculum will go a long way to mitigating any negative consequences associated with a transfer.

Opponents of a national curriculum worry that the cries for accountability will impact teachers by degrading their skills and not allowing their personality to show in their work. The following negative aspects of a national curriculum can be overcome or mitigated:

1. Deciding the curriculum...
2. De-professionalize teachers...
3. Disadvantaged students may have problems keeping up with the higher standards due to problems at home.

("Pros and cons," 2011).

When it comes to deciding what the curriculum contains, it will be necessary to make sure that professional educators with the input of interested parties, such as parents, are the ones making this decision. It is not necessary that every minute of every day be predetermined by a committee as to how it will be spent in support of implementing a national curriculum.

Therefore it is not necessary that a national curriculum be planned to such a level of detail; this in itself may reduce some potential areas of disagreement about what should be in the curriculum. Diane Ravitch stated it best when she wrote "a curriculum is not a script but a set of general guidelines" (Ravitch, 2010) and that "this curriculum would designate the essential knowledge and skills that students need to learn" (Ravitch, 2010). There must be a certain level of agreement as to what we want students to know so that they can be well-educated, participating citizens in our democracy.

Since a national curriculum is not a script, this leaves the success of each student in the hands of the teacher. The teacher's skill level and personality will still provide the greatest impact on

student outcomes. The teaching profession will not be de-professionalized, because each teacher will still have a classroom full of unique and talented students with whom they will have to work with and individualize for. Their students, even with a national curriculum, will not be cookie cutter kids, and they will have their own set of needs, wants and circumstances that will require that teachers employ their skills for the benefit of their students.

We will still see that low income students are the most disadvantaged in school and what a national curriculum will do is highlight the fact that these students and their schools need additional resources. They will at least need the same level of resources that the more affluent school districts are able to provide for their students or perhaps even more if the school district is to attempt to offset the impact of poverty. The focus will not be on a set of standards that disadvantaged students cannot reach but rather on the fact that we have disadvantaged students that need additional resources so that they can receive the type of education everyone deserves.

Ravitch says it best “if we are willing to learn from top-performing nations, we should establish a substantive national curriculum that declares our intention to education all children in the full range of liberal arts and sciences, as well as physical education” (Ravitch, 2010). Educational reform cannot fix everything; a national curriculum cannot fix everything. However, a set of expectations for the nation’s students captured in a curriculum will be the foundation of our public education system and something upon which we can grow.

References

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