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Can Academic Standards Boost Literacy and Close the Achievement Gap?

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Good jobs in the nation's twenty-first-century economy require advanced literacy skills such as categorizing, evaluating, and drawing conclusions from written texts. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards by nearly all the states, combined with tough literacy assessments that are now in the offing, will soon reveal that literacy skills of average students fall below international standards and that the gap in literacy skills between students from advantaged and disadvantaged families is huge. The authors offer a plan to help states develop and test programs that improve the quality of teaching, especially in high-poverty schools, and thereby both improve the literacy skills of average students and narrow the literacy gap.

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To read the full report on literacy challenges for the twenty-first century, edited by Richard Murnane, Isabel Sawhill, and Catherine Snow, go to www.futureofchildren.org.

U.S. schools are struggling to enable students, especially those from poor families, to attain the advanced literacy skills required by the twenty-first-century American economy. One approach to enhancing schools' efficacy in this area is improved educational standards. Standards are routine in American life. Sports have them; businesses have them; professions have them. Standards are useful in clarifying the knowledge, skills, and competencies that society expects from individuals and organizations. Society also needs a way to determine whether the standards have been met, usually through testing, certification, licensing, or inspection systems. And a respected body of experts must be responsible for maintaining the integrity of the standards.

It is no surprise, then, that standards have become a key part of American primary and secondary education in recent decades. As mandated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, every state now has standards that specify the skills and knowledge in literacy (and mathematics, which we do not address here) that

children should have at specific grade levels. States also have standards that students must satisfy to graduate from high school. In the majority of states, these include passing state-specific English language arts and math exams. Now a new set of national standards has been adopted by nearly every state. These tough standards hold promise for playing an important role in an overall strategy for improving literacy skills for all students, including those from poor families who suffer from a striking literacy deficit. However, as we explain below, the new standards are only one step down a long road.

The Common Core State Standards

Thanks to an ongoing effort by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the fifty separate sets of state standards are being supplanted by a single set. Although we strongly support the standards movement in general and the Common Core State Standards in particular, our object here is to clarify the nation's literacy problem, to build a case that standards are an important part—but only one part—of solving the literacy problem, and to briefly review the policies that must accompany standards if they are to enable the nation's schools to make progress in boosting literacy, especially among children from poor families. We conclude with recommendations about using federal dollars to help all children, but especially those from poor families, meet the Common Core standards.

As shown in a recently released issue of *The Future of Children*, "Literacy Challenges for the Twenty-First Century," America has a literacy problem—actually, two literacy problems. The basic cause of both is that the literacy skills demanded of Americans by today's economy far exceed those required only fifty years ago. It is no longer sufficient to define reading as merely the ability to recognize words and decode text. The American economy, responding to technological advances and international competition, has shed blue-collar and administrative support jobs that involve simple operations and minimal reasoning skills while adding jobs that require the ability to select, categorize, evaluate, and draw conclusions from written texts. Think of twenty-first-century literacy as reading plus.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the reading skills of American children are inadequate for the heightened literacy demands of the twenty-first-century economy. Nor do American students perform well on international test score comparisons. U.S. students score lower in reading than students from fourteen other countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. That is literacy problem number one—the literacy skills of the average American student do not match international standards. And although the NAEP scores of recent cohorts of black and Hispanic U.S. students have improved, the gap in average reading skills between students from high- and low-income families has widened. That's literacy problem number two—in a nation committed to equality of opportunity and economic mobility, a widening literacy gap between students from rich and poor families is a national affront.

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Enter the Common Core State Standards. In 2008, at least partly in response to the confusion created by the fifty-one sets of state standards and fifty-one definitions of proficiency that resulted from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the NGA and the CCSSO set out to work with state educators, researchers, and others to develop detailed common standards in English and mathematics for grades K through 12. The standards, released in 2010, have now been formally adopted by forty-five states and the District of Columbia. The Thomas G. Fordham Institute compared the Common Core State Standards with state standards across the nation and concluded that the Common Core reading standards are more

demanding than those of thirty-seven states. States with rigorous standards and the best NAEP scores have embraced the Common Core.

Beyond the Common Core

The impressive procedure followed by the NGA and the CCSSO, combined with the Fordham study, justify the conclusion that the Common Core is an excellent set of standards. If American children were to master the Common Core, they would fare better in international comparisons, the American economy would receive a boost, and the literacy achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children might narrow somewhat—and in any case, disadvantaged children would boost their literacy skills, giving them a better opportunity to compete in the twenty-first-century economy.

But not so fast. Even the best possible standards cannot raise student literacy unless they are part of a larger strategy. Excellent standards are no more than a first step. Research by Grover Whitehurst and by Tom Loveless of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, for example, finds virtually no relationship between the quality of state education standards and the achievement test scores of students in the respective states. These and other studies offer little support for the expectation that even the fine standards developed by the NGA and the CCSSO will, by themselves, improve student learning.

Several articles in the new *Future of Children* issue identify additional elements of a strategy to boost student achievement in literacy and close the literacy gap. At least four elements stand out. The first is adoption by states of assessments now being designed to accompany the Common Core. These assessments, which will test how well students are performing relative to the Common Core standards, including those in literacy, are now under development by two groups of states with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education. The second is a common system for reporting results that will provide schools, parents, and communities with detailed knowledge about how their students are performing relative to the Common Core and to other communities. The third is a better curriculum that is aligned with the Common Core for every grade and every subject. Above and beyond these three, almost all researchers and practitioners agree, the single most important element in any strategy aiming to boost student literacy and close the literacy gap is improving the quality of teaching. It follows that institutions preparing teachers must undergo a major retooling to produce graduates who know the Common Core, who can teach challenging curricula, and who have developed skills requisite to helping students achieve the standards. Preparing teachers who can help disadvantaged children master the standards will undoubtedly require even greater efforts by schools of education. Similarly, teacher in-service education will need to become much stronger than the current mostly ineffective professional development programs.

In our view, the nation is now making significant progress on only the first of these four elements of a comprehensive strategy that would, together with the Common Core standards, boost average literacy achievement and close the gap. The two groups of states working with assessment firms to develop tests that gauge whether children are actually meeting the Common Core standards are expected to have quality measurement instruments ready by 2014. Then comes the grueling political challenge of developing common performance indicators acceptable both to states like Massachusetts, whose students do quite well on assessments, and other states like Mississippi, whose students' scores are near the bottom.

If all the states that have adopted the Common Core also adopt the new assessments, a major flaw in NCLB will be resolved. Under pressure from NCLB to show that they could meet its standards, states developed tests and standards that made it easy for students to score as "proficient," thereby overestimating student performance and obscuring the real comparative information about school, system, and state performance levels. With a common test and indicator system aligned with the Common Core—ideally a system adopted voluntarily by most or even nearly all states—the problem of inflated and misleading tests and indicators will be diminished (although teaching to the test in ways that narrow the curriculum will likely remain a problem).

One virtually certain outcome of the Common Core and the assessments now under development deserves special attention. If states adopt the new assessments that measure students' mastery of the Common Core literacy standards, the results will show a much larger

literacy gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students than revealed by current achievement tests. The more demanding Common Core standards in literacy, based on reading comprehension, conceptual knowledge, and vocabulary as well as accurate and fluent reading, combined with accurate assessments of these skills, will reveal how far disadvantaged children lag behind on these more advanced literacy skills. This finding will ratchet up pressure on states and local school systems to oppose accurate assessments and may reduce the number of states that agree to use the new assessments. Similarly, the light shed on education outcomes may convince states that adopt the new assessments to abandon their use once they see how their students' poor performance inflames public opinion.

Beyond Standards: What to Do

The solution to the nation's literacy problems is adopting policies that improve schools, not abandoning accurate assessment instruments. After all, clarity about the nature and magnitude of a problem is critical to solving it. We recommend a strategy, based on recent research, that holds promise for helping students, especially those from poor families, achieve the new level of literacy required for success in the nation's twenty-first-century economy.

A host of studies document what most parents already know, namely, that good teachers have substantial impacts on student learning. Indeed, we now know that having good teachers for several consecutive years leads to cumulative increases in learning by students, including students from disadvantaged families. Augmenting this already persuasive research is a recent study by Raj Chetty, John Friedman, and Jonah Rockoff showing that good teachers raise adult earnings, arguably the most important outcome of education in a society that for the past three decades has been characterized by large increases in inequality and by wage stagnation among workers at the bottom of the income distribution. As a result of this body of research, there is widespread agreement that good teachers can boost learning, increase test scores, and improve life outcomes. Thus, in anticipation that a very large gap in literacy between advantaged and disadvantaged students will be revealed by the new assessments, we stress the importance of improving teaching to help disadvantaged students learn these more complex literacy skills.

The task will be daunting. Numerous studies and surveys show that teachers in schools with high concentrations of students from poor families tend to be ineffective. As studies by Susanna Loeb and her colleagues find, the typical pattern in high-poverty schools is that as teachers accumulate experience and seniority, they tend to exercise their option to move to schools in low-poverty areas, thus creating a continuous inflow of new, inexperienced teachers into high-poverty schools. And a frequently replicated research finding is that the work days of beginning teachers are dominated by classroom management problems, thus causing their students to miss out on many opportunities for learning.

How can high-poverty schools attract and retain better teachers and create the collaborative work environment required for success? Several recent studies provide important clues. First, many teachers leave high-poverty schools because of poor social conditions for their work. Such schools lack the strong leadership, culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for learning, and resources needed to teach their challenging and needy students. Second, teachers, especially novices, are more effective when their grade-level colleagues are effective teachers. Third, the current system of basing teachers' pay solely on educational credentials, years of teaching experience, and participation in professional development activities does not reward excellent teaching. Fourth, better pay does make a difference in attracting and retaining teachers in high-poverty schools, though it does not compensate for working conditions in which they feel ineffective.

An implication of these findings is that combinations of incentives and accountability can attract teams of effective teachers to high-poverty schools and create the conditions for their success. What is not clear as yet is just what the most effective combinations of incentives and accountability will be. For example, will it be less costly to attract effective teachers to high-poverty schools as individuals or as parts of teams? Is it more effective to hire a school principal and let her select teachers or to recruit a team of effective teachers and let them choose the principal? Will the availability of particular types of professional development attract teachers to high-poverty schools? These are just a few of the many questions that will arise in the process of designing initiatives to improve teaching in high-poverty schools.

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We propose a plan to answer these and related questions as well as a way to pay for the plan. The core of the plan is for the federal government, redirecting a significant portion of funds from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to initiate a competitive grant program that encourages school systems to design and implement programs to improve teaching and learning in high-poverty schools. As outlined below, to be eligible for an award, the program must combine incentives and accountability.

The system for rating proposals should favor those in which the components, such as curriculum consistent with the Common Core standards, professional development approach, and teacher compensation strategy, have a favorable research base. To assure a balance between evidence-based components and innovative components, proposals that contain elements that show promise but do not yet meet high program evaluation standards, such as those promulgated by the Institute of Education Sciences, would also be eligible for funding. Each proposal must also show how the school system will continuously evaluate the impact of its plan on student literacy scores as measured by the new tests being developed in association with the Common Core. Thus, each school system plan will be evidence-based in two senses: its major parts will be consistent with what is known from the best research available, and its impacts on student literacy skills, especially those of students from disadvantaged families, will be continuously evaluated. The plans can include evidence-based elements that focus on basic reading skills such as those recently reviewed by the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy and the Social Genome Project but must also feature elements that promise to improve the teaching of advanced literacy skills, especially in high-poverty schools.

The Obama administration is well-prepared to implement an evidence-based initiative of this sort because senior officials in the White House, the Office of Management and Budget, and the executive agencies are now implementing six evidence-based initiatives in areas such as teen pregnancy, infant development and parenting, workforce training, and other aspects of education. These initiatives have provided senior administration officials with a wealth of experience in working with Congress to plan and fund evidence-based competitive grant programs.

We are confident that the coming assessment of whether state education systems are meeting the Common Core standards will reveal an expanded literacy achievement gap between children from advantaged and disadvantaged families. The cause will be the new twenty-first-century literacy standards that are specified in the Common Core and that, we assume, will be accurately measured by the assessments scheduled to be implemented in 2014. Rather than wait for the expanded literacy achievement gap to be revealed, U.S. policymakers and educators should begin now to shrink the gap. Based on solid research that supports a strategy centered on improving the quality of teaching in high-poverty schools, our plan would use funds redirected from Title I to help local school systems aggressively implement new programs based on both research-tested and innovative components that hold promise for improving the literacy, and thus improving the life chances, of students from poor families. Once implemented, these new programs could serve as models for school systems throughout the United States. Unless strong new reforms such as these are adopted, the nation will yet again discover that its schools are not meeting the needs of its disadvantaged students.

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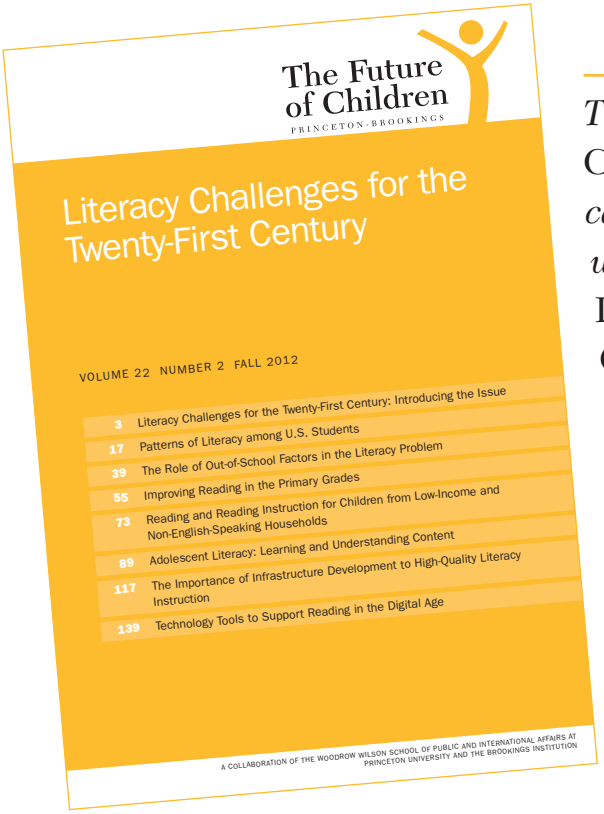

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