

Standards-Based Reform

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Overview

The strategy of setting statewide standards, measuring student performance against those standards, and then holding schools accountable for the results was at the heart of the federal No Child Left Behind Act and dominated education policy from the 1990s into the 2010s. The goal of these reforms was to bring more coherence and alignment to the fragmented K–12 system and to get everyone “rowing in the same direction” in pursuit of stronger and more equitable student outcomes.

Did it work? We know that student achievement improved markedly in the late 1990s and early 2000s—the very time that states were starting to put standards, tests, and “consequential accountability” into place. Student achievement plateaued and even started to decline in the 2010s, though, and while the reasons are unclear, there are clear lessons for policymakers.

Guidance for Policymakers

- A clear-eyed approach about the capacity of the system is needed. It was wrongly assumed that once we put pressure on schools to improve, they would figure out how to help their students meet standards. What standards-based reform revealed, however, was how little capacity existed in many schools. States need to take a more muscular role around issues like curriculum and teacher preparation.
- There are times to stay the course. Education happens slowly, year by year, and policy leaders stay on course over a long period of time. The urge to always look for the “next big thing” should be resisted.
- Scholars need new ways to study policy change all the way to the classroom. Thanks in part to the data produced by standards-based reforms, the field of education research has improved markedly, but insights are still needed about effective curriculum implementation, instructional strategies, grouping practices, student discipline, and much else.
- Consequential accountability will work much better if it is combined with efforts to boost the knowledge, skills, and confidence of educators. Providing high-quality instructional materials is arguably the best way to do that.

What the Research Tells Us

- Student achievement improved dramatically from the mid to late 1990s until the early 2010s—especially in math, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, and especially for the most marginalized student groups.
- High school graduation rates shot up as well during this era, climbing fifteen points on average from the mid-1990s until today. We saw major improvements in college completion, too.
- Studies of states that adopted “consequential accountability” *before* being required to by No Child Left Behind found large impacts of those policies on math achievement, with even greater effects for the lowest-achieving students as well as Black, Hispanic, and low-income kids. The impacts on reading and science were null.

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