



# Curriculum Narrowing



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## Introduction

The current era of education reform in the United States can be traced to the passage of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 (ESEA), which, among its provisions, required states to monitor and assess the educational progress of students. Over the intervening decades, the reauthorization of ESEA in various forms—most recently the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB)—has coincided with the progress of a movement in education known as “standards-based reform.” This approach relies on content standards—established by education stakeholders, such as parents, educators, and the government—to motivate and guide improvement of the education system (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2002; Jennings, 1998).

In the current era of reform, large-scale assessments that measure the standards are the primary way of holding teachers and students accountable to high levels of achievement. Moreover, the results from these assessments are frequently expected to serve as a source of information for improvement of the education system (Jennings, 1998; Ogawa, Sandholtz, Martinez-Flores, and Scribner, 2003; Thurlow, 2002). However, critics of this reform movement suggest that the combination of standards and accountability assessments is having an undesirable impact on education. Districts, schools, and teachers are increasingly focusing their resources on the instruction of the subject areas which are covered by the accountability assessment, while other subject areas receive less attention or are eliminated (National Education Association, 2004; von Zastrow and Janc, 2004). Conversely, some commentators observe that this combination of standards and assessments is having a positive effect on the curriculum by causing educators to focus on teaching these important standards. This report examines the history of recent curricular reform, discusses some of its implications, and reviews the opinion of education experts concerning the effects of this reform on the education system.

## The Advent of Standards-based Education Reform

Following the publication of several reports on the state of education in the U.S., most notably the U.S. Department of Education's *A Nation at Risk* (1983), policy makers earnestly began to examine the need for reform of the K–12 academic curriculum. *A Nation at Risk* reported that the education system of the United States was allowing some students to graduate from high school without the ability to read or perform simple mathematical calculations. Moreover, high school graduates were often found to have mathematics or reading skills and knowledge that was inadequate for success in the work force. While increasing numbers of students were pursuing higher education than ever before (who, in previous generations, may not have considered attaining a college degree), many students were found to be academically unprepared. In such cases, first-year college students required extensive remedial education.

Such findings were cited as a reason for serious concern about the ability of the United States to remain competitive in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation at the global scale. In response, policy makers in education adopted a variety of reforms to improve the education system. *A Nation at Risk* cited the variety of standards for the content of instruction in classrooms, and the subsequent standards-based reform movement has perhaps had the most enduring impact on the education landscape. At the core of the movement is the concept of standards—the priorities for an education system which function as the primary guide to educators and students (Webb, 1997). Supporters of this movement assert that establishing standards makes the system more effective and coherent, thereby supporting student learning and improving achievement (Ananda, 2003; von Zastrow and Janc, 2004). Standards-based reform is also promoted as more equitable because, theoretically, all students are taught the same academic content.

In the wake of *A Nation at Risk*, state and federal governments began implementing standards-based reform through a series of laws in the 1980s and 1990s. With the *Improving America's Schools Act* of 1994 (IASA) and the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, the federal government brought standards-based reform to the forefront of national education policy by encouraging states to adopt content standards in core subject areas, such as mathematics, English language arts, Reading, and science (Linn and Gronlund, 2000; Webb, 1997; Webb, 1999). With the enactment of NCLB, standards-based reform became national education policy.

## **NCLB: The Era of Accountability**

Building upon previous reforms, NCLB requires each state to develop content standards that will promote high levels of achievement. To be eligible for federal funds under NCLB, states must adopt content standards in three subjects: reading, mathematics, and science. While previous legislation had also encouraged such standards, NCLB requires the adoption of standards as a condition for the availability of federal funds. Moreover, NCLB mandates the administration of *accountability assessments* that are tightly aligned with the standards in these subjects. By the 2005–2006 school year, each state must also implement rigorous annual testing programs in reading and mathematics for students in grades 3 through 8 and in one high school grade. By the 2007–2008 school year, students must be assessed in science at least once in grades 3 through 5, once in grades 6 through 9, and once in grades 10 through 12 (U. S. Department of Education, 2003; NCLB, § 6311).

The main purpose of these accountability assessments is to determine the percentage of students proficient in each subject area. The results from these assessments must demonstrate that the overall student population and designated subgroups (such as English language learners and disabled students) are meeting the state’s requirement for adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward proficiency in each subject area. Sanctions are placed on schools that repeatedly fall short of the annual AYP goal. All students tested must attain proficiency by 2014.

## **The Curriculum Before and After NCLB**

The immediate implication of the accountability assessments mandated by NCLB is that the corresponding standards are more relevant to teachers than ever. Classroom instruction must focus on the core subject area knowledge and skills in which students are expected to become proficient (National Research Council, 2003; Nitko, 2004). While it would seem that teachers should always have focused on the standards, education experts such as W. James Popham, chairman of the Commission of Instructionally Supportive Assessment, provide anecdotes that suggest another story:

My first serious brush with curriculum occurred some five decades ago, when I began teaching in eastern Oregon. Even way back then, Oregon had a state-approved curriculum syllabus, and I was given a copy of that thick text for my bookshelf. And that’s where it stayed—right on that shelf. Other than glancing at the syllabus for an hour or so before the school year began to find out what goals the state decreed for the courses I was scheduled to teach, I never looked at it again. (Popham, 2004, p. 30)

The kind of scenario that Popham describes “came to a screeching halt on January 8, 2002, when President Bush affixed his signature to [NCLB]” (Popham, 2004, p. 31). To avoid inadequate levels of achievement that lead to NCLB’s sanctions for schools, students must receive instruction that will prepare them for what is on the accountability assessment. Since the content standards are the basis for the assessments, the standards are a guide for teachers in daily classroom instruction.

## **A Narrowing Curriculum**

This refocusing of classroom instruction was certainly intended by proponents of standards-based reform and NCLB. However, educators were faced with a new concern, which Popham acknowledges:

Unfortunately, in most states’ current collections of content standards, there are far too many curricular aims to teach or to test in the time available for teaching or testing. . . . [T]he result . . . was invariably to lay out way too many curricular targets. (Popham, 2004, p. 31)

The broad nature of state curricula presents a challenge to teachers who frequently must identify the curricular targets that will appear on the accountability assessment. As calculated in a report by the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (Marzano, Kendall, & Cicchinelli, 1999), the knowledge considered essential to obtain a high-school diploma seems to exceed the practical time and resources available for education. Teachers have become overwhelmed by the curricular aims which they must impart to their students. This situation has recently been magnified by the accountability mandate of NCLB. Administrators of districts and schools have begun searching for ways to meet this challenge (Marzano, 1999; Popham, 2004).

The most commonly observed response to this challenge has been referred to as the phenomenon of *curriculum narrowing* (Gunzenhauser, 2003; Hess and Brigham, 2000; Mathis, 2003; Vogler, 2003). In this situation, the core academic subjects of reading, mathematics, and science are given priority at the expense of the time and resources dedicated to the instruction of other subjects in the curriculum, including social studies, physical education, foreign languages, and the arts. Teachers exclude from their lesson plans the material that is not tested in an attempt to maximize the learning opportunity for students on the content of the test. This change is seen as a nearly unavoidable reaction to the pressure on teachers from district and state educational leaders to raise test scores. These effects have been documented in education research; a survey by the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy (2003) found that 79% of teachers in states with accountability testing reported that instruction in the tested subject areas had either increased a great deal or moderately, and that more time

was being devoted to the tested segments of the curriculum than to the non-tested segments. The instruction of the curriculum in the classroom has been further impacted by teachers who prepare their students for accountability assessments by focusing on test-taking skills—an approach sometimes called “drill and kill”—rather than planning instruction around the standards measured by the assessment. In addition to narrowing the curriculum, teaching test-taking skills to students has been found to be one of the least effective ways to improving test scores (National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, 2003).

The implications of curriculum narrowing have been widely reported and discussed (Fiske, 1999; Manzo, 1996; 2005; Meyer, 2005; von Zastrow and Janc, 2004). A significant number of education experts and stakeholders, including parents and teachers, have pointed out that although NCLB does not mandate testing in other subject areas, they are still important to the development of young people. Researchers have found correlations between instruction of subjects such as the arts and high levels of achievement in reading and mathematics (Fiske, 1999; Meyer, 2005; Paige and Huckabee, 2005; Rabkin and Redmond, 2005; von Zastrow and Janc, 2004). Moreover, commentators express concern about the formation of a tiered education system in which students from schools of a low socio-economic status (SES) have less access to subject areas outside the core subjects than students from high SES schools (Manzo, 1996, 2005; Pinzur, 2004; von Zastrow and Janc, 2004).

## **The Response to Curriculum Narrowing**

In response to these concerns, the education community has voiced a myriad of opinions and possible solutions. Two approaches presented in this report are the integration of subject areas with one another and the reconceptualization of the curricular targets measured by accountability assessments.

### **Integrating Subject Areas**

A frequently posed solution to the narrowing curriculum is to integrate instruction of the core subject areas (reading and writing, mathematics, and science) with other subject areas that are not currently covered by accountability testing, particularly social studies and the arts (Gunzenhauser, 2003; Manzo, 2005; Meyer, 2005; Pinzur, 2004; Rabkin and Redmond, 2005; Vogler, 2003; von Zastrow and Janc, 2004). In this approach, content from science, social studies, foreign languages, or the arts is used during the instruction of mathematics, reading, or writing. For an example, reading instruction might use text concerning a topic in history; mathematics instruction could include content about values of time and rhythm in music (Fiske, 1999; von Zastrow and Janc, 2004).

Researchers cite several benefits of this approach. By integrating other subject area content into reading and mathematics instruction, teachers can make the subjects more relevant and engaging for students, thereby motivating them to learn. These researchers assert that *what* students are reading about may be as important as the reading instruction itself (von Zastrow and Janc, 2004).

School administrators have also found that integrating subject areas makes the overall curriculum more cohesive. Classroom teachers, regardless of subject, take responsibility for providing students with reading and mathematics instruction, thereby unifying the efforts of a school to raise achievement. For example, a social studies teacher can use reading assignments as an opportunity to contribute to reading achievement, while a science teacher may contribute to mathematics achievement. Ideally, by integrating subject areas, achievement goals can be met while simultaneously reducing the likelihood of administrators being forced to choose between mandated subjects and other valuable subjects (von Zastrow and Janc, 2004).

### **Reconceptualizing Curricular Targets**

In a recent article, Popham has suggested a solution that addresses the narrowing curriculum by making accountability assessments more manageable for teachers. Acknowledging the importance of the broad curricula already in place, Popham suggests that states “leave . . . current content standards untouched but derive from them a framework for NCLB assessment that focuses on a small number of reconceptualized, eligible-to-be-taught curricular targets” (2004, p. 32). In this approach, teachers and students will know exactly the curricular targets to which they will be held accountable. The subject area content that has been judged by the public to be important would remain in place, but the guesswork which teachers must undertake when preparing students for accountability assessments would be removed.

The principal benefit of this approach is that the number of curricular targets will be small enough that they will not strain available resources. Moreover, rotating the curricular targets selected for the accountability assessment could prevent the same parts of the curriculum from being over-emphasized year after year. The task of preparing students for accountability assessments will be more reasonable for teachers without reducing the standards. As a result, administrators will be able to maintain the breadth and quality of the educational opportunities available to students, thereby reducing curriculum narrowing. Reconceptualizing the curricular targets does not necessarily entail a reduction in the rigor and quality of the state accountability assessments. As long as they are based on the state’s rigorous content standards, the accountability assessments may satisfy the requirements of NCLB.

## Conclusion

In the current era of accountability, curriculum narrowing is the latest challenge facing the education system. Frequently, the accountability assessments mandated by NCLB are identified as the source of this issue. However, accountability assessments are intended to be one source of data about what students know and are able to do. Many other sources of information are necessary to build a complete understanding of a student's abilities. Proponents of accountability assessments do not suggest that a high-stakes decision be made based on one and only one piece of evidence. Test results are a single point of evidence that, when added to other pieces, help students, parents, and teachers understand what a student knows and can do. Because a single assessment result is not necessarily reflective of a student's abilities, many state assessment programs allow students multiple opportunities to succeed on the annual accountability assessment. Assessments must be understood as tools that are only useful when used correctly.

Certainly, educators can participate in the solutions to this challenge. Many states involve classroom teachers in the design of aspects of the curriculum and accountability assessments. Because teachers are closer to the curriculum than any other segment of the educational community, it is vital that they participate in this process. Teachers can use their experience to guide the structure and content of the curriculum and accountability assessments, thereby helping to ensure and protect the breadth and depth of the curriculum. Moreover, teachers and administrators alike can help prevent curriculum narrowing by demonstrating that teaching test-taking skills is not equivalent to teaching. While it is important for students to be familiar with the format of an assessment, skill at taking a test is no substitute for real subject-area knowledge. If teachers base their classroom instruction on the standards and continue to use sound, proven instructional methods, students can reach high levels of achievement. Any student who receives rich and deep instruction on the breadth of the curriculum can be successful on the state's accountability assessments.

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