



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
AFT Public Employees
AFT Healthcare

555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202/879-4400
www.aft.org

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April 28, 2009

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

The American Federation of Teachers strongly supports the president's commitment to ensuring that all students, upon high school graduation, are prepared to enter higher education or the workforce. We endorse the idea that federal funds be used to help develop rigorous common state standards that outline clearly what all students should learn in American public schools.

As an organization that has led the push to improve academic standards over the past 25 years, we are ready to assist the Obama administration in any way we can. Our hope is that our experiences will help guide the administration's policies to ensure that tax dollars are spent wisely. This is particularly important with so much federal funding going toward education in the coming weeks and months.

Lessons Learned

The AFT first advocated common state standards in 1983, as part of Albert Shanker's response to the landmark report "A Nation at Risk." Since then, we have been at the forefront of this issue. Unfortunately, that means we have witnessed a series of mistakes that have derailed the effort to create rigorous academic standards for all students.

As a nation, we have made little progress in developing standards in a way that will improve teaching and learning. Today, there are no common state standards. The state standards that are in place are not aligned to the demands of college and work, and standards among states vary widely in quality and quantity. Often, states have too many standards, and their standards can be both vague and unrealistically broad. Finally, there is no comprehensive standards-based system, with aligned teacher preparation, professional development, curricula, textbooks and assessments.

Despite the lack of progress so far in creating strong, common standards, we have some reason for optimism: We have more knowledge today about how to develop standards the right way. We have learned the following:

- **Creating standards with teacher input makes them much more likely to help improve learning and teaching.** Teachers' collective experience is invaluable in developing education policies because teachers know, better than anyone else, the learning and teaching conditions they need to help children reach rigorous standards. Including teachers at each step in the process ensures that standards are rooted in real-world classrooms. Also, developing standards with teacher input convinces other teachers that the standards will be useful and not just the latest fad imposed from the top.
- **Creating better standards is only one aspect of a comprehensive standards-based system to improve teaching and learning.** Done in isolation, creating better standards is little more than an academic exercise. To be effective, standards must be aligned with assessments and with all the supporting mechanisms needed in a standards-based instructional system. These include professional development, instructional resources, learning conditions, instructional strategies and curriculum frameworks.

Recommendations

We encourage the administration to require those developing standards to commit to the following guidelines:

First, federal funds are needed to support the partnerships that agree to develop this comprehensive, standards-based system, and to ensure the coordination and the alignment of this work. No single group could or should produce all these components on its own, nor should any group work in isolation on any one piece. The issue of standards is much larger than producing good written documents. Standards development has taken place in a vacuum in too many places, resulting in statements that mean nothing because they don't align with the rest of the system. *To expect students to meet high standards, systemic changes must occur.* Assessments must be developed that reflect what students should know and be able to do. Curriculum resources must be developed that help bring the standards into the classroom. Professional development must be provided to help teachers deliver the content, differentiate instruction, and adjust delivery based on data analysis and best practice. Federal funds should be distributed to those groups that establish partnerships that can fully address all of these areas.

Second, the focus should be on fewer, deeper and clearer standards. We are all familiar with the stacks of standards that teachers are expected to teach to and students are expected to meet. The sheer volume of material is not realistic in any setting. We must learn from our international peers, and focus on a manageable set of standards that emphasizes the most important content and skills that all students should learn and that provide the foundation for additional learning.

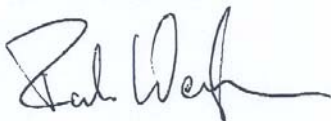
Third, teachers must be involved in creating and implementing not only the standards, but the assessments, professional development activities and accompanying materials (e.g., standards-based guides for teachers that provide essential background knowledge, model lesson plans that new teachers could teach from and more experienced teachers could draw from as they see fit, and textbooks that are focused on the content students must learn). All too often, educators who are responsible for helping students progress toward mastery of the standards have no input into what to teach and how to teach it.

Fourth, policymakers should take the steps necessary to coordinate work in different subject areas, to strike the right balance and prioritize the standards. We must move past the days of the English teachers creating their own expectations for students and the math teachers creating theirs. This “my group” thinking leads, not surprisingly, to each creating plans that would require the use of the lion’s share of instructional time. In such a situation, teachers are left to decide what should be taught. Instead, teachers from each subject area must come together and identify the critical set of standards that covers all grades and subject areas.

Finally, even the best materials, created with the critical input of teachers, are not sufficient to ensure success. We also must make sure that teachers and students have the necessary teaching and learning conditions we know foster student achievement. These include a safe and orderly environment, additional help and/or differentiated instruction, and wraparound services for students. In addition, success depends on an overall climate that promotes trust and parental involvement, and that supports collaboration and professional growth for teachers.

We know that implementing systemic, standards-based reform will require work from a variety of organizations. The AFT is ready to assist in any way we can to help move in this direction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randi Weingarten". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Randi Weingarten
President

RW:gd opeiu#2 afl-cio