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## **Principals' Group Calls for National Academic Standards and Tests**

**By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo**

A plan for adopting national academic standards and assessments in reading and mathematics, as well as for helping states and districts implement them, should be included in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, a major education group says.

In a position statement released last month, the National Association of Secondary School Principals calls on Congress to appoint an independent panel of researchers, educators, and others to come up with a set of common guidelines for what students should know and be able to do in the two subjects at each grade level. The standards, and accompanying assessments, should replace punitive provisions in the federal law, the NASSP says.

"Under NCLB, we're holding schools accountable, talking about adequate yearly progress, creating lists of schools not reaching AYP," said Gerald N. Tirozzi, the executive director of the Reston, Va.-based organization. "The irony is that we have 50 states, which have 50 different definitions of proficiency, and NCLB never even describes what is meant by proficiency."

A number of experts and organizations have called for a renewed discussion on academic standards over the past several years. While they mostly suggest that the standards would be voluntary, the proposals include providing states with grants or other incentives for adopting them.

Recently, some such proposals have suggested that states align their standards with those of top-performing countries around the world as a means of ensuring that students in the United States can compete with their peers around the globe. ("[Forum Seeks A New Vision for U.S. Role](#)," April 23, 2008.)

“More and more, we are being compared with other countries that have very centralized systems of education, and they do use national standards,” Mr. Tirozzi said. “If we’re going to be involved in those kinds of comparisons, we ought to do that, too.”

## **U.S. System Rejected**

Support for national standards is far from universal, however. And even some longtime proponents have said that, given state-level control over education, it is not feasible to have a national system.

Last year, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings argued in an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* that “the debate over national standards would become an exercise in lowest-common-denominator politics” and would not necessarily improve the content of schooling.

The National Conference of State Legislatures, after debating the issue, voted last summer to reject the idea of common standards.

“We need rigorous state standards that are anchored in real-world demands. ... This can be most readily accomplished through individual state refinement of standards,” the position statement from the lawmakers said, “not through federal action—which flies in the face not only of the role of states since the inception of our system of providing education, but the historical role of states and local school districts in funding education with diminished federal support.”  
(**"Legislators Oppose National Standards,"** August 15, 2007.)

The Denver-based group cited flaws in the federal No Child Left Behind Act as one reason to reduce federal control of education.

Mr. Tirozzi of the secondary school principals' group, who was the U.S. Department of Education's assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education when a federal plan to devise national assessments failed in the late 1990s, said that states are equipped to adapt to national guidelines.

States and districts, Mr. Tirozzi added, would still decide which curriculum and instructional approaches to use in their classrooms. “This time around we have

NCLB as the backdrop, and we're holding schools accountable," he said. "NCLB brought accountability to the forefront."