

Will Standards Save Public Education?
Deborah Meier

“These historic reforms will improve our public schools by creating an environment where every child can learn through real accountability, unprecedented flexibility for states and school districts, greater local control, more options for parents, and more funding for what works.” President George W. Bush on No Child Left Behind. In an era of increased standardization that began in the 1980’s, American education is at a crossroads. In the early 80’s, *A Nation at Risk* was published, outlining the crisis of American education. It awoke the country from educational complacency and slumber. But the book was prompted by large economic concerns that education could not meet the new American economic demands. Written during the Cold War, *A Nation at Risk* drew on the growing economies of Japan, South Korea, and Germany etc. (*A Nation at Risk*). American education had failed to churn out people who were ready to compete in this world economic market. Academic excellence was linked to economic proficiency. American education had felt to be rigorous and engaging. Teachers and administrators were not being held accountable for the skills that students were to acquire during their education (*A Nation at Risk*). “... individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life.” (*A Nation at Risk*). Since there were no standards, students were graduating with varying levels of academic ability. Thus began what we know as standardization. Proponents of standardization claim that by having set standards for schools to achieve, real success could be measured and thus the educational systems could be analyzed and improved where necessary. Students who had previously suffered from poor education could now have a

standard to hold their schools accountable for (A Nation at Risk). The government believed that experts in the field of economics and education should create the standards, since they understood the needs of the American economy and society.

Twenty years later, the American Public is faced with the biggest push for standardization thus far. President Bush's major platform for education is No Child Left Behind. Under the auspices of the government, states would decide upon standards that "close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind." (<http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/beginning.html#sec1>). It is the most sweeping reform in education since the 60's. The state would have the jurisdiction to decide about what standards were important for each grade level. These standards would help the disadvantaged students because teachers would be required to provide effective instruction. (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/standards/standards.html>). Schools are required to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Failure to meet the benchmark would require certain schools "to develop a school plan, in consultation with parents, school staff district and outside experts within three months." (<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/ayp203/edlite-slide013.html>). The state is then still required to provide technical support for up to a year. By the end of the second year, if schools still fail to meet the AYP standard, then major restructuring needs to take place, including, "outside experts to advise the school and replacing school staff relevant to the failure." By the fourth year, schools that are still unable to adequately progress, are subject to state take-over (<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/ayp203/edlite-slide016.html>). With new state set standards, the debate on who should set these standards and what the goals of the standards should be, has reached a new level.

Though Deborah Meier published her book *Will Standards Save Public Education* before *No Child Left Behind*, reading the book presents the reader with valued insights into the motivations for standardization and the implications of public education in a democracy. There has been no better time to understand the results of standardization on the individual student and citizen.

Deborah Meier is hailed as one of the great innovators of American education. She first began as a kindergarten school teacher and went on to start Central Park East School; an innovative school offering inner city students with a sound education. She is currently the principal of Mission Hill School in Boston. She has been the major voice on the opposing side of the debate for standardization. As an educator for over thirty years, she has been in the field since the beginning of standardization. Her schools have provided alternatives to state-mandated standardization.

In the book, Meier criticizes the current process of standardization. Meier's thesis is not to argue the elimination of standards but to question who constructs and imposes these standards. Meier's thesis is very simply put in her first chapter.

“I disagree...the current push for far greater standardization than we've ever previously attempted is fundamentally misguided. It will not help to develop young minds, contribute to a robust democratic life, or aid the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens. By shifting the locus of authority to outside bodies, it undermines the capacity of schools to instruct by example in the qualities of mind that schools in a democracy should be fostering in kids—responsibility for one's own ideas, tolerance for the ideas of others, and a capacity to negotiate differences.” (Meier 4-5).

According to Meier, standards created by experts without clear flexibility and consideration for the students most affected by it, undermines certain principles of a democracy. Students will spend most of their time concentrating on acquiring skills for the numerous tests and not on proper reflection of their ideas and the ideas of their peers.

The first section of the book deals with Meier's essay on Education for Democracy, while the second section is a response by numerous other experts in the education field, and the third is Meier's rebuttals to their critiques.

In Meier's essay she outlines the process of standardization. She then continues to explain the history behind standards and the motivations of the government. Next she outlines the problems with these standards and provides what she believes should be an alternative vision. Her main issue with the standards is the disconnect between the people who sets the standards and the people affected by it. Her main argument here is that standards need to be created by people who are closest to the students, who understand what they need in order to learn effectively. "Our schools have grown too distant, too big, too standardized, too uniform, too divorced from their communities, too alienating or young from old and old from young." (Meier 13).

She outlines the fundamental contradiction of having state imposed standards when the state remains so disconnected for individual students. It is at this juncture of her argument that the question of effective democracy rises. For Meier this vertical flow of information and control from the state to the schools seen in the current types of

standardized tests, does not allow students to consciously question their society; a fundamental of democracy.

She then provides explanation for the kinds of standards she believes in as an alternative model. It is here she begins to cite her experiences in the field and how her schools have functioned according to her alternative model. This model does not eliminate standards altogether, but creates standards created in direct interaction with the students. “Our oldest kids, the eighth graders, will graduate only when they can show us all that they meet our graduation standards, which are the result of lots of parent, staff, and community dialogue over several years.” (Meier 21). She finally continues to explain how within her suggested framework, democratic values are enhanced.

The next few sections are a series of responses to Meier’s thesis. These broad essays, written by thinkers with both liberal and conservative views on education, outline different ways of looking at Meier’s premises. The seven contributors either defend standards or extend upon the points raised by Meier; each bringing a different pie to the table. Four main questions arise from the contributors.

“Don’t I know that standards are meant to ensure equity for the least advantaged?”
(Thernstrom).

“What about the dangers of local control.” (Nash).

“But don’t we need some standards?” (Chase).

“But if you agree that we need higher standards, why not use standardized tests?”
(Thernstrom).

Meier in the final section of the book responds to each of these questions either by reaffirming her previous points and clarifying her arguments.

The book is structured very systematically so the arguments presented do not get muffled in facts. By presenting outside critiques to her arguments and responding, Meier further strengthens her thesis and at the same time gives space for the voices of standardization. This also makes the reader think critically of Meier's points, making her work a highly convincing piece of public scholarship.

Meier specifically uses her experience as an educator in innovative schools such as Central Park East to cite concrete examples of the alternatives to the state mandated standards for education. She presents a story filled with what she believes standardization creates for students and how that can detract with the goal for democracy. She attacks the way standards have been created and how that has affected students and teachers.

The book is a launching pad for people who are interested in the implications of standardization. Meier's book is especially relevant since the institution of No Child Left Behind. In the 88 pages of this book, the reader is pushed into the heart of the debate.

Another key issue she raises is flexibility. With the current No Child Left Behind policy you have a system where standards are imposed without much flexibility. Meier argues that the standards have little flexibility since the students are alienated from the decision making process; she makes a call for more local leverage in the whole process of creating standards. Meier makes a point that most state politicians and policy makers do not have

opportunities to interact with students; they thus are unable to understand students' needs. Meier takes on the proponents head on; she argues very effectively that what students need the most is a clear connection with the "adults in their communities." (Meier 17). "They need to witness the exercise of judgment, the weighing of means and ends by people they can imagine becoming; and they need to see how responsible adults handle disagreement." (Meier 17). Most traditional educators neglect the need for trust between adults and youth. Meier always takes into account the youth, this is one of her greatest strengths both as a thinker and writer. She never ignores her students; they are the constant driving force behind her solutions. She reaches out to the younger generation, making the book appealing to all.

Her principle of more local control over standards; where the mechanisms of creating the standards are smaller and intimately with the students, is at times highly idealistic. "But the United States also has a long history of vicious and retrograde local school boards. Meier's position awkwardly places her in a company with many religious right who aim to control local school boards in order to banish evolution in science classrooms, scrap critical thinking, circumscribe world history, and reinstitute prayer" (Meier 49). Gary B. Nash, a contributor to the book who is also director of the National Center for History in the Schools, argues that local districts have in the past sought to teach a much more conservative curriculum, and at times neglected to teach principles of equality and freedom. It is a rather skeptical view to Meier's suggestions of more local control. But his point does raise other issues.

She weakens her thesis of the need for education to promote democratic values by idealizing local control. In the book Meier neglects the possibility of some school districts

isolating themselves from the wider community. Another principle of a democracy involves being aware of how the nation functions and understanding the interconnectedness of the country. In David T. Sehr's book *Education for Public Democracy* he gives clear criterion for education's role in preparing citizens for a democracy. "Schools can create opportunities for students to explore their interdependence with others, both through study and through experiential learning." (Sehr 90). Local districts have a dual responsibility here; they have a responsibility to students to explore their interdependence within a community, and two to explore interdependence within the nation. More rural local districts could opt for standards that do not require students to have any knowledge of the state and the greater nation. Without some sort of standardization on a greater state wide level, you could possibly be creating a system where students in local districts are not learning through experience and exposure about how their country functions. A possible answer to this problem could be the combination of Meier's experienced suggestions on her standards at Central Park East and a few state set standards. Her standards were created through direct interaction with the students making the issue of flexibility less problematic. A few state set standards could require local districts to teach about the greater community, eliminating the problem of isolated local districts.

Meier's experiences in urban public schools have definitely allowed her to confront issues of race and poverty and its affects on academic achievement. In most of the current debates on standardization, the achievement gap is raised. Meier does point out very briefly; that tests do not take into account the family and societal background of some of her minority students that puts them at a disadvantage even before entering the test room. This is such an important point in the debate for equity.

“Accountability is an exercise in hope. When we raise academic standards, children raise their academic sights. When children are regularly tested, teachers know where and how to improve. When scores are known to parents, parents are empowered to push for change. When accountability for our schools is real, the results for our children are real.” (President George W. Bush, on No Child Left Behind).

Since 2002 new graduation requirements were placed on students, and many students found themselves stuck at the midnight hour before graduation. Students are also not receiving a quality education in overcrowded urban schools where the large majority of students are minorities. Standards arose without clear regard for school resources and students’ current abilities, leaving many schools struggling to provide adequate support for their students. Peter Schrag in his book *Final Test* articulates quite clearly articulates the problems with the states’ inability to provide proper resources for students. “If the states are making the schools and students accountable, then surely the states have a reciprocal duty to make certain that the students have an opportunity to learn and thus a chance to succeed.” (Schrag 6). Meier could have greatly strengthened her arguments by delving into the topic of this magnitude. It also affirms her arguments that because these standards were created by officials disconnected from students, it has put many schools in a quagmire about how to ensure students pass the tests. Meier could also make a great counter argument that there would be less questions of adequacy if, local districts decided upon these standards and therefore took into account their most disadvantaged students.

Schrag also makes an important point that only through these new standards could issues like the achievement gap and adequacy be raised. “The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, the Texas test, has plenty of flaws, and it may have increased the dropout rate. But it also meant that many Latino and black students were being taught for the first

time instead of being ignored.” (Schrag 232). Meier does at times seem to ignore the fact that at times and in different states, only through these standardized tests created by the state were systems of inequity raised to the attention of the entire country. Standardization does call upon educators to question the reasons behind the marginalization of certain students.

The book does present much food for thought. Anybody, from the concerned parent, to the troubled student can read this book. The book is especially relevant to teachers and administrators because her alternative vision gives much guidance. It is also important for the proponents of standardization to read the book in order to understand how her alternative model has worked. She does however present a far too idealistic look at the potential of local control. She also touches only briefly on issues like the achievement gap that could be her most powerful arguments. But one should count this book as a starting point to an endless list of books that extend on Meier’s points or raise other issues she did not address. As one of the greatest educator’s of our time, she is a major voice of dissent that is greatly needed in American education at this point. She gives hope to those who firmly believe that the current standards ignore the people most affected by it. Meier has been raising her voice for years and she will continue for years to come. She provides a progressive outlook on education and the potential it holds for creating citizens who really care. Meier points out what most adult educators fail to realize about youth, is the lack of trust worsened by standards fashioned by distant academics. Reading the book is both an educational and powerful experience. “Her voice conveys a life of struggle in the front lines—victories and losses, hopes and disappointments—and a seasoned recognition of how hard it is to make a difference in the years God gives us. It’s a voice that’s seldom harsh, and never overbearing, but humane and principled and wise; and it’s a voice our nation needs to hear.” (Jonathan Kozol in the foreword).

Katyana Melic

Macalester College

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