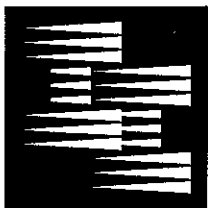


# INDEPENDENCE ISSUE PAPER

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## **"Education Standards" Proposal Will Harm Education** by Edward L. Lederman



**INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE**

14142 DENVER WEST PARKWAY, SUITE 185

GOLDEN, COLORADO 80401

(303) 279-6536 FAX (303) 279-4176

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## **"Education Standards" Proposal will Harm Education**

### **Academic Standards Could Fall, While Political Correctness Standards Rise**

*By Edward L. Lederman*

It is often hard to select, in such a competitive field, that bill which goes furthest in hurting the cause of the education consumer. However this session, one bill stands out head and shoulders above the rest: HB 1313, Education Reform. The bill promises to mandate "Standards Based" education, and my colleague John Andrews, in a previous Independence Issue Paper (no. 10-93) called it a good starting point. Unfortunately, I must differ. The bill is less likely to improve the curriculum of Colorado's public school students than to inflict on them even more of the bureaucracy and political correctness which have caused so many of the state's current educational problems.

The bill requires the State Board of Education to adopt by March 1, 1994 a model of content standards at graduation level in such areas as reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, geography, and the arts. The State Board is going to devise these content standards by holding a series of public meetings.

The real work of establishing state model content standards, and by inference, totally revamping over one hundred years of accreted public school curricula—some

#### ***In Brief...***

■ *House Bill 1313 promises to improve educational standards for public school students, but will likely have the opposite effect.*

■ *The bill shifts curricular control towards a state-level bureaucracy, where educrats would outnumber the educators.*

■ *The top-down curriculum and its creators would be weighted towards political correctness rather than to neutral standards of educational excellence.*

■ *Imposing state-wide standards would likely lead to further "dumbing down" of the curriculum, in order that students from poorer districts would not be denied high school diplomas.*

■ *As school districts attempted to implement the state-level standards, develop their own alternative standards, and constantly check their progress, educational consultants would have a field day, while educators would once again take a back seat.*

■ *Instead of hoping that more bureaucracy can fix the bureaucratized public schools, Colorado could adopt proposals by California School Superintendent Bill Honig, which offer reliable, academically sound methods for schools and students to judge progress.*

good, some bad, some indifferent—will fall to the State Standards and Assessments Development and Implementation Board, consisting of 13 members appointed by the Governor. What are the professional requirements of these appointees? “Experts in the areas of curriculum, Student learning, Instruction, Assessments, and Professional Educator Development.” In short one may expect, taking the language of the law at face value, the math requirements are to be devised by committee containing four educators for every mathematician.

Oh yes, whatever else is to be said of these “content standards” (i.e., what our schools are to teach in the future), they are to be “without cultural or gender bias.” What that phrase means is never defined. There are, however, plenty of “education professionals” who think that building a curriculum around the core values and writings of Western culture amounts to “cultural bias.”

HB 1313 also requires the districts to formulate their own content standards in essentially the same subject areas by June 1, 1995 using a similar modus operandi, the major difference being the Districts will have the work of the “Standards and assessments technical council” to reference in devising their own standards.

The State Board may waive any and all current standardized testing requirements “in order to allow districts to concentrate their energies and resources on the development of content standards, curriculum frameworks, assessments, *and programs for professional educator development in standards-based education ...*” (emphasis added; and more about that below).

By 1996, the State Department of Education will conduct “random” statewide assessments at the fourth and tenth grade levels on three year cycles using the state developed standards in order to “corroborate” the district assessments.

By May 1999 all the Districts will essentially be required to rate each graduating student’s performance in each of the “areas” it, the District, has devised, on an attachment to the diploma itself. If the student flunks any area an optimistic “In Progress” notation is to be made opposite that area.

The bill provides for an appeals process so that a citizen may challenge any statewide or district standard; and an aggrieved student may challenge any assessment put on his/her diploma attachment.

Students may sidestep the diploma and assessment provisions by engaging in a portfolio “Individual Education Plan” of the type now being experimented with in the Littleton district, or by taking the GED or similar test.

The bill mandates extensive “Professional educator development program(s)” at the state and district levels both to develop the standards in “Standards Based” education; and then to build the curriculum around those standards. Statewide and massive teacher re-education is explicitly anticipated and authorized. Such professional development programs are to be excruciatingly politically correct by “...utilizing cultural diversity in applying the precepts of standards-based education.” “Cultural diversity” is never defined. In other places where “cultural diversity” has been imposed, it has been interpreted to mean that if, for example, an Advanced Placement English teacher wants to spend the whole term on an in-depth study of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Dickens’ *Bleak House*, she can’t, since both authors are “dead white European males” whose works show no awareness of oppression based race or sexual orientation, and show little interest in challenging stereotyped gender roles.

Let’s see if we have got this straight. First we totally revamp nothing less than the curriculum (i.e. what is taught) in all our schools. This is bureaucratic hubris of the highest order. No attempt to carve out a small area—say American history—to see how a top down, state-wide mandated, curricular revision program could work. No, nothing so tentative. Full steam ahead on *everything*. This blind faith in the ability of state level officials to deliver positive results flies in the face of both logic and history.

So, we accomplish this herculean task by setting *standards*. Are these state-wide standards? Well, no and yes. You see standards are set by the State Standards and Assessments Development and Implementation Board (SSADI) but then each district sets its standards too, touching base now and then to get the approval of the state level bureaucracy but essentially doing its own thing.

What we have here is nothing less than a full employment bill for education consultants and other non-teaching “professionals.” Not only do they get numerous markets in which to peddle their wares but they (consultants and districts) get the luxury of both being able to reference state standards but not being held accountable to them. Why? Because the “random” “corroboration” of comparing the state developed standards to the district standards is guaranteed to be both expensive, unwieldy and confusing. There will never be a clear way to compare school X with school Y. There will always be the escape hatch that: “We, as a District, do not test, and therefore teach, to those particular standards.” HB 1313 will create a lot of non-classroom activity while at the same time enhancing comfort levels for providers.

But it gets better (from a provider standpoint). HB 1313 gives educational bureaucrats a *carte blanche* to revamp an already anemic public education curriculum. The enormous restructuring anticipated by HB 1313 will not likely be toward more substantive content or rigorous academic standards but in the opposite direction. Content

is roundly abused by the officials and consultants who will most likely sit on the SSADI. It is that Board, appointed by the Governor, which will determine the curriculum, i.e. the *raison d'être*, for public schools. The very strong hints in the language of the law itself (four educators for every "content specialist"; "Cultural Diversity"; lack of "Gender and ethnic bias") are all code, for anyone willing to read it, for a highly politicized and formless curriculum.

A better way to compare academic achievement throughout the state would be to:

1. take valid off the shelf testing regimens (the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other like devices on the national level; locally, the DPS has a perfectly serviceable content oriented testing system called ALPAS);
2. do away with the manipulations district bureaucrats routinely employ to cook the books, and
3. combine such standardized testing with a system developed by Bill Honig in California which compares drop-out rates, attendance, enrollment in advanced placement courses, and SAT scores of each and every school. Honig attempted to start a system of comparing schools of like socio-economic student bodies with each other to get a picture of which schools, principals, teachers, consultants are producing and which aren't.

The education establishment blocked Honig's genuine reform in California, and is apparently not interested in similar reforms in Colorado. Instead we have a massive Full Employment for Educational Consultants Act guaranteed to drain not only financial resources out of the classroom, but teacher time as well. It will most likely accomplish a further dumbing down of the curriculum, particularly for poorer districts and render more problematic, not less, the ability to monitor district, building and student performance.

HB 1313 is pork for the educrats; a disaster for people who send their children to public schools; and a sterling example of pedagogical churning.

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EDWARD L. LEDERMAN is a Senior Fellow in Education Policy with the Independence Institute, a businessperson, and a free-lance writer. He currently has one child in the Denver Public Schools, with another slated for entry next year.

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## **Statewide Educational Standards: Pro and Con**

Many people agree that there's a desperate need for better standards in Colorado's elementary and secondary public schools. But how to achieve those standards? House Bill 1313, recently approved by the Colorado House of Representatives in a narrow vote, and now facing an uncertain future in the Senate, offers one approach: create a centralized standards-setting state body. Will HB 1313's approach work?

"Yes," says Independence Institute President John Andrews. He predicts that 1313's standards could be the jump-start that our educational system needs to get back on track to teaching basic skills.

"No way," replies Edward L. Lederman, a Senior Fellow in Education Policy with the Independence Institute. When the bill is examined carefully, he says, it becomes clear that HB 1313 will impose additional bureaucracy and political correctness on the school system. The bill may please "education professionals" and consultants, but offers little hope for actual educators, says Lederman.

The issues surrounding House Bill 1313 are ones where reasonable people can differ, even if they continue to agree of the fundamental need for education reform. Instead of suggesting that there is only one correct answer to the questions raised by HB 1313, this Issue Paper presents both sides of one of the more intriguing bills that has been presented to the Legislature this year.