

This is the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's first comprehensive look at the quality of state academic standards since 2000, before Congress enacted No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While 37 states have updated or revised their state standards in at least one subject during that period, on the whole they are just as mediocre as ever. The average grade for state standards across all subjects was a disappointing "C-minus" in 2000 and remains so today. Two-thirds of the nation's K-12 students attend schools in states with C-, D-, or F-rated standards.

Standards matter: Several analyses link strong state standards and gains on NAEP.

Over the past three years, expert reviewers for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation examined state standards in five subjects: U.S. history (2003), English/language arts (2005), mathematics (2005), science (2005), and world history (2006). The reviewers gave high marks to standards that are clear, rigorous, and right-headed about content. For example, excellent English standards expect students to read and understand important literary genres, worthy science standards place the teaching of evolution at the center of biology instruction, and strong U.S. and world history standards are organized around a chronology of key events with an ample supply of fascinating and important individuals.

Solid standards matter because they are the foundation of standards-based reform, the dominant education policy strategy in America today. They have become even more important in the NCLB era, when weighty consequences befall schools that do not rise to meet the standards (at least in reading and math). While the pros and cons of testing and accountability get most of the ink in newspaper debates, the standards themselves exert enormous influence over what actually happens inside classrooms.

While the states as a whole have not improved their academic standards, several jurisdictions have shown marked

progress, especially Indiana, New York, Georgia, and New Mexico. Unfortunately, others made their standards worse, including Utah, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin.

Three states stand out with perfect scores: California, Indiana, and Massachusetts. They are the focus of a separate essay by journalist and author Joanne Jacobs, "It Takes a Vision: How Three States Created Great Academic Standards." She tells the fascinating story of how these three jurisdictions managed to develop clear and rigorous standards while most others fell short. Some common themes appear in each: if you want great standards, you can't leave the process to committees. It takes strong visionary leadership and a willingness to fight (and win) the curricular battles. At the same time, bipartisanship is essential.

Do Good Standards Raise Student Achievement?

Several new analyses show a link between strong state standards and gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP):

- Ten states made statistically significant progress in the percentage of their students (or the percentage of their poor and minority students) reaching proficiency in fourth-grade reading on NAEP from 1998 to 2005. Nine of these ten states received at least a C from Fordham for their English/language arts standards.
- Five states made statistically significant gains on the science NAEP between 2000 and 2005 at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels, and three of these have among the best sets of science standards in the nation, according to Fordham's reviewers.
- The relationship is less clear in mathematics, though four of the six states that received "honors" grades from Fordham also posted statistically significant gains on the eighth-grade NAEP from 2000 to 2005, either for the state as a whole or for their poor or minority students. (Many other states made progress, too, however.)

State Grades in 2006 vs. 2000

STATE	CUM GPA 2006	CUM GPA 2000	2006 GRADE	2000 GRADE	2006 RANK	2000 RANK
California*	4.00	3.60	A	A-	1	1
Indiana*	4.00	2.40	A	C+	1	10
Massachusetts*	4.00	2.60	A	B-	1	8
New York*	3.40	1.80	B+	C-	4	21
Georgia*	3.20	1.80	B+	C-	5	21
Virginia	3.20	2.40	B+	C+	5	10
Arizona*	3.00	3.40	B	B+	7	2
South Carolina*	2.80	3.00	B-	B	8	3
Alabama*	2.60	2.80	B-	B-	9	5
Louisiana	2.00	2.20	C	C+	10	14
Maryland*	2.00	2.40	C	C+	10	10
Oklahoma	2.00	1.80	C	C-	10	21
Illinois	1.80	1.60	C-	C-	13	26
Nevada*	1.80	2.20	C-	C+	13	14
New Jersey*	1.80	1.40	C-	D+	13	29
New Mexico	1.80	0.20	C-	F	13	47
Texas*	1.80	3.00	C-	B	13	3
West Virginia*	1.80	2.20	C-	C+	13	14
Colorado*	1.60	1.40	C-	D+	19	29
Delaware*	1.60	2.20	C-	C+	19	14
Kansas*	1.60	2.20	C-	C+	19	N/A
North Carolina*	1.60	2.80	C-	B-	19	5
South Dakota*	1.60	2.60	C-	B-	19	8
Tennessee*	1.60	0.20	C-	F	19	47
Minnesota*	1.40	0.80	D+	D-	25	39
Ohio	1.40	2.00	D+	C	25	20
Utah*	1.40	2.40	D+	C+	25	10
District of Columbia*	1.20	2.75	D+	B-	28	7
Mississippi*	1.20	1.80	D+	C-	28	21
Nebraska	1.20	2.20	D+	C+	28	14
Idaho*	1.00	0.00	D	-	31	N/A
Kentucky	1.00	1.00	D	D	31	38
Michigan	1.00	0.80	D	D-	31	39
North Dakota*	1.00	0.20	D	F	31	47
Oregon	1.00	1.40	D	D+	31	29
Pennsylvania*	1.00	1.33	D	D+	31	34
Vermont	1.00	1.20	D	D+	31	36
Arkansas*	0.80	0.40	D-	F	38	45
Connecticut*	0.80	1.40	D-	D+	38	29
Maine*	0.80	1.20	D-	D+	38	36
Missouri*	0.80	1.40	D-	D+	38	29
New Hampshire*	0.80	1.60	D-	C-	38	26
Rhode Island*	0.80	1.33	D-	D+	38	34
Florida	0.60	1.80	D-	C-	44	21
Washington*	0.60	0.80	D-	D-	44	39
Wisconsin	0.60	1.60	D-	C-	44	26
Alaska*	0.40	0.75	F	D-	47	42
Hawaii*	0.40	0.60	F	D-	47	44
Montana*	0.20	0.66	F	D-	49	43
Wyoming*	0.00	0.40	F	F	50	45

*At least one set of subject standards has been revised or is currently under revision since review