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## **The Challenge of Developing Content Standards**

Standards-based initiatives have been the centerpiece of educational reform in the United States for well over a decade. The term *standards* encompasses several elements of curricular reform, including content standards, performance standards, and opportunity-to-learn standards. This review focuses primarily on content standards, documents that define what students should know and be able to do in given subject areas. The story of content standards is a national story, a state story, a story of specific disciplines, and a story of philosophical and theoretical shifts and differences that have had an impact on views of teaching and learning across disciplines. Content standards represent ideas about what disciplinary content is most important for students to know and be able to do across years of schooling. However, content standards are also ideological, reflecting values and beliefs regarding the nature of teaching and learning and, more generally, the purposes of education. Tracing the interplay of ideas and values in standards and standards development—or, in other words, examining the intellectual roots of content standards and the debates that inform their development and use—reveals the complexities inherent in this aspect of standards-based reform.

Our analysis examines three areas of literature: first, the documents and reports that started U.S. educational policy down the path toward national standards; second, literature on the development and evaluation of specific content standards documents; and, third, literature that informed the debates that arose within the groups that developed standards and that followed their dissemination. We identify the tensions that have arisen among the policymakers, business leaders, educators, and public interest groups involved in the setting of standards. We also describe the factors that are operative in any specific standards development effort and how these factors influence decisions in areas such as organization of subject areas, desired level of specificity, processes used to achieve consensus, and effective evaluation of a given set of standards. We then provide a case study of how this has worked in English language arts (ELA), the discipline in which we are grounded and, arguably, one of the most highly contested and publicly visible subject areas. Finally, we conclude that what began as an attempt to move from low-level to high-level standards through inclusive, deliberative processes appears to be coming full circle back to mandates for the types of restrictive, default curricula the standards-based movement promised to move beyond.

### **THE CONTENT STANDARDS MOVEMENT**

Historically, national and state policymakers delegated their authority over public education to local school districts, particularly in matters of curriculum and instruction. Districts, in turn, entrusted the curriculum to teachers or indirectly to textbook publishers, and they did little to develop or provide instructional guidance (Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe,

1997). Until recently, the legacy of U.S. education embedded within our federalist construct allowed individual schools, teachers, and textbook publishers to dictate what is taught in schools. Since the publication of the now-famous report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), however, the federal government and states have made unprecedented forays into curriculum and instruction (Massell et al., 1997). This modern reform movement has been characterized by efforts to create new “policy instruments” to elicit, encourage, or demand changes in teaching and learning and reduce the tangles of regulation, bureaucracy, proliferating policy, and incoherent governance that would impede reform (Smith & O’Day, 1991). Included among the new policy instruments are the content standards that are the subject of this review.

Despite its critics (e.g., Stedman & Smith, 1983), *A Nation at Risk* appealed to the American public, policymakers, and educators alike (Massell & Kirst, 1994), if perhaps for different reasons. Many policymakers and business leaders agreed that improved education was essential for the nation’s future economic well-being (Toch, 1991), so they responded well to the call for the betterment of American schools, even though the exact connection between education and economic productivity was never very clear (Vinovskis, 1999). At the same time as policymakers and business leaders were attracted to the economic imperative in *A Nation at Risk*, the education community was attracted by the call for a move from the low-level, basic skills curricula that had dominated American education for decades toward higher expectations for all students. This direction was consistent with the desire on the part of many educators to move away from the traditionally behavioristic thinking about teaching and learning characterized by skills-based, mastery learning curricula and minimum competency tests toward a more cognitive or sociocognitive view of teaching and learning that emphasized what Resnick and Resnick (1992) called the “thinking curriculum.”

As characterized by Resnick and Resnick (1992), the thinking curriculum called for the recognition that all real learning involves thinking, that thinking ability can be nurtured and cultivated in everyone, and that the entire educational program must be reconceived and revitalized so that thinking pervades students’ lives beginning in kindergarten. Resnick and Resnick also noted that while it was not new to include thinking, problem solving, and reasoning in *some* students’ school curriculum, it was new “to seriously aspire to make thinking and problem solving regular aspects of the school program for the entire population, even minorities, even non-English speakers, even children of the poor” (pp. 38–39).

*A Nation at Risk* helped launch an initial wave of educational reforms focused on raising coursework standards for high school graduation, implementing and/or expanding assessment programs, and raising standards for prospective teachers (Goertz, Floden, & O’Day, 1995). Although many states and local school districts increased graduation requirements and academic course offerings, policymakers were disappointed by the lack of improvement in student achievement scores. As a result, both policy-makers and educators supported a second wave of reforms that called for the restructuring of schools and the professionalization of teachers (e.g., Elmore, 1990; Mitchell & Goertz, 1990). These reforms of the 1980s did little to change the content of instruction; nor did they result in the desired changes in teaching, learning, and student achievement (Cuban, 1990; Firestone, Fuhrman, & Kirst, 1989). Fragmented and contradictory policies

diverted teachers' attention, provided little or no support for the necessary professional development, and made it difficult to sustain the very promising reforms that were taking shape in individual schools or clusters of schools (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Goertz et al., 1995).

As noted by Massell (1994a), reform efforts of the 1980s that imposed more requirements without specifying what the particular content should be were found "to lack the substantive grist necessary for meaningful school-based change" (p. 85). In addition, reforms of the 1980s contributed to the lack of coherence in the policy demands that operate on schools because different policies were frequently designed for different sets of standards and objectives. A more systemic approach to education reform that was built around coherent sets of academic standards emerged in the 1990s as a way of addressing these issues. According to Cohen (1995), systemic, or standards-based, reform has as its aim changes in teaching as the most direct route to changes in students' learning, and it is posited as a means of providing top-down support for bottom-up instructional improvement in classrooms, schools, and districts. Researchers from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education indicated that this type of reform embodies three integral components: (a) establishing challenging academic standards for what all students should know and be able to do; (b) aligning policies—such as testing, teacher certification, and professional development—and accountability programs to the standards; and (c) restructuring the governance system to delegate overtly to schools and districts the responsibility for developing specific instructional approaches that meet the standards for which the state holds them accountable (see Goertz et al., 1995). Content standards, then, are a central feature of the systemic reform efforts initiated in the early 1990s.

### **Moving Toward National Standards**

Growing concerns about the educational preparation of the nation's youth prompted President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors, including then-governor Bill Clinton, to call an education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, in September 1989. The deliberations at this summit resulted in six broad goals for education to be reached by the year 2000, which President Bush announced in his State of the Union address on January 31, 1990. Shortly thereafter, the president and the governors established the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) to monitor progress toward these goals. Key among the goals were those indicating that students would demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter and be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement and that the percentage of all students demonstrating the ability to reason, solve problems, apply knowledge, and write and communicate effectively would increase substantially. As with *A Nation at Risk*, the national education goals enjoyed support from many quarters because they addressed the multiple agendas of the public, policymakers, business leaders, and educators.

A 1991 report of the NEGP used language that appeared later in the proposed Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 indicating that standards of "what students should know and be able to do" must be "world class" and "public, realistic, and valued." As noted by Massell (1994b), the need for world-class standards emerged out of concern that U.S. students repeatedly lagged behind their counterparts in other countries and the

implications of this situation for the economic competitiveness of the United States. Massell (1994b) further suggested, as we have previously, that the emphasis on world-class standards was also an attempt to remedy the basic skills orientation that had dominated the American school curriculum for decades. The 1991 NEGP report recognized that these criteria had “far-reaching implications, not the least of which is reaching consensus on what it is that students should know and be able to do” (p. 270). According to Massell (1994b), the panel’s emphasis on consensus was an effort “to address an often cited criticism that previous education reform, especially large scale curriculum reforms, ignored the social, political, and technical realities of implementation in schools” (McLaughlin, 1991; Yee & Kirst, 1994). As discussed in more detail later, the 1991 NEGP report was prescient in its implication that achieving consensus would be challenging. However, it has not been simply the issue of consensus on what students should know and be able to do that has proven difficult. As will be discussed throughout this chapter, it has been equally difficult to achieve consensus on the fundamental nature, purposes, and processes associated with standards and standard setting.

Groups of experts convened to consider how best to measure progress toward the National Education Goals recommended measuring student achievement against voluntary national education standards. In pursuit of this recommendation, Congress established the bipartisan National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) in June 1991 to provide advice on “the desirability and feasibility of national standards and tests, and recommend long-term policies, structures, and mechanisms for setting voluntary education standards and planning an appropriate system of tests” (NCEST, 1992, p. 1). NCEST was co-chaired by Governors Campbell of South Carolina and Romer of Colorado, and its membership consisted largely of educators, along with representatives from the policy and business communities. In January 1992, NCEST issued a report recommending national standards and a national system of assessments aligned with those standards. In explaining the recommendations, the report indicated that “high national standards tied to assessments can create high expectations for all students and help to better target resources. They are critical to the Nation in three primary ways: to promote educational equity, to preserve democracy and enhance the civic culture, and to improve economic competitiveness” (p. 3).

The NCEST report indicated that the “intent in recommending the establishment of national standards was to raise the ceiling for students who are currently above average and to lift the floor for those who now experience the least success in school, including those with special needs” (p. 4). To accomplish this goal, several types of standards were recommended, including those that would hold the education system accountable for delivering a quality education. The types of standards recommended were as follows:

*Content standards* that describe the knowledge, skills, and other understandings that schools should teach in order for students to attain high levels of competency in challenging subject matter; *Student performance standards* that define various levels of competence in the challenging subject matter set out in the content standards; *School delivery standards* (often referred to as *opportunity-to-learn standards*) developed by the state collectively from which each state could select the criteria that it finds useful for the purpose of assessing a school’s capacity and performance; and *System performance standards* that provide evidence about the success of schools, local school systems, states, and the Nation in bringing all students, leaving no one behind, to high

performance standards. (NCEST, 1992, p. 13)

In describing the types of standards needed, the NCEST report emphasized that content and performance standards alone would not change student achievement and teacher performance unless they were part of a coherent and systemic approach to improving instruction.

In its definition of national standards, the NCEST report emphasized that they should “include substantive content together with complex problem-solving and higher order thinking skills” (p. 3). It further stipulated that standards must provide focus and direction, not become a national curriculum, and that they must be dynamic, not static. These recommendations largely reflected the views of educators, who represented the majority on NCEST and who were most concerned with raising expectations for all students. The vision of standards put forward by NCEST appeared to differ in only relatively minor ways from the vision of groups such as the Business Round Table (BRT) whose membership did not include academics and subject-matter specialists. For example, in 1990 the BRT issued a nine-point policy agenda for K–12 education improvement titled *Essential Components of a Successful Education System*; according to this agenda, “a successful system clearly defines, in measurable terms, expectations for what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in school, in the workplace and in life. A successful system aligns and focuses its policies and programs on student achievement of high academic standards.” At least in the early stages of the standards movement, the stated positions of business and education appeared to be fairly well aligned.

Consistent with the general direction of reform articulated among NEGP, BRT, and NCEST, the U.S. Department of Education pursued a purposeful strategy of systemic initiatives based on high standards. The implicit models for national content standards used by the U.S. Department of Education were the California curriculum frameworks developed in the mid-1980s under then state superintendent Honig and the work of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), as reflected in the publication of its *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics* in 1989. These efforts promoted the idea that educational improvement should begin with an agreement on content standards that could be forged at both national and state levels. The logic was that once broad agreement had been achieved on what students should know and be able to do, everything else in the system, including tests, professional development, textbooks, and so on, could be redirected toward reaching those standards. The broad-based support for these efforts reflected their apparent responsiveness to both the call from many educators for high standards for all students consistent with more contemporary views of teaching and learning and the call from groups such as NEGP and BRT to use standards as a vehicle to improve K–12 education and, therefore, the nation’s economic future. The widespread acceptance of the curriculum frameworks in California and the NCTM standards led policymakers, business leaders, and many in the education community to believe that a system of national standards and assessments was indeed feasible and desirable.

What appeared to be relatively minor differences in emphasis among those individuals and groups supporting standards-based reform eventually proved to be major roadblocks to achieving the consensus needed to move forward with national standards. At issue were differences in beliefs about the purposes of high-quality content standards. Those

who were most concerned about issues of equity and the quality of teaching and learning, primarily educators, saw standards more as a guide to substantive conversation that could be used to develop local curricula. Those who were primarily concerned with increased student achievement as the means to improved economic competitiveness saw standards as more of a prescription that would cure the ills of public education by providing a mandated curriculum for all to follow.

Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander believed that comprehensive, systemic reform would occur without a new federal agency to control the process (Ravitch, 1995). As a result, he chose to use federal dollars to support voluntary national standards that would then have to win support from important constituencies, just as the NCTM standards had done in the mathematics field. Toward that end, the Department of Education made awards in 1991 and 1992 to broad-based groups of scholars and teachers to develop voluntary national standards in science, history, the arts, civics, geography, foreign languages, and ELA. It also made competitive awards to states to develop curriculum frameworks, including state content standards, in all of these subject areas along with mathematics, suggesting that national standards would probably serve as a guide to state standard setting.

It is important to consider the many ways in which these national initiatives affected standard-setting efforts, including the impact of identifying the subject areas in which national and state standards were to be developed in ways that were not entirely consistent with how they have functioned traditionally within the education community. For example, national standard-setting efforts were supported in the areas of history, civics, and geography, but not social studies. Yet, social studies is the area most widely recognized by the education community as encompassing history, civics, and geography as well as economics, law, and political science among other component disciplines. It is not clear how this decision was made, although it may have been a function of strong lobbying on the part of discipline-based professional organizations combined with the view that attention to core disciplines is preferable to the more interdisciplinary, and possibly less focused, area of social studies.

In contrast, the emphasis of federally funded standard-setting efforts on ELA actually brought together a number of subareas that had a long tradition within education of operating separately: reading, writing, listening, speaking, and literature. These areas arose from different disciplinary traditions that have had and continue to have a significant impact on the educational practices associated with each area. Although it is intuitively reasonable that these subareas should be combined into a single integrated area, individuals working in each of the subareas had little experience working together, making the consensus process within ELA even more difficult than it was for areas already organized in a manner consistent with the work in the field. Long-standing traditions were so strong that the national professional association in social studies moved forward to develop standards without federal funding, and many states simply bypassed the call for integrated ELA standards and continued to focus separately on reading, writing, listening/speaking, and, to a lesser extent, literature.

The Clinton administration, in support of the systemic reform agenda, made Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) the centerpiece of its education agenda. Around the same time, the reauthorization of Title I within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994 put teeth into the move toward standards-based reform by requiring states

wishing to continue receiving Title I funds to develop and implement challenging standards and assessments for *all* students. The 1994 Goals 2000 legislation formally authorized the NEGP and the national education goals. This legislation also called for the creation of a new federal agency, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), to certify national content and performance as well as school delivery/opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards and state assessments.

### **Moving Away From National Standards**

Although the Goals 2000 legislation passed, it was not without controversy on a number of issues, including the desirability of school delivery or OTL standards. As noted by Ravitch (1995), advocates for students in low-income districts championed OTL standards as a means of forcing equalization of resources and funding in the nation's schools. These advocates argued that it was unfair to expect students in these districts to meet the same educational standards as those who attended well-funded schools. Opposition to OTL standards came mainly from governors, who saw these types of standards as an invitation to the federal government to impose unfunded mandates and regulation on states and local schools (Ravitch, 1995). Porter (1993) summed up the debate when he suggested that OTL standards could either provide "a vision . . . of what good practice might be," the original intent, or "prescriptions of required practice that can be used to police the actions of teachers, administrators, and politicians" (p. 25).

Although education was not a major theme in the 1994 congressional elections, conservative candidates frequently criticized Goals 2000 as a dangerous step toward federal control of education. In a climate in which Republican leaders wanted to reduce the power of the federal government and even eliminate the U.S. Department of Education, Goals 2000 was an obvious target as a symbol of federal intervention into local control. NESIC was one of its most objectionable features because it would have the power to tell states whether their standards and assessments were good enough (Ravitch, 1995). As the political campaign of 1994 was coming to a close, the issue of national standards captured the spotlight when Lynne Cheney vigorously attacked the proposed national history standards, which had just been released. Cheney criticized the standards as being too negative in their treatment of the United States, the West, and White males; too dismissive of traditional heroes; and too uncritical in their embrace of multiculturalism. Other critics, including historians, asserted that the standards were politically biased in their descriptions of controversial issues and 20th-century presidents (Ravitch, 1995, p. xvii).

The response to the proposed history standards helped doom NESIC before it was ever actually created and, with it, any federal role in certifying national and state standards (Ravitch, 1995). The history standards became a symbol, in the eyes of state and federal policymakers, that it would be impossible to forge national standards that would have broad public credibility. This image of failure was reinforced by the publication in March 1996 of a set of proposed national ELA standards developed jointly by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA). The ELA standards released by these groups in 1996 were harshly criticized in the press—all but sealing the fate of efforts to develop national standards.

The issues surrounding the national history and ELA standards surfaced long-standing

differences in beliefs among educators, policymakers, business leaders, and the public about the nature and purpose of standards. Those who viewed standards as the cure for the ills of public education expected standards to be precise statements of the content to be mastered and measured. Those who saw standards as a means of improving the quality of teaching and learning for all students expected standards to provide guidelines that would be the subject of deliberation eventually leading to ownership by local communities. Underlying these expectations were clear differences in beliefs about the nature of knowledge, which, in turn, manifested themselves in different perspectives on teaching and learning. For example, the expectation that the knowledge to be gained will be explicitly described in standards reflects the belief that essential skills and knowledge can be objectively identified, transmitted directly through teaching, and discretely tested. In contrast, the expectation that standards will guide the construction of new knowledge reflects the belief that knowledge is situated, co-constructed by teachers and students within the social contexts of classrooms, and difficult to measure adequately through standardized tests.

In the wake of the controversies associated with the history and ELA standards, the processes and participants involved in standard setting also came under scrutiny. In principle, most had agreed that standard setting should include broad representation from all constituencies in processes that involved multiple iterations of draft materials. For example, the 1992 NCEST report recommended that

standards be developed through a broad-based process that involves educators, including scholars in each field. Teachers should play a key role in this process. So, too, should representatives of business and the public. The standards setting process should be informed by work in other industrialized countries in order to ensure that the new standards are world class. The process envisioned is a dynamic one with standards updated to meet changes in scholarship and to remain world class. (pp. 21–22)

In practice, however, early standard-setting efforts fell primarily to educators and disciplinary experts with limited or nonexistent input from the public and other constituent groups (cf. McDonnell & Weatherford, 1999).

Reflecting on these matters in the context of the evolution of state standard-setting efforts in California, McDonnell and Weatherford (1999) observed that standard-setting efforts faced serious problems as it became clear that standards embodied contested values about the content and purposes of public education. These problems were compounded by the fact that small, but vocal, segments of the public held strong views in opposition to those of the professionals who were developing standards. Enduring philosophical questions—for example, “Which educational content should be the prerogative of public education, and which should remain within the purview of the family?”—were joined with more practical questions about when students should use calculators and what role phonics should play in the curriculum. Over time, standard-setting efforts became more inclusive processes that involved not only education professionals but also parents, members of the business community, and other representatives of the public with a stake in the education system. Inclusiveness by itself, however, has not been a guarantee of consensus, as this depends on the nature of the involvement of individuals and/or groups representing different constituencies and the perspectives and legitimacy they bring to the process.

The perceived success of the consensus process is also related to the time allotted for the completion of a standard-setting effort. One of the keys to the success of the NCTM standards was a lengthy development process that took nearly a decade to complete. NCTM took plenty of time to educate the community about the need for standards, conduct research before the development committees met, and solicit review and feedback. Subsequent reform efforts have operated in a more politically charged environment than existed when NCTM was deliberating. However, it is important to recognize that consensus building is a long-term endeavor and that the time frame for development of standards has an impact on both the process and the product of standard setting (Massell, 1994a).

The issues associated with the proposed history and ELA standards also made clear the differences among groups of disciplinary experts and professional educators about what constitutes the domain of a particular subject-matter area. Such differences had not been readily apparent in the development of mathematics standards, suggesting that there were factors unique to mathematics that probably contributed to the success of the NCTM standards and did not necessarily apply to other subject areas (Massell, 1994b). For example:

Mathematics, unlike science or social studies, is not fragmented into a large number of competitive subdisciplines; furthermore, the subareas that do exist (e.g., geometry, algebra, calculus) share a common conceptual base and language. In contrast to English or science, mathematics does not tend to galvanize debate on pressing social issues or political concerns. The mathematics community has relatively few national organizations, and many have overlapping membership. These elements strengthen communication and provide a more solid foundation for consensus. (Massell, 1994c, p. 188)

The problems associated with moving forward at the national level led the governors to agree at the National Education Summit in 1996 that the pursuit of national standards had failed and that the states would be the primary vehicle for future standards development (Ravitch, 1995). This resulted in an increased emphasis on state standard development efforts already under way with support from the U.S. Department of Education and in response to the mandates associated with the 1994 reauthorization of Title I. The demise of NESIC, however, meant that there was no way to know whether the states had actually developed acceptably rigorous standards. As a result, the governors resolved to develop some kind of nongovernmental “entity” to evaluate state standards. This led to the creation of ACHIEVE in 1998 by the nation’s governors and corporate leaders. ACHIEVE was designed “to help states benchmark their academic standards and assessments against the best national and international exemplars” (<http://www.achieve.org>). A related purpose for creating ACHIEVE was to provide high-quality, constructive information about state standards, which had been difficult to obtain from the conflicting information coming from other evaluation efforts such as those conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Fordham Foundation, and the Council for Basic Education (CBE).

In an analysis of several of the groups evaluating state standards and their evaluations of ELA standards in particular, Valencia and Wixson (2001) identified some of the ideological and political factors operating within these various evaluating bodies that gave rise to dramatically different evaluations of the same sets of standards. Some of

these differences were apparent in the criteria used by different groups to evaluate standards. For example, the AFT evaluations were focused on the extent to which state standards were sufficiently clear and specific to provide the basis for a common core curriculum from elementary school through high school. Although the AFT evaluations included content coverage, they were not intended to judge the quality or rigor of the content covered. In contrast, the CBE evaluations were designed primarily to examine the rigor of state standards while acknowledging the importance of specificity, clarity, and organization and the confounding effects these qualities have on judging rigor. ACHIEVE evaluations were based on the premise that standards must be specific enough about content to provide guidance to teachers as they develop lessons, to parents as they guide students' learning, and to curriculum and test developers who write standards-based materials and tests—that is, standards should be sufficiently specific to be measurable. The issues raised by the various criteria used to evaluate state standards are at the heart of the continuing debates around what makes high-quality standards.

Valencia and Wixson (2001) argued that rather than simply reflecting different criteria, these ratings reflect much deeper and nuanced philosophical and political beliefs about the discipline, its curriculum and instruction, and the role of standards in teaching and learning. Beneath the rhetoric of evaluation are fundamental beliefs about the role of standards and the nature of learning within specific disciplines that are reflected in evaluations. Some believe that standards should be so specific as to lead schools to a core curriculum, while others see standards as distinct from the curriculum; some accept process approaches to particular disciplines, while others do not; some are tied to measurable outcomes, while others include standards that may be difficult to measure in large-scale assessments; and so forth.

As with the concerns expressed about the proposed national history and ELA standards, differences among various evaluation efforts made more prominent the tensions surrounding the nature and purpose of standards. Many educators who were willing to support standards did so when the standards reflected contemporary views of teaching and learning and were designed to provide guidance for the development of local curricula. These educators found the concept of standards as prescribed curricula antithetical to their beliefs about teaching and learning. In contrast, however, a significant number of the educators who were faced with direct implementation of standards believed that greater specificity in standards was desirable for developing local curriculum and instruction. Similarly, the policymakers, business leaders, and members of the public who were often focused more on the economic imperative than advances in knowledge about teaching and learning wanted to see standards that described exactly what students should know and be able to do and could serve as a prescription for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

### **Resurgence of National Attention to Standards**

If education had not been a central theme in the 1994 congressional elections, it resurfaced as a major focus of the 1996 presidential elections. As Sims (1999) wrote, “from the myriad of proposals Clinton offered during the campaign, it was clear that the President was . . . creating for himself an image as the ‘education president’ ” (p. 3). A

large focus of Clinton's education package in 1996 was his continued emphasis on world-class national standards and assessments, extending his commitment to the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) as well as the mandated state standards and assessments included in the 1994 reauthorization of Title I. President Clinton's 1996 education agenda and President George W. Bush's education platform in 2001 provided evidence that although the *national* standards and assessments movement had been forced "underground" in the mid-1990s, it quickly took root and blossomed through different venues. Ironically, it would be the conservative Republican leaders who wanted to reduce the power of the federal government in education during the mid-1990s who orchestrated the new tools of national and federal education reform in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The resurgence of national attention to standards and assessments can be characterized as a shift from what McDonnell and Weatherford (1999, 2000) described as a more deliberative to a competitive process of policy-making. The deliberative process that had prevailed prior to the rebirth of national involvement is an ideal advocated by political theorists and public intellectuals that embodies inclusiveness, equal standing, open-mindedness, and credibility as essential to decision making (Bohman, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). In contrast, the competitive approach to policy-making is

more adversarial and partisan, emphasizing the winning of political victories, often by sharply differentiating oneself from one's opponent. In arenas such as this, compromise is possible, but it comes through bargaining—strategizing, bluffing, splitting the difference—more than through persuasion, and the incentive for compromise is the need to build a winning coalition, rather than the explicit aim of working collaboratively to articulate a conception of the public interest. If one side does not need opponents' votes for victory, there is little incentive to get them on board because it will dilute political "credit claiming" and ideological purity. (McDonnell & Weatherford, 1999, p. 44)

The competitive arena often has the power to modify or unilaterally reject the work of deliberative bodies—or short-circuit the potential for deliberation that a relationship of shared authority would provide. McDonnell and Weatherford (1999) argued further that although some might suggest that the deliberative arena is preferable because it is less partisan, more civil, and more likely to facilitate solutions all sides can live with, there are also strong arguments for the electoral accountability of the competitive approach to policy-making. They also acknowledged that, in practice, it is likely that deliberative processes will nearly always need to coexist and work with other paradigms of democratic decision making, particularly more competitive or adversarial forms. As examined further in the final section of this chapter, there has been a noticeable shift of emphasis in standard setting from deliberative to competitive processes of decision making over time.

At the national level, the shift to a more competitive approach to decision making has been most apparent in the area of reading. Reading was the subject of much of President Clinton's emphasis on educational standards and assessments largely as a result of scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment indicating that approximately 40% of all U.S. fourth-grade students were reading below a "basic" level—as defined by the NAEP proficiency levels (McDaniel, Sims, & Miskel, 2001). In his 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton urged the Congress and the American people that "we must do more to help our children read" (Clinton, 1997).

To this end, the president proposed the America Reads program and a new voluntary national test in reading that was to gauge whether students were meeting “national standards of excellence . . . not federal government standards, but national standards” (cited in Hoff, 1997, pp. 2–3). This meant standards that were national in scope but not under the control of the federal government (Smith, Fuhrman, & O’Day, 1994).

Both proposals were swiftly and decisively defeated, with the opposition led by Representative Goodling (R-PA), then chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. America Reads went forward without legislation, and Goodling won approval for his own version of the literacy legislation, the Reading Excellence Act (REA), which was passed into law in October 1998. Reading research conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and its acting chief, Reid Lyon, was very influential in helping Goodling and his committee draft legislation for the REA (McDaniel, Sims, & Miskel, 2001). Also, McDaniel et al. (2001) noted that those groups not in complete accordance with NICHD, such as the IRA, NCTE, and NEA, prominent organizations within the reading educational community, were not invited to testify at hearings on the REA.

Goodling’s bill explicitly—and, in the view of many educators, too narrowly— defined reading, effective reading instruction, and the type of research on which reading instruction was to be based. The original language of the bill used the term “reliable, replicable research,” which Goodling (1997) defined as “objective, valid, scientific studies.” “Reliable, replicable research” eventually was negotiated to read as the now (in)famous “scientifically based reading research,” which appeared for the first time in the REA and was to be replicated more than 100 times in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (Miskel & Athan, 2001). Although the REA did not explicitly set national standards for reading, it did serve to promulgate one set of values and ideas in the highly controversial arena of national reading policy. It legislated, for the first time, a “national” (or, at least, federal) definition of reading, reading research, and effective reading instruction. The U.S. Department of Education called the REA “the most significant child literacy law in three decades” (cited in Sims, 1999, p. 40).

Following closely on the heels of REA, Congress commissioned a panel—the National Reading Panel (NRP)—to conduct an assessment of research-based knowledge on the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read, the readiness of the programs for classroom instruction, and a strategy for rapidly disseminating the information to schools. The panel published its findings and conclusions in *Teaching Children to Read* (NRP, 2000), which immediately garnered mixed reviews (e.g., Garan, 2001; Krashen, 2001; Pressley, 2001), revealing once more the intellectual and ideological differences among reading educators. Despite the criticism, the NRP report played a key role in federal reading policy and in establishing current reading standards and practices, primarily through President George W. Bush’s Reading First initiative. Reading First is part of President Bush’s landmark education bill, the No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110), which was signed into law January 8, 2002.

Reading First and NCLB have kept the policy debate around standards alive in several ways. For example, states and districts in a position to receive funds to improve reading achievement must adhere to the definition of reading provided in the Reading First legislation, which was taken almost directly from the NRP report. States must adopt “scientifically based” reading programs that are sanctioned by federal review boards;

usually those programs approved are a select few phonics-oriented and heavily scripted commercial packages. In addition, NCLB mandates that a sample of fourth and eighth graders in each state participate in NAEP testing every other year to provide a common national comparison for each state's results. Many states previously participated in voluntary state-by-state NAEP testing; however, now all states are required to take part in this "national" test. This mandatory NAEP testing affords a de facto version of the voluntary national tests in reading and mathematics so stridently debated and so soundly defeated in the previous administration—and it has the potential to make the NAEP subject-matter frameworks de facto national standards. Finally, the NCLB requirements of annual reading and mathematics testing in Grades 3–8 also encourage states to adopt standards and testing benchmarks at each grade level that are specific and more skills based in nature, as discussed further in the next section.

As we write this chapter, the more deliberative processes that accompanied the national education goals have been replaced by the more competitive politics of NCLB. The emphasis on accountability through annual testing in NCLB virtually dictates a view of content standards as measurable objectives. The irony for educators is that we appear to have come full circle. What began in the standards movement as the promise of moving beyond behaviorist thinking in teaching and learning now threatens to bring us right back to where we started.

### **A CASE STUDY**

We now turn to an example of how the tensions between ideas and values play out in a specific standard-setting effort. We discuss standard setting in ELA to examine how the process unfolds and is influenced by the theoretical and epistemological conversations within disciplines and the particular social and historical contexts in which these conversations take place. Our discussion is guided by a conceptual framework developed by Massell and Kirst (1994) that identifies the contexts that have an impact on the outcomes of any given standard-setting effort. We found the model useful in identifying the levels of context in which standards development occurs. However, it is not our intent, nor would it be possible, to make clear distinctions among these contexts. As we will demonstrate, they are necessarily overlapping and interrelated.

According to the model, the largest context in which standard-setting efforts are embedded includes the political, social, and cultural environment that shapes their outcomes. For example, the legacy of previous efforts to reform a particular subject-matter field is likely to have a strong impact on standard setting. Contentious debates, lessons learned about the decision-making process, analysis of implementation successes and failures, and other past experiences all play a role in any new standard-setting effort. The political climate during the time in which a standard-setting effort is in progress is also likely to have a significant impact on the outcome. In addition, preexisting public and professional consensus in a particular subject-matter field influences the effort in terms of both the project's overall goals and the processes used. As suggested by Massell and Kirst (1994):

It is important here to understand where the fault lines of the major curricular content disputes lie. In addition to the substantive debates, it is important to gain a general understanding of the influence structure of the field—the associations, interest groups,

and other organized elements that determine the dialogues and directions in a subject-matter area. (p. 113)

Embedded within the political, social, and cultural contexts are the local conceptual elements around planning, such as overall goals and the management structures that surround any given standard-setting effort. According to Massell and Kirst (1994), the elements of the local context include systemic linkages and process factors that can influence adoption and implementation. Specifically, these include aspects of the management of the agenda-setting effort such as selection and grouping of participants, staffing, lines of authority, rules of deliberation, and financial/technical resources. A critical dimension of the local context is who participates in the process.

Embedded within the local conceptual structure are the more particular elements of the deliberative process, including the following: agreeing on goals and standards, writing documents, obtaining feedback, and revision. This is the level at which decisions are deliberated that fundamentally shape standards and their role, including how to parse and/or integrate subject matter, level of uniformity of content for all students, and level of specificity at which standards are written.

The elements of standard-setting efforts included in this framework—political, social, and cultural contexts; local conceptual structures; and particulars of the deliberative process—are, as emphasized by Massell and Kirst, always interwoven within any given standards project. This was decidedly so in the case of ELA, in which standard-setting efforts have met with highly politicized responses to both content and process. Intellectual debates within the discipline have been intimately tied to larger social movements, and deliberative processes have varied greatly depending on the national or state contexts in which they occurred.

As with the standards movement generally, standards development in ELA unfolds as both a national and a state story. Since national and state standards development efforts in ELA began in the early 1990s, each has been more or less prominent at particular moments, and each has influenced the direction of the other into the first years of the 21st century. In this section, we discuss national and state standards efforts in ELA, how these efforts have influenced each other, and how they have been shaped by the social, political, and intellectual contexts in which they have occurred.

### **Disciplinary Contexts: Theoretical Movements and Intellectual Debates**

In addition to the previously described political contexts surrounding standard setting, many of the issues that have fueled debates about content standards and influenced the direction of standard-setting efforts in ELA reflect theoretical shifts within the disciplines of both reading and English. These theoretical shifts reflect new ways of thinking about the social nature of knowledge and the role that culture plays in learning. Prominent among these influences was the “cognitive revolution” in education, as discussed previously, which emphasized the active role of the learner in constructing knowledge and had a great impact on the field of reading, shifting views of reading instruction from rote instruction in basic skills to a focus on the active role of the individual reader and his or her past experiences or “prior knowledge” in building new knowledge through texts (e.g., Anderson, 1977; Pearson, 1979). Equally influential were sociocognitive and sociocultural perspectives that further challenged views of literacy learning to move

beyond the active *individual* learner and include social context and interaction as crucial components of learning through reading, writing, speaking, and listening (e.g., Bakhtin, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978).

As theoretical shifts in the underlying disciplines were transforming approaches to the teaching of reading, similarly momentous philosophical and theoretical shifts were fueling debates within literary theory that caused significant changes within the field and in educators' views of what the study of English should entail in schools (Eagleton, 1983; Elbow, 1990). For instance, literary theory had largely rejected the humanism of the "new critics" in favor of critical theory and poststructuralism. These theories, though many and including important variations, all call into question the base assumptions of humanism by asserting that the author, reader, and reality itself are produced by and function within language. Furthermore, these theories assert that language and texts are implicated in power relationships in society. Knowledge, from these perspectives, is not absolute but contingent; what constitutes reality is not an objective given but a subjective interpretation. These theories held enormous implications and have had a tremendous influence on the field of English.

During the 1980s, the influences of feminist literary theory, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies began to have a significant impact on debates about curriculum in the study of literature (Saldivar, 1997). Scholars in feminist theory and ethnic studies emphasized that the traditional canon included primarily works by White male authors and that the criteria used to judge the worth of literature were subjective and political rather than objective and disinterested (e.g., Gates, 1992; Showalter, 1985). These debates resulted in major revisions to some university curricula in English (Abrams, 1997) and increased research on and revisions to the use of the traditional canon in the K–12 curriculum (e.g., Applebee, 1992; Bishop, 1990; Pace, 1992).

These theoretical influences in reading and English argued for classroom practices that were less teacher directed, were more focused on the student as an active agent of his or her own learning, and emphasized diverse perspectives through literature. In ELA, this meant encouraging students to engage with "authentic literature" rather than the contrived texts of traditional basal readers. Writing instruction emphasized process, personal reflection and response, and student choice of topic. It meant fewer worksheets on the skills of grammar and phonics and more attention to skill instruction in the context of literature or students' own writing. These perspectives encouraged the use of texts that represented ethnic and racial diversity and encouraged students to adopt multiple perspectives in discussions of texts. These reforms were met with resistance from individuals who feared that they represented a move toward a less rigorous curriculum, a fragmentation of U.S. culture, and a relativist epistemology (e.g., A. Bloom, 1987; D'Souza, 1991).

As theoretical shifts and political movements transformed approaches to curricula, teaching, and learning, some educators and laypersons invested in education argued the need to return to a "back-to-basics" approach reemphasizing basic skills such as phonics, grammar, and writing conventions and instruction in the literary "classics" or the traditional canon (e.g., H. Bloom, 1994; Finn, 1991). As discussed subsequently, the tensions between "back to basics" and more current approaches to ELA were particularly visible in certain state-level standards development processes.

## The National Standards Story in English Language Arts

The Standards Project for the English Language Arts (SPELA) officially began in October of 1992 when NCTE and IRA, along with the Center for the Study of Reading (CSR) at the University of Illinois, were awarded a federal grant to develop national standards in ELA. As discussed previously, the proposed national ELA standards and the controversies surrounding them crystallized many of the tensions inherent in standards development, including beliefs about standards and the roles they should serve, what content is most important for students to learn, and the nature of knowledge and teaching.

IRA, NCTE, and the Center for the Study of Reading began to lay the groundwork for the national standards project in the summer of 1992. Given the different emphases of NCTE and IRA, the two largest ELA professional organizations, it was not a given that the groups could come to consensus on even a broad vision of the field that could guide a standard-setting venture. Although both organizations have more recently broadened their focus around issues of K–12 literacy, they have historically focused on different domains of ELA and different developmental levels; in addition, they have drawn on different disciplinary bases. IRA has tended to focus more on reading at the elementary level, and its primary disciplinary foundations are psychology and linguistics. NCTE has tended to focus more on writing and literature at the secondary and college levels and has been primarily grounded in the discipline of English (and, more specifically, literary criticism, rhetoric, and composition studies). To begin conversations between the organizations, the IRA Board of Directors, the NCTE Executive Council, and representatives from the Center for the Study of Reading held a meeting in Chicago in August 1992 to discuss shared assumptions about standards and visions for the field of ELA (Russ, 1992). As Marie Clay, then president of IRA, explained:

This was really a meeting in which we brought the two boards together to explore how much consensus there was between them, and I think it has shown that we do have consensus.... We have already done a lot of thinking in our own areas. We need now to cross-fertilize those [thoughts] across the two organizations. (cited in Russ, 1992, p. 8)

As articulated by Miles Myers (1994), one of the leaders of the project, the areas of consensus included the following:

Meaning in English processes is socially constructed, leading to complex and multiple readings of texts; knowledge about language is learned through the use of language and reflection about that use; and language is an instrument of power and recreation, providing both a means of labeling and structuring human relationships and a means of liberation and restructuring those relationships. (p. 70)

In addition to exploring consensus on issues related to the field, the August 1992 meeting was designed as a forum for discussions about the nature and purpose of national standards. Toward that end, organizers invited John Dossey, past president of NCTM, to speak about that organization's standard-setting process and the vision of standards that informed its project. Dossey spoke to the group about key principles that had guided the NCTM standards, for example: Teachers are the key figures in changing the way subjects are taught in schools; change requires adequate resources and long-term support; and grade-level expectations or achievement levels are to be avoided so that local districts can tailor standards to meet their individual needs. Dossey also emphasized the importance of

building consensus in the field and advised that the organizations be prepared to deal with debates around content, citing the literary canon as an example of an area of content that was likely to brew controversy.

Dossey's comments provided a context for SPELA participants to discuss the commitments that would drive their standards work. These included an emphasis on teacher control of curriculum and instruction, inclusion of OTL standards, and a level of specificity in standards that would leave room for significant local interpretations. Furthermore, the August meeting foreshadowed key struggles over content that were driven by theoretical and epistemological tensions both within the field itself and between ELA educators and their critics among policymakers and the general public.

The project was housed at the Center for the Study of Reading and directed by a 25-member English Standards Board that included ELA professionals, business leaders, public officials, and representatives of the general public. The day-to-day operations of the project were overseen by the board director and the three leaders of the collaborating organizations (David Pearson, director of the Center for the Study of Reading; Miles Myers, executive director of NCTE; and Terry Salinger, director of research at IRA). As one of their first tasks, the project leaders set up three task forces to represent the interests of educators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. These task forces of 8 to 9 members included classroom teachers, district and school administrators, professors, and other ELA professionals such as literacy specialists and directors of writing projects (NCTE/IRA, 1996). The project was organized into five overlapping phases that would unfold across the planned 3-year duration, beginning with development of an initial prospectus and framework for the project and moving to the drafting and dissemination of the standards and the classroom vignettes that would illustrate their use.

As these attempts to involve a broad spectrum of ELA professionals would suggest, building consensus was articulated early as one of the primary goals of the standards project. SPELA leaders emphasized that the project would seek input from a broad spectrum of interested groups to form the basis for broad consensus (Roettger, 1993). The standards were viewed, as IRA Executive Director Alan Farstrup put it, "as a shared process rather than a product" (cited in Roettger, 1993, p. 4). SPELA leaders and participants who have written about the standards development process emphasize that the standards had many reviewers both within and outside the field of ELA (Salinger, 1995–1996; Suhor, 1994). Importantly, the vast majority of these reviewers were educators, and the majority of those were teachers in K–12 schools. NCTE and IRA had recruited as many teachers as possible to become involved in reviewing drafts of the standards by publishing invitations to join the effort in their newsletters (e.g., IRA, 1993). They also solicited vignettes from teachers for possible inclusion in the standards document.

SPELA's vision of standards was clear from the beginning of the project. In December 1992, an IRA publication, *Reading Today*, summarized some of the goals of the project as articulated by SPELA leaders: viewing SPELA as an opportunity to define the common core of what was valued in the field, creating standards that reflected diversity as a resource, and crafting standards that were generative rather than definitive, were dynamic rather than static, and would serve as an adaptable framework for local schools and districts (IRA, 1992/1993). These very commitments were the focus of some of the most pointed criticisms aimed at the ELA standards after their unveiling in 1996. In

addition, not all members of NCTE and IRA embraced the idea of national standards.

The very idea of content standards was controversial within the field. Some believed strongly that standards were not in the best interest of the profession or of children in that they encouraged a “one size fits all” approach to learning and teaching and capitulated to political rhetoric about failing public schools (Goodman, 1994; Shannon, 1996). Standards were viewed by some as part of a larger effort to increasingly control education by imposing a single path to achievement rather than supporting multiple means to similar ends. Others critiqued standards for epistemological reasons, arguing that standards represented a view of knowledge as absolute rather than situational and contingent (Mayher, 1999). Still others worried about the common conception of standards as “high” and, therefore, tied to the top quartile of students (Mayher, 1999). There were English educators who questioned the motives of the national organizations for jumping aboard the standards wagon and accused the organizations of being too easily led down the standards path (Shannon, 1996).

Even among ELA educators who took leadership roles in the standard-setting effort, the approach to standards was one that might be termed wary optimism. For instance, two of the co-directors of the project—Miles Myers and David Pearson— wrote of the potential for standards to play a positive role in local conversations about curriculum and instruction in K–12 ELA. However, both were also careful to clearly articulate a view of standards that valued breadth, diversity, opportunity to learn, and, ultimately, local control over specifics of content and implementation (Myers, 1994; Pearson, 1993). These commitments resulted in very broad standards that left ample room for local interpretation. SPELA’s approach to content standards reflected both deeply held philosophical perspectives about teaching and learning in ELA and the need for SPELA’s leaders to speak to and for professionals in a field that seemed to be at least somewhat skeptical of the standards enterprise. Arguably, the most consequential of SPELA’s actions was the decision to craft a single set of K–12 standards, a highly unusual move in standard-setting efforts and one that garnered much criticism. The SPELA standards were inevitably compared with content standards being developed by various disciplines at both the state and national levels, the majority of which had been organized into grade-level clusters, if not by individual grade levels; as a result, the ELA standards were found lacking in both content and specificity.

Although the desire to craft standards that invited interpretation among educators in ELA was undoubtedly a factor in the development process, the very large grain size of the national ELA standards is attributable to more than a desire to leave room for conversation. It was also a result of the breadth of intellectual and disciplinary commitments in the field. In Myers’s words, written in the midst of the process, “the task of describing content in English is happening at the very moment that the foundations of the discipline are a matter of professional and public debate. We are not describing a target that is standing still” (1994, p. 152). Similarly, Peter Elbow (1990) wrote that ELA “seems to be more divided or disunified across levels than other disciplines” (p. 114). Indeed, the field of ELA is an umbrella under which several disciplines gather, including, most prominently, English, linguistics, and psychology, but with philosophy, sociology, and anthropology also influential. Each discipline brings its own commitments and theoretical orientations with accompanying ideas about the content that is crucial to an exemplary ELA curriculum. In addition, the disciplines of most influence have

traditionally varied among developmental levels of schooling, with psychology and its theories of cognition having greater influence in elementary language arts and English and literary theory having greater influence at the secondary level. Furthermore, as the foundational perspectives on learning and knowledge shifted within the key disciplines, the perspectives held by some within those disciplines, as well as other influential players (policymakers, legislators, business leaders, and certain public intellectuals), remained firmly ensconced in more traditional notions. Given this range of views within and outside ELA, the national organizations would be hard-pressed to achieve consensus on more specific national standards.

In January of 1994 the standards were reviewed, and criticized, by the federal government. According to project members, when drafts of the standards were submitted to the federal government at a site visit, the Department of Education found them too broad and too vague (Myers, 1996). The Department of Education expected standards that were specific enough to be measured, an expectation that would not be met by SPELA's K–12 standards (Diegmüller, 1994a). SPELA leaders reiterated their argument that the standards were purposely written broadly, allowing room for states and districts to adapt them locally—the philosophy that had been articulated from the beginning of the project (Burke, 1996; Myers, 1996). However, when SPELA submitted its application for continuation of federal funding in March 1994, the negative response was swift and final. The government discontinued funding for the project, finding the draft standards lacking in both content and specificity (Diegmüller, 1994b). Critics also charged that the standards relied on academic jargon, were too focused on the reading and writing process (as opposed to skills), and devalued grammar, spelling, and canonical literature (Diegmüller, 1994a; Ravitch, 2000). In addition, the government did not support the inclusion of OTL standards, a component that SPELA considered crucial.

As discussed previously, OTL standards were viewed by many educators as a way to ensure equity of resources across districts. These standards were controversial because of the funding requirements they could potentially impose on states. From early in the standards development process, SPELA was steadfast in its belief that the content standards should be accompanied by a set of “delivery standards,” essentially a set of OTL standards meant to ensure that schools had the structures and resources available to enact the curriculum and pedagogy embedded in the national standards (Myers, 1994). The OTL standards were key to the political commitment of the leadership in the ELA development process. For instance, Myers (1994) cited the OTL standards as a primary ethical motivation for NCTE's involvement in the standards effort; Pearson (1993) pointed to the crucial importance of attention to “equity at the outcomes level”; and Marshall, the executive secretary for the secondary task force of SPELA, defined content standards as “the kinds of curricular experiences in which all students ought to have an opportunity to participate” (cited in Pearson, 1993, p. 462). The issues the organizations wished to address through this focus on OTL were very specific and included the following: elimination of tracking, teacher load (no English class should exceed 20 students, and no teacher's daily load should exceed 80 students), a move toward performance assessment, adequate time for teachers to prepare and grade, and budgeting and restructuring of the school day. Clearly, these standards would require significant funding and oversight on the part of states.

Even as these and other tensions led the Department of Education to reject SPELA's

proposal for continued funding, IRA and NCTE decided to forge ahead with the work of constructing ELA standards, hoping that the document might have some influence on states' and districts' efforts to build their own sets of content standards (IRA, 1994). In the meantime, the Department of Education announced in the summer of 1994 that it would publish a request for proposals for the development of national standards in ELA. That fall, IRA and NCTE developed draft standards that they circulated for review; in addition, they filed objections to the Department of Education's plan to fund other efforts to develop national ELA standards. According to reports published in *Education Week*, the Department of Education received hundreds of letters from ELA educators vowing that they would not support any standard-setting efforts in ELA unless NCTE and IRA were centrally involved (Diegmueller, 1994a). Soon after, the Department of Education announced that it would not fund a national standards project in ELA (Diegmueller, 1994b; NCTE/ IRA, 1996). After 2 years of further drafts, reviews, and revisions, the final draft of the national standards was unveiled, to much controversy, at a press conference in March 1996.

From the moment of their unveiling, the SPELA standards were criticized, by both educators and noneducators, as lacking in content and specificity. For instance, Ravitch (2000) described the national ELA standards as “an unmitigated disaster” and “lacking in content and actual standards” (p. 437). The standards were criticized in newspaper columns and op-ed pieces across the country as not holding “students to any standards,” as “gobbledygook,” and as mired in “pedagogical molasses” (e.g., Feagler, 1996; *New York Times*, 1996; Rochester, 1996). In addition, the standards had critics among ELA professionals, who echoed concerns that the standards were not rigorous and were too vague to be useful (Maloney, 1997; Zorn, 1997). Critics desired standards that more clearly specified content at particular grade levels, that defined the literature students should read, and that included a view of knowledge as absolute rather than relative. In contrast, many ELA educators praised the standards, citing the criticized characteristics as strengths (e.g., Burke, 1996). Ultimately, SPELA's and critics' definitions of standards and the purposes they should serve were incommensurable.

### **The State Standards Story in English Language Arts**

As the national ELA standards were being developed, states were working to create their own standards. When it became clear that there would be no official national ELA standards, the state standards took on increased importance. In the early to mid-1990s, a time when the vast majority of states were engaged in efforts to construct standards in ELA, two circumstances were influencing state standards development in this subject area. First, California, a consistently important influence in educational reform (Chrispeels, 1997), was overhauling its standards in response to the state's low ranking in the 1992 and 1994 NAEP state-by-state test scores. In part because California was viewed as a leader in standards-based reform, the revised California ELA standards became a default model for many states (just as the previous framework had been a model for the national standards). Second, the grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to develop content standards in the key subject areas allowed states to undertake ambitious ELA standards-development projects. Some of these efforts—including those in Michigan and Texas—revealed political tensions around curriculum

and instruction in ELA and illustrate well the political and social contexts and deliberative processes cited by Massell (Massell & Kirst, 1994) as key influences on standards development.

The ELA standards that California constructed in the mid-1990s were starkly different from the curriculum framework crafted a decade earlier. In the mid-1980s, California had revised its curriculum in response to new theories of literacy learning, adopting a literature-based curriculum that encouraged teachers to teach skills through the reading of authentic literature, to employ process approaches to writing, and to implement portfolio assessment (Freeman, Freeman, & Fennacy, 1993). When NAEP began to report individual state scores in 1992, California ranked near the bottom in reading, fueling a conservative backlash against the ELA curriculum framework. Critics were quick to point to the NAEP results as proof that the curriculum required a renewed focus on basic skills, particularly phonics. Reid Lyon, Representative Goodling, and others who touted the importance of “scientifically based” reading methods became leaders in this movement to revise California’s approach to reading instruction. The result was a new set of California standards that were highly detailed and included a strong emphasis on word-level skills.

In 1995, California legislated a “back-to-basics” approach to reading with Assembly Bill 170, which required that the state-adopted curriculum materials in reading include “systematic, explicit phonics, spelling and basic computational skills.” This was followed by a 1998 law, Assembly Bill 1656, requiring all state-funded professional development providers to emphasize the role of phonics in learning to read. California’s new standards, currently in use, were widely pointed to as a model for other states’ standards efforts. Indeed, ACHIEVE selected the California standards as one of its models against which to compare other state ELA standards. As a result, the direction taken by California has had an influence on how state ELA standards have evolved.

As standard-setting efforts in California were beginning to influence the national conversation around reading, the states that had been awarded Department of Education grants for development of content standards were undertaking ambitious standards projects in ELA. Two of the states that received these grants for ELA standards development, Texas and Michigan, each saw highly politicized responses to initial versions of their ELA standards, but with different outcomes. In Michigan the deliberative process, with consensus as its goal, prevailed, and the initial version of the proposed ELA standards was adopted with relatively minor revisions. In contrast, the standard-setting process in Texas appeared to encompass elements of both the deliberative and the competitive arenas, which resulted in major changes in the initial version of the proposed ELA standards. In the following, we discuss briefly the standards development process in these two states and the political contexts that shaped the resulting outcomes.

For the past several decades, many of the major education policies in Texas have been initiated or supported by the Office of the Governor (Shepley, 2002). Many aspects of the current Texas school accountability system were begun during Governor Ann Richards’s administration. Business interests have also increasingly become entwined with Texas education policy, most publicly through the efforts of business tycoon Ross Perot. During his 1995–2000 tenure, Governor George W. Bush continued earlier efforts with a concentrated focus on improving the state’s reading achievement, garnering support from both political and business interest groups.

The Texas State Board of Education, along with the Texas Education Agency (TEA), began to revise the state standards (the Texas Essential Elements) in 1994, the year George W. Bush became governor. The effort to revise the reading standards was bolstered by Governor Bush's decision to make reading reform central to his education plan. In January of 1996, Governor Bush and Michael Moses, then commissioner of the TEA, announced the Texas Reading Initiative (TRI). They challenged Texans to have every child reading at grade level or higher by the end of third grade (Miskel et al., 2003). Shortly after the announcement of the TRI, Governor Bush and Commissioner Moses called a Governor's Business Council (GBC) reading summit in Austin to help promulgate the new reading initiative. With the GBC as the primary organizer, numerous reading summits were held in major cities throughout Texas, with experts such as Marilyn Adams, Barbara Foorman, and Reid Lyon advocating code-emphasis approaches to early reading instruction.

The launching of the TRI, with its phonics-oriented agenda for early reading instruction, was the backdrop for what was to become a long, contentious battle waged in the State Board of Education over revisions of the ELA standards. The State Board of Education and the TEA (headed by the same Commissioner Moses who would soon work with the governor on the TRI) began a review of the state curriculum standards in 1994 with the goal of making them more specific and rigorous (Shepley, 2002). Additional groundwork for creating new standards was codified in Senate Bill 1 (1995), which called for a new state curriculum. The bill established the manner in which the new standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills [TEKS]) would be used within the framework of the newly strengthened accountability system.

The State Board of Education began work on the new TEKS in 1994 by assembling writing teams for each of the content areas consisting of various stakeholders and educators. Thus, at least initially, there was an attempt at some level to make the standard-setting process deliberative, although arguably the specter of the governor and the TEA dominated the processes, with the GBC media blitz representing only one type of early reading instruction. In any case, the revisions to the ELA standards by the writing team became the focus of heated debate among members of a politically polarized state board. Five board members, who described themselves as Christian conservatives, argued that the revised standards were lacking in specificity and a focus on basic skills (Miskel et al., 2003). As one of the five former board members described it, "We went after the English Language Arts [standards]... We were very, very dissatisfied with the first and second drafts . . . [they] were very general; you could apply them generally and make up whatever you wanted" (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 10).

Governor Bush also expressed disappointment with the first ELA drafts. Characterizing them as vague, he suggested that the state standards be more clearly delineated. In a now (in)famous declaration, he suggested that

the document will determine the learning landscape for all of Texas, from our textbooks to our testing system, so it's important that we get it right and come up with a plan that is clear, concise, and do-able. No touchy-feely essays or learning by osmosis, no holding hands until the karma is right, just straightforward lists of state expectations. (cited in Brooks, 1996, p. 1)

Agreeing with the board's critiques of TEKS, Governor Bush further called for revisions

to increase specificity and the focus on word-level skills.

As the standards revision process became more heated within the state board, a member of the ELA writing team, a classroom teacher from Waco, along with seven other teachers and an educational consultant, spearheaded a substitute set of goals that became known as the Texas Alternative Document (TAD). The TAD was much more prescriptive than the writing team's drafts, calling for specific outcomes at each grade level. For example, first graders were expected to "read and spell the 44–45 phonemes of English and read and spell four sound words that use basic phonograms" (Texas Alternative Document, 1997). The ELA standards were again revised by the writing team in response to the TAD, but the next draft still did not satisfy the demands of the conservative board members.

The TAD architects and other supporters took their concerns before the board as the debate continued into 1997. At this juncture, the patience of the governor and the TEA began to wear thin. As a member of the TEA stated, "Governor Bush, by that time, had become somewhat . . . frustrated and tired of trying to make every change . . . we had made many, many changes to try and accommodate [the conservative board members'] wishes" (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 12). Although consensus had not been reached, Governor Bush put an end to the debate in 1997 by publicly backing a more moderate version of the revised TEKS, and the state board subsequently approved this version by a vote of 9–6 (Miskel et al., 2003).

By the time they were finally approved in 1997, the Texas ELA standards had undergone 3 years of contentious revision and, as a result, were substantively different from the standards that had first been submitted to the state board. Although the adopted standards did not fully reflect the wishes of the most conservative members of the board, neither did they represent those developed by the original consensus process. Yet, members of the state board who had supported the TAD and voted against the final draft maintained that the adopted TEKS were "bulging with fuzzy fluff and meaningless recommendations" (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 13). Governor Bush was more publicly satisfied with the revised document, stating that "the TEKS curriculum today is a far different and much improved document" (Brooks, 1997, p. 1).

The Texas ELA standard-setting process was a complex conglomerate of deliberative and competitive dynamics, underscoring the mix of values and ideas represented in Texas educational policy. In the final analysis, the outcome reflects the dominant legacy of a power nexus comprising the governor, the TEA, and more recently the GBC and other business interests (Shepley, 2002). In a study of Texas reading policy actors, Shepley (2002) found that the Office of the Governor was perceived as being "by far the most influential actor in Texas state reading policy . . . while the office of the Governor has relatively limited constitutional power, the office affords a 'bully pulpit' from which an entrepreneurial governor can test ideas and launch new policy initiatives" (p. 8). The TEA was found to be the second most influential actor in Shepley's study. According to one former state board member, "The state board never voted against the Texas Education Agency's suggestions. So really the commissioner and the TEA ran education, and the state board kind of looked over the agenda and said 'yes' to all of it" (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 13).

Conspicuous in their absence in the standard-setting process were Texas reading researchers and teachers' unions. Although the TAD document was authored by eight

teachers, most of the reading policies in Texas have been developed by government actors. According to Miskel et al. (2003), interest groups, including educators, have usually played only limited roles in Texas reading policy. A reading professor cited in Shepley's (2002) study confirmed that "what's true about most of these organizations, including the university, is that they've been . . . remarkably acquiescent and silent on most of the initiatives related to reading" (p. 17). Although Texas has four statewide organizations representing teachers, none was found to be particularly influential in state reading policy (Shepley, 2002). It is perhaps the following sentiment of a Texas business group member that best describes the role of educators in the ELA standard-setting process:

We have an interesting philosophy in Texas. We think that the schools belong to the people, not the teachers, not the professors. So frankly, we've never been concerned about what professors think. They fought us vigorously in the beginning on testing. They fought us on all variety of things. And so we invited them out of the meetings. We don't even talk to them. (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 19)

The Texas ELA standards story is one in which elements of both the deliberative and competitive policy-making arenas are evident. Although also politically fraught, the Michigan standards story that unfolded during this time was somewhat different. Michigan's long history of reading reforms includes the introduction of its statewide testing program in 1969 and, in 1973, becoming one of the first states to establish educational objectives/standards (Shepley, 2002). In the 1980s, Michigan's reading policy underwent significant changes when the state's definition of reading was revised from a focus on word identification and fluency to an emphasis on reading as a dynamic process of constructing meaning from texts. The new definition led to major changes in the way reading was assessed on the state test. The move to revise the state's definition of reading represented a collaboration among the University of Michigan, the Michigan Reading Association, and the Michigan Department of Education that continued into the standards movement of the 1990s.

The work to craft ELA content standards in Michigan began in 1993 with a 3-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the Michigan Department of Education in collaboration with the University of Michigan. Participants in the standards project—called the Michigan English Language Arts Framework (MELAF) project—included state department personnel, university researchers, professional development experts, teachers representing the professional organizations related to ELA in Michigan, and teams of teachers and administrators from four Michigan "demonstration" districts. The primary objective of the MELAF project was to develop a statewide framework that integrated the English language arts through a vision statement; K–12 content standards; grade-level benchmarks for K–3, 3–6, 6–9, and 9–12; and guidelines for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. In addition, the MELAF project was designed to develop an inclusive process that worked from both the top down and the bottom up and to develop and support demonstration projects for implementing the standards at the local level (Wixson, Peters, & Potter, 1996).

The MELAF project grant was awarded to the Michigan Department of Education at the same time as other curriculum framework projects were initiated in mathematics/science, geography, and social studies. Subsequent to the initiation of these framework

projects, Public Acts 335, 336, and 339 were signed into law in December 1993. Public Act 336 altered the entire funding structure of public education in Michigan, while Public Acts 335 and 339 expanded an existing law to include additional quality controls, the most notable of which was a required State Board of Education Core Academic Curriculum. To be accredited, schools were required to provide core academic curricula to the State Board of Education in the areas of mathematics, science, reading, writing, history, geography, economics, and American government. This legislation significantly shortened MELAF's time line for developing a working draft of the content standards.

The State Board of Education used the work of the ongoing curriculum framework projects, including MELAF, to develop a draft of Michigan's new Core Academic Curriculum content standards; the draft was approved in August 1994. The plan was that the standards would then enter an 18-month period of review and public hearings, resulting in a revised document that would be submitted to the State Board of Education for approval before being forwarded to the Michigan legislature. However, the election in the fall of 1994 of more conservative legislators and members of the State Board of Education changed the political climate to favor voluntary as opposed to a mandated curricula. Although the state held public hearings and the State Board of Education approved standards, the standards were never forwarded to the Michigan legislature.

Although most of the public hearings on the proposed ELA standards were uneventful, one or two resulted in a fair amount of criticism stemming largely from respondents' philosophical, social, and political contexts for understanding the proposed standards. For example, a standard called "Language" was understood by some to mean that students would be taught to speak nonstandard dialects, when the intent was to recognize that it is necessary to build on an understanding of students' language to enable them to use English effectively in all situations. Similarly, the omission of words such as "classics" was interpreted by some to mean that these would not be part of any instruction resulting from the standards, when the intent was to include classics along with a wider range of literature (Wixson et al., 1996).

MELAF project members revised the draft ELA standards in response to feedback from a variety of sources, including the public hearings. These revised standards were presented to the State Board of Education in July 1995 for its approval along with testimony from teachers in support of the revised MELAF standards. Before approving the ELA standards, members of the State Board of Education edited them in ways that outraged many in the MELAF project. In addition to not liking the changes that had been made, MELAF members were incensed that the board would make unilateral changes to the revisions that had resulted from the public hearings, particularly because they believed that the standards would be the mandated curriculum for districts. Subsequently, the ELA professional organizations in Michigan approved the version of the standards that the MELAF project had submitted to the board at its July meeting. For most of the next year, the ELA community in Michigan urged districts to work with the approved MELAF standards rather than the version approved by the State Board of Education.

Although MELAF participants were incensed at the board's response to their work, most remained committed to the project. However, the State Board of Education continued to be concerned about the ELA standards and the grade-level benchmarks MELAF was developing to accompany them. Several members of the board were adamant about the need for more focus on direct instruction in phonics. To build their

case, they invited Bob Sweet, then head of the National Right to Read Foundation, to testify on the importance of phonics instruction. The board also sponsored a trip for select Michigan educators to Houston to visit a school using a highly scripted phonics curriculum. In an interview for a policy study, a former member of the Michigan Department of Education commented:

The role of phonics in reading instruction turned into religious warfare. I say that because we had people from a particular conservative Christian perspective [who] felt that what we were doing [redefining reading] was wrong. As a conservative Christian myself, I wanted to speak out to these people because they had literally taken some things [out of context] and were just absolutely flat-out lying about it. (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 5)

Early in 1996, the State Board of Education reviewed the MELAF project's second annual progress report, which also included a description of the upcoming work of the third year of the project. Displeased with the content of the report and the direction of the project, the board threatened to redirect the project by identifying new leadership. As the highly publicized controversy threatened to derail the MELAF project, a joint steering committee overseeing the standards in all core subject areas petitioned the State Board of Education to preserve the development of ELA standards and grade-level benchmarks. To continue their process, MELAF leaders agreed to two conditions required by the board: First, they would consider alternative methods of reading instruction; second, they would employ Bob Sweet—a strong advocate for more specific, skills-oriented standards—as a consultant.

As the MELAF project moved forward, the conservative members of the State Board of Education sought to reject the grade-level benchmarks that MELAF brought for the board's approval in the fall of 1996. Confronted with the board-led criticisms, local teachers advocated strongly for the drafted benchmarks. Teachers who had never before testified publicly defended the standards and benchmarks. As one teacher explained, "I mean I've gone to the state board of education and spoke on behalf of the standards and benchmarks. I mean when would you think a little first grade teacher from [my district] would ever have anything to say about what happens on a state level?" (cited in Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002, pp. 797–798). In the end, the conservative board members did not have the votes necessary to reject the benchmarks, and—in a compromise—the board voted to "accept" the benchmarks rather than approve them. Although not mandated, the standards and benchmarks were viewed as highly influential by districts. As one administrator said, "[The standards are] not voluntary. I mean, they're voluntary in the legal sense, but, yeah, everybody knows what they are.... Everybody looks at them. They matter to a school district" (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 6).

The teachers and administrators advocating for the MELAF standards and benchmarks made a difference in the outcome of the approval process. As discussed by Cusick and Borman, the teachers involved in MELAF "legitimized the reforms to critics and gave the standards a practical and reassuring slant that mollified a hostile State Board" (2002, p. 782). These constituent voices represented a grass-roots effort to resist the pressures of the State Board of Education and contributed to sustaining a deliberative process in relation to the ELA standards. Although the conservative members of the State Board of Education did not retreat from their positions, it became clear over time that the standards and benchmarks would survive.

In spite of the long and contentious process, the approved ELA standards were not significantly different from those that MELAF had originally developed. In the end, as one board member explained, the conservative board members “simply didn’t have the votes” to force the creation of significantly different standards (cited in Shepley, 2002, p. 6). The board’s criticisms had been met with resistance from a broad and vocal range of constituents, resulting in compromises from each side on some issues. In this way, Michigan’s standards process can be viewed as an example of the deliberative process prevailing.

Although Michigan’s ELA standards were greeted with hostility similar to that met by the Texas standards, the Michigan standards survived with relatively few changes, while the Texas standards underwent fundamental changes. The difference may reside in part with a top-down versus bottom-up approach to approving the standards. The Michigan standards were defended by large numbers of credible representatives from local districts and communities, the governor operated more behind the scenes with regard to the standards, and the conservative members of the State Board of Education did not have the political force necessary to mandate the changes they desired. As fraught as the process was, it did stimulate conversation on the contested points and resulted in changes that left neither side citing a clear victory or defeat. The Texas process was much more top down, with legislators ultimately prevailing in substantively altering the original standards. Other contextual factors certainly played a role in the outcomes in these two states. For instance, Michigan had a stronger tradition of local control stemming, at least in part, from the history of labor union movements in the state. This history may in part explain why a grass-roots movement was able to mobilize in defense of the Michigan standards. Furthermore, Michigan historically has had more of a liberal and progressive approach to educational issues, particularly in ELA. Texas has more of a conservative tradition with regard to educational issues, as witnessed by the support of some Texas Reading Association members for the adopted standards (cf. Miskel & Athan, 2001).

As these standards stories differ in their locations within deliberative or competitive arenas, they also differ in their consequences. Because Texas is a textbook adoption state, which Michigan is not, the direction of the Texas standards greatly affected the content included in the commercial reading programs developed by major textbook publishers. By default, then, the Texas standards would implicitly find their way into classrooms in districts across the country. The Michigan standards, representing a very different approach to ELA, would have no such widespread impact. Of course, the state story is ever evolving and, as we discuss subsequently, Michigan’s current ELA standards are undergoing revisions that make them very different from those developed by MELAF in the mid-1990s, at least in part owing to recent federal legislation related to reading reforms.

### **Continuing National Influence**

As discussed previously, although states’ standard-setting efforts took center stage in the mid-1990s, by the late 1990s the national story was back in the spotlight. In this section, we focus on two recent areas of national influence on content standards in ELA: first, the presence of many and varied evaluations of state standards that influenced the direction of ELA standard-setting efforts across the nation, and, second, federal mandates

from the NCLB and Reading First legislation.

### *Evaluations of Standards*

ELA standards were first evaluated by AFT in 1995, followed by the Fordham Foundation in 1997, CBE in 1998, and, finally, ACHIEVE in 2000. The inconsistencies across these reports have been confusing and frustrating to states and to the teachers who developed the standards, not to mention policymakers and public education watchers (Valencia & Wixson, 2001). For example, Michigan received an F from Fordham and a B+ from CBE, and New York received a C from Fordham, the highest rating from AFT, and a B from CBE. Underlying assumptions about what constituted appropriate content in ELA varied widely among evaluators. To cite just one example, Fordham penalized states for including standards that encouraged students to relate ideas in literature to their own lives, whereas CBE valued attention to students' personal responses to literature (Valencia & Wixson, 2001).

Connecticut, a state with among the highest scores in the country on the NAEP, and the state cited as making the most progress in reading achievement since 1992 (Baron, 1999), received the lowest possible rating from AFT. In a response to AFT, the Connecticut associate commissioner of education wrote, "Isn't it odd that our students should be doing so well and yet your ranking indicated a less than positive review of the standards we use" (AFT, 1999). Furthermore, during the 1997 gubernatorial race Senator McGreevey, the Democratic candidate, cited two of the reports as proof that New Jersey's standards were the "worst in the nation," and then-Governor Christine Todd Whitman, a Republican, cited a different report as proof that New Jersey's standards and assessments were in the top five in the nation (Olson, 1998).

As a result of these inconsistencies, states were left to decide when to defend their ELA standards against criticisms and when to respond to those critiques by revising their documents. These decisions, as with most involving state-level standards policy, were influenced by the political climate within states (Miskel et al., 2003). Some governors or state legislatures, for instance, viewed negative evaluations of their state ELA standards as an opportunity to push for revisions that were more in line with their values and beliefs.

### *NCLB/Reading First Legislation*

As discussed previously, the NCLB legislation of 2001—and Reading First as part of that legislation—includes provisions that are encouraging many states to revisit their ELA standards. NCLB mandates annual testing for students in Grades 3–8, which requires that states write grade-level expectations for each grade tested. Furthermore, Reading First mandates that states adopt scientifically based reading programs that attend to specific content for early reading instruction in those schools or districts using Reading First funds. For the most part, this has resulted in the adoption of commercial packages that are heavily phonics and skills based. When this mandate is combined with the NCLB requirement for grade-level expectations for Grades 3–8, it is likely to lead states to develop more specific standards that are consistent with the NRP report, which was influential in the Reading First legislation. This is particularly the case for those states whose standards had been written in grade bands (e.g., Grades 1–3, 4–7) rather than grade by grade. States that had purposely written broader standards through a

commitment to local curriculum control have been forced to create what amounts to standards for each grade level as the basis for grade-level testing.

In Michigan, these grade-level expectations were written within the state government without the undertaking of a consensus process and with an eye toward gaining approval from ACHIEVE, which continues to use other sets of state standards, such as those of Texas, as models. Although this has met with some resistance from educators in the state, the net effect is a set of grade-level expectations that are much more specific than was the intent of the 1996 standards, which, as described previously, were developed through a more deliberative process. Given the increasing stakes associated with test performance under NCLB, it is highly likely that these grade-level expectations will become the de facto standards for ELA in Michigan. The policy-making process for ELA standards development in Michigan may be entering more of a competitive arena than prevailed previously.

Given the philosophical differences within the ELA field, it is not surprising that changes in the specificity and content of state standards resulting from recent federal legislation have been greeted with despair by some educators and enthusiasm by others. Whatever the reception, the funds at stake ensure that NCLB and Reading First are having widespread influences on the teaching and learning of ELA.

### **Beyond English Language Arts Standards**

ELA standard-setting efforts, at both the national and state levels, have illuminated tensions within and outside the discipline about the nature of knowledge, the relationship between skills and processes in language arts instruction, and the role of standards in ELA curriculum and instruction. Some of the major fault lines in developing consensus in ELA have involved OTL standards, literary canon, philosophies of teaching and learning, and, perhaps most visibly, debates about the teaching of reading. Although these factors are interrelated, each sparked specific debates during efforts to set standards in the discipline. The areas of dispute in other core subjects— mathematics, social studies, and science—have both paralleled and diverged from those in ELA.

Unlike ELA, the first set of mathematics content standards developed by NCTM (1989) received far less political scrutiny during their development. They were developed prior to, and helped to spark, the official “standards movement,” and thus it was not until the standards were published and distributed that they were publicly debated. Though critiques were raised by some, the standards were met positively by many professionals and policymakers and were adopted by a vast majority of states (Massell, 1994b). When critiques were raised, they centered primarily on how content would be taught, rather than on the content itself (Massell, 1994b; Roitman, 1998). This contrasts with social studies and science, in which issues of content were central to disputes over standards.

Although content was an issue in ELA to a much greater extent than in mathematics, philosophies of teaching and learning fueled similar debates in each subject area. As in reading, mathematics standards also surfaced tensions between the competing paradigms of behaviorism and constructivist approaches stemming from cognitive psychology (Massell, 1994b; McLeod, Stake, Schappelle, Mellissinos, & Gierl, 1996). Indeed, the “basic skills” approach was arguably much more entrenched in mathematics than in reading prior to the NCTM standards. Although “reading wars” had been present in the ELA professional community for decades, mathematics instruction had been primarily

centered on direct instruction of standard algorithms (Massell, 1994b; Roitman, 1998).

The debates around standards in social studies, and history in particular, were similar to those surrounding the role of the traditional literary canon in ELA. The most visible debates in history standards involved the tension between emphasizing multiculturalism and multiple perspectives, on the one hand, and a common narrative of social progress, on the other. As we mentioned previously, the national history standards were met with fierce criticism that their emphasis on multiple perspectives on U.S. history was divisive and too critical of key historical figures (Ravitch, 2000). These national-level debates were foreshadowed in California's efforts to create history frameworks in the 1980s (Massell, 1994b). As in ELA, the consensus reached within the professional community disintegrated when the standards entered the public arena. In both disciplines, theoretical shifts and social movements—particularly poststructuralist and critical theories and ethnic and women's studies—had an indelible influence on orientations within each field that was not shared by policymakers. The controversies surrounding national standards in history and ELA shifted the emphasis to state standard setting in these disciplines.

In contrast, the standards conversation in mathematics remained centered on the national standards that most states were using as a model. The 1989 NCTM standards had a widespread influence on state standards efforts in mathematics and, although not without some controversy around pedagogy, were received with relatively little resistance by professionals in the field, the general public, and policymakers (Massell, 1994b). The standards story in mathematics may illustrate the potential of more widespread consensus on content, at least in part, because the subject matter did not engage the cultural and social issues that were fundamental to history and ELA. It may be that consensus is less likely in subject areas in which social and cultural issues are central to content and that, as with ELA, have a long history of politically and professionally charged debate about instructional approach and emphasis.

Looking to the future, both reading and mathematics are central to the agenda of NCLB but are influenced by this policy in different ways. Although no equivalent to Reading First legislation is mandating content in mathematics, both subject areas are influenced by the testing requirements of NCLB. The impact of these new testing requirements will not be known for some time, but, at the very least, they raise questions for both ELA and mathematics about the role of tests in determining what is taught in classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

We conclude this chapter with thoughts on the present state of content standards within education reform and what current policy and the history of curriculum reform suggest about their future. Though brief, the history of the standards movement demonstrates the extent to which standard-setting efforts are influenced by the tensions between ideas and values present in the particular political, social, cultural, and disciplinary contexts in which they occur. The architects of standards-based reforms viewed content standards as the foundation on which curriculum, instruction, and assessment would be built. This represented a significant shift in approaches to curriculum. An agreed-upon set of content standards would determine what was to be taught, rather than the textbook serving as the

default curriculum. Teachers' goals, mapped to standards, would be served by commercial programs rather than determined by them. Key to the vision was that content standards should be "world class" or high level, rather than the minimal standards relied upon previously, and that they should be developed through consensus processes involving all of the major constituents of education reform. As our review has suggested, standard-setting efforts have made clear that the consensus process was not as straightforward as originally conceived.

Without doubt, the deliberative process at the heart of consensus building is complicated by competing beliefs about teaching and learning that collide in any standard-setting process. Educators, policymakers, and others involved in standards efforts bring with them various beliefs about teaching and learning that affect their visions of what standard-setting processes ought to entail and the purposes that standards ought to serve. These belief systems result in an array of positions that might be mapped onto a continuum, with consensus becoming more difficult the farther apart these beliefs reside from one another. It could be argued that the deliberative processes that reveal the political tensions around standards ultimately do result in documents that approach consensus on what students should know and be able to do in a given discipline. The deliberative process is often difficult because of competing interests and values, but this process, however fraught, represents an attempt at consensus.

The competitive process is not looking for consensus, focusing instead on political victories and often using the resulting position of power to reject deliberative efforts that do not reflect the positions of the "winning" side. Political goals certainly play a role in any policy movement as visible as standards, whether centered in the deliberative or competitive arena. The distinction may be a foreground/background issue—the difference between political goals as the primary incentive as opposed to the search for common ground as a primary goal, as with the aforementioned example of ELA standards in Texas. Although certain state standard-setting efforts seemed to enter the competitive arena, for the most part those involved in creating and approving content standards have had consensus as an explicit goal, however hard-won. As opposed to this tradition, recent federal policy appears to represent a significant move into the competitive arena, a move that has implications for standards and their role in more narrowly conceived curricula.

It remains to be seen how far-reaching the effects of federal mandates in core subject areas will be in changing the direction of future standard setting. The standards that were so central to early visions of systemic reform may be taking a back seat to high-stakes testing and other federal mandates. Currently, reading and mathematics are most directly affected by these mandates, but increased scrutiny in reading and mathematics could affect how existing standards in other subject areas are evaluated. For example, states must soon also implement science testing, and we may witness similar moves to mandate science curricula as there have been in reading.

For the present, recent developments in the area of reading suggest the manner in which current mandates might affect standards. For example, federal mandates that combine attention to specific content in the early grades to qualify for Reading First funds and the need for grade-level expectations in Grades 3–8 are leading to greater specificity in state standards or their proxies. In addition, the Reading First legislation is compelling states to provide districts with a short list of two to five suggested commercial programs that are scientifically based and focus on the specified content (Manzo, 2004). Some

districts are finding that the literacy programs they have built over several years do not qualify for Reading First funding, so they turn to the approved commercial programs as replacement curricula (Manzo, 2004). The few districts that have refused to abandon their established programs for these commercial programs have done so at a high financial cost. With a few commercial programs determining the curriculum for a large number of districts, we wonder whether federal mandates might bring us back full circle, with commercial programs again serving as the default curriculum.

The history of curricular reform suggests that the recent focus on increased accountability reflects a trend that has been developing over the past few decades. In the 1970s and early 1980s, this trend began in the form of minimal competency testing, behavioral objectives, and diagnostic-prescriptive methods and materials. Even in the more holistic approaches of the late 1980s and early 1990s, accountability remained a key reform issue. Arguably, the largest reform movement just prior to standards focused on performance assessments and how they might work to drive instruction. The trend toward accountability predates NCLB, having taken different forms, but it is becoming increasingly prominent in education reform. Current policy represents unprecedented federal forays into curriculum and instruction; regardless of what happens with NCLB, however, we do not expect this trend to end.

Standards-based reforms initially represented a move toward collaboration in reform. Since *A Nation at Risk* mobilized the public around education, many stakeholders have become involved in curricular reform. As business leaders, politicians, and the general public have joined educators in thinking about what students should know and be able to do in subject areas, competing values and ideas have increasingly come into play, as have the practical issues involved in implementing standards. Recent trends, however, suggest a move toward a more competitive than deliberative process of standard setting. As suggested by McDonnell and Weatherford (1999), rather than thinking about deliberative and competitive processes in policy-making as an either-or proposition, it is important to recognize that both of these arenas have played a central role in education policy. It was the deliberative process, however, that was seen from the beginning of standards-based reform as central to the standard-setting process. Given the challenges of locating standards in that arena, it is important to consider the implications of the competitive arena for decisions regarding what students should know and be able to do.

## NOTES

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