

**Testimony of Randi Weingarten,
President, American Federation of Teachers,
Before the House Committee on Education and Labor
April 29, 2009**

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon and members of the committee, I am Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. I am also president of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to present the views of the AFT on the issue of common state standards.

Let me begin by expressing, on behalf of the AFT's more than 1.4 million members, our thanks to President Obama and the Congress for supporting state and local governments, so they are not forced to make cuts in vital education programs in the midst of our current financial crisis. The AFT strongly supports the president's commitment to ensuring that all students receive a rich, rigorous education that prepares them to go from high school to higher education or directly into the workforce. The investment reflected in the stimulus package will help achieve that goal.

But to address the challenges and seize the opportunities presented by this new century, we must do more. We must invest our intellectual capital in developing and implementing policies and programs that make our education system work—for all our children and, yes, for the teachers charged with educating them. Too often, and for too long, we've taken a triage approach to public education. But it's not a sustainable response or a lasting solution.

Education, when done correctly, follows a continuum, each piece building upon and responding to the next. But our "system" of education is not really a system, following a logical progression. Instead, in the quest for the magic reform, we have divvied up or isolated the components that comprise public education and have treated each as if it were in a vacuum. That is a mistake. We can no longer treat these components—such as standards; assessments; teacher recruitment, retention and support; professional development; curricula; improved working and learning conditions that students and

teachers need to succeed; and accountability frameworks—as separate policy silos that need not be integrated. Nor can we think about early childhood education, or wraparound services like after-school programs and healthcare—which help level the playing field for poor kids—as ancillary or extra. To put a finer point on it, if we’re not addressing all of these issues, looking at the whole picture when we think about education policies, we’re just tinkering around the edges of true education reform.

We should start with standards.

The AFT supports the development of rigorous common state standards. Our reasons are straightforward. We live in a highly mobile, instantly connected world in which knowledge travels on highways we can’t even see. Our students need to be able to navigate through that world—to study, work and live in states other than the one in which they were educated, if they so chose or if circumstances demand it. Their ability to do that, and to do it well, will be limited if we don’t change our current patchwork of varying state standards.

This is not a position we’ve reached only recently, although we feel the urgency now more than ever. The AFT has been at the forefront of the standards-based education movement, which grew out of two imperatives: the need to ensure that our students are learning what they need to know to compete in a global economy, and the need to address the intolerable achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and between minority and nonminority students. Those imperatives have not changed. If anything, they have become more striking.

Since 1995, the AFT has judged state standards on their clarity and specificity, and here’s what we’ve found: As a nation, we have made too little progress in developing standards in a way that will improve teaching and learning. Despite the decades of work starting from the admonitions of *Goals 2000* to the testing requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), there simply is not enough coherence, rigor or alignment in the standards presently in place in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. For instance, standards

are not aligned to the demands of college and work, and standards among states vary widely in quality and quantity. Further, although there may be standards for the core subject areas, often the standards for each subject are written separately and distinctly from the others; the disciplines are not integrated as they should be. These problems have had a ripple effect throughout the system.

AFT members know firsthand that the typical state's standards are not nearly comprehensive enough to serve as the foundation for a well-aligned, coherent education system. Knowledge builds on knowledge. The more you know, the more you can learn. Teachers know this better than anyone. It is, therefore, imperative that standards offer carefully sequenced content from the beginning of kindergarten (or, better yet, pre-K) through the end of high school. But most state standards don't. As a result, we are left with the following:

- Students, especially those who change schools frequently, end up with gaps and repetitions in their schooling.
- Textbook developers try to “cover” the standards by creating books that have a little bit of everything and a lot of nothing.
- Guesses as to what will be on the state assessment often end up driving instruction.
- Professional development too often is about pedagogical fads.
- Too many districts don't even try to flesh out the state standards, much less their own curricula and lesson sequencing, which leaves teachers to face these challenges on their own.

All of these problems could be addressed if we had clear, specific, content-rich, grade-by-grade standards. But unfortunately, we seem to have fallen off a logical continuum and into a belief that what gets tested is what gets taught. All too often, state tests and state content standards don't match up. In fact, in one of the AFT's surveys, we found that just 11 states had all of their reading and math tests clearly aligned to strong standards

("Smart Testing: Let's Get It Right," July 2006). The AFT research gives us the information we need to develop standards the right way.

In addition, a report issued earlier this year by the Fordham Institute detailed the variability of NCLB's system of accountability, while also reinforcing the argument for common state standards. The Fordham report concluded that "Schools that make AYP in one state fail to make AYP in another. Those that are considered failures in one part of the country are deemed to be doing fine in another. Although schools are being told that they need to improve student achievement in order to make AYP under the law, the truth is that many would fare better if they were just allowed to move across state lines."

Imagine the outrage if, during the Super Bowl, one football team had to move the ball the full 10 yards for a first down while the another team only had to go seven. Imagine if this scenario were sanctioned by the National Football League. Such a system would be unfair and preposterous.

While developing strong core standards, we also need to ask: What else do schools and teachers need? Strong standards are just one piece of a foundation that, at a minimum, also should include a content-rich, sequenced curriculum and aligned assessments. As for other instructional supports, how about standards-based guides for teachers that provide essential background knowledge? How about model lesson plans that new teachers could teach from and more experienced teachers could draw from as they see fit? How about pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development that prepare teachers to teach the specific content for which they are responsible? How about textbooks that, because they are based on clear standards of a reasonable length, are slim and focused? How about a survey of teachers that asks them what conditions they need to help children reach these standards? How about then ensuring that any accountability measures track whether teachers actually were provided what they said they needed?

Developing a new system of standards at first blush seems like a daunting task, but it must be done. There are a number of ways to do it: One way, as I have previously

suggested, is by creating partnerships—made up of educators, elected officials, community leaders, and experts in pedagogy and particular content—to take the best academic standards and make them available as a national model. Teachers then would need the professional development, and the teaching and learning conditions, to make the standards more than mere words. Toward that end, the AFT was glad to see that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan proposes using the “Race to the Top” funds to help develop these standards. The “Race to the Top” program presents a historic opportunity to move toward common state standards by providing funds to get the job done. It would be the best possible use of that funding, and could and should guide all future reform efforts.

Regardless of the process by which a comprehensive, standards-based system is created, we believe the following guidelines should help guide that work. I shared these criteria with Secretary Duncan in a recent letter:

1. Federal funds are needed to support the partnerships that agree to develop this comprehensive, standards-based system, and to ensure both the coordination and the alignment of this work. No single group could or should address all these components on its own, nor should any group work in isolation on any one piece. The issue of standards is much larger than producing good written documents. To expect students to meet high standards, systemic changes must occur. Assessments must be developed that reflect what students should know and be able to do. Curriculum resources must be developed that help bring the standards into the classroom. Professional development must be provided to help teachers deliver the content, differentiate instruction as needed and adjust delivery as needed, based on data analysis. Federal funds should be distributed to those groups that establish partnerships that can fully address all of these areas.
2. The focus should be on fewer, deeper and clearer standards. We are all familiar with the stacks of standards that teachers are expected to teach to and students are expected to meet. The sheer volume of material is not realistic in any setting. We

must learn from our international peers, and focus on a manageable set of standards that emphasizes the most important content and skills that all students should learn and that provide the foundation for additional learning.

3. Teachers must be involved in creating and implementing not only the standards, but the assessments, accompanying materials and professional development activities as well. All too often, the educators who are responsible for helping students progress toward mastery of the standards have no input into both what to teach and how to teach it.

4. Finally, policymakers should take the steps necessary to coordinate work in different subject areas, to strike the right balance and prioritize the standards. We must move past the days of the English teachers creating their own expectations for students and the math teachers creating their own. This “my group” thinking leads, not surprisingly, to each creating plans that would require the use of the lion’s share of instructional time. In such a situation, teachers are left to decide what should be taught. Instead, teachers from each subject area must come together and identify the critical set of standards that covers all grades and subject areas.

The countries that consistently outperform the United States on international assessments have education systems that include all these features: national standards, with core curricula, assessments and time for professional development for teachers based on those standards. Can we afford to do any less here?

Getting the standards right will not be enough. We also have to fix the fundamentally flawed accountability system in NCLB. We need a system of accountability that is built around standards and recognizes that student, teacher and school success means much more than producing high scores on two tests a year. We need a system of accountability that is meant to fix schools, not fix blame. And we need an accountability system that gives credit for progress and holds everyone responsible for doing his or her share—in

other words, an accountability system that results in the well-rounded education we all want for our children.

More specifically, inadequate tests and a flawed accountability system have gotten dangerously out in front of the other elements of standards-based reform, threatening the very educational quality we're trying to build. Too many communities have inadequate curricula, and most school districts have not addressed the huge challenge of building faculty and school capacity to lift student achievement dramatically. If we are not testing the right information, or the accountability system is flawed, or the tests are inadequate, or teachers are not supported, we will not reap the rewards a standards-based reform system offers. As we look ahead to NCLB reauthorization, we need to address these issues in order to fulfill the promise of offering all students a high-quality education.

In addition, data collection and usage needs to be about more than just keeping score. It must be used to proactively improve teaching and learning. When used well, data can be a powerful tool to inform classroom instruction, focus professional development opportunities and evaluate curricular programs. Only then will it fulfill its promise of helping to improve instruction and student learning.

As I wrote in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, I'm not so naive as to think it will be easy to reach consensus on common state standards. But I believe that most people agree there is academic content that all students in America's public schools should be taught, and that it should be taught to high standards. And I would expect near-consensus on the opinion that today we are failing in that important mission. It won't be easy to reach a national agreement on what every well-educated child in every American public school should learn, but few things worth achieving are ever easy.

High standards improve teaching and learning. If we really believe that all children can and should reach high levels of achievement, it only makes sense to define those benchmarks. The time has come for a serious consideration of common state academic

standards, and for the development of a richer and fairer accountability system to measure our progress in reaching them.

The AFT is ready to assist in any way we can to help move in this direction.