

Evidence on the Effects of Standards

Douglas N. Harris
University of Wisconsin at Madison

Why Are We Here?

- n Because some of us think common, high-quality standards might improve education by . . .
 - providing better instructional coordination across schools and grade levels;
 - allowing students to experience higher-level academic content;
 - addressing inequities, since disadvantaged students are presently more likely to experience lower-level content
 - providing concrete curricular advice to teachers;
 - improving fairness and effectiveness of federal and state accountability

What Evidence Do We Have?

- n Variation in textbooks and enacted curriculum across schools, districts, states
- n Overlap in curricula across grades
- n Positive correlations between centralization and aggregated achievement levels (TIMSS)
- n “Effective schools” (those with high test scores) tend to have high academic expectations

This Evidence Tells Us Little

- n Variation in curriculum across schools is due to decentralization and local experimentation, which many see as the system's greatest strength
- n The overlap in curricula across grades is partly deliberate and might also have advantages
- n With TIMSS and “effective schools” research, correlation is not causation

What Would the “Ideal” Evidence Look Like?

- n Randomly assign whole states to treatment and control groups
- n Measure various student outcomes
- n Wait a long time because standards may result in systemic change—a catalytic effect
 - Possible catalytic effect is also why we would have to randomly assign whole states
- n This is, of course, impossible. In fact, there are few systemic reforms where random assignment is very useful

What Feasible Studies Could We Carry Out?

- n Quasi-experimental analyses of the relationship between standards and student outcomes
 - Ex: Study effects on student outcomes from state changes in standards
- n Hypothesis: We will find no effects
 - Again, have to wait a while, which makes it more likely that we'll see confounding factors
 - Also standards are “small reforms”: requires essentially no new resources; doesn't directly change the teachers in the classroom or what they know
- n Developing Theme: Studying effects of standards is more difficult than the typical education program

Recommendation #1: Review Effects of Standards on Intermediate Outcomes

- n What are the intermediate outcomes of interest?
 - instruction and enacted curriculum
 - teacher preparation, prof. dev.
 - textbook design and adoption
 - administration
- n Also qualitative evidence about how aware teachers and administrators are of standards

Recommendation #2: A New Research Agenda

- n Again, use quasi-experiments (e.g., value-added)
 - researchers here have demonstrated variation in enacted curricula; now, let's see if variation is (causally) related to outcomes
- n Also need qualitative evidence about how aware teachers and administrators are of standards
- n Try “reverse engineering”--Find schools where changes in standards have had an influence

Recommendation #3: An Alternative Way of Looking at Standards

- n So far, I have talked about standards as having effects independent of other aspects of the educational context
- n In reality, the largest effect is likely to depend, almost completely, on the design of accountability
 - why would standards influence intermediate outcomes if schools had little reason to pay attention to the tests on which the standards are supposed to be based?

Implications

- n We can understand the effects of standards through studies of accountability
 - is accountability more effective in contexts where there are common, high-quality standards?
- n Formally, we can say that standards may act mainly as moderating variables-moderating the effects of accountability on student outcomes

Studying the Negative Side Effects

- n More than just “resource costs”
- n Even if we find that standards improve some student outcomes (directly or indirectly thru accountability), we also have to consider:
 - are the effects of standards solely the result of increased focus on measured outcomes?
 - if so, what aspects of learning are losing out?
 - does the reduction in local flexibility turn off current or prospective teachers who are already effective?

Summary

n To understand the effects of standards, we need to:

(1) piece together the variety of imperfect current sources of evidence

- always true, but more so here

- final outcomes and intermediate

- purpose of forthcoming paper

(2) create a new research agenda on the effects of standards (positive and negative)

(3) include the issue of standards in studies of accountability