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DO NATIONAL CURRICULAR STANDARDS ENSURE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY? BY ALBERT CHENG

ABSTRACT

On June 2, 2010, new national curricular standards in math and language arts, called the Common Core State Standards, were released by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. As of November 4, 2011, all but four U.S. states have adopted and already begun to implement the new standards in their primary and secondary schools. These developments have become a key subject of widespread debate in the education policy arena. Proponents of the Common Core State Standards argue, in particular, that establishing a single set of national standards is necessary in order to ensure educational equity: a condition in which all students have access to the same educational opportunities and performance expectations. This paper first draws upon the biblical worldview to reexamine this concept of educational equity and then argues that the effort to establish national standards carries a fundamental flaw that prevents the realization of equity. The paper also investigates two other approaches to set curricular standards (i.e., state-level efforts and school-level, parent-driven efforts) and argues that school-level, parent-driven efforts are the most viable approach to promote educational equity.

Do National Curricular Standards Ensure Educational Equity?

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*, an alarming, landmark report, decrying the poor state of American primary and secondary schooling. Among the several recommendations for education reform, the report called for establishing rigorous curricular standards and high performance expectations for all students. Since then, as education historians have documented, extensive efforts by state and federal governments (e.g., the National Education Goals movement, America 2000, Goals 2000, and the No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act of 2001) have emerged to heed this recommendation (Vinovskis, 2009).

More recently, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers led a movement called the Common Core State Standards Initiative to create new national curricular standards for math and language arts. The new standards, named the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), were released on June 2, 2010 (National Governors Association, 2010). Since its inception in 2009, the CCSS have moved to the forefront of education reform and policymaking. As of November 4, 2011, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the new standards in their entirety, while one state has adopted only the language arts standards (Gewertz, 2011). With the help of \$350 million in federal grant money, two consortia of states are earnestly at work developing new assessment systems to measure student proficiency at the CCSS (Rothman, 2011).

Other federal funds have been offered to promote the implementation of the standards. In 2009, the Obama administration used the Race to the Top program to offer a share of \$4.35 billion in federal funds to states who adopted the new standards (US Department of Education, 2009). More recently in 2011, the administration has provided states with waivers from NCLB's most burdensome mandates if they fulfill requirements such as establish "college- and career-ready standards"; notably, only the only set of curricular standards that the administration presently considers college- and career-ready is the CCSS (US Department of Education, 2011, p. 2). The point is that national standards are a reality in the United States for the first time in its history, and state governments as well as the federal government are vigorously working to implement them.

One of the many arguments in support of the CCSS, and national standards in general, is that they are needed to ensure educational equity (Hunt, 2011, Kendall, 2011). Ravitch (1995), a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education and prolific writer about education policy, defines educational equity as a condition in which all students

“encounter the same educational opportunities and the same performance expectations” (p. 27). Rothman (2009) of the Alliance for Excellent Education and CCSS supporter contends that without national standards, students, especially those from low-income or racial minority backgrounds, are often relegated to attending schools with a mediocre curriculum and low expectations. National standards, however, will ensure that the quality of education that students receive will be consistent, not dependent on where they “happen to live” (p. 2).

With national standards emerging in the U.S. education system, it is worth debating its merits and demerits. This paper specifically asks two questions. First, do national curricular standards ensure educational equity as Ravitch, Rothman, and other CCSS supporters contend? And second, what other viable alternatives exist to promote educational equity?

REEXAMINING THE MEANING OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Before answering these questions, however, it will be necessary to reexamine the meaning of educational equity. There are important points to glean from the assertions made by Rothman, Ravitch, and supporters of national standards. For example, it ought not to be the case that certain students are relegated to a low-quality education, a proposition that is corroborated by the Christian worldview. According to biblical teaching, the aim of serving others is to “present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28, English Standard Version; see also James 1:4). Education, then, entails empowering all children to realize their full, created potential. There is a God-given calling to whom each individual is meant to become. The Prophet Jeremiah writes, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). An education with meager expectations and diminished opportunities inhibits children from attaining the fullness that God intends for them. Therefore, all children, by virtue of the fact that they are beings created in the image of God, ought to be on the receiving end of others’ best possible effort to educate them (Genesis 1:27). Any lesser effort is inconsistent with the inherent worth of a child as a human.

On the other hand, biblical insight also reveals a key, often-overlooked aspect of equity. Implied by King David’s proclamation that each individual is uniquely “knitted” together is the idea that equity includes meeting the unique needs of each student (Psalm 139:13-16). David himself is said to have “administered...equity to all his people” (2 Samuel 8:15). The original Hebrew word that is translated as *equity* in 2 Samuel 8:15 comes from the root word for righteousness, suggesting that David gave to each person what he or she ought to have deserved. Educational equity, then, means more than merely giving every student the same thing but tending to the particulars (e.g., their abilities, needs, goals, character, cultures, desires, and life-callings) of every student and, given those particulars, providing what he or she needs.

Volf (1996), a well-known theologian, points out that God Himself tends to the particulars of individuals when dealing with them. For instance, a call to minister to the unique needs of the weak (e.g., the widow, the poor, and the orphan) resounds throughout Scripture, but that same ministry is not due to the strong. Although God, to some extent, treats both the weak and strong as equals because they both share a “common humanity,” God also considers “their specific histories, their particular psychological, social and embodied selves” when dealing with them respectively (p. 222). In other words, equity cannot completely be administered by blind procedure or, as Rawls (2007) has famously proposed, “behind a veil of ignorance” where the particulars of individual people are not taken into account when making judgments about them (p. 631). Rather, people’s particulars have moral bearing when determining what ought to be done for them.

Thus, limiting educational equity to mean ensuring the same opportunities and expectations for each student, as Ravitch (1995) has done, is legitimate only to the extent that it treats all individuals equally and recognizes the “common humanity” which Volf (1996) alluded to (p. 222). Yet *equity* means more than treating everyone *equally*. Though unequal treatment may lead to inequities, some measure of unequal treatment is also needed to meet

specific needs and, in so doing, to ensure equity. Ultimately, Ravitch's notion of equity is incomplete for overlooking the differences among individuals and being blind to particulars. Ravitch's notion of equity will henceforth be designated as *educational egalitarianism* in order to distinguish it from the term *equity*.

COURSES OF ACTION TO REALIZE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

The goal, then, is to find a way to establish curricular standards in order to ensure educational equity and not just educational egalitarianism. What follows is a discussion and evaluation of three options: They are (a) establishing national curricular standards, (b) letting each state establish its own curricular standards, and (c) empowering parents and other members of local school-communities (e.g., teachers, administrators, community leaders) to establish curricular standards for themselves.

Option 1: Establish National Curricular Standards

The impulse behind national curricular standards. The current effort to establish national curricular standards is heavily driven by the desire to address the weaknesses of NCLB. In particular, NCLB does not mandate a national curriculum but only requires states to implement the same curricular standards in math, language arts, and science for all of their own respective students. States, in addition, must create their own assessments to measure student proficiency at their standards and determine their own definitions of what proficiency entails (US Department of Education, 2003).

Unfortunately, many states have manipulated the system and created a facade of high achievement in order to comply with NCLB's mandates and to avoid federal sanctions. Studies have widely documented how states have (a) lowered their curricular standards, (b) made their assessments easier, (c) used statistical gimmicks to avoid counting lower-achieving students, and (d) lowered their minimum requirements for students to be deemed *proficient*. These actions have increased proficiency rates, but only nominally. Students are not being well-served in such a system of mediocre curriculum and low performance expectations (Cronin, Dahlin, Adkins, & Kingsbury, 2007; Cronin, Dahlin, Xiang, & McCahon, 2009; McCluskey & Coulson, 2007). In the end, equity is missing as many students are being shortchanged by not having their individual needs met. Nor are these students being prepared to reach their full potential so that they may flourish.

Supporters of the CCSS have argued that a single set of national standards will remedy this problem. By compelling all schools to teach the same rigorous curricular standards and to measure student achievement according to the same high performance expectations, states will be unable to limit educational opportunities and to lower their expectations for students. The wide variation of standards and expectations among states that relegate some students to a poor-quality education would be mitigated, if not eliminated (Finn, Petrilli, & Winkler, 2009; Rothman 2009).

Kendall (2011) of Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, who supports the CCSS, also suggests that national standards will remedy the social and political pressure that drove states under NCLB to decrease the quality of standards and expectations. Instead, national standards will generate the pressure to maintain high-quality standards and high expectations. For with a "critical mass" of states that have agreed to adopt the CCSS, "no district that sends students ignorant of the Common Core to other districts and states will escape the notice of its peers" (p. 55). In other words, there is enough pressure to guard against lowering standards and expectations because no state would want to be found as the one lagging behind other states which are working within the same system. In this case, national standards may at least ensure educational egalitarianism.

Criticisms of national curricular standards

Standardized mediocrity. However, there is no reason to be certain that national standards will be insulated from

unforeseen political pressures that decrease their quality. For one, Ravitch (1995) concedes that there is a strong, undesirable possibility that standards will have to be watered-down in order to garner support from as many states and stakeholders as possible. Thus, contrary to Kendall's (2011) assertions, other CCSS supporters acknowledge that "national standards would face the same perils as state standards" (Finn, Julian, and Petrilli, 2006, p. 16). The quality of standards and expectations could still tend to be lowered so that states could more easily attain what is deemed to be success and avoid sanctions for failure. Eventually, as some education policy analysts have explained, "the rigor and content of national standards will tend to align with the mean among states, undercutting states with higher quality standards" (Burke and Marshall, 2010, p. 6). Though educational egalitarianism would obtain, the education system would end up with standardized mediocrity, which is not the outcome that even supporters of national standards desire.

In fact, research is suggesting that the risk of ending up with lower-quality standards is already materializing under the CCSS. Even studies conducted by supporters of the CCSS are casting doubt as to whether the new national standards offer a significant improvement over many existing state standards (Carmichael, Martin, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, 2010; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). Nevertheless, states with existing, higher-quality standards are being relegated to adopting the CCSS due to political and financial pressures (McCluskey, 2010). Other states that are currently making progress in student achievement with their own standards may have their efforts derailed by a new system (Peyser, 2006).

Inattention to the particulars of students. Furthermore, establishing national standards fails to address other problems that have surfaced under NCLB. For example, by codifying their curricular standards according to NCLB mandates, states essentially establish a minimum goal that all students need to attain. Studies have reported that some schools consequently exert the most effort to aid students who have not met the standards while neglecting students whose achievement exceeds the standards. Such a system is inequitable towards these higher-achieving students because it overlooks their unique needs (Jolly & Makel, 2010).

Curricular standards need to be both high in quality as well as appropriate to the particular student. Rigorous national standards may or may not achieve the former, but they certainly cannot achieve the latter. National standards cannot ensure that all students are taught according to appropriate standards and expectations: Blanketing every student with a single set of standards results in a uniformity that fails to account for the reality that each student has different needs and learns at varying paces. In an op-ed piece, Coulson of the CATO Institute (2010) writes:

The whole idea of imposing a single set of age-based standards on all students rests on a false premise: that children are identical widgets capable of being dragged along an instructional conveyor belt at the same pace, benefiting equally from the experience. But kids are different – not only from one another, but when it comes to their own varying facility across subjects as well. Any single set of age-based standards, no matter how thoughtfully conceived, will necessarily be too slow or too fast for most children (para. 2-3).

National standards are too blunt an instrument and cannot be calibrated to account for every relevant detail about each student in order to determine how best to serve them.

More generally, any increase in the scale of standardization pigeonholes students, abstracting them from the particulars which are constitutive to their being and without which their unique needs cannot be met. In their book *Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective* scholars Spears and Loomis (2009) explain that excessive standardization "[tends] to eliminate student individuality (the particulars) by using the lens of sameness in the means and ends of education" (p. 137). McCluskey and Coulson (2007) make similar remarks; they write that education is a "field that demands, by its very nature, considerable individualization and personal attention," but increasing the scale of standardization results in a system run by a "sprawling impersonal bureaucracy," which is "distant" and cannot be

“truly responsive to the unique needs of local communities and individual families” (p. 11).

Large-scale standardization efforts, therefore, have a fundamental flaw: They are unable to pay attention to the fine-grained particulars of students and depersonalize these students into “widgets” (Coulson, 2010, para. 2). As a result, a system of national standards such as the CCSS will be unable to realize the fuller sense of equity that is consistent with the Christian worldview. A more viable alternative must allow for the capability to dynamically establish different sets of curricular standards that are personalized to meet the diverse needs of individual students.

Establishing national curricular standards: A summary. The track record of past national and federal efforts to establish high curricular standards in the name of equity is not promising. Nor does the potential of current efforts warrant any more optimism. At best, establishing a uniform set of national curricular standards can only ensure educational egalitarianism, but even then it is doubtful that a high-quality curriculum for all students can be maintained. Moreover, the inability to account for the particulars of individual students is a fundamental flaw of establishing codified national standards. Without accounting for those particulars, needs remain unmet and the more complete picture of equity as described in Scripture remains elusive. So, if national standards are not a viable course of action, what else can be done? Is leaving states to establish their own standards a better option?

Option 2: Letting Each State Set Its Own Standards

Traditionally, state governments have the authority to create their own curriculum (Essex, 2011). This arrangement is more decentralized than an arrangement in which a single set of national standards is required of all states. Accordingly, states, often nicknamed “the fifty laboratories of democracy,” are able to freely experiment with their own standards and to find better ways of educating students. States are also able to learn from the experiences of other states. For example, a state is able to adopt and to adapt a successful model that other states have created. Likewise, states may harmlessly avoid and learn from an unsuccessful model that others have tried. In contrast, establishing a single national curriculum for all states to teach stymies this learning and discovery process, and as some researchers have noted, a more-centralized system of national standards puts states at risk of having a bad idea imposed on them wholesale (McCluskey, 2010).

Moreover, a state government, being more proximal to its students, is typically more in tune than the federal government with the particulars of its students. States, then, are in a better position to know how to serve their own students well. There also is prudence in allowing states to find their own solutions because viable solutions must be sensitive to each state’s own unique culture and needs. In fact, there are reports documenting that states with a high proportion of rural schools are becoming increasingly critical of the Obama administration and U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan, a former chief executive officer in the urban Chicago public school system, for showing a bias towards policies that are feasible for urban settings but are unhelpful or even harmful for rural settings (McNeil, 2009).

Letting each state establish their own respective standards is an improvement over a establishing a single set of national standards, but leaving reform up to the states has not always resulted in high-quality standards and equity. Indeed, NCLB and other federal efforts aimed at raising standards have been in response to the perceived failure of states to raise standards on their own. Fortunately, there is a third and more effective alternative that enhances the advantages of state-level standards-setting, secures additional benefits, and avoids pitfalls common to the reform efforts of both state and federal governments.

Option 3: Empowering Locally-controlled, Parent-driven Efforts

This third alternative is to devolve authority from state and federal governments to the local level in order to grant parents and local school-communities the autonomy to make their own decisions. This alternative results in several additional benefits that promote a more complete picture of equity. For instance, it (a) allows for a greater familiarity with students so that their needs may be more effectively met, (b) promotes the innovation that is necessary for

improving and expanding educational services, (c) makes genuine accountability possible, and (d) recovers the voice that parents ought to have over their children's education.

Greater familiarity with students. As argued earlier, a necessary condition for effectively and equitably serving students is familiarity with their particulars. Obtaining such familiarity requires a great degree of proximity between students and those who serve them. Local governments, school communities, and parents have this type of proximity, whereas state or federal bureaucrats typically do not. Even Secretary Duncan has often acknowledged that the “[the best ideas in education are] always going to come from great teachers, great principals at the local level,” not from “anyone else in Washington” (Mora, 2011, para. 6).

Local school-communities have access not only to a greater depth of information (i.e., the particulars) about their students but also to a greater breadth of information. Hayek (2007) observes in his classic work of political philosophy, *The Road to Serfdom*:

The point which is so important is the basic fact that it is impossible for any man to survey more than a limited field, to be aware of the urgency of more than a limited number of needs....the ends about which he can be concerned will always be only an infinitesimal fraction of the needs of all men (p. 102).

State- and federal-government bureaucrats, therefore, can only possess a limited amount of insight about students. Parents, school staff, and local government officials are likewise limited in their knowledge of their own students, but because of their sheer number – a number which surpasses that of a handful of state- and federal-government bureaucrats – they collectively possess a much greater amount of insight.

So, local school-communities are able to process a greater volume and richer type of information about their students, placing them in the most favorable position to best serve those students. In contrast, student needs often go unmet in a centralized education system in which a few, non-omniscient individuals use overly-generalized and an insufficient amount of information to make less-than-optimal decisions on behalf of many.

Promoting innovation to improve school quality and expand educational services. With the freedom to establish their own curricular standards, schools also possess the flexibility to innovate, experiment, and discover better ways to meet the unique needs of their students. This is the second benefit of implementing locally-controlled, parents-driven efforts to set standards. Like states, schools can learn from, replicate, or even improve the successful innovations of other schools who serve similar student populations. Conversely, schools can harmlessly avoid bad ideas and learn what *not* to do by observing any unsuccessful innovations that other schools have attempted. Some schools may even specialize, finding a niche to more effectively serve students with a particular need. In turn, a plethora of curricular standards and associated pedagogical approaches emerge. This expansion of a wide range of different educational opportunities is conducive to ensuring equity because it provides access to more alternatives that are better suited to meet the unique needs of students. Professor John Merrifield (2008) of the University of Texas explains that unlike national or state standards which are codified by cumbersome bureaucracies and modified by drawn-out political processes, individual schools operating on a smaller, more-localized scale are nimble enough to innovate and to dynamically modify their curricular standards so that they may improve their services for all students.

Critics of allowing parents and local schools to implement their own curricular standards argue that doing so will result in a wide range of school quality. They argue that although such a system will result in some excellent schools, other schools will be ineffective because they may implement poor curricular standards. In this case, some children will remain relegated to attending schools that offer a low-quality education; equity will remain elusive as these students are not having their needs met. “Letting a thousand flowers bloom” may result in “weeds” that sprout alongside them (Ravitch, 2010, p.227).

Those critics, however, fail to recognize that locally-controlled and parent-driven efforts operate within a dynamic

system with a mechanism to constantly improve schools. Parents and local schools are incentivized and able to use their autonomy to work towards meeting the needs of the students in better ways. So, being ineffective is not necessarily a permanent feature of any school under such a decentralized system.

If anything, it is centrally-established, uniform standards that threaten to stymie innovation and progress. Hess (2011), a well-known education policy commentator, cautions against the confining nature of centralized standards. These standards drive curriculum and teaching practice itself. Although supporters of the CCSS, such as Rothman (2011), hope and believe that national standards will not stymie innovation, Hess notes that trends suggest the contrary and observes that “assessments and prescriptions” of the CCSS are becoming more “intrusive” (para. 4). If Hess is right and innovation is stymied, then the quality of curriculum may stagnate. Burke and Marshall’s (2010) warning that centralized, uniform standards “eliminate the possibility of competitive pressure for increasing standards of excellence” would come to pass (p. 7). Making improvements to better serve all students will be difficult, and educational equity would then be more difficult to achieve as the unique needs of students remain unmet.

Making genuine accountability possible. A locally-controlled, parent-driven system enables a school not only to innovate and to improve its services but also to form a closer partnership with parents. Notably, numerous studies find that educational outcomes for all children regardless of their backgrounds improve as their parents become more involved in their children’s schooling (Lim, 2011). Such a finding certainly bodes well for the potential of locally-controlled, parent-driven efforts to serve students well and thereby ensure educational equity.

More important, locally-controlled, parent-driven efforts provide parents with the opportunity to become more involved with and vested in a school. It is the nurturing of such types of personal relationships between schools and the parents that enable both parties to serve children in good faith. These personal connections between parents and schools create the moral context in which both parties can commit to collaboratively serve the students and to hold each other accountable for doing so. Without such personal connection, individual members of local school-communities are missing the “habits of the heart” (i.e., what Aristotle classically called *civic friendship*) that help them to pursue the good of others (Bellah et al., 1996, p. 116).

On the other hand, the current education bureaucracy follows a rote formula and blind procedures to evaluate schools. The resulting lack of personal connection erodes accountability as schools become “more responsive to the centralized scorekeeper” and policy mandates rather than to parents’ desires (Burke & Marshall, 2010, p. 4). As mentioned before, this type of behavior is already occurring under NCLB where parents are often misinformed about their children’s progress because states distort achievement data in order to avoid NCLB sanctions. Furthermore, there is no personal advocate to inform parents about the available, federally- provided services that they may use to help their children (Vernez et al., 2009). As a result, there is no genuine accountability between parents and schools in a centralized system. A nationalized system of standards and accountability would expand this type of impersonal governing body, making it difficult to ensure that all students are being equitably served.

Moreover, as studies have documented, the test scores that are used by a centralized governing for accountability purposes may not be an accurate indicator of student progress. For example, test scores often do a poor job of accounting for student growth. Students who initially started the school year with very low academic skills may make monumental gains yet still be deemed as unsuccessful for not meeting minimum scores for proficiency. Other times, assessments are poorly aligned with curricular standards, so the assessments do not measure how well a student has mastered the standards (Hamilton et al., 2007).

Invalid evaluations of student achievement are to be expected in a highly-standardized system because as argued earlier, such systems are unable to generate an adequate quantity and quality of information in order to make the most valid judgments. Instead, these impersonal systems make over-generalized, albeit not completely inaccurate, conclusions about student achievement. Parents are consequently hindered from getting a richer picture of their

children's progress, and holding schools accountable to serve their children then becomes unlikely. Reestablishing locally-controlled, parent-driven efforts recovers the personal touch and proximity that is necessary in order to gather an adequate amount and quality of information to make accountability possible. Accordingly, a more effective and efficient accountability system ensures that students are more equitably served.

Recovering parental voice. Recovering accountability helps to recover the parent's voice regarding the education of their own children. However, parental voice can be muffled in other ways by a highly-centralized system. For instance, the curriculum established by national standards, especially for a nation as diverse as the United States, will inevitably clash with the values and commitments of some parents. These values and commitments are not trivial for they often constitute people's moral and spiritual identity. For example, there is little agreement regarding numerous curricular issues, such as sex-education, evolution, what should be taught in social studies courses, or constructivist versus traditionalist pedagogy. In fact, Vinovskis (2009) points out that Goals 2000 was derailed due to the inability to agree on history standards. Centralized standards-setting is by nature a political process and a single set of national standards will not be free from political bias (Meier, as cited in *Education Next*, 2009).

Parents are typically unable to voice their desires in a highly-centralized system of national standards because they are unable to compete with other, more highly-organized interest-groups. These other interest groups can easily concentrate their resources towards a single centralized body and promote their own agendas (McCluskey, 2010; see also Ravitch, 2003). Those agendas, notwithstanding their legitimacy, often conflict with the interests of parents and the needs of the parents' children. Equity is consequently more difficult to realize must act in accordance to what is politically popular rather than respond to student's needs.

Alternatively, a locally-controlled, parent-driven system allows parents to maintain the reins of control over the curriculum instead of ceding it to a political process over which they have no control or voice. Parents are then empowered to ensure that their children are served in the ways that they deem more suitable.

By giving them a greater voice in their children's education, parents are empowered to seize their calling to "train up a child in the way he should go," (Proverbs 22:6). In contrast, state and federal efforts may tend to stifle parental responsibility, as decisions are made in the parents' stead. Parents become disenfranchised as their voices are suppressed. Yet parents, as the people with the greatest vested interest in their own children, ought to be given a voice to speak on their children's behalf (Burke and Marshall, 2010). Locally-driven, parent-controlled efforts, by giving parents a voice, align with the biblical call to establish equity by "[opening] your mouth for the mute" (Proverbs 31:8).

Locally-controlled, parent-driven efforts: A summary. In summary, locally- controlled, parent-driven efforts avoid the problems that plague centralized standards-setting and secure many benefits that centralize standards-setting cannot. The ways that such efforts bear upon parental voice, accountability, innovation, and being familiar with students make realizing a fuller sense of equity, rather than limited educational egalitarianism, more likely.

CONCLUSION

Determining whether establishing national curricular standards ensures educational equity requires a clear understanding of the nuances of equity. There is an important distinction between educational egalitarianism, where all students receive identical educational opportunities and expectations, and a fuller sense of equity, where all students are served according to their unique, individual needs. It is the latter understanding that enables students to flourish according to their God-given potential.

Ensuring educational equity has been a major argument in favor of national standards. However, national standards are more conducive to achieving educational egalitarianism than to achieving equity. Yet even then, there are significant reasons to doubt that national standards will attain the optimistic vision of educational egalitarianism as

supporters of national standards hope. In other words, instead of the same high-quality standards and high performance expectations for all students, there is reason to believe that all students will be relegated to a second-rate curriculum and low performance expectations.

What is more significant is that the effort to establish national standards and further centralize the education system carries a fundamental flaw that prevents the realization of equity: The effort cannot account for a sufficient breadth and depth of information about individual students in order to serve them well. Establishing national standards pigeonholes all students into a one-size-fits-all curriculum, making it impossible to adequately address all their distinct, complex needs. So although the CCSS may rightfully be worthy of some merit, their potential to promote educational equity is slim.

On the other hand, creating policies that devolve more authority to local communities, schools, and parents to make educational decisions is most conducive achieving a fuller sense of equity. Local school-communities are nearest and, hence, most familiar with the fine-grained details about their own students. Thus, they are in the optimal position to meet those students' needs and ensure educational equity. Locally-controlled, parent-driven policy also help to promote innovation, ensure genuine accountability, and recover the voice that parents ought to have over the education of their children – additional benefits of are also conducive to progressing towards educational equity.

As the US education system appears to be entering a new era of national standards, a dialog about how national standards bear upon the important topic of education equity must be continued. At the very least, the ways in which national standards fall short of attaining educational equity must be considered in policy debates if educational equity is to be an end that the nation's public institutions want to realize. Indeed, such an end ought to be pursued and achieved. Therefore, it is the hope that this paper has played at least a modest role in providing a framework and some principles — particularly those from a Christian worldview — by which the nation can move forward with the debates, research, and legislation of education policy so that a more equitable system may come to fruition.

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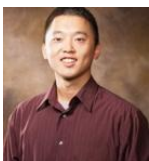
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