

IT TAKES A VISION: HOW THREE STATES CREATED GREAT ACADEMIC STANDARDS

BY JOANNE JACOBS

Standards-based education reform involves many elements—testing, accountability systems, cut scores, to name but a few—but the success of each ultimately rests upon getting state academic standards right. So far, however, the states that have produced exemplary standards are greatly outnumbered by those whose standards are weak, nebulous, watered-down, content-free or otherwise unable to bear a real burden.

Perhaps a dozen states have good standards in one or two subjects, but just three states—California, Massachusetts, and Indiana—have consistently produced top-flight K-12 standards across the curriculum. The question is, How did they do it?

It's no secret what causes most jurisdictions to botch the job: overreliance on faulty national standards; the exclusion of real subject-matter experts from the standards-writing process; an obsession with vast committees and “stakeholder consensus.” But California, Massachusetts, and Indiana avoided these traps because they had visionary leaders—and bare-knuckled infighters with thick skins—who exploited unique political opportunities to fight for and pass top-flight standards. This is their story.

In Massachusetts, an equity lawsuit in the early 1990s forced the legislature to address school funding issues. Sensing an opportunity, reform-minded leaders, headed by businessman Jack Rennie, offered the education establishment a deal: more money in return for real reform. The massive funding increase for schools softened what would otherwise have been stiff opposition to standards-based reform.

In California, reform leaders such as Governor Pete Wilson and reading activist Marion Joseph got a boost in 1994 when their state received the lowest reading scores in the union on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). That shock—weakened the influence of progressive educators who had dominated the Department of Education and paved the way

for Sacramento to institute statewide standards and testing to monitor what students were learning.

And Indiana, which had lost thousands of high-paying, low-skill factory jobs, was also shaken by national reports criticizing its schools. Leaders such as higher education commissioner Stan Jones turned to out-of-state experts to help turn things around.

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To be sure, these visionaries and fighters had lots of help. In each state, the governor and key legislators worked across party lines to make first-class standards a reality. The state boards of education took a strong leadership role in Massachusetts and California, and the governor's Education Roundtable did much the same in Indiana.

Teacher unions in all three states chose not to oppose rigorous standards, in part because they realized that more funding for schools hinged on reform. Eventually, many union leaders came to believe that clear standards would help teachers understand what they were expected to do.

Urban superintendents also climbed aboard the standards' train. Some believed that higher standards would lead to more money; others were simply sick of the cloudy, mediocre status quo. Like teachers, they wanted clarity.

As progressives in state education departments were outmaneuvered (or beaten to a pulp) by more traditional education thinkers, reformers also brought in reading researchers, math professors, Nobel Laureates, and consultants with benchmarking expertise. Each of these states tried to learn from others—and from high-scoring Asian and European nations. Nobody in these states tried to learn from education school professors.

Pockets of resistance can still be found in these states in affluent suburban districts and university education departments, where progressives maintain bastions. But, for the most part, “major combat” has ended in the standards battle even as fighting rages over testing and accountability.

In Massachusetts, the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) is under constant attack. Students in the class of 2006 had to pass the tenth grade MCAS to earn a high school diploma. “Half of teachers believe there should be no graduation requirement,” says Kathleen Kelley, who headed the Massachusetts Federation of Teachers until June 2006.

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“The rest say the test shouldn’t be the only measure.”

Indiana’s testing system is markedly weaker than its standards and new fights have broken out over “cut scores”—how good is good enough to pass?—and whether students should be testing at the beginning of the school year (current practice) or at the end. The union is pushing to keep testing in the autumn.

California took three years to back up its standards with a standards-linked test and even longer to complete the transition to a standards-based accountability system.

Bilingual teachers and their political allies have recently fought to exempt English language learners from testing and to create a simplified, standards-lite K-8 curriculum for students from non-English-speaking families. As of August 2006, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, an immigrant who learned English through immersion, was backing the state board of education’s insistence that all students be taught to the same standards. Two former governors—Pete Wilson and Gray Davis—joined hands across party lines to back those standards.

Creating standards is only a first step on the long road to reform—but it’s also a critical step, one that can take

years to achieve. Visionary leaders who can adroitly mix conviction with conversion, friendship and politics are critical to making high-quality standards a reality.

California: A Shock to the System

California was a national leader in progressive education until the 1994 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) scores showed the state mired at the bottom nationally in fourth-grade reading—tied with Louisiana and scoring below Mississippi. On the whole, California fourth-graders were more than a year behind in reading.

“Abysmal,” says Michael Kirst, a Stanford education professor who had served on the state board of education in the 1970s.

“Humiliating,” says Marian Bergeson, a former teacher turned Republican legislator who later became Governor Pete Wilson’s education secretary.

It wasn’t the first jolt to California’s progressive education leaders, but it proved to be the most fatal. In 1992, the state’s students had also done poorly on the NAEP exam. Apologists and cynics blamed the “M & Ms”—too many Mexicans, and too little money—and not much more was said. But the 1994 scores couldn’t be passed over as easily. They made clear that the full range of California’s students was falling behind the rest of the nation: One NAEP chart showed half the children of California’s college graduates reading below the “basic” level.

“That single chart started all this,” says Jerry Treadway, a professor of education at San Diego State University.

The NAEP earthquake had set the reform pendulum swinging with a bipartisan consensus that the progressives had led the state to academic ruin. Leading the charge was Governor Pete Wilson. He was not, however, blazing a wholly new trail.

Reform’s False Start

California’s standards story starts in 1983, the year *A Nation at Risk* was published and the dynamic Louis “Bill” Honig Jr. took over as the state’s elected superin-

tendent of public instruction and head of the department of education. In his dark-horse campaign against Wilson Riles, who had served in that post for the previous 12 years, Honig called for raising standards and graduation requirements and for teaching “a core of knowledge in the arts and sciences.”

It was a bold move. Prior to Honig’s arrival, most California education dollars came from local property taxes, so the state had little say over how they were spent and minimal power to set standards. The decision by voters in 1978 to pass Proposition 13, which shifted education funding from local districts to the state, changed all that. And Honig, who wanted to craft new statewide standards calling for students to read literature, study classic civilizations, and develop mathematical and scientific understanding, saw his opportunity.

But having the will did not give him the capacity to overcome the progressivists who controlled the state education department and the writing of curriculum frameworks. These were people who believed that the teacher should be “a guide on the side,” facilitating children’s natural learning, not a “sage on the stage” teaching skills or knowledge.

“The frameworks were, mostly, here’s how you teach, which wasn’t that helpful,” recalls Glen Thomas, who was staff director of the curriculum commission and then deputy director of the Academic Standards Commission. “Quality was uneven. The ones we did later tended to be better because we learned as we went along. History was pretty good,” he remembers, because leaders such as Diane Ravitch and Charlotte Crabtree, who stressed content over teaching methods, were involved. “But math was weak. We had kids going all the way through school and never doing algebra. They could just take general math.”

The reading frameworks were especially “crappy,” says Sue Burr. An education consultant in the legislature at the time who worked with state Senator Gary Hart—a Democrat who chaired the state Senate Education Committee and left the legislature in 1994 to open the Institute for Education Reform at Sacramento State University—Burr later served as Governor Gray Davis’s education secretary. Whole language enthusiasts, she says, wrote a visionary reading framework in 1987 that was heavy on literature and the joy of learning, very light on phonics, spelling, and direct instruction.

BILL HONIG



Elected superintendent of public instruction in 1983, he led an early effort to write education standards for all California schools and became an advocate for statewide testing of students. Without it, he believed, there would be no way to measure if the standards were elevating student performance.

[Without a state test], we were flying blind. That’s why NAEP was such a shock in 1994.

The math framework didn’t come until 1992, and predictably, it embraced the “new new math” ideas promulgated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, which stressed students working in groups, solving real-world problems, and developing their own strategies instead of applying traditional algorithms. Computation drills were out, feeling good was in. Students would feel “mathematically empowered,” the framework promised.

But how would anyone know if the state’s newly “empowered” students were any better at math? California had no state test. In 1990, Governor George Deukmejian vetoed funding for the California Assessment Program (CAP) multiple-choice test, complaining that it didn’t produce individual scores.

Honig says he realized students were foundering, but couldn't muster the political support necessary to launch a statewide test. "It could have been corrected so easily, if we'd had a state test, but we were flying blind," Honig says. "That's why NAEP was such a shock in 1994."

Honig also tried to bring back skills instruction but made little headway. Then he was distracted by charges involving education department contracts for his wife's nonprofit foundation. Convicted of conflict-of-interest charges, he resigned at the start of 1993.

CEO Sam Ginn, who complained that high school grads couldn't pass a simple arithmetic test, moved Wilson to action.

Demoralized by Honig's fall, the education department was managed for the next two years by an interim superintendent named Dave Dawson, a long-time civil servant who tried not to make waves. Inside the education department and the colleges of education, progressivism reigned supreme. But outside, even before Honig's fall, the traditionalists were gathering their forces.

Rallying Traditionalist Troops

If Honig couldn't break the back of failed progressive policies in California, others were willing to try. A remarkable array of citizens began a grassroots struggle for improved reading and math instruction.

Their spiritual leader and inspiration turned out to be Marion Joseph, a retired former aide to Riles, who spearheaded the revolt against whole-language reading in California. When she discovered that her grandson wasn't learning to read naturally, as whole-language theorists had promised, Joseph dived into the reading research literature, learned where the whole-language advocates were wrong, and became a shrewd and relentless lobbyist for the return of direct, systematic teaching of phonics.

Richard Lee Colvin, writing in *The Los Angeles Times* in 1995, described her as an "unpaid lobbyist" who "relies on 'moles,' as she calls them, to tip her off to proposed policies so she can press for language that suits her purpose."

Her success is demonstrated by the "conversion" of Bill Honig to her cause. After leaving office in 1993, he became the leader of the Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) in 1995 as a born-again phonics man.

Joseph went to work on key legislators, persuading them that reading instruction was failing California students. "I carted research studies to legislators and the governor's office," Joseph says. "I couldn't be accused of being a right-wing nut, because I was a left-wing nut."

On the math front, parent groups were forming to fight for traditional instruction—algorithms and all. Honest Open Logical Debate (HOLD) started in Palo Alto in 1995 as a group uniting mathematicians, computer scientists, engineers, and lower-tech parents concerned about "fuzzy" math textbooks—or no books at all. Mathematically Correct, a website started by San Diego scientists, spread word of the parents' revolt across the state and eventually the country.

The Internet was critical, says Ze'ev Wurman, a Palo Alto computer scientist and HOLD member who later was named to the committee that rewrote the math framework. High-tech parents, early e-mail adopters, "could easily exchange information, cull supporting articles from regional and national press, and rally people to meetings."

Sam Ginn, then the chair of the California Business Roundtable and CEO of Pacific Telesis, shared his concerns about math education directly with Governor Pete Wilson. "A few weeks after I took office as governor" in 1991, Wilson says, "I had a call from Sam Ginn, saying, 'We give tests for entry-level jobs to high school graduates. The exam is pegged at the seventh grade level—the math is just arithmetic, fractions and percentages and it's the equivalent for reading comprehension and writing. Two-thirds of high school graduates flunk the exam. If they're close enough, we'll do remedial instruction, but we really think it's not our job to be teaching reading and math to high school graduates.' He thought that was our job."

One response to that complaint was the creation in 1991 of a Cabinet-level position, secretary of child development and education, to rival the elected superintendent of public instruction. Wilson named Maureen

DiMarco, former president of the California School Boards Association, who is best remembered for describing new-new math as “fuzzy crap.”

Rise of the State Board of Education

The California state board of education, a relatively quiet group under Riles, rebelled against Honig in 1991. It sued Honig, claiming the board, not the secretary of public instruction, had the constitutional power to set education policy. It won its case in 1993.

“The appeals court ruled that the board of education was a policymaking body and the department of education was the arms and legs of the board,” says Bill Lucia, who was executive director of the board at the time.

Wilson, as evidenced by his appointment of DiMarco, was friendly with the reform-minded board. Yvonne Larsen, president of the board in 1993, had served as vice-chair of the Nation at Risk panel and was a good friend of Wilson. They got to know one another in the '70s and early '80s, when Wilson was mayor of San Diego and she sat on the local school board.

Wilson wasted no time appointing assertive board members who were unwilling to take the department's lead. “I appointed Tim Draper to the board,” Wilson says. “I told Tim, ‘You don't have a snowball's chance in hell of being confirmed, but you'll have a year on the board to make your case.’ Janet Nicholas had guts and honesty and I knew she would hang in there. We had awfully good people who we knew would hang in.”

“Wilson got serious about K-12 and took the board seriously,” says Suzanne Tacheny, who directed California Business for Educational Excellence. “He died on his sword over some appointments. He was willing to fight.”

The shift in power from the superintendent to the board didn't just happen, says Wilson. “It was by conscious design.”

Wilson wasted little time in stripping the department of its power. As mentioned, there was no statewide test before 1993 but the department's progressives were at work developing the new-fangled California Learning Assessment System (CLAS), which asked students to write about their feelings and draw pictures in response to reading passages.

Parents on the religious right railed against the exam after it was administered in 1993, complaining that questions about students' personal beliefs and experiences were an invasion of privacy. The department stonewalled its critics, dismissing them as right-wing extremists. But the criticisms leveled by statisticians hired to analyze the assessment for its technical soundness could not be so easily ignored. Their report in 1994 revealed numerous problems in producing valid scores. Moreover, CLAS couldn't provide individual student scores, a top priority for Wilson, who wanted to empower parents.

Pete Wilson died on his sword over appointments to the state board of education. He was willing to fight.

These two shortcomings gave Wilson all he needed in 1994 to veto funding for CLAS.

That debacle—the word everyone uses to describe it—did more than weaken the department politically. It clued in state officials, who had previously relied on the department of education's so-called professional expertise and ability to objectively determine what constituted best practice, that these “experts” were in fact part of the problem.

The department was further damaged in 1995 when Delaine Eastin took office as superintendent of public instruction. Eastin tried to restore balance to the department, moving some true believers to other jobs. “The progressives in the department didn't like Delaine at all,” Stanford's Michael Kirst recalls.

But neither did the governor. “Pete Wilson hated Delaine,” says Kirst. “She'd made very personal attacks on Wilson when she was in the legislature and he never forgave her.”

Wilson slashed the education department's budget by 25 percent, further weakening Eastin's power.

And when Eastin thought things could get no worse, they did. With no friends among the progressives inside the education department, no support from the governor's office, and no public support in the wake of the CLAS debacle, she faced the public outcry over the 1994 NAEP results, released to the public in 1995.

Yet in the face of such adversity, she scored a success, launching both the Reading Task Force and the Math Task Force to look into the state's low performance. The Reading Task Force talked with reading researchers and called for "balanced" instruction combining phonics and comprehensive strategies. Joseph was a task-force member and lobbied successfully to include systematic and explicit teaching of phonics. The battles fought here would prove helpful when Wilson launched a commission to write new standards for the state in 1995.

The CTA had no interest in defending progressive education, and the CFT was pro-phonics.

The Math Task Force was somewhat less successful. It, too, called for balance in instruction, but what was meant by balance was never decided. Not surprisingly, when the math standards were written several years later, the process erupted into an all-out war.

Meanwhile, the legislature was waiting for no one. Liberal Democrats allied with conservative Republicans to pass the ABC bills in 1995, which required the state board of education to ensure that instructional materials in math and reading teach "systematic, explicit phonics, spelling and basic computational skills."

In a July 6, 1995, *San Francisco Chronicle* story, assemblyman John Burton explained why his bill required schools to teach spelling. "You cannot run until you walk. You cannot walk until you crawl," said Burton, an influential Democrat. "And what has happened in public education is we're trying to teach people how to run and jump, and nobody taught them either how to crawl or how to walk."

The ABC Bills passed the assembly without a single "no" vote. The bipartisan consensus was a tribute to Marion Joseph's aggressive lobbying and the progressives' lack of clout. The California Teachers Association had no interest in defending progressive education while the California Federation of Teachers was pro-phonics.

Eastin admitted that her department had made an "honest mistake" in neglecting basic skills.

"All the players agreed K-12 was a real mess," says Nicholas, who was a Wilson appointee to the state school board. "It wasn't making anybody happy. A key moment for me was when I was driving to Sacramento and heard on the radio that John Burton—a very liberal Democrat—had passed the ABC bill saying kids should be taught to spell. I started laughing. It was like passing a bill saying people should walk."

Republicans held a slim majority in the assembly. Steve Baldwin, "the most extreme right-wing Christian legislator we've ever had," says liberal Democrat Joseph, chaired the education committee. "I told Baldwin we had to stick to reading—no school prayer. We had to stay in the box."

"Without Baldwin, this wouldn't have happened," says Treadway. "CTA controls the agenda when the Democrats are in power. The Republicans are more likely to let a public voice in. Delaine thought because she'd been chair of the education committee she could walk over there and tell them what to do. By the time she got there, Marion had it sewn up."

"Everyone was in favor of excellence by then," says Hart. "It reminded me of crime. 'I can be tougher on crime than you.' Everyone was talking tough on education."

"The stars aligned," says Kirst. "Pete Wilson had the governor's power. The legislature was moving to the right; the Republicans gained control by one vote of one house. Honig was gone. There'd been an interim superintendent for two years, then Delaine Eastin, who didn't build any coalitions. The department of ed was beaten down."

The unions kept quiet. "This wasn't a bread and butter issue for them," says Kirst. "In terms of progressive vs. traditional, they probably had members split six ways to Sunday."

A Consensus for New Standards

By the end of 1995, Wilson, Eastin, and the legislators agreed: A new 21-member standards commission dominated by gubernatorial appointees would write rigorous, world-class, unfuzzy standards that would be used to create a new state test—one that didn't ask students about their feelings. The law required a majority of commission members to be parents with children in public school.

Victory has a thousand fathers, it's said, while defeat is an orphan. It's a sign of the success of California's standards that everyone now claims to have backed them from the beginning.

But there's general agreement that unions, education groups, and the business community went along rather than leading the charge.

The CTA wielded enormous power, Wilson says, but the CTA and the smaller California Federation of Teachers "chose not to fight standards."

"The unions were skeptical about standards at first," says Bergeson, who in 1996 replaced DiMarco as the governor's education secretary. "They worried this would be tough for teachers to absorb. Their concern was that there's never enough money for staff development. They came to support standards because it let them understand what to expect."

Joe Nunez, then a CTA lobbyist and now its assistant executive director and a state board of education member, agrees with Bergeson's analysis. "The CTA participated as one of many groups," says Nunez. "Initially, there was a hue and cry about teachers having to do the same thing in the same way on the same day." Teacher empowerment was a CTA priority. However, union leaders decided that clear standards aligned to a well-written test would help teachers do their jobs. "We think that if you set expectations and let teachers do what they need to do to meet those, that's empowering."

Like the unions, the professional associations representing school board members, administrators and non-teaching staff were "non-players," says Scott Hill, who headed the school boards' association and became the second director of the standards commission. "I used to complain to the various associations: You think public education revolves around money. You don't under-

PETE WILSON



As governor of California, Wilson oversaw the transfer of power in the state's education realm from the Education Department to the State Board of Education, the body that finally made high standards a reality in the Golden State.

[The shift in power] was by conscious design.

stand standards and testing is going to change your life. This is going to put a spotlight on your school."

The California Business Roundtable argued that good schools were critical to California's economic health. But they didn't get into specifics of how to improve schools.

"Business was not pushing an ideology," says Thomas. "They wanted clarity, specificity, and rigor" in the standards.

In 1997, with all the players in tow, Wilson pushed through the STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) system. It

took effect in 1998, using a nationally normalized off-the-shelf test that produced individual scores. Wilson was adamant that parents couldn't wait any longer. In 2001, questions based on the newly crafted state standards were added.

“People writing standards need to know their work will go out for review.”

Writing the Standards

In 1996, the standards commission went to work. The governor, the superintendent and the legislature appointed former teachers, school administrators, academics, business leaders, and a home-schooling mother—but no current classroom teachers. Later, as vacancies opened up, some active teachers were named to the commission.

Ellen Wright, an education grant writer who'd served on previous commissions, was chosen as the chairwoman. Ellen Moratti was the executive director in charge of the commission staff, replaced by Scott Hill in 1997.

The commission's first job was to hire consultants with standards-writing experience. StandardsWork, a Washington-based organization that stressed the need for clear, measurable, grade-by-grade standards, got the job. Consultants Susan Pimentel and Leslye Arsht used existing standards and frameworks as models: Virginia's Standards of Learning and the local standards employed by Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina were influential, but commissioners also looked at California models, such as the Education Roundtable standards, as well as work done in Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, New York, Massachusetts, Texas, Washington, Chicago, Hungary, Japan, and Singapore. They also considered Core Knowledge, the International Baccalaureate Program, the New Standards Project (a joint effort of the National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington, D.C., and the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh), and TIMSS.

Commissioners invited researchers to testify, though, as E.D. Hirsch Jr. pointed out in his testimony, evaluating the reliability of research was a challenge:

The enormous problem to be faced in basing policy on research is that it is almost impossible to make educational policy that is not based on research. Almost every practice that has ever been pursued in education has been supported with data by somebody. I don't know of a single failed educational policy, ranging from the naturalistic teaching of reading, to the open classroom, to the teaching of abstract set theory in third-grade math that has not been research-based. Experts have advocated almost every known educational practice short of inflicting permanent bodily harm.

Each commission member served either on the English language arts or math subcommittee; once these were done, the commissioners went on to history/social studies and science.

“It helped that our meetings were public,” says Pimentel, who took charge of English and history. “Many teachers came, and we often turned to them as we were struggling with what level of detail to include. We asked them to be a check on us.”

Commissioners often asked the audience to participate. Pimentel remembers, “Trying to do all this in public was daunting, but I really felt the atmosphere was that we wanted to get it right. There was a sense of openness.”

“What was good about California's process,” she continues, “was the many layers of review.” The draft standards were sent all over the state and the country for review. “People writing standards need to know their work will go out for review by colleagues in the field and to experts around the country. It's not just the say-so of the 10 or 20 people in the room.”

“We set a process and stuck with it,” says Thomas, the commission's then deputy director. “All papers were made public. There were times for public comment. I think people thought the process was fair.”

Reading: Civility, Not a Civil War

To everyone's surprise, reading wasn't a fight. The battle had already been won.

“English language arts was fairly peaceful because it was preceded by the Reading Task Force, which came out with *Every Child a Reader*,” says Jerry Treadway. A member both of the task force and the commission and an Education professor at San Diego State University, Treadway had converted from whole language to phonics when his student-teachers said their students couldn’t read. “The task force is where the blood was spilled. Marion Joseph fought to the last minute to get ‘phonics’ in the report and she won. When we started on the standards, Delaine came in and said, ‘We’ve fought this battle. It’s over. Leave it alone.’”

Alice Petrossian, a deputy superintendent from southern California, was a “terrific chair” of the subcommittee, says Sheila Byrd, a commission staffer who helped write the English and social studies standards. “Alice was very inclusive. Everybody felt listened to. Some folks from the audience became almost like part of the subcommittee.”

“In reading, we made it clear up front that phonics and phonemic awareness would be important in the early grades,” Pimentel says.

Researchers flew in to testify about reading research, including Marilyn Adams and Louisa Moats, both leading researchers in reading instruction.

“Every standards document claims to be ‘research based,’ often with no explanation of what research it’s talking about,” Pimentel says. In reading, “bringing in researchers helped achieve consensus” in California.

“The base of reading research was so overwhelming,” Burr says. “We relied on the NIH (National Institutes of Health) research. At the ed schools, the sheep were still going to whole language,” but teachers came to see the value of phonics-based, systematic reading instruction. “There was a lot of consensus.”

The greatest resistance in reading came from kindergarten teachers who didn’t want to see kids pushed at all at that tender age, recalls Treadway. “The teachers complained, but within a year they told us we could have made the standards more rigorous.”

The commissioners emphasized reading in grades K-3, and writing in grades 4-8. There were some complaints that the high school standards were too hard, Treadway

says. “People said students would need a master’s degree to pass.” But the commissioners, checking their work against Virginia and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, forged ahead.

Joseph, named to the state board of education by Wilson in 1997, was asked by the board to monitor English language arts along with Kathryn Dronenburg, an elementary teacher and a staunch phonics advocate. These two approved of the commission’s work.

*“We did a lot of stressing *e pluribus unum* rather than multiculturalism.”*

History and Social Studies: The Great Peace

Remarkably, history/social studies was also tranquil—at least within the commission.

The commissioners liked the extant history framework, written by Diane Ravitch and others when Honig was in office, and agreed to use it as a foundation.

“In history/social studies, people wanted their culture represented and the wording to be correct, but there weren’t rival camps,” says Pimentel. “Early on we got long, very scholarly, often very angry, responses about the wording of specific items, often questioning our motives. We tried to look at the content of what they were saying to see what had merit.”

“When we got to world history,” she continued, “we decided it was important to look at the eastern hemisphere, but it also was very important for students to know where our system of government came from. We were able to pull in other events not just from Europe but we made a determination not to stick in everything. It’s still very comprehensive and maybe there’s too much to teach.”

With the history framework as a guide, the subcommittee tried to resist pressure to mention every student’s ethnic heritage.

“We did a lot of stressing *e pluribus unum* rather than multiculturalism,” recalls attorney Lawrence Siskind, who chaired the committee. “The standards were sort of anti-multicultural.”

Still, when the commission held hearings to talk to teachers, they heard complaints that the standards asked too much, Siskind recalls. “We were getting more excuses than constructive comments. Teachers as a group were intimidated by standards. They felt they were too high, that it wasn’t practical.”

Byrd still worries about sixth and seventh grade, which are “chock full of history, geography and economics, even some social history. It’s a lot.”

The ideological fight everyone expected over reading and history erupted over math and science instead.

The subcommittee members did their best to find a teachable balance, and finished without igniting a history war.

However, California made no provision for updating the standards, Hart points out. “Tenth grade world history is oriented to Europe. We have the Glorious Revolution, the French Revolution, very little post World War II, and nothing on terrorism, not much on Islam.”

“I’m afraid to reopen the standards,” Thomas says. “They could be turned into a laundry list or watered down or factionalized.”

For this reason, the state board of education resisted pressure in 2006 from Hindu nationalists who wanted to rewrite textbooks to change the Aryan “invasion” of the subcontinent to an “incursion,” and to change the “caste system” to a “class system.”

The subcommittee “was a very harmonious group,” says Siskind, who served as the chair. “We had disagreements but were determined to keep discussion at a polite level. I kept telling myself, ‘This is not litigation. This is politics. I have to be nice.’ On reflection, I think we were all glad we weren’t in math or science.”

Math Attack

The ideological fight everyone had expected over reading and history erupted over math and science instead.

“Math was a war from the get-go,” says Hill.

Unlike reading, where the task force set up by Eastin sorted out the differences between the progressives and the traditionalists, the Math Task Force had failed to negotiate common ground between supporters of NCTM’s progressive standards and the math traditionalists.

The NCTM standards were multi-grade and sometimes vague, Pimentel says. “California decided to go grade specific and detailed. Plus there was the push to make sure students had basic skills under their belts, that algebra needs to be traditional algebra, that geometry has to have proofs in it. People thought NCTM was under attack.”

The commission’s firebrand was Bill Evers, a HOLD member appointed by the governor and a Research Fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution. Evers is a political scientist but had developed a “math brain trust” that advised him, including math professors at Stanford, Berkeley, Oregon, and the California State University system, and HOLD members with backgrounds in statistics and biomedical research.

Evers believed strongly that children need to be taught math fundamentals before they can build conceptual understanding. He also opposed the use of calculators in elementary school.

Judy Coddling, a former high school principal and vice president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, became the leader of the commissioners who supported NCTM standards.

“On the math committee, we carefully examined what they were doing in Asian countries, the Czech Republic,” Coddling says. “Our concern was once you’ve acquired math skills and knowledge, how do you use that knowledge? In our country, conceptual understanding is left out of the mix. It shouldn’t be either/or. You can’t apply something you don’t have.”

Evers and Coddling believed they were advocating a balanced curriculum that would include both basic skills and higher-level thinking. They wanted benchmarks tied to international standards. If kids can do it in Singapore and Japan, why not in the U.S.? But they had different ideas about how to get to “world-class.”

The business community wasn’t a great deal of help, recalls Hill. They wanted higher standards, but what

would those look like? Evers, he continues, “had the specifics. He had a bank of advisors—mathematicians—that became an ad hoc committee that worked with the state board when they rewrote the standards.”

Evers’ persona carried the day at the beginning, but by the end the commission sided with Coddling, who had the votes needed to pass a progressive agenda.

With Evers as the sole “no” vote, the commission eventually approved a set of NCTM-inspired math standards that Coddling believed “could have been the best in the country.”

But Evers didn’t give up. A canny political scientist, he looked at where the power lay: The standards commission could recommend standards, but the state board of education had the final say. “When I noticed severe problems, I’d go to people in the governor’s office. But they had plenty on their plates. So I went to members of the state board. Did they want to defend math standards with no long division?”

Evers tried to bargain with the commissioners, threatening to write a minority report unless they amended the standards. “The staff went apoplectic. They really didn’t want a minority report. I had a complete alternative set of standards. It got very bitter. I think I got no votes other than my own. But I put my standards on the web and handed them out. I wrote in the *New York Times* and *Mercury News* about my views.”

Evers knew he’d angered the commissioners by going directly to the state board. But he didn’t care.

The board agreed that the commission’s standards were too fuzzy. “Teaching long division was seen as moral turpitude,” says Nicholas, who was friendly to Evers’s position. “Memorizing the multiplication tables was a really horrible thing to do to young minds.”

The state board asked Nicholas and fellow board member Robert Trigg to “fix” the commission’s standards. “I can remember making the most outlandish phone calls to people,” says Nicholas. “I called a very well-known mathematician at Princeton and asked for his help. He asked me what the compensation was. I basically said, ‘Love and kisses.’ We had no budget. We had minimal staff.”

A team led by Stanford math professors rewrote the commission’s standards, reordering them to make sure basic skills came before advanced skills, eliminating ambiguity, and fixing more than 100 errors in the original document.

“They stripped it of discovery learning, and they paid attention to the content and curriculum controversies,” Evers said. “They didn’t use my alternate standards, but I think the standards they did are very good.”

When progressives won the first round, Bill Evers bypassed his committee and went directly to the state school board.

Other than banning calculators in elementary school, the board’s standards didn’t dictate how to teach. For example, schools had the option of teaching “integrated mathematics” rather than the traditional algebra, geometry, or advanced algebra/trig sequence. Students could learn through drill or through discovery, as long as they learned.

In a letter of protest to the board, NCTM President Gail Burrill wrote: “Today’s children cannot be prepared for tomorrow’s increasingly technological world with yesterday’s content ... The vision of important school mathematics should not be one that bears no relation to reality, ignores technology, focuses on a limited set of procedures.”

But the progressive tide was turning. A few years later, the NCTM standards were revised to include more emphasis on foundational skills.

Science Stand-Off

After math, the subcommittee turned to science. Once again, Evers said he would go to the state board of education if he didn’t get the standards he wanted from the commission. Again, the board was on his side.

“Looking at what had happened with math, we knew science would be a huge battle,” says Hill. And the battle began with a struggle over which consultant to hire to advise and help write the standards.

Two teams applied for job: One, led by Bonnie Brunkhorst, a California State University-San Bernardino science education and geology professor, strongly supported national standards written by the National Science Foundation and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Stan Metzenberg, a California State University at Northridge biology professor, assembled a rival team that included three Nobel Laureates, including Glenn Seaborg, former U.C. Berkeley chancellor, head of the Atomic Energy Commission, and chair of the Nation at Risk panel.

The science commission's standards stuck to one verb, "to know."

Metzenberg's team volunteered to work without pay; Brunkhorst asked for \$178,000. The commission's scoring system used cost as the denominator, which should have guaranteed a Metzenberg victory. Instead, however, the Brunkhorst team was chosen on grounds that its members had more experience writing standards. When Metzenberg complained, Hill conceded the rules hadn't been followed. While the commission revamped the scoring system and repeated the process, Metzenberg recruited more Nobel Laureates and Brunkhorst recruited a few of her own. A battle of the Nobels was raging.

"I could see this was going to get really ugly really fast," Hill says. "I talked to Ellen Wright and Bill Evers and said, 'I think we should force both groups to work together. We can find that neither meets the sufficiency hurdle.' I did this knowing my life would be hell working with these people and it was a miserable experience, just wretched. Our job was to force them to talk to each other."

When Larry Stupski, a Charles Schwab vice president, resigned from the commission, his seat had to be filled. Wilson appointed Seaborg and made him chair of the science subcommittee. Roland Otto, a nuclear physicist who'd been a Seaborg protégé, resigned from Brunkhorst's group and became the facilitator, acting as a go-between linking Seaborg and the two teams of consultants.

Metzenberg, suspicious at first, came to trust Otto's ability to "see both sides." Brunkhorst, however, saw Otto's resignation as betrayal.

The two teams worked side by side without establishing trust or respect for each other. A draft might have one color for Brunkhorst suggestions, another color for Metzenberg's language. The split document went to the commission.

Brunkhorst was amazed and angered by the commission's refusal to accept AAAS standards based on student inquiry. Metzenberg, focused on content, opposed a separate strand for investigations and experimentation. "I was never worried students wouldn't get lab experience and hands-on activities. I thought it was important they actually know something at the end of the lab experience."

The commission's standards stuck to one verb, "to know."

Brunkhorst cites that as a failing. "They never say 'understand and be able to use it.' They just say 'know.'"

For Metzenberg, simplicity is a virtue. "Other state standards pulled out Bloom's taxonomy: They use 'to understand, interpret, analyze' . . . nobody knows what that means. We just use 'to know.' Ours are easy to write test questions for, very precise and straightforward."

The subcommittee looked at Virginia's Standards of Learning as well as overseas at India and elsewhere. "We looked at countries that haven't fallen into the trap of fuzzy education," Metzenberg says.

The American Federation of Teachers' reports on what college bound students abroad are expected to know in chemistry, physics, and biology proved helpful. The AFT printed the Tokyo University entrance exam, the British A-level exam and Germany's Abitur, including what percentage of students attempted the test and what percentage passed.

"Developmental appropriateness" became a battle. Brunkhorst believed children could be confused and frustrated by being exposed to concepts they're not ready to understand. Metzenberg saw no harm in exposing children to ideas that might be a stretch.

"In kindergarten we said they should know that water evaporates from an open container but not from a closed con-

tainer,” Metzenberg says. “It suggests a nice experiment. Bonnie said psychologists have found kids that young have no concept of water as a gas. It would case them stress and harm to try to learn that. My friends joked that California needs an open container law to protect children from harm.”

“People try to ignore developmental psychology,” says Brunkhorst. But “it does more harm than good to be exposed to the periodic table in third grade.”

Seaborg wanted the periodic table—element 106 was seaborgium—on the wall in elementary school to prepare students to learn more in high school. It became a symbol of high expectations.

Brunkhorst’s team focused on the lower grades, while Metzenberg started in high school and worked backward. They met in middle school, which became “a huge train wreck on content,” Metzenberg says. “Bonnie was arguing students couldn’t learn a lot of content in fourth and fifth grade so the content built up in middle school.”

Seaborg pushed for more content in the early grades. Other commissioners didn’t want to set low standards that might become the ceiling, but also feared setting high standards that would be unreachable.

The compromise was to put an asterisk by standards that only advanced students would be expected to learn.

Metzenberg was pleased with the result; Brunkhorst says only that the science standards ‘could have been a lot worse.’”

When it came to a vote, Seaborg abstained, complaining that too much had been asterisked. But he autographed a copy of the periodic table for Hill.

When the board accepted the standards, progressives protested once again. Luther Williams, the NSF program officer, wrote a letter saying the foundation would stop funding education grants in California.

The board didn’t waver. The threat proved to be empty.

Classroom teachers like California’s math and science standards, Pimentel says. As she goes around the country consulting on standards, she brings models from other states as a base to build on.

“I bring California science standards along, as well as Indiana, and more often than not they like the clarity and focus of California—and they really like Indiana—even though they know and like NSF and AAAS. While the battle may rage outside, the teacher in the classroom is able to look at these different renditions and put them together in a way that makes sense.”

Intellectual leaders and advocates fought like hell to make sure the standards came out right—and didn’t stop until they won.

California’s standards aren’t a compromise, Kirst says. “California turned very traditional in reaction to what had happened before. One side won over the other: That’s what makes the California standards so strong. You don’t have a lot of mush.”

...

California’s abysmal NAEP showing in the early 1990s created an environment friendly to reform. But that wasn’t enough; shrewd political leaders such as Governor Wilson also made tactical decisions—such as strengthening the state board of education and weakening the superintendent of public instruction—that eventually proved critical. Most important, intellectual leaders and advocates such as Marion Joseph, Bill Evers, and Glenn Seaborg fought like hell to make sure the standards came out right and didn’t stop until they won.

Massachusetts: Business Leadership in the Bay State

In the massive bureaucracy that is any state’s education system, reform leaders rarely unify the many factions that hold a stake in the industry. More often, they become yet one more group fighting for control of the K-12 apparatus. In Massachusetts, however, a reform-minded business leader long set on improving K-12 education in his state played the unusual role of mediator—paving the way for the Education Reform Act of 1993 that set the Bay State on its way to creating first-rate standards and accountability systems.

That leader was Jack Rennie, CEO of Pacer Systems (now AverStar Inc.). In 1988, he formed a group called the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), a collection of entrepreneurs and executives worried about the effect of a poorly educated populace on the state's economic future. His goal was to get business involved in education policy reform, not just in funding pet projects.

Working with co-founder Paul Reville, a former teacher and alternative school principal who served on the state board of education from 1991-1996, Rennie produced the 1991 manifesto *Every Child A Winner*. It spelled out three broad goals for reforming education in the commonwealth: 1) Improve student achievement by tying academic goals to international norms; 2) Improve teacher quality and the operations of schools; and 3) Reform the education finance system, which at the time rested heavily upon property taxes, and thus shortchanged low-income children.

"We knew we had to reform funding," says Reville, who's now executive director of the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy in Cambridge. "The poorest quarter of districts were spending \$1,300 less per student than the richest quartile." Business-school partnerships had let executives "see the antiquated ways schools operate with no clear goals, no data on performance. The whole thing struck business people as poorly organized."

The business community was also influenced by international comparisons, such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Reville says. "Americans used to think we educate more students while other countries educate only the elite. It became clear that's not true any more. Other countries educate more kids to a higher level than we do. Our top students are like average students in Japan."

An Opportunity for Reform

The Rennie report's release was serendipitous. About the same time, the state was hit with an equity lawsuit challenging its system of funding schools. The legislature was forced to fix the finance system and in *Every Child A Winner* it had a blueprint.

"We worked for years for comprehensive school reform, not just small initiatives," says Robert Antonucci, who was Massachusetts commissioner of education from 1992 to 1998. But it was MBAE, he recalls, that made it possible.

True, but the reform initiatives also enjoyed ample support in the governor's office and legislature. Then-Governor William F. Weld, a Republican, supported introducing an education reform initiative in the legislature. Backing him were two powerful legislators—Democrats Tom Birmingham, president of the state Senate, and Mark Roosevelt, chair of the House education committee, who led the fight to pass a comprehensive bill.

"In 1992-93, there were five different versions of the education reform bill," Antonucci recalls. "We all worked aggressively on a bill we could agree with. A big piece was the curriculum frameworks... The consensus backed sustained funding for equity coupled with standards and assessment."

Birmingham, who now practices law in a Boston firm and was then considered strongly pro-labor, says: "As a matter of principled conviction, I and others believed [that] without measurable standards there would be no way to tell if we were making progress. The idea that we'd make a massive investment in schools without standards was a nonstarter. We're going to increase funding by \$2 billion and not change a thing?"

Teachers had a "show me the money" skepticism, he continues. "The legislature had a habit of embracing the trendy ed reform du jour and then getting tired of it and dropping it. In addition, there were people who said we were just throwing money at the problem. That wasn't true. We were demanding accountability from teachers, principals, and students. If we'd tried to do standards without more money, it would have been a pitched battle. Education reform is like a bicycle: One wheel is funding and the other is standards and accountability. It won't move forward with only one wheel."

"Among the educators' groups," recalls Roosevelt, who's now superintendent in Pittsburgh, "only the superintendents' group supported the bill" initially.

The unions did not take a strong stand. "One of the teachers' unions supported the bill mildly; the other opposed it mildly," Roosevelt notes. This is where MBAE was "enormously helpful...For a business group to support more funding was critical." MBAE was "more of an advocacy group than just a business group," he points out. It may not have represented the views of the commonwealth's entire business community but it was the most active and vocal group focused on education.

Rennie went across the state, listening to people's concerns. "Jack Rennie had the particular quality of creating civil discourse," Reville says. "He was a great listener, very appreciative of educators."

Teachers' union leaders remember Rennie, who died in 2001, with respect and affection. "Before Jack Rennie got involved, there wasn't much leadership from business," says Kathleen Kelley of Massachusetts Federation of Teachers (MFT). "Without him it would have been hard to pass a comprehensive education package. He talked to everyone. He listened to us. He challenged us. His personal leadership was unbelievable. Talking about standards, accountability, resources—he was such a dynamic personality."

"Jack Rennie was a fabulous person," says Rosanne Bacon Meade, who headed the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) during the negotiations that led to the Education Reform Act. When other groups were pointing the finger of blame solely at teachers," Meade recalls, "Jack and Paul were [working] to bridge the gap."

MTA invited Rennie and Reville to meet with local presidents. "Rennie had the ability to tell you you were wrong and make you glad he'd told you," Meade says.

Creating Standards: Phase I

Once the reform act passed in 1993, however, teachers began pushing back.

"There was some resentment at the idea that standards had to be imposed from the outside, that we didn't have our own standards at the local level," Meade says. Ultimately, the standards push forced a much-needed discussion: "Do we have lower expectations for urban kids?"

The answer was clear: Yes.

Massachusetts had little to build on when the standards effort started. The only statewide test administered at the time measured basic skills in fourth, eighth, and tenth grades; it was aligned to nothing in particular and nearly everyone passed. "A Massachusetts diploma meant nothing," says Birmingham. "We only required English, U.S. history, and four years of gym, which is a testimony to the strength of the gym teachers' lobby."

"Massachusetts really believes in local control," says Antonucci. "We have more school districts than towns in the state. The reform bill was seen as taking away local control. School committees lost the power to hire and fire anyone but the superintendent. The big complaint was, 'We can't hire the football coach.' That seemed to bother them more than anything else."

Rennie had the ability to tell you you were wrong and make you glad he'd told you.

But the education department had its marching orders, and its first move was to establish a commission to create a "common core of learning" that would identify what high school graduates should know and be able to do in order to "lead productive, fulfilling, and successful lives."

"It was an aspirational document that was quickly ignored because it was too general," Reville says.

Meanwhile, the department was recruiting for committees that would write multi-grade "curriculum frameworks," to be aligned to tests at grades 4, 6, 8, and 10.

Out of roughly 1,000 applicants, the department selected superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, high school students, professors, and business and community leaders to serve on the framework committees (each with about 25 members) in English, history, math, science, world languages, health, and arts. The committees took 1994 and 1995 to do their jobs. It proved a labor-intensive task.

"We looked at what was happening nationally, in states like Kentucky, and overseas," Antonucci says. "We didn't try to reinvent the wheel. We didn't want to be pioneers."

The department's own work reflected familiar progressive thinking about how children learn and it focused on making bold advances in teaching, learning, and school culture.

Dan French, then Massachusetts director of curriculum and instruction, describes the process in "The State's Role in Shaping a Progressive Vision of Public Education" in the November 1998 *Phi Delta Kappan*:

PAUL REVILLE



Along with Jack Rennie, Reville was co-founder of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, which produced the book *Every Child A Winner*—an early key to standards reform in the Bay State.

Americans used to think we educate more students while other countries educate only the elite. It became clear that's not true any more. Other countries educate more kids to a higher level than we do. Our top students are like average students in Japan.

The original draft frameworks were developed to be broad guidelines of what students should know and be able to do, while providing wide latitude to districts in the creation of curriculum that matched the standards. They avoided long lists of bits of knowledge that students must learn. The standards were crafted to focus on the concepts and skills that students must know, which could then be applied to the voluminous factual content of the discipline.

Grants were given to each school district to launch teacher study groups. The money paid for 1,000 teachers to be trained as facilitators. The teachers discussed how to implement the draft standards and developed curriculum examples.

About 10,000 teachers were involved across the state, says French. “We had almost 20 percent of teachers in study groups.” Their involvement proved important, both for the ideas about teaching the material they generated and for the buy-in it created. Teachers were, for the most part, thrilled to finally be a part of the curriculum process.

“In the first iteration of standards, there was lots of cooperation and collaboration,” says David Driscoll, who took over as commissioner of education in 1998, when Antonucci left to become president of Fitchburg State College. “At the start, the department and the field were singing Kumbaya,” Driscoll recalls. “We got teachers talking to each other across grade lines and within the grade.”

“The first two years of reform was an exciting time,” the MFT’s Kelley says. “People in schools were moving forward. For the first time, teachers sat down and looked at what they were teaching, really discussed the curriculum. They realized they had lower expectations for students than they should have.”

As teachers and administrators got more involved, business leaders began fading into the background, Reville says. “When you look at the standard-shaping process, the overwhelming majority of people involved were educators. After the first push for reform, it was hard to get business executives to attend tedious meetings hashing out standards.”

Creating Standards: Phase II

The cordiality of the first two years of standards development didn’t last. The state board of education, chaired by Martin Kaplan, accepted the science and math frameworks in 1995 but sent the English/language arts and history frameworks back for revision. Abigail Thernstrom, a new member of the board, complained that the history framework stressed “process skills” and “modes of inquiry” at the expense of content.

While some educators were excited by the discussions, others complained about the slow pace. “A *Boston Globe* op-ed called the process ‘inclusive to the point of paralysis,’” Birmingham remembers.

In 1996, Governor Weld decided he needed a strong leader to run the board of education and expedite standards development. He picked the man who’d almost beaten him in the governor’s race, John Silber, the brilliant, acerbic take-no-prisoners president of Boston University.

During the 1990 campaign, Silber had called Weld a “backstabbing son-of-a-bitch” and an “orange-headed WASP.” He was just the type of man who could move the process along.

Silber thought the board too large and unwieldy, so Weld and Democratic leaders in the legislature agreed to cut its membership in half. Weld appointed the new board, which included Ed Delattre, a Silber friend who was BU’s dean of education.

The new board was more conservative—and much more aggressive.

“Silber drove a much increased level of rigor—and he hated edubabble,” Driscoll says. “Basically, he drove us to a more traditional, rigorous, and classical framework.”

In Silber’s view, inclusion was a waste of time. At his first board meeting on March 22, 1996, he said that the large number of advisory groups working on the frameworks was an obstacle to progress. The board notes record what happened next:

Silber suggested it would be more efficient to use a few well-informed experts to draft policies and curriculum frameworks, and then solicit public comment.

Paul Reville responded that the Board has assumed the scope and scale of Education Reform require major change, and that people will support the changes they help to create. For that reason, the Commissioner and Board have worked to engage many people in policy decisions.

Dr. Silber followed up by noting that too much participation tends to lead to the “lowest common denominator.”

The framework committees were dissolved and in their stead consultants were hired to form new committees to develop the English/language arts and history frameworks. The board wanted the frameworks to be more specific about what to teach (phonics for new readers, content for history students, etc.), while avoiding directives on how to teach.

The English consultant was Sandra Stotsky, a former third-grade teacher who edited *Research in the Teaching of English*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, and directed

summer institutes on civic education at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Stotsky worked with a committee made up equally of “outstanding academically oriented teachers” she’d chosen and members of the old framework committee.

“It was very politically intense,” says Stotsky. “There was a lot of pressure from whole-language believers. I did a lot of the writing myself.” As the editor of a research journal, Stotsky knew the reading research well and could call on prominent researchers for support.

By the end of the year, she was ready to present her draft. “The first thing was to make sure John Silber liked the document. When I showed it to him, he treated it like a dissertation. He went over it line by line for four hours. I went back to the department and said, ‘this is what we have to do.’ I didn’t give in to him if I didn’t agree with his point of view.” A good example is how the reading lists were constructed.

Silber envisioned *Moby Dick* as required reading. Stotsky decided to list authors, not titles, and to write two lists: One covering “literary and civic heritage” (the dead white males), and the second covering “contemporary, multicultural and world authors.”

Stotsky asked the editor of *Horn Book* magazine to vet the K-8 list, and an eminent African-American scholar and a number of other scholars to vet Appendix B for grades 9-12. “That ended it,” she says. “There was nothing more they could do about the list.”

Stotsky’s English framework was accepted by the board.

Pitched Battles Over History

History turned into a war—a long one—that angered progressives and turned board members against one another.

It “was a disaster,” says Driscoll. “We had dueling frameworks: Silber and Ed Delattre wrote one. We had board members writing frameworks!”

“Silber and Delattre were adamant about getting more content experts from higher education,” says Jeff Nelhaus, then deputy commissioner in charge of assessment

“They almost all came with personality disorders,” Driscoll adds.

“They were people with incredible content knowledge who hadn’t been in a high school for decades,” says Nelhaus.

Even before Silber’s takeover, the board had considered the original history framework too trendy and vague.

“The original history committee argued for organizing around fundamental themes and dilemmas of history, allowing flexibility in local districts,” says French, the Massachusetts director of curriculum and instruction.

Historian Paul Gagnon, the new history/social studies consultant, removed the jargon. Instead of “people and places,” Gagnon brought back “geography.” “Power” was replaced by “civics and government.” What the phase one standards had called “time and place,” Gagnon called “history.”

*“I wanted to know,”
says Sandra Stotsky, “When are students
learning standard algorithms?”*

But Gagnon didn’t change enough to satisfy Silber’s board, which wanted a stronger foundation of factual knowledge. Thernstrom suggested that the board model Massachusetts’ framework on Virginia’s Standards of Learning, the Old Dominion State’s standards, which are tied to the state’s SOL exams required for graduation.

A board committee composed of Thernstrom, Jim Peyser, and Roberta Schaefer revised Gagnon’s draft using Virginia’s standards and others. Diane Ravitch, who had served as U.S. assistant secretary of education, praised the draft in a letter to the board for its “richness, conciseness, and appropriateness.”

But not everyone agreed.

“All hell broke loose,” say French, who resigned and became executive director of the Center for Collaborative Education. Educators attacked the Virginia-inspired draft as Eurocentric and called it a laundry list of disconnected names, dates, and events. They hastily organized to protest at the January 1997 board meeting.

Worried that the standards were too ambitious, especially for elementary students, the board sent the latest

draft out for another rewrite. Silber named a new committee composed of board members Delattre, Patricia Crutchfield, William Irwin Jr., and three teachers. Their work proved no less controversial.

“Heavy on facts, the latest draft provides flexibility in outlining what material teachers should cover,” wrote *Education Week* on June 11, 1997. “It includes sections on core content, guiding principles, and reasoning for all grades, allows for a more multicultural focus, and provides for integration of the subject into other disciplines.” The guidelines were also more appropriate to each grade, Silber said.

Members of the first committee—Peyser, Schaefer and Thernstrom—were not happy with the Delattre/Crutchfield/Irwin rewrite. *Education Week* reported:

“Ms. Schaefer questioned Mr. Delattre’s motivations in writing a 17-page critique of her committee’s draft. She accused Mr. Silber, the chancellor of Boston University, of trying to gain a financial advantage for his institution by handing the project over to Mr. Delattre, who is the dean of education there. Paul A. Gagnon, a senior research associate at the university, was the author of the draft that was submitted last fall.

Having Boston University officials so closely involved with the document, Ms. Schaefer asserted, would allow the school to attract much of the business of writing textbooks and training teachers.

Mr. Silber called the allegations ‘libelous and slanderous.’

More than two years after the original deadline, the board finally approved in 1999 a history and social studies framework. The struggles proved worthwhile. The Fordham Foundation awarded the state’s history standards the grade of B in 2000. But the battle took its toll on Silber, whose alienated many of his colleagues on the board, even those who’d started as his allies.

“The board ground to a complete halt,” Reville says. In 1999, Silber stepped down and was replaced by Peyser.

Meanwhile, the math and science war had ignited.

Math and Science Mayhem

The original math framework, influenced by NCTM standards, stressed hands-on activities, multiple approaches to problem solving, real-world examples, and student exploration of math ideas. The goal was conceptual understanding. The board wanted it rewritten to include computation skills.

Recalling that first draft, Driscoll said “What the hell was I thinking?”

He had majored in math in college and thought the debate had nothing to do with math. “It was all about ideology, philosophy, and politics.”

“It was set up as either/or,” says Nelhaus. “Learn procedures or learn to solve problems. Of course, kids need to do both.”

The framework lacked clarity, Driscoll says. “On the first go-round, we said students in grade four should know basic math operations. But what does that mean? Should they be able to multiply a three-digit number by a two-digit number? We needed to be more precise. Look, two-thirds of my kids couldn’t do simple division problems in fourth grade.”

Stotsky joined the education department in 1999 as a senior associate commissioner charged with revising the frameworks, starting with math and science.

“We hired Sandra Stotsky, who’s a true intellectual,” Driscoll says. “She’s very smart, but ... [she] came along a little bit like Attila the Hun and said, ‘We’re going to do it this way.’”

“The fuzzies were in control,” Stotsky says. “The early grades had been written by TERC, a progressive math and science education group, which then was selling its materials to fit the standards they’d written.”

She wrote a bluntly worded critique of the framework, assuming it would be circulated only within the department. It went to committee members, angering many of them.

“I wanted to know,” says Stotsky, “When are students learning standard algorithms? [The committee members] were very unhappy,” she remembers. “They said, ‘There’s no such thing as a standard algorithm. Who are you to critique this?’”

JOHN SILBER



Brought on by Governor Weld in 1996 to head the state board of education and to expedite standards development, this former head of Boston University had a reputation for being acerbic and having no patience for edubabble.

Basically, he drove us to a more traditional, rigorous, and classical framework.

—David Driscoll speaking about Silber

But Driscoll believed in teaching standard algorithms and so did the state board. Furthermore, passing the tenth grade MCAS would be a graduation requirement. “Kids were doing terribly in math, and math would count for graduation by 2003,” Driscoll said.

The relationship between Stotsky and the committee charged with writing the science frameworks was no less acrimonious. The same progressive/traditional divide separated her and Driscoll from many working on the frameworks.

“In science, we’re out there doing hands-on, inquiry-based: We’ve got kids pumping up balloons having a ball,” said Driscoll. “But what are they learning?”

“Science teachers were teaching inquiry as good in itself, separate from science,” says Nelhaus, who majored in science in college. “In the revised version, we have 10 inquiry skills in the framework, things like being able to frame a scientific problem, test a hypothesis. We have open-ended math and science questions, not multiple choice.”

“I made a mistake in thinking that reasonable people could compromise.”

Originally, the department called for integrating science subjects, Driscoll says. “Our 10th grade test was a smattering of biology, chemistry and physics. Classroom teachers said, ‘It’s not working.’ Then we asked how many schools were teaching integrated science? About 2 percent. We thought we were following the European model, but we realized the Europeans teach these subjects concurrently but distinctly.”

Stotsky urged the commissioner and board to reject the math and science drafts and disband the committees. The “Dear John letters” went out.

Wilfried Schmid, a Harvard mathematician, volunteered to help write new math standards. “His daughter was in third grade,” says Driscoll. “At home he was teaching her differential equations. He saw her homework was to circle like things; the next week she was still circling like things.”

In addition to Schmidt, who donated 100 hours of time to the math framework, Stotsky relied heavily on a team of gifted classroom teachers who’d been offered sabbaticals to work temporarily in the department. Beth McBride, the math coordinator, knew classroom teaching and did much of the writing. “The sabbatical teachers helped translate it to grade-level standards,” said Stotsky.

Throughout the process of revising math and science, Stotsky called on her network of academics. “I could call up and get an answer in 12 hours. They’d never had so many PhDs volunteering.” Teachers working in the department also “came over and became my most dedicated helpers.”

Stotsky was accused of advocating “drill and kill.” Called a “bloodsucker,” she bought a Dracula puppet on a trip to Europe and hung it in the entry way of her house in Brookline.

Progressive educators opposed the revised math framework, says Driscoll. “NCTM testified against us. Two years later, NCTM rewrote their standards, calling for more rigor, more computation.”

Some who complained about the math framework hadn’t actually looked at it, Driscoll says. “I got a petition from a Cambridge elementary school that thought the math standards process was terrible. I told them the board had voted, this was it, to give it a try and I’d come to visit when they were a few months into the school year. I came in October. They reiterated their complaints about the process. It was as if they were reciting every event in the Civil War by date and battle. I asked again how they were teaching the standards. They hadn’t even looked at the frameworks. They said their superintendent had told them to emphasize reading; the kids could catch up with math later.

“I made a mistake in thinking that reasonable people could compromise,” Driscoll says. “On some things, we had to just decide. Picket all you want.”

Testing the Standards

As controversies over the standards faded, the focus shifted to testing—an eternal source of conflict. MCAS was given for the first time in 1998.

“When we gave the test, that was the beginning of the end of our happy relationship with teachers,” says Driscoll.

“High-stakes testing has drained a lot of life and fun out of teaching. There’s too much regurgitating for the test,” says the MTA’s Meade. “But it did bring tutoring and extra support to places where kids were doing poorly. Some teachers think standards will go away. I disagree: Standards are here to stay and that’s a good thing. But you don’t fatten a cow by weighing it.”

“Some teachers didn’t think we’d have a test,” says Birmingham. “We said we would, but there was a willing suspension of disbelief. Some districts didn’t take standards seriously till we came out with the test. Surprise! They really mean it! Then we saw a sea change. There was a renewed focus, particularly with kids who posed the biggest challenges.”

Making MCAS a graduation requirement was essential to motivate students to try harder, Birmingham says.

He was terrified that a third or more of students would fail to graduate because of the MCAS requirement. As it turned out, most youngsters rose to the challenge. “As a political matter,” Bridge observes, “when you get 90 percent of kids passing a test it’s a different equation from having only half pass. I was putting on my seat belt for a 66 percent pass rate.”

Reville had the same fears. “The MCAS train wreck didn’t happen,” he says. “The standards we set proved to be attainable for the overwhelming majority of students.”

“Education reform has helped city schools the most,” says Reville. The suburbs were complacent about their schools and unwilling to change. “It was the urban superintendents who stood up and defended it, even though they arguably had the most to lose.”

“Before education reform there were loads of kids not getting a meaningful education,” Birmingham says. “They were socially promoted.” His sister is principal of a high school in low-income, multi-ethnic Chelsea.

“The overwhelming majority of urban superintendents strongly support standards,” he continues. “The most zealous opponents to MCAS are the privileged communities. They think it’s soul-destroying, that what students need is higher-level thinking. But if they don’t know anything, thinking about what?”

“I think standards are the best thing we ever did,” Antonucci says. “They got everyone focused on the fact that everyone can learn. There was a time when we wrote off a lot of kids.”

At the “competency” level on MCAS, the achievement gaps are closing, Reville says. The next goal is to close those gaps at the higher “proficiency” level.



Standards-based reform in Massachusetts would have been impossible without business leadership. The foresight and energy of Jack Rennie set the stage for fundamental reform. But even this wasn’t enough to get the standards themselves right, as the state’s false start demonstrates. It also took intellectual leadership from John Silber and Sandra Stotsky, the political backing of Governor Weld, and a willingness to fight and win the

tough curricular battles. As in California, good intentions were not enough to achieve good standards; plenty of grit was needed, too.

Indiana: Clear, Concise, and Jargon Free

Once upon a time, an Indiana teenager could leave high school for a factory job and earn more money than his teachers in his first week. He could work on the family farm without tracking global markets or environmental regulation.

By the 1990s, however, high-wage, low-skill manufacturing jobs were gone and farming had gone high-tech. To earn a decent living in a factory or farm or almost anywhere else, Indianans needed far more education.

The standards movement in Indiana came from the sense that the state had to turn the corner.

“Employers complained that they were giving tests for entry-level jobs, and out of 50 people they’d only get 10 who could be considered because of the lack of reading skills,” says Sue Scholer, a Republican who served on the House education committee. “When the steel mills closed, a lot of those workers couldn’t be retrained. They were illiterate.”

Business leaders feared Indiana would be stuck in the Rust Belt if it didn’t start competing with other states—and countries—to produce a skilled workforce. They had reason to fear. In 1986, the legislature approved the A+ bill, which mandated the Indiana Statewide Testing for Education Progress (ISTEP) exam. The failure rate was high. Parents grew outraged as children who did pass the exam and enter college found themselves taking remedial courses just to stay afloat. Higher education leaders seconded their cries, noting that the remedial burden on them was only growing.

Indiana’s requirements for a high school diploma were the weakest in the country, says Cheryl Orr, a higher education commission staffer who became leader of “the standards gang.” “Our college-going rates were dismal. Families didn’t think college was needed.”

“The standards movement here came from the sense that Indiana had to turn the corner,” says Teresa Lubbers, Republican chair of the Senate Education Committee. “In Indiana, we only change out of a sense of crisis.”

In 1997, led by the Chamber of Commerce, state business leaders proposed that the legislature create a roundtable to discuss what kids need to succeed. The legislature wouldn’t bite, in part because it was under the sway of the Indiana State Teachers Association (ISTA), which had no interest in pursuing a reform agenda.

Governor O’Bannon took the decisive step to reform the state’s ailing K-12 system.

The state board of education wasn’t interested, either. It “wasn’t an aggressive group,” says Republican Brian Bosma, now speaker of the House, who worked on the A+ education reform bill that created the state testing system. “The board was captive to the vested education interests—to the union and the bureaucracy. They weren’t interested in change, just getting more money in the system.”

O’Bannon’s Charge

Governor Frank O’Bannon understood what the business leaders, parents, and professors were worried about. And unlike the education establishment, he took a decisive step to reform the state’s ailing K-12 system. He created a 29-member advisory group, an action permitted by the legislature, called the Education Roundtable. O’Bannon, a Democrat, worked with Superintendent Suellen Reed, a liberal Republican, and Higher Education Commissioner Stan Jones, a former Democratic legislator who’d been defeated by Reed for the superintendent’s job. They gathered together all the players: educators, legislators, business leaders, union leaders, and parents.

Early in 1999, a series of national reports ranked Indiana’s academic standards as among the worst in the country, says Derek Redelman, who worked for the Hudson Institute and then for CLASS and ended up at the Sagamore Institute. “Our English standards were the worst in the country, according to the Fordham [Foundation],” says Redelman. But some in the state were still in denial. “The *Indianapolis Star* ran a story saying, ‘Oh no, that’s not true. We’re the best.’”

A year after the Education Roundtable was created, O’Bannon pushed a law through the legislature giving the group official status with the job of developing standards and tests.

“There was a Democratic governor and House, and a Republican Senate,” says Dan Clark, ISTA’s standards specialist. “Because of the power split, nothing got done. ISTA and the Chamber of Commerce didn’t agree on anything. They felt fulfilled in disagreeing. O’Bannon got interested in the national movement for standards and wanted to do something in Indiana. It was clear you couldn’t get anything done without bringing people together.”

“We’d had a very bad legislative session,” says Scholer, who became one of four legislators on the Roundtable. “People were at each others’ throats.” O’Bannon and Reed got ISTA, the principals’ and superintendents’ groups, the Chamber, and the Manufacturers Association to sit down together. “The people at the table were leaders, not lobbyists,” Scholer says. “Reed and O’Bannon came to every Roundtable meeting. They didn’t send underlings.”

The Roundtable met every month. “When we started, there was very little trust,” says Orr. “People hadn’t talked to each other in a long time. They were playing the blame game.”

“It took 18 months before everybody became comfortable about putting controversies on the table and talking it through,” says Scholer.

“When the Roundtable started, educators were suspicious and resistant to having a policy board with so much business representation,” says Kevin Brinegar, president of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. “We had battles over the cut scores on ISTEP. By and large, business folks prevailed on cut scores. Educators realized we were a force to be reckoned with. We got beyond ‘just give us more money’ to ‘OK, we know you’re not going away so let’s talk.’ We moved to much more collaboration, a more constructive relationship.”

Eugene White, then superintendent of Washington Township and now of Indianapolis, credits O’Bannon and Reed for creating an atmosphere where people could disagree without insulting each other. “They emanated

courtesy and respect. These were nice, Indiana-bred people. It was hard to be mean around them.”

While the governor and the superintendent ran the roundtable, “Stan Jones was the man behind the curtain,” White says. “Cheryl Orr and Stan Jones set the table and set the agenda. They’re very good puppet masters. They created an agenda that didn’t leave a lot of time for discussion and dissent. There was too much to do.”

When disputes did break out, says White, “Stan was the mediator. He put out fires.”

“Politically, the roundtable was made up more of educators and people in the system,” says Pat Kiely, a former legislator who became Indiana Manufacturers Association (IMA) president. “Business could be outvoted two to one. But nobody wanted to endorse standards that the business community said were no good.”

ISTA “did not go negative,” says David Shane, who’s now an education aide to Governor Mitch Daniels. “They had a seat at the roundtable and were part of the conversation. It was an oddly collaborative process.”

Accountability + Money = Standards

All the roundtable members agreed that Indiana needed tougher graduation requirements, which became known as the Core 40, as well as new academic standards.

“A lot of frustration and infighting preceded the Roundtable,” says Jones. “We started where we thought we might be able to find consensus, the standards.”

Teachers wanted clarity, says Judy Briganti, president of ISTA. “Before we had vague proficiency statements. It was difficult for me as a fourth-grade teacher to see what students should know. The proficiency statements weren’t aligned to the tests, so the tests just came out of the blue.”

The union also wanted more funding to help schools reach higher standards. The business community was willing to negotiate. “Business was willing to support more funding with the standards and accountability in place,” says Brinegar. “It would have been much more difficult without the money.”

Reed and Jones created a group of standards writers, led by Cheryl Orr, that met every two weeks and reported to

STAN JONES



Stan Jones is a Democrat and head of the Higher Education Commission. As a member of the Education Roundtable, he kept the group focused on reforming standards, not allowing petty arguments and personal agendas to detract from the great goal.

Stan Jones is the man behind the curtain. [He] set the table and set the agenda. ... that didn't leave a lot of time for discussion and dissent. There was too much to do.

—Eugene White,
Indianapolis School Superintendent

the Roundtable. The first job was to look at what Indiana already had: Vague, wordy, inconsistent “proficiency guides” that covered multiple grades and focused on what teachers should do, not what students should learn. It was impossible to use the proficiencies to measure progress.

The proficiencies were “loaded with such spongy benchmarks as a student should be able to ‘show a positive attitude toward language,’” wrote Dave Smith, a Gannett reporter.

“We had to be brutal with ourselves, willing to look at the good, the bad and the ugly,” says Orr. “At the beginning, we knew we needed improvement, but we didn’t realize how much. Some thought we could just tweak the proficiencies. No. It was a significant amount of work.”

“Clear, precise, and jargon free” became the mantra of the standards gang.

“We had to abandon the priestly language we’d always used,” says Dorothy Winchester, education department program officer and standards gang member. “If we said our goal was for children to be ‘making meaning,’ what did that mean?”

*Clear, precise, and jargon free
became the mantra of the standards
gang in the Hoosier State.*

The old proficiency guides had been mailed to district offices. “We’d visit schools and see the proficiencies in their shrink-wrap on top of a cabinet,” Reed says. She wanted the new standards to be so useful that people would be motivated to read them.

“Some people wanted one set of standards for teachers and another set to show to parents,” Reed says. “I said, ‘no, no, no, no.’ We sent copies of the standards home in the fall. They’re written so parents and even students can read them and understand them. We put them up on the web.”

The roundtable decided that specific standards would be more helpful to teachers. “Before we had grade clusters: fourth through sixth, second through fourth. But people don’t teach like that. They teach grade 5, not grade 4, 5, and 6,” says Jones.

Researchers were invited to talk to the Roundtable. “We had Kati Haycock of Education Trust in to talk about disaggregating scores,” says Scholer. “Everybody was

getting the same information from people with expert knowledge so everybody was on the same page.”

The Roundtable looked at NCTM standards, standards in other states, NAEP, TIMSS and the Baldrige continuous improvement model used in North Carolina.

Committees of teachers wrote and reviewed standards.

“Part of the reason our standards are good is that they are written by classroom teachers,” Lubbers says.

“So many teachers were involved that almost everybody knew somebody who was part of the process,” Reed says. It helped create buy-in.

At first, teachers were resistant, says Reed. “A fourth-grade teacher who’s developed a spectacular unit on butterflies doesn’t want to give that up because it’s a third-grade standard.” But the standards let teachers focus on how to teach.

More and more teachers came over, Winchester says, when they realized the virtues of knowing what was going to be taught when.

For teachers in inner-city or rural schools, the standards were daunting, says Winchester. “With the publication of the first draft of the standards, teachers said, ‘My kids could never do this.’ They didn’t believe their kids were capable. But the standard of what’s good has to be the same across the state.”

That’s important for parents in low-income communities, says Rogers. In 34 years as a K-6 teacher in Gary, “I never paid attention to what the state had to say. It was all decided locally.” State mandates sent from Indianapolis would go to the principal’s office, nicely shrink wrapped, and never be seen again by teachers. “Now all kids get taught the same thing across the state. That resonates well with parents. Third graders in Gary have the same standards as third graders in rich communities like Munster.”

The first draft was vetted by teachers across the state. The “standards gang” also talked to professors to make sure that students who passed high school chemistry, for example, would be ready for college chemistry.

Outside Validation

It wasn't enough to reach consensus within Indiana. Business insisted on external validation to make sure the standards were competitive, says Shane. "Having outside advice relieved us of the need to fight among ourselves about what was adequate. We weren't trying to be the first in the country. We just wanted to do the right thing."

The Chamber of Commerce paid the academic experts who carried out the Fordham Foundation reviews to evaluate the first draft of the standards. Chris LaMothe, a Chamber and Roundtable member, showed the report to Jones. "Fordham gave us a B+ and an A. So I felt pretty good," says Jones. "Chris said, 'Shouldn't we get an A in both?' So the Roundtable hired Fordham and then Achieve to evaluate our work. Fordham was not, however, involved in writing these standards. We looked at some standards that were fuzzy, not very concise and couldn't be tested. We tried to learn from those, but Achieve and Fordham best represented where we wanted to go," says Jones.

"We thought we'd done a good job on the standards," says Reed. "But Achieve told us, 'You need more rigor.' So we looked at that."

Sandra Stotsky, fresh from working on English/language arts for Massachusetts was hired to evaluate the Indiana English standards through several stages of development. "Before their reform effort, Indiana had some of the worst standards in the country," Stotsky notes. "It was things like: 'Children should love to read.' Is this a standard? It has to be measurable." In the end, Indiana "came up with a fantastic document," she says. "Indiana piggybacked off California and Massachusetts, but they didn't just clone. They wrote it themselves."

Sheila Byrd, with experience as a staffer on California's standards commission, was also hired by Achieve to help Indiana benchmark its standards to other states and to international standards. "They had a huge, unwieldy set of expectations," she says. "We held up California as a benchmark."

"Early on, Stan Jones and others realized we were not going to get better unless we expanded our views," says White, the now-superintendent of Indianapolis. "We turned to Achieve, the Education Trust, and others. We had a sense you had to know what was going

on in the rest of the country. We were not into education trends. We stayed focused on outcomes, preparing kids to go to college."

The gang also consulted AAAS's Science Project 2061, the International Center for Leadership in Education, and a group of history educators. "For each of the content areas, we had at least two outside national groups plus our own people," Orr says. "We opened ourselves to scrutiny."

"We were not into education trends.

We stayed focused on outcomes, preparing kids to go to college."

Outside experts didn't always understand classroom challenges, White says. "We had to make sure that people with a theoretical understanding of standards understood what was going on in the classroom, getting them to see what was real and what was memorex." But outside perspectives proved valuable. "I'm in the forest looking at trees. The outside experts are at a higher level seeing my forest and lots of other forests."

Indianans are free of the not-invented-here attitude, says Sue Pimentel of StandardsWork, who consulted with the Roundtable on aligning the test to the standards. "Indiana people ask for advice, listen, and then move forward understanding that they can go back later and make improvements if they need to; they don't sit and wring their hands for five years. They don't need to wait till everything's perfect. They're very open to advice. And they have fun. They're some of my favorite people to work with."

"We didn't have to have our names on it," Reed says. "You get more done if you give everybody credit. "

Ongoing Work

Indianans continue to refine their standards and to work on aligning them with ISTEP, which Indiana students must pass to graduate from high school. The process promises to be as demanding as establishing the original standards.

"In math, teachers break it down into little pieces so students can understand but we're afraid we're losing

the big concepts,” Orr says. As in other states, English and math are crowding out other subjects, largely due to NCLB requirements.

“Social studies educators,” according to a state education official, “are begging for assessment. Because so much hinges on reading and math, they’re afraid that if their subject isn’t tested, it won’t be taught.”

“We superintendents realized we had to have standards,” says White. “Our concern was why so many? Can we teach all of these? We needed standards to give us some sense of uniformity across the state but how many standards and what would be significant on ISTEP?”

Indiana is now consulting with StandardsWork on developing a list of essential “power standards.”

“We’re trying to distinguish between power standards you must teach, those you should teach and those that are nice to teach if you have the time,” White says. “It’s not possible to teach everything.”

Jones agrees that the challenge now is to set priorities. “Critics of our proficiencies said they were a mile wide and an inch deep. Now we’re half a mile wide and two inches deep. It’s dramatically better than what we had before, but we have to address the mantra that all standards are equal. That’s not true. What are the big concepts, not just 50 little ideas? You’re a fourth grade teacher with four subjects plus gym and art and more than 200 standards. What do you do?”

Jones says, “The good news is that the standards are out there and teachers are teaching them. The bad news is they’re taking them too literally. But it’s better than where we were. The standards are out of the shrink wrap.”



Unlike California and Massachusetts, Indiana managed to develop great standards without the process turning acrimonious. Perhaps this is due to Indiana’s courteous culture, but is also explained by the extraordinary leadership of people such as Governor O’Bannon, Suellen Reed, Stan Jones, and Cheryl Orr. They managed to enlist the state’s teachers as part of the process while keeping control of the reins. Most importantly, Indiana officials were willing to learn from other states and outside experts, and were not

satisfied until their standards were among the best in the nation. The challenge that awaits Hoosiers is to create comparable assessments and accountability systems.

Perfecting the Wheel

Leadership matters when it comes to producing high-quality education standards. That is the first lesson that states that want to improve their own standards can take from the experiences of Massachusetts, California, and Indiana.

In Massachusetts, the venerable and affectionate Jack Rennie, a CEO, was loved by all. Without his efforts to get business, educators, and government to the table, the state’s internal conflicts may well have prevented new standards from ever being written. In California, Governor Pete Wilson pushed hard for reform and created a political environment in which it could thrive. In Indiana, the role was played by tough-minded, politically savvy Governor Frank O’Bannon, who created an atmosphere that ensured that everyone felt welcome at the table—essential in a state that puts a premium on being nice.

In the end, however, tough, hand-to-hand combatants willing to find a way to make reform work in the face of overwhelming odds must enter the fray. Had it not been for Bill Evers’s determination to find victory in defeat, California’s math standards would have remained touchy-feely. In Massachusetts, Sandra Stotsky fought the good fight, standing firm for English standards not warped by whole language, and then ensuring rigor in math and science standards, too.

And, of course, there’s Marion Joseph, a grandmother who saw her grandchildren being strangled by a failed curriculum and got in the face of anyone who would listen.

If strong leaders are the key to pushing standards through, an obsession with laissez-faire consensus-building guarantees that they’ll fail. In both Massachusetts and California, early attempts at reforming standards were thwarted by committees more focused on keeping parties happy than making hard decisions. John Silber played the role of committee buster in Massachusetts, getting involved with standards-based reform at the time the *Boston Globe* called the process “inclusive to the point of paralysis.”

Instead, “steered” consensus—bringing opposing parties around to accepting the importance of fact-driven, explicit standards—is important. At times it takes the subtle hand of a Jack Rennie in Massachusetts, and at others, the iron hand of a Bill Evers in California.

Silber’s decision to cut the size of the state board in half and rearrange the framework committees created a lot of tension between whole-language advocates and traditionalists in the world of English instruction—but it also broke the logjam.

Still, for all the knock-down fights that reformers had to win to achieve great standards, a key lesson is that bipartisanship is essential. When the Golden State learned in 1994 that its students were among the worst performing in the nation on reading and math NAEP scores, the public outcry forced both sides of the aisle to figure out a way to make it work.

Likewise in Indiana, as rust began creeping into the state, parents, higher-ed leaders, and even teacher union leaders had to concede that what was in place wasn’t working.

Sometimes, bipartisanship must be forged. That was Jack Rennie’s brilliance in Massachusetts. A court order to correct funding inequities could easily have led to

more money, but no more accountability. Rennie forged a coalition of the willing when no one else thought it possible. But money helped, too—the Massachusetts teacher unions got the money they wanted in return for not pushing back against standards.

Finally, what set these states apart was their willingness to accept that standards are the starting point of any serious reform. That dedication led leaders to demonstrate leadership, seek bipartisanship, fight the good fight, spend some money, and bring in expertise. States serious about reforming their education systems should look to those that succeeded in producing these standards and shouldn’t hesitate to turn to California, Massachusetts, and Indiana for help. The results—for your state and its children—are well worth the effort.



Joanne Jacobs, a freelance writer and blogger (joannejacobs.com) based in California, is the author of *Our School: The Inspiring Story of Two Teachers, One Big Idea and the Charter School That Beat the Odds* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), which tells the story of a San Jose charter high school that prepares Mexican-American students for college.