Introducing Rigorous Standards into Wisconsin's Schools

The Virginia Model
REPORT FROM THE PRESIDENT:

One of the most important issues in education today is the level of standards in our elementary and secondary schools. In Wisconsin, there is almost no point at which we actually know what our students have learned in the 13 years they are in elementary and secondary schools. This needs to change. We need rigorous standards that stress knowledge and accountability for our children.

We decided to look at various ideas from around the country that could strengthen Wisconsin’s curriculum. We discovered that, without question, the leading state in strengthening standards is Virginia. We asked Dr. William Durden and Leah Vukmir to examine the Virginia standards and compare them to recently published standards from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Dr. William Durden is an internationally known educator and the executive director of the Institute for the Academic Advancement of Youth at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Leah Vukmir is president of a Wisconsin group called Parents Raising Educational Standards in Schools (PRESS). She is also a member of the Standards and Assessment Subcommittee of Governor Tommy G. Thompson’s Task Force on Education and Learning.

The findings of this study show that Virginia is dramatically raising the standards in its schools. Wisconsin is not. We need to challenge all of our students. We also need to be able to measure what our children know and to hold accountable the educators who run our schools.

Almost a decade ago, Dr. Durden issued a report about programs for the gifted in Wisconsin. It was immediately criticized because it pointed out the low level of participation in advanced-placement courses by Wisconsin high-school students. After the criticism subsided, the state Department of Public Instruction moved rapidly to improve advanced-placement courses in Wisconsin high schools. Since that report — under the leadership of the then-state superintendent, Dr. Herbert Grover — Wisconsin has made the most dramatic improvements in advanced placement of any state in the country.

There is no reason why these same kinds of improvements in our overall curriculum cannot be made. We must think of our children first and the educational bureaucrats last. That is the only way we will ever see the kind of improvement Wisconsin needs to produce graduates who can compete with students from other countries, not just from other states.
Standards are the *sine qua non* of virtually every human endeavor. Lou Gerstner, chairman and chief executive officer of IBM, recently observed:

I must confess I find the whole [issue of K-12 standards] baffling. In virtually everything else we do, we set high standards and strive to be No. 1. Why not in education? In basketball, you score when the ball goes in the hoop, not when it hits the rim. In track and field, you must jump over the bar, not go under or around it.!

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Wisconsin’s educational system has been improving. But the rate of change has not been sufficient to ensure that state’s children will be educationally prepared for the demands of the 21st century. As we enter the new knowledge-based century, we must take additional steps to bring the educational system up to the level required. Many steps must be taken to sufficiently change the system. But that change should begin at the beginning, the goals set for the system. Wisconsin should debate and adopt new, rigorous, concise, jargon-free, easy-to-understand, specific educational standards.

Educational standards are simply a series of statements about what it is that students should know and be able to do. The standards describe the knowledge and skills that schools are expected to teach and students are expected to learn. They are a measurable, academic description of what a student should know after a particular grade or course is completed. Standards include both substantive knowledge and process skills for utilizing that knowledge. Standards also include means of measuring the progress made.

A cursory debate on educational standards for Wisconsin has been started by the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI), with the release in September 1996 of its *Discussion Draft of Wisconsin’s Academic Content and Performance Standards*. The DPI has narrowly circulated a draft of some proposed educational standards for Wisconsin and engaged in modest discussion of their contents. This is a step in the right direction. But the standards being proposed and circulated are deficient in many ways. For example, they apply to only three grades. They cover 12 different subjects. They range from being very brief, vague statements to being extremely verbose, overly specified statements. The majority err on the side of inarticulateness. Educational standards are intended to give clear direction to students, teachers, and parents. The current DPI versions fail in this regard.

We strongly recommend a continuation of the development of educational standards for Wisconsin. We cite 10 reasons why this should occur. But the place to start is with the initial adoption of the standards developed in the state of Virginia. These standards have been developed over several years, with most of the effort occurring during the last two years. They reflect much public debate, as well as considerable professional input. They have been endorsed by the American Federation of Teachers and business associations. They include only core content areas, but they have specific contents for each grade, kindergarten through 12th. They are rigorous, concise, easy-to-understand statements of what it is that students should learn at each grade level in the core subjects.

The process that we recommend for adopting these standards is different from the one being used by the DPI. We propose that an independent commission be established to oversee the process. That commission should start with the adoption of the Virginia standards. Those standards should be changed modestly to reflect such elements as the inclusion of Wisconsin, rather than Virginia, history. Then, the proposed standards would be sent to every library and school board in the state. Each school board would be asked to hold a hearing on the standards. The commission itself would schedule additional hearings. After much public input, the commission would write the final version of the standards and publicize them statewide. Furthermore, it would oversee the creation and operation of an Institute of Validated Education Research to distribute "best-practice" research findings to the teachers of the state, so that they could achieve more quickly the success that the standards would demand.

Well-stated and appropriate educational standards are a critical ingredient in the prescription for Wisconsin’s educational system. The adoption of appropriate standards is not a sufficient step for change, but it is an extremely necessary and important step. It is one that should be taken immediately. Wisconsin should adopt the rigor of Virginia.
INTRODUCTION

As we approach the next century, we are undergoing a dramatic change, a change as enormous as the industrial revolution. The new era will be based on "knowledge." If individuals do not have this knowledge, they are at an increasingly greater disadvantage. If individuals are to succeed in the 21st century, they must know more than they do today. Students preparing for the 21st century must be subject to a higher standard of learning. The demands of the economy, the workplace, society, and families require that individuals have a much higher level of knowledge, skills, and competencies.

In the emerging high-technology, information-processing economy of the 21st century, individuals will need to master complex knowledge and use it to solve complex problems and issues. Our current Wisconsin educational system is not up to the challenge of preparing individuals for these roles. The educational approach in the state overemphasizes the development of problem-solving skills at the expense of the attainment of a vital knowledge base. That knowledge base is the initial, critical ingredient required to prepare children to become critical thinkers and problem-solvers. It is this vital knowledge foundation that transcends current and future societal changes and which must be the primary focus of our educational system. If Wisconsin's educational system continues as it has, it will not prepare its students for these new challenges. The state and its school districts must change their approach to education.

Many parts of the educational process must change. But the place to start — if efficient, systematic change is to occur — is at the beginning, the goals of education. The state should adopt demanding content standards that all students should meet. Such standards will provide a clear vision of what learning is to be attained and a means of measuring how much progress is being made toward realizing that vision. These standards by themselves will be insufficient to foster an increase in learning. Numerous steps must be taken to ensure that students can meet such standards. Establishing rigorous content standards, however, is an important start. The standards will give the necessary specificity to the direction in which education must head and will establish a new level of competency that all students must achieve.

Without new, high standards, educational reform efforts will continue in a rudderless fashion. The validity of innovation cannot be tested because there is no agreement as to what should be learned. Those who believe that their school is doing fine have little actual evidence by which to judge the merits of their school. Without clear standards of what children should know and whether or not they know it, one can believe whatever one wants about one's school. That belief can diverge dramatically from reality.

Nationwide, recent studies have shown that the general public is supportive of the setting of academic standards for our children. We have no reason to believe that Wisconsin residents are any different. The Public Agenda Foundation, a nonprofit and nonpartisan research organization, has released findings of an extensive six-year review of public opinion surveys showing "nearly universal support for the idea that public schools do not currently demand enough from students." Some 82% of Americans endorse "setting up very clear guidelines on what kids should learn and teachers should teach." Within the state, the Governor's Task Force on Education and Learning has endorsed the concept of educational standards. Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, an employer organization, has gone on record as supporting standards that are explicit, clear, and high-level. The DPI is an advocate for standards, but it currently supports much lower-level and more-diffuse requirements.

Our report builds on this support and specifies how it is that Wisconsin should go about establishing some new, rigorous, concise, jargon-free, easy-to-understand, specific educational-content standards for the students of the state to ensure that they will indeed be well-prepared for the challenges of the 21st century.

THE ABILITY TO CHANGE

Can the educational system in Wisconsin be improved? We continue to believe so, and we do have some evidence that improvement has occurred. Eight years ago, for example, one co-author of this report, William Durden, examined the Wisconsin educational system and found it to be lacking in several dimensions. One specific
charge he made was that gifted and talented students in particular were being shortchanged. He noted that only a very small percentage (2.5%) of the state’s high-school graduates were candidates for Advanced Placement (AP) exams. This ranked Wisconsin 46th-lowest among the 50 states. The Wisconsin rate of participation was one-third that of the national average.

Under the leadership of then-DPI Superintendent Herbert Grover, change occurred. Today in Wisconsin, many more students have access to AP classes. According to the figures for 1995-96, some 7% of Wisconsin’s juniors and seniors (approximately 14% of its seniors) were participating in AP classes. While this is still about three-quarters of the national average, it does reveal a dramatic change (the state has experienced the most dramatic growth in AP usage of any state in the nation) and improvement in access to an important piece of the academic challenge. It is clear proof that Wisconsin’s educational system can improve.

The fact that the system can change is what gives us hope that we can bring about improvement in yet another very important area of education, educational standards. Educational standards should be the beacon for all districts. Standards should be established to give clear direction to teachers, schools, districts, the DPI, and parents as to what the schools should be accomplishing every year with Wisconsin students. Such standards cannot be vague statements about some high level of learning. Nor should they be statements about somebody’s favorite learning devices. The standards must be explicit statements of substantively what it is students should learn, and be held accountable for, each year. The current system of educational fiefdoms (be they in the classroom, the school, the district, or the state) allows incredible variation, defying any system of accountability for the outcome. This lack of a common standard must be changed and is the subject of this report.

**WHAT ARE EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS?**

The educational standards to which we refer and for which we are advocating are called educational-content standards. These standards simply spell out what students should know and be able to do. They describe the knowledge and skills that schools are expected to teach and students are expected to learn. They are a measurable, academic description of what a student should know after each grade or course is completed. The standards include a description of both substantive knowledge and process skills — that is, thinking skills for utilizing that knowledge.

The formula for viable educational standards must include performance standards as a necessary and integral part. Performance standards define the level of achievement expected in each content area. They detail “how good is enough” to meet the standard. To resort to a sports analogy, a common device in Wisconsin, we can focus on figure skating. In a required program, a skater must perform, say, six different compulsory moves. These are the basics, the substance. Individuals are judged on how well they perform each of the basics, losing points the further they are from perfection. The content is the moves everyone must know; the performance standards are how well they exhibit their knowledge of the content. The expectation is not that everyone performs the moves perfectly, but that they make a reasonable attempt. The athletes are expected to have learned the basics and are evaluated on their execution. The skating example has very precise definitions of what must be known if the performer is to score well. Thus, if a skater needs to score consistently at a 5.0 level to compete at the next highest level of competition, it is clear what the skater must do to achieve 5.0. Those are performance standards.

In education, content standards are commonly thought to imply both the specifics of what should be learned and the definition of what are appropriate levels of achievement. Thus, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress exams (NAEP), there are three performance standards: advanced, proficient, and basic achievement. On the Advanced Placement exams for college credit for high-school courses, students are graded on a 1-to-5-point basis, with colleges often giving credit and varying levels of advanced placement for scores of 3 and above. In this latter case, a score of 5 will carry credit at most colleges and universities — whereas a 3 is borderline and, to many colleges, indicates that a student may not be ready for any advanced courses in that particular subject. Both of these tests, however, establish specific levels of proficiency that must be met. Those are the performance standards.
WHY CONTENT STANDARDS?

Some claim that Wisconsin schools are so good that we do not need to worry about new standards for education in the state. The main supporting evidence for the claim of quality is the state’s repeated role as the state with the highest average ACT score. But this test is largely confined to midwestern states. Unfortunately, there is no test that a large proportion of all U.S. students take that can be used to compare the quality of high-school graduates. One that is used to allocate National Merit Scholarships, the PSAT, is taken by about two-fifths of all high-school juniors and can be used as a partial proxy for the educational level of college-bound students. In the allocation of National Merit scholarships, an exercise that insures a geographic distribution of winners, an exam-grade cut-off is chosen in each state based on the number of high-scoring students in that state. To qualify for a scholarship in Wisconsin is considerably easier than it is in eastern states; that is, the score needed in Wisconsin is lower, reflecting a student population that is not as well-prepared. Aside from this fact, there is not much national evidence to prove that Wisconsin students are very well prepared for university education. In fact, the state does not have “crowding” rights by objective measures, even though it does exercise them.

Some individual school districts are attempting to improve their product. Many, though, are not. The state DPI has some initiatives. But these are unlikely, as presently conceived, to bring much positive change to the schools of Wisconsin. A major reason for the lack of progress is the lack of clear direction. We do not have in place a clear statement of what it is that the students of Wisconsin should be learning. Without such statements, it is difficult to know whether the schools are performing well. It is even harder to judge whether progress is being made over time and to what to attribute any progress that is made. In other words, without an explicit definition of what it is that students should know, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to judge how well they are doing.

This report focuses on one necessary component of the effort required to improve the quality of the educational product in Wisconsin — statewide standards for core material for all students. The DPI has published and circulated a draft of standards for numerous content areas for Grades 4, 8, and 12. This is a step in the right direction. We understand a second draft of these standards will appear shortly and correct a few shortcomings. We discuss some of those shortcomings and, more important, describe in some detail what we think are far better standards. We try to construct the arguments for both the notion of standards and the specifics of those that are illustrated. We admit up front that the exemplary standards we cite are taken from the state of Virginia — which has labored long and hard at creating useful, clear, measurable, content standards.

Some (such as current DPI Superintendent John Benson) may say that it is silly to look for guidance to a state that has much lower test scores than Wisconsin. While Virginia may have lower scores on the NAEP for fourth-graders, it has higher average PSAT scores for high-schoolers than Wisconsin. Furthermore, it has several high-school students who annually win Westinghouse Science awards, given to the top 40 science students in the country each year. (Wisconsin may have one winner every four or five years, at most.) And the people of Virginia have invested the time in creating standards. These standards are now looked upon by many as the premier example of content standards for any state in the nation. Why reinvent the wheel?

SPECIFIC REASONS FOR CONTENT STANDARDS

Why should we have educational standards at all, and why should we have content standards in particular? The answers to both questions are intertwined.

We know from experience that goals give our human efforts direction. Without direction, our activity is aimless. Clear statements of what should be achieved, just like clear statements of what should be covered in a school’s curriculum, help all involved to understand what needs to be accomplished. As virtually any motivational speaker will attest, goals are the first essential ingredient on the road to success. We need to know where we are going in order to get there.

First, to produce educated students, we need to specify what it is they need to know. We need standards of what must be covered and mastered. Without these we have an educational system that is a system in name only.
Without a specific understanding of what students should learn, we have lots of platitudes and bluster, but little progress. We need a defined goal towards which to aim. We can continue to chant that we want increased test scores as a goal, but if we are not in agreement as to what students should learn and be tested on, we will find a somewhat-random relationship between what students learn and what their tests cover.

Another, *second* reason for clear, specific content standards is that such standards give those involved in education — students, parents, and teachers — a clear idea of what students should be learning. Parents finally would have a road map of what is covered in school. They would be reassured that what is being covered is precisely what which many individuals, not just their child's specific teacher, think is essential. Teachers would have guidance as to what many think should be covered. In addition, they would have some assurance that the material they cover is age-appropriate, has been introduced by the preceding year's teacher, and is the appropriate material to prepare students for the following year. The guesswork of determining what is essential is removed.

Content standards also create a clear vision for students of what they are expected to learn. They can be told with certainty that they must know specific material, be it facts or processes. With some of the ambiguity removed, students can better focus their attention. They know they will be tested on the material later and that it forms building blocks for material that will follow in subsequent years.

A *third* reason to establish clear content standards is to assure students and parents of continuity across school and district boundaries. Mobility is a fact of modern American life. This is especially true for lower-income households. If students change schools and find that the expectations of what must be learned are virtually the same anywhere within the state, then mobility will have a less detrimental impact on those children. Students who change schools in the summer will know that their next school will cover the same material in the next grade as the school that they left. Even if they change schools within the school year, students more likely will encounter familiar material because of the common core material standards. That type of synchronization is especially helpful for the lower-income child who may move with greater regularity. It gives some stability to what otherwise may be a chaotic school life.

The same assurance for the child applies to the teachers. They too change schools. A set of expectations for what is to be covered would be extremely helpful. Even more helpful would be the within-the-same-school understanding of what needs to be done at each grade level. Many teachers have not had the opportunity to talk with teachers a grade above and below themselves. They do not know why students come to them ill-prepared in certain skills or subject knowledge. Nor do they know why subsequent teachers object to the lack of preparation for their classes. If the content to be covered is externally specified, then all teachers know what it is that is expected of them and their students. They know why some material is covered and other material is not covered. With such continuity, teachers can plan their own lessons better and bring their students along at the pace prescribed by the standards.

Teachers also would be aided in another way by the new, specific content standards; they will have a clear idea of the topics to be covered. They would not need to invest time and energy in deciding what subjects to cover or in exploring extraneous topics. Teacher energies could be invested in curriculum design and teaching.

A *fourth* reason for the construction and adoption of specific content standards is that the progress of students can be judged fairly. As things currently stand, tests are given to all students. These students, however, may not have had the same preparation for the tests because they have not had any common knowledge spelled out for their study. With the adoption of a core set of materials to be studied, test results will reflect more accurately how well students and teachers have prepared for tests. Common assessments thus will finally have meaning both for the students and the schools.

*Fifth*, this ability to assess how well material has been learned would allow us for the first time to hold schools in the state truly accountable. Up to this point, without agreement as to what should be learned, no school could be fairly criticized for not performing well — because a school rightly could complain that it was being judged by inappropriate standards, that the measures being used were not in concert with what the school or district felt was important to learn. Such an argument has validity. With the establishment of statewide learning standards,
though, such arguments are invalid. When content to be covered is specified and then testing is done, especially on an annual or biannual basis, the results can be compared. If students in some districts do better than students in other districts, it is clear that some districts have done a better job of covering the same material, not just by luck, but by paying attention to the content standards and developing means of delivering those materials in an appropriate fashion for their students.

- A *sixth* reason for the creation and application of clear content standards is that such standards aid disadvantaged students. Some will argue that such standards make it more difficult for disadvantaged students to succeed. With the establishment of the standards, though, the task for teachers becomes clearer. They know what material their students are expected to learn. They can concentrate on these topics. They know that the students should have made progress on these subjects prior to entering their classes. There is systemwide direction for the educational experience. As E. D. Hirsch has argued,

  > What chiefly makes our schools unfair, then, even for children who remain in the same school year after year, is that some students are learning less than others not because of their innate lack of academic ability or their lack of willingness to learn but because of inherent shortcomings of curricular organization. A systemic failure to teach all children the knowledge they need in order to understand what the next grade has to offer is the major source of avoidable injustice in our schools.⁶

Hirsch also reports on an international study of the equality of educational opportunity that various nations provide for their citizenry. A 1988 study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement reported that the nations that educate their children at all schools to an appropriate average level, basically a fairness rating for each system, regardless of location or social class, were those nations with a core curriculum. For example, Finland had only 2% of its schools showing a below-standard average achievement. Japan had but 1%. The U.S., without a core curriculum, had 30% of its schools below average. In the German state of Bavaria, with its highly detailed guidelines, the disadvantaged offspring of Turkish “guest workers” were brought up to grade level despite the enormous handicaps of Turkish children in Germany. A core curriculum is thus highly associated with equity.⁷ All students are held to the same standards and helped to achieve those standards.

In the U.S., disadvantaged students can be left by the wayside if expectations for them are far below those of others. If we state explicitly that all students should learn specific material, then we cannot so easily dismiss the failure of certain schools or districts to deliver that education. Thus, disadvantaged students or students currently being mislabeled as having learning disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorders will have to be brought along, however it is humanly possible, to meet the same standards that middle-class, suburban students must meet. If we are moving increasingly toward a "knowledge-based society," and all signs point in that direction, then we must assure that all students have equal access to that knowledge base. If we establish content standards for that knowledge base, then students and teachers both can be held accountable for mastery of that base knowledge.

Currently, there is discussion underway about testing high-school students to see if they meet certain knowledge and skill levels to warrant the earning of a high-school diploma. Disadvantaged students are likely to do poorly on this 12th-grade exam. Such a test is cumulative and late. Students and schools must be held accountable throughout the educational careers of the students, so that it is clear that students have been developing the base knowledge that subsequent tests assume has been mastered. That is why grade-specific standards are important — both to give direction and to ensure that students have mastered the material before they proceed to the next level. Moreover, the establishment of grade-specific standards reduces the likelihood and merit of lawsuits from families whose children do not pass the high-school competency test.

- A *seventh* reason for the creation of high-level, explicit, content standards is the positive impact it can have on the University of Wisconsin (UW) System. Students coming out of state school systems will have specific knowledge and skills, knowledge and skills far beyond those that are commonly found today. This will allow UW faculty to upgrade their expectations and course materials to take university students to higher levels in the undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Remedial work at all the UW campuses uses resources that should be spent on raising the quality of education, not compensating for the inadequacies of the state school systems. With a clear set of standards for what it is that students should know by the time they graduate from high school, state schools will produce a more highly educated and uniform product than has been the case to date.
An eighth reason that Wisconsin should create and adopt clear content standards is that these standards can cover both substance and process. Many educators today are enamored of process skills. Teachers are concerned that students understand the processes by which they reach a mathematical solution or how they go about constructing an argument in English literature or history. Process is indeed important. But for processes to have any validity, there must also be substance. The use of content standards ensures the presence of substance within process, along with the presence of appropriate processes. Both are indeed necessary.

A ninth reason for the adoption and use of specific content standards is that urban districts having trouble meeting the goals can receive special attention. They may require changes in approach, additional resources, or smaller classrooms. If we are to ensure that all children have a reasonable chance to be part of the "knowledge-based society," then the state must be prepared to do what it takes to bring them along with everyone else. As it now stands, we can use many excuses for not giving additional assistance to struggling urban districts. But if we have said as a state that all students must meet specific standards, then we have a mandate for change and greater pressure to deliver whatever is necessary to achieve the success implied in the standards.

A 10th reason for establishing specific content standards is the impetus to create a well-developed testing program, one that accurately reflects the material that is to be taught. One charge leveled at most standardized tests is that they do not cover the material students have been taught in a given year. The impetus of standards can and should lead to the creation of a series of tests that absolutely reflect the material specified in the standards and that should have been taught. Such tests should be developed and implemented as soon as standards are accepted, so that a true baseline can be created by which to judge the impact of content standards and other innovations. With the adoption of specific standards, we will be able to judge how much improvement we must make and are making.

### BASIC RECOMMENDATIONS

It is all well and good to argue for standards. This has been done for decades. Many states in recent years have heeded the call for standards and created sets of them for the schools of their respective states. Like the DPI's recent efforts in Wisconsin, however, most of these state efforts have been at best inadequate — and, in some instances, misleading. Specifying standards is not an easy task. It must be done well, or those who accept the standards will be headed in the wrong direction.

To be truly helpful, educational standards in Wisconsin should reflect a new high minimum for all students and include the following elements:

1. Clear, simple, straightforward statements of the content to be covered
2. Standards created for academics for each grade, K-12
3. Standards only on core subjects: English, mathematics, science, and history and social science
4. Standards that are objectively measurable
5. Standards that contain both content and process skills
6. Statements as to how and when performance will be evaluated, preferably with a state testing system that includes some local elements
7. A long-term commitment from the state to ensure consistent policy signals and full implementation

In addition, the standards should be consistent with the American Federation of Teachers' criteria for standards — which include recommendations that the standards be rigorous and world-class, that they must define multiple levels of performance for students, that they be manageable, given the constraints of time, and that they be specific enough that they ensure the development of a common curriculum.

These criteria are specified because of the failure of many efforts to create standards that truly serve the intended goals. As discussed above, there are numerous reasons why standards should be clear and easily understood, why they should be created for each grade, why they should focus on the core subjects, why they should be objectively measurable, and so forth. These are reiterated because such specifications seldom have been attained. Creating such standards is not easy, nor can it be done swiftly.
To speed the adoption of educational standards, Wisconsin should look to Virginia for an exemplary set of such standards. Virginia has worked since 1986 on standards, and for two years on these specific standards. They have gone through several revisions, the most recent of which were made in 1994 and adopted in June 1995. The citizens and professionals involved in the process in these last two years found their predecessors' results inadequate in many respects. They rewrote them to be much more focused and specific. They replaced as insufficient a set of standards that looked very much like those currently being offered Wisconsin by the DPI. Wisconsin should follow Virginia's example and replace the current offering with a far superior set of standards.

Unlike the recently published Wisconsin standards promulgated by the DPI, the Virginia standards are quite explicit as to content. The Virginia standards do mention process, but they usually contain many more substantive standards than do those for Wisconsin. The Virginia standards are written for each grade, kindergarten through 12th grade—not just Grades 4, 8, and 12, as Wisconsin has done. Furthermore, the subject of the standards is the core material, four subject areas. These are the areas considered of supreme importance, the areas of competence that all students should master. Wisconsin has dissipated the effort by dealing with 12 subjects, ranging as widely as physical education, family and consumer education, dance, and visual arts for all students. Expenditure and effort on goals for body movement for all Wisconsin students is not as important as the ability to use the English language or various mathematical skills. Perhaps the non-core subjects can be addressed by local districts—giving them the opportunity to create standards suited to their specific needs, desires, faculty expertise, and resources. At this point, however, we need to focus all efforts on the core.

On the next several pages are some examples of the Virginia standards, juxtaposed with their current Wisconsin counterparts. As should be immediately evident, the Wisconsin versions are usually much less specific and much less useful for guidance. The Virginia standards are quite explicit and easily understood by both teachers and parents. The selection of comparisons is largely random. Examples of the core subject areas are given for the three grades that Wisconsin has addressed. Additionally, examples are cited from Virginia for other grades and for specific subjects in the core that Wisconsin, to date, has ignored. An example of this is a world-geography class, a subject of increasing import as we move to a truly global economy—but one that is almost totally ignored in Wisconsin's classrooms.

We shall first examine mathematics—specifically, the fourth-grade content strands of number sense, computation and estimation, and measurement. As is incredibly obvious from this one example, the Virginia standards contain far more detail on what fourth-grade students should be doing and mastering in mathematics. Rather than vague phrases like the ones that appear in the DPI version, students, teachers, and parents all would have a clear idea of the material and skills to be covered in the fourth grade.

At the high-school level, it is interesting to note that the Virginia math standards have specific content noted for the courses of algebra, geometry, trigonometry, mathematical analysis, and advanced-placement calculus. While Wisconsin describes standards for algebra, it does not cover the subjects of trigonometry, mathematical analysis, or calculus. The subject of geometry is covered in the Wisconsin standards—but it is referred to as "spatial sense," rather than the more commonly understood term.

To illustrate further the inadequacies of the DPI-proposed standards, we shall also examine the English standards for the eighth grade. Again, we juxtapose the Virginia and (a portion of the) Wisconsin versions. For Virginia, all standards are listed. For Wisconsin, only the language portion is reproduced.

Unlike mathematics, the DPI English standards go on for pages—with additional items on listening skills, reading, literature, research, speaking, writing, and media and technology. (A draft November revision of the original September English language arts standards is 28 pages long!) As in the example, excruciating detail appears that seems to dictate far more than the reasonably specific Virginia standards. The utility of these DPI standards can be questioned on many grounds. One is values. Is it, as the standards state, that no one way of communicating is superior? If so, then why teach proper English? Such statements are absurd to include in a set of standards. The lists also include several suggestions for the curriculum that seem to be a set of somebody's favorite tools, with little evidence that these tools are truly the best way to convey the knowledge and skills that appear in the lists. These standards, on the one hand, are often vague—giving little in terms of clear directions to the teachers of the state.
**Virginia vs. Wisconsin Fourth-Grade Math Standards**

**Number and Number Sense**

4.1 The student will
- identify, orally and in writing, the place value for each digit in a whole number expressed through millions;
- compare two whole numbers, expressed through millions, using symbols (<, >, or =); and
- round whole numbers expressed through millions to the nearest thousand, ten thousand, and hundred thousand.

4.2 The student will identify and represent equivalent fractions and relate fractions to decimals, using concrete objects.

4.3 The student will compare the numerical value of fractions having denominators of 12 or less.

4.4 The student will read, write, represent, and identify decimals expressed through thousands, and round to the nearest tenth and hundredth, using concrete materials, drawings, calculators, and symbols.

**Computation and Estimation**

4.5 The student will create and solve problems involving addition and subtraction of money amounts using various computational methods, including calculators, paper and pencil, mental computation, and estimation.

4.6 The student will estimate whole-number sums and differences and describe the method of estimation. Students will refine estimates, using terms such as closer to, in between, and a little more than.

4.7 The student will add and subtract whole numbers written in vertical and horizontal form, choosing appropriately between paper and pencil methods and calculators.

4.8 The student will find the product of two whole numbers when one factor has two digits or less and the other factor has three digits or less, using estimation and paper and pencil. For larger products (a two-digit numeral times a three-digit numeral), estimation and calculators will be used.

4.9 The student will estimate and find the quotient of two whole numbers given a one-digit divisor.

4.10 The student will
- add and subtract with fractions having like and unlike denominators of 12 or less and with decimals through thousandths, using concrete materials and paper and pencil; and
- solve problems involving addition and subtraction with fractions having like and unlike denominators of 12 or less and decimals expressed through thousandths.

**Measurement**

4.11 The student will
- estimate and measure weight/mass using actual measuring devices and express the results in both metric and US Customary units including ounces, pounds, grams, and kilograms; and
- estimate the conversion of ounces and grams
and pounds and kilograms, using approximate comparisons (1 ounce is about 28 grams, or 1 gram is about the weight of a paper clip; 1 kilogram is a little more than 2 pounds).*

* The intent of this standard is for students to make “ballpark” comparisons and not to memorize conversion factors between US and metric units.

4.12 The student will
- estimate and measure length using actual measuring devices and describe the results in both metric and US Customary units, including part of an inch (1/2, 1/4, and 1/8), inches, feet, yards, millimeters, centimeters, and meters; and
- estimate the conversion of inches and centimeters, yards and meters, and miles and kilometers, using approximate comparisons (1 inch is about 2.5 centimeters, 1 meter is a little longer than a yard, 1 mile is slightly farther than 1.5 kilometers, or 1 kilometer is slightly farther than half a mile).*

* The intent of this standard is for students to make “ballpark” comparisons and not to memorize conversion factors between U.S. and metric units.

4.13 The student will
- estimate and measure liquid volume using actual measuring devices and using metric and US Customary units, including cups, pints, quarts, gallons, milliliters, and liters; and
- estimate the conversion of quarts and liters, using approximate comparisons (1 quart is a little less than 1 liter, 1 liter is a little more than 1 quart).*

* The intent of this standard is for students to make “ballpark” comparisons and not to memorize conversion factors between US and metric units.

4.14 The student will identify and describe situations representing the use of perimeter and will use measuring devices to find perimeter in both standard and non-standard units of measure.

On the other hand, numerous examples of approaches — e.g., an “error log” should be used — come out of nowhere and seem to dictate what it is teachers must include in the curriculum. Why do teachers not get to choose their own methods of teaching editing skills? The DPI lists have not been edited for clarity and parallel construction across subjects. They do not even share the same philosophy across the subject areas. This makes them harder to swallow and less useful.

We must note at this juncture that the draft of the DPI November revised version of the English language arts standards no longer contains the statement that no variation is linguistically superior, has one fewer reference to an “error log,” and is a bit more specific on the skills to be used. It also has eliminated the recommendation to watch television. These are steps in the right direction. But the revised version still has standards for only three grades and has excruciating detail that still is not very helpful in giving teachers direction as to what it is that is the essential material for the grade.
By grade eight:

Students will apply their knowledge of language and its uses to achieve a variety of purposes. They will:

- demonstrate in both oral and written forms how context affects language choices;
- illustrate the difference between dictionary meanings and the power of words;
- compare English with modern foreign languages and describe features both common and unique (i.e., what makes English, English?)
- observe and describe how language shapes relationships within the family, the school, and the community

Examples include tasks in which students —
- explore current business and school logos and create new ones
- examine modern ads and create new ones
- role-play adolescent literature characters in different settings
- write a character sketch from positive and negative perspectives
- write stories and poems with dialogue
- write scenes for dramatization
- revise prose sentences through simple combinations
- revise paragraphs through better connections and transitions among ideas
- use an error log as a revision and editing tool
- develop a dictionary of words associated with hobbies, sports, or occupations
- watch national television and compile a list of words and expressions that differ regionally
- talk with older family members and compile a list of words or expressions that are not used much or at all today
If we go to yet another subject area, science, we have almost as much difficulty following the logic and the direction of the Wisconsin standards. Science standards are broken into nine parts. These nine include statements on: 1) the nature of science; 2) problem-solving in science; 3) making connections among scientific disciplines; 4) understanding basic physical science; 5) understanding the structure and systems of the earth and other bodies in the universe; 6) understanding the characteristics and structures of living things, the processes of life, and how living things interact with each other; 7) how to effectively communicate about science; 8) how to understand the interrelationships of science, technology, and human activity and how they can impact Wisconsin and the world; and 9) how to use scientific information and skills to make decisions about themselves, Wisconsin, and the world in which they live.

Virginia, by contrast, at the high-school level, has specific content noted for the four basic science courses normally offered in high school: earth science, biology, chemistry, and physics. Instead of students being held accountable (in some vague way) for explaining “the uses of technology in a career” or demonstrating “the interrelationships between science and technology,” as the proposed Wisconsin standards state, Virginia’s standards are quite specific by subject area. They include the main areas that should be covered in specific science subjects. The emphasis is on the science, not on the fuzzy topics listed in Wisconsin’s standards. Virginia’s science standards, as illustrated by those for earth science, give a very clear definition of what it is that should be included and mastered in such a class in high school.

The length of the exposition alone (only one-fifth of the statements on earth science from Virginia are even listed) demonstrates the very different and inadequate approach the DPI standards have. The Virginia standards are specific as to the materials that should be covered in a year-long class on earth science. The Wisconsin standards, by contrast, are non-specific and non-inclusive. Wisconsin teachers receive few clues as to what students should be taught in earth-science classes. The same holds for biology, chemistry, and physics.

Virginia’s standards have other noteworthy inclusions. One of them is a separate listing for the fifth and eighth grades of what computer/technology standards should be mastered by the end of these grades in each of the core areas. The excerpt on page 14 illustrates what is stated for eighth grade. These standards build on those adopted for the fifth grade and are complete enough to serve well all high-school students.

A separate standard exists for particular coursework that all students should have. Most noteworthy is a high-school history/social-science requirement for a 10th-grade world-geography course. Wisconsin might be hard-pressed to initially staff such a course, but in an increasingly “global economy,” it is imperative that Wisconsin students develop a much better understanding of “how people in various cultures influence and are influenced by their physical and ecological environments.”
Admittedly, the standards that should be set for Wisconsin will differ in some respects from those in Virginia. For one, the Virginia standards must be modified to fit the Wisconsin context. History, for example, in Grades 4 and 12 will focus on Wisconsin, rather than Virginia. For another, in the process of adoption, modest changes are likely to be made. For a third, once state standards are adopted for Wisconsin, additional detail must be added by the school districts. The state standards will provide clear direction for the districts because they will be a set of curriculum standards for all grades for core subjects. The state content standards may be more specific in the grades in which testing will be done. Detailed and required standards, and perhaps a scope and sequence of curriculum, will be developed by the individual districts. Individual schools will align themselves with the state and district by developing specific standards for what must be taught and mechanisms for performance testing to determine how well it is taught.
Virginia Eighth-Grade Computer/Technology Standards

Computer/Technology skills are essential components of every student's education. In order to maximize opportunities for students to acquire necessary skills for academic success, the teaching of these skills should be the shared responsibility of teachers of all disciplines.

Minimum skills that all students should acquire by the end of Grade 8 include the following:

C/T8.1 The student will communicate through application software.
- Compose and edit a multi-page document at the keyboard, using word processing skills and the writing process steps.
- Communicate with spreadsheets by entering data and setting up formulas, analyzing data, and creating charts to visually represent data.
- Communicate with databases by defining fields and entering data, sorting, and producing reports in various forms.
- Use advanced publishing software, graphics programs, and scanners to produce page layouts.
- Integrate databases, graphics, and spreadsheets into word-processed documents.

C/T8.2 The student will communicate through networks and telecommunication.
- Use local and worldwide network communication systems.
- Develop hypermedia "home page" documents that can be assessed by worldwide networks.

C/T8.3 The student will have a basic understanding of computer processing, storing, retrieval, and transmission technologies and a practical appreciation of the relevant advantages and disadvantages of various processing, storage, retrieval, and transmission technologies.

C/T8.4 The student will process, store, retrieve, and transmit electronic information.
- Use search strategies to retrieve electronic information.
- Use electronic encyclopedias, almanacs, indexes, and catalogs to retrieve and select relevant information.
- Use laser discs with a computer in an interactive mode.
- Use local and area-wide networks and modem-delivered services to access and retrieve information from electronic databases.
- Use databases to perform research.

In addition to the standards themselves, Wisconsin must establish a testing system that measures how well students are doing at mastering the content specified in the standards. Wisconsin should continue to provide tests of Wisconsin students in Grades 4 and 8. These tests should be similar to the WSAS (Wisconsin Student Assessment System) now in place. (WSAS tests are the vehicle being designed to measure how well students can apply their knowledge, thinking, and communication skills. The tests were initiated in the fall of 1996 and will be aimed at several grades.) These tests should be re-evaluated once the new state model standards have been developed and ensure that the WSAS reflect the new content standards in a reliable, valid, cost-effective manner.

The state also should proceed with the development of an examination to be used as a graduation exam. Such an exam would be administered at the end of 11th grade to allow time for remediation of students who do not succeed in passing the exam. Individual districts would have the opportunity to use either the state exam or a national exam that is determined to be relatively similar, if such an exam exists. The state would publish the results of the fourth-, eighth-, and 11th-grade exams so that parents across the state will be able to compare the achievement in their schools to other schools and other districts.

Individual school districts will be allowed to develop and implement performance standards for the grades and subjects not covered in the state exams. The local districts should use the grade-by-grade content standards as the guide to the construction of their local performance standards. Creating such standards should not be onerous, since that is precisely what teachers do today in their respective classes.

The Invalidity of Common Criticisms

Vague educational standards have many proponents. Teachers may endorse them — because it gives them greater leeway in the classroom and there is less opportunity for accountability, because there is little specific learning that must be accomplished in a given year. School boards accept them because they too cannot be held as accountable; little valid can be said about failure if there are no specific standards of achievement that have been set. Teachers' unions like the vague standards because there is less opportunity for charges of failure by members. How can teachers fail if there are no accepted standards by which to be judged? State departments of public instruction
cannot be charged with failure if, again, there are no specific standards by which to judge their performance. The argument can be embellished further. There is a great deal of support for non-specific standards of achievement. If we cannot measure it, we cannot be said to fail.

Members of these many populations will, therefore, tend to endorse vague standards. Such standards seemingly meet the cry for direction. With enough public relations, vague standards can be sold, as we have seen. The sellers will do their best to undermine more specific standards. They will utilize several common arguments to help defend the creation of relatively useless goals. Among those needing some refutation are those discussed below.

Specific standards, such as those from Virginia, are said by some to be so specific that they remove district and teacher leeway as to what should be done in the classroom. This is false. The specific educational standards give a clear indication of what materials should be learned in a given year, but the standards do not say which teaching methodologies should be used. (Unfortunately, the proposed Wisconsin standards have some examples, such as those in English, that do go beyond this boundary.) Many teachers today face the double burden of choosing what topics must be learned and how it is they are to be mastered. By setting state content standards, the question of what to learn is largely settled. The teacher can then concentrate on how best to convey the material. The teacher, school, and district can concentrate on the means to achieve the goal and not be worried about defining the goal.

Content standards, such as Virginia's, are also said by some to focus only on content (read, facts) and not on the processing of information. This is also a false charge. For persons to process information, they need some substantive information with which to begin. Content standards specify what material is to be learned. But the content standards can also state how that material is to be processed by students. We can look, for example, at the history standards for fifth grade in Virginia. The subject to be covered is U.S. history until 1877. Standards range from specific content to interpreting and historical thinking skills.

Standard 5.1 reads:

The student will describe life in America before the 17th century by
• identifying and describing the first Americans, their arrival from Asia, where they settled, and how they lived, including Inuits (Eskimos), Anasazi (cliff dwellers), Northwest Indians (Kwakiutl), Plains Indians, Mound Builders, Indians of the Eastern Forest (Iroquois, etc.) Incas, Mayas;
• explaining how geography and climate influenced the way various Indian tribes lived; and
• evaluating the impact of native economies on their religions, arts, shelters, and cultures.

Standard 5.9 reads:

The student will develop skills for historical analysis, including the ability to
• identify, analyze, and interpret primary sources (artifacts, diaries, letters, photographs, art, documents, and newspapers), and contemporary media (television, movies, and computer information systems) to better understand events and life in United States history to 1877;
• construct various timelines of American history from pre-Columbian times to 1877 highlighting landmark dates, technological changes, major political and military events, and major historical figures; and
• locate on a United States map major physical features of bodies of water, exploration and trade routes, the states that entered the union up to 1877, and identify the states that formed the Confederacy during the Civil War.

And Standard 5.10 reads: "The student will develop skills in discussion, debate, and persuasive writing by analyzing historical situations and events, including ...."

These examples illustrate the fact that educational standards can contain both content and process requirements. The fifth-grade students are expected to learn the specifics of geographic locations, trade routes, Indian tribes and their economies, major historical figures, landmark dates, and the like. This is specific content that should be absorbed. Content alone, though, is not what is required. The content must be processed in varying ways. Students are expected to be able to interpret primary sources, to develop skills in discussion, debate and persuasive writing, among other skills. Teachers are assisted by the specific nature of the material that is to be cov-
ered, and they are also guided by the types of information-processing that students should be expected to master at a grade-appropriate level. There is no truth to the charge that such standards are restricted to recitation of facts.

Some critics charge that having specific content standards will further penalize disadvantaged students because so much more will be expected of them that they cannot help but fail. This charge also can be refuted. Disadvantaged students would benefit greatly from a common curriculum stated in content standards. Teachers' expectations would be dictated by the standards; teachers could no longer say “these kids” can’t learn that. The charge to the teachers is that all students must learn this material. It is up to the teacher, the principal, and the district to develop the appropriate mechanisms for this to occur. If these students change schools, as commonly occurs in city districts, the students will be responsible for the same material, thus making the adjustment easier.

Superintendent Benson charges that the adoption of Virginia’s standards works against the notion of local control. He believes that what the DPI has done to date — the creation of very loosely stated standards, examples of which appear on the previous several pages — is superior to the much more clearly defined standards from Virginia. Among the arguments he uses is that the virtual wholesale adoption of standards from elsewhere undermines the local input on the creation of standards. Furthermore, he points to Virginia’s allegedly lower test results to discredit anything from the state of Virginia. Such statements misrepresent the adoption process.

As is clear above, the Virginia standards are well-developed, have been approved by many persons, and are extremely helpful. They have been cited by others — such as the Education Leaders Council, the American Federation of Teachers, and IBM Chairman Louis Gerstner — to be the best-developed standards in the nation. Yes, Virginia could do better academically, just as Wisconsin could do better. But the scores to which Benson refers are those achieved by fourth-graders when the state of Virginia was using a set of educational standards that are stated in very similar, ambiguous terms to those which the DPI is now peddling across the state of Wisconsin. Their inadequacy and the resulting inadequacy of their students in Virginia spurred Virginia to revisit the standards. The new ones, sampled on pages 9 through 14, are thought to be much more likely to result in increased educational achievement.

The notion that adopting and modestly revising another state’s set of standards undermines local control is fallacious. Local districts, schools, and teachers must still decide how they are going to ensure that students in their classrooms can meet the new standards. They will have been assisted by the presence of clear definitions of what is expected in terms of content and processes. But local individuals must still design and implement the curriculum that will succeed in getting students to master the material. It is the curriculum that is still very much under local control.

Furthermore, adopting already-developed standards also does not undermine local control, if local individuals have been included in the discussion of the merits of the adoption. Stating the standards ex cathedra is not acceptable, as it does undermine local control. But if there is discussion, more than has been allowed to date on the DPI standards, then the adoption should gain both legitimacy and support.

Moreover, the adoption of standards similar to those in Virginia reduces the control of the state in education. These standards help give the districts direction without imposing excessive regulation, which is the current practice. With a clear statement of the standards that should be met, school districts have the freedom to decide how they will meet the standards. Minute details of the process will no longer be regulated by the state. The bottom line is how well do the districts reach the goals stated in the standards. Do the children learn what they are supposed to learn? The state will not micromanage the classroom. Instead, it will hold the districts and schools — and, ultimately, the teachers — responsible for the outcomes, ignoring past efforts to tell the districts exactly how they should approach the offering of education. Schools may have to restructure themselves to reach the goals, but it will be local decisions that determine the new directions taken.

Another charge against the Virginia standards is that they are too comprehensive in that they cover every grade, rather than just three grades — as in those proposed by the DPI. The major reason behind standards for every grade is that the alternative places excessive work on the teachers in the designated grades. It is the fourth- or eighth- or 12th-grade teachers who are held responsible for the four years of learning being tested. That is unfair,
and poor practice as well. Knowledge is cumulative and should be acquired over several years. That cumulative learning is acknowledged and built upon if there are separate requirements for each grade. We must note that grade-specific standards are the norm in European countries and that it is the grade-specific nature of the standards that is commonly cited as a reason for the higher levels of achievement among European students.

One characteristic that the Virginia standards do not have is the specificity that some of the standards discussed for the U.S. do have. The history standards developed for the U.S., for example, were so specific that they elicited a great deal of debate. It was not only the specificity, but also the specifics of what was stated that engendered heated discussion — which has slowed the development of other national standards. This specificity should be avoided. A great deal of direction can be given without having to resort to dictating the exact content of courses. The Virginia standards, again, do not overrun the bounds of reasonable specificity (which some of the DPI-proposed Wisconsin standards do).

**THE BENEFITS FOR MILWAUKEE**

Several years ago, then-Superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools Howard Fuller decided that the district could no longer countenance the acceptance of low standards for the district’s high-school students. He instituted two policies that are just beginning to increase the opportunities for the district’s clientele, its students. One change was the institution of the requirement that all students take an algebra course for graduation. Yes, some students did not immediately pass the course. But many more minority students than ever before are taking and passing the course, opening many new doors that previously had been closed. Fuller also instituted passage of a comprehensive exam to graduate from high school. After a shaky first year, this also is raising expectations and results.

Some of the same thinking is behind the advocacy for clear, concise, higher-level content standards for all of the state. If we raise the bar and specify precisely what the bar is, we should have greater success in jumping over it. Everyone, including Milwaukee students, will have a better chance for success in the 21st century. If the standards apply to all — including Milwaukee — not only will Milwaukee students benefit from the high expectation, but they will be held to the same standards as everyone else in the state. The teachers, schools, and districts will be held more accountable because everyone in the state will know what is supposed to be accomplished. Because of the similarity of expectations across schools, children who change schools will have a much better chance of seeing the same material in each school. They will not be disadvantaged by covering very different subjects. They will have structure in their academic lives, which should lead to greater academic success. Better and universal content standards will “advantage,” not disadvantage city students. Moreover, as argued above, if all of the state’s students are held to the same standards and certain districts are unable to meet those standards consistently, it becomes clear that further assistance must be forthcoming from the state. The state has set the goals, and the state must do all in its power to see to it that all districts meet the goals. Under any scenario, Milwaukee and its students will come out ahead.

**HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?**

New, rigorous, concise, jargon-free, easy-to-understand, specific content standards and the accompanying testing system must meet the scrutiny of both professional and public audiences. Many mistakes have been made elsewhere in the country in not seriously involving the public in policy decisions. Wisconsin should learn from these mistakes and create a process for involving the public in the debate and adoption of the recommended new standards and measures. The state should begin by establishing a state commission to oversee the development and implementation of both standards and a system for assessing the results.

The commission would have a broad-based membership. The membership would include professional educators, other professionals, parents, employers, and citizens. The commission should begin the process by adopting a set of standards that has already been created by broad-based discussion and approved by the American Federation of Teachers, the standards from Virginia. (The DPI also started with a draft set of standards to stimulate discussion; unfortunately, the DPI chose an extremely inadequate set of standards with which to work.) The commission would initially rework the Virginia standards to include Wisconsin history and any other obvious changes. It would then open the process to input from others.
The public-engagement process would be far more extensive and elaborate than that utilized by the DPI in its review of educational standards. The proposed standards would be sent to all school boards and libraries in the state. Each school board would be asked to formally review the proposed standards. In addition, public hearings would be scheduled across the state by the commission to take both written and oral recommendations. At the conclusion of public testimony, the commission would modify the standards based on the input received. The notion here is that the process, unlike the current DPI effort, would involve genuine, far-reaching, public engagement.

In this process, all participants involved — the citizens and the educational professionals — should be reminded of the evaluation criteria persons involved in the educational-standards project in Beaufort, S.C., employed as they worked their way through the process of creating educational standards. They urged every reviewer to ask the following questions of the standards being proposed:

1. Are the standards sufficiently rigorous to be labeled internationally competitive?
2. Are the standards measurable? Can you envision telling the difference between a student who has achieved a standard and a student who has not?
3. Do the standards address knowledge and skills that will be valuable over a student’s lifetime?
4. Do the standards reflect the right mix of knowledge (facts, ideas, concepts, issues, and information) and skills (intellectual powers of observation, communication, reasoning, reflection, judgment, perspective, and synthesis)?
5. Are the standards specific enough to ensure the development of a common core curriculum?
6. Do the standards reflect a proper pattern of cumulative learning? Do the standards reflect proper scope and sequence?
7. Are the standards intelligible to teachers, parents, students, and lay people?

If Wisconsin participants can answer “yes” to each of these questions, then the standards being proposed should be adopted. Clearly, the ones currently being proposed by the DPI (and the modified versions soon to be released) do not pass muster. We must make the effort to revise them. We need standards that truly will lead us to a higher-quality education for all students in Wisconsin.

ANOTHER ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT

Setting appropriate content standards is absolutely essential if the state is to upgrade the quality of education that its students receive. Establishing appropriate performance standards is also critical. It is likely that the full benefit of the new, explicit content standards and assessment, however, will not be felt unless many of the teachers in the state are additionally aided through the dissemination of more information on the best teaching practices for bringing students to the new, higher levels of achievement. Some teachers are able to keep current, but many do not have the time or access to the latest research on what practices are proving to be most successful in which settings. If we are really expecting our teachers to fulfill their obligation to raise the level of learning in their classrooms, we need to ensure that they (and their administrators) have easy access to information that identifies effective and ineffective teaching practices.

The charge to the state is to construct a mechanism that can identify best practices and disseminate this information on a regular basis to the teachers and administrators of the state. The mechanism must be established to guard against past practice in education, which allows innovation after innovation to be tried despite a total lack of proof that these innovations can be expected to increase learning. In fact, much of education in recent years has lurched from one idea to another without any of the scientific-research base required in so many other professions. Teachers will innovate on their own as they become aware of the new expectations for content and performance that the new standards will require. The teachers would be aided, however, by knowledge of the proven experience of others. A state role in assessing and disseminating such experiences would seem to be another important ingredient in ensuring that all of Wisconsin’s students will be well prepared for the demands of the 21st century.

Thus, the third essential ingredient beyond the establishment of a commission and the public-engagement process, is the establishment of an Institute of Validated Education Research. Such an institute would review edu-
cational research on the best teaching practices and disseminate the findings on both appropriate and inappropriate methods. The institute could be housed in a neutral agency and be accountable to the legislature and governor. It would have members of research-based professions outside education, such as medicine and engineering, who have a solid history of peer-review research practice, among its members. The findings of the institute would be made publicly available to teachers, parents, school boards, and universities. The educational establishment should then be held accountable for the best practices identified.

If these three ingredients — an independent commission on standards, a truly open, statewide, public-engagement process, and an Institute of Validated Education Research — can be implemented, then Wisconsin can be much more assured of adequately preparing its children for the 21st century.
NOTES


3 This definition is taken from materials published by the National Education Goals Panel as it appears in the "Business Leaders Guide to Setting Academic Standards" (Washington, D.C.: The Business Roundtable, May 1996), p. 34.

4 In 1994, Virginia suffered a 10% drop in the number of fourth graders reading at or above the "basic" level. It was the single greatest drop of the 40 participating states. Those results were based on the old 1988 standards, which were vague and sanctioned the 1988-89 decision by the state Department of Education to "approve" only whole-language textbooks. Not a single textbook with skills (phonics) was on the approved list. In fact, 1994 was the first year that the NAEP test results can be tied directly to the whole-language, anti-skills policy. California had a similar result with their wholesale change to whole language; it was a disaster that has led to reformulation of the California approach to reading.

5 See, for example, Michael Barrett, "The Standards Primer: A Resource for Accelerating the Pace of Reform" (Washington D.C.: Education Leaders Council, May 1996). The American Federation of Teachers has also publicly praised Virginia's standards.


8 Virginia, by its own admission, created a set of standards in 1986 that led it down the garden path to rapidly declining test results. It greatly regretted its choices and has restated the standards.


11 Among those promoting vague standards are individuals who are promoting innovations in testing. The educational assessment industry is trying to sell a very expensive form of testing, Performance Based Assessment, which relies on time-consuming portfolio assessment, among other things. This approach has proven not to be statistically valid and shifts the focus in classrooms further away from content and more toward process — the very problem we are trying to avoid. Vague standards beget vague assessments, which can be very costly.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute is a not-for-profit institute established to study public-policy issues affecting the state of Wisconsin.

Under the new federalism, government policy increasingly is made at the state and local levels. These public-policy decisions affect the lives of every citizen in the state. Our goal is to provide nonpartisan research on key issues that affect citizens living in Wisconsin, so that their elected representatives are able to make informed decisions to improve the quality of life and future of the state.

Our major priority is to improve the accountability of Wisconsin's government. State and local governments must be responsive to the citizenry, in terms of the programs they devise and the tax money they spend to implement them. Accountability should apply in every area to which the state devotes the public's funds.

The agenda for the Institute's activities directs attention and resources to the study of the following issues: education, welfare and social services, criminal justice, taxes and spending, and economic development.

We believe that the views of the citizens of Wisconsin should guide the decisions of government officials. To help accomplish this, we also conduct semiannual public-opinion polls that are structured to enable the citizens to inform these officials about how they view major statewide issues. These polls are disseminated through the media and made available to the general public and the legislative and executive branches of state government. It is essential that elected officials remember that all of the programs established and all of the money spent comes from the citizens of Wisconsin and is made available through their taxes. Public policy should reflect the real needs and concerns of all of the citizens of the state and not those of specific special-interest groups.