

CHAPTER 1

The Best-Laid Plans

For thirty years, standards have been at the heart of education reform efforts. Every seven to ten years over that period, committees of experts have gotten together to write new standards for states to adopt. Districts have selected new curriculum materials and offered teachers professional development. Teachers have worked with colleagues to understand the standards and go about the hard work of doing their best to implement them in the classroom. Kids have taken tests to gauge their progress. Scores have risen and fallen. Gaps have narrowed and widened. Every other year samples of kids have taken the National Assessment of Educational Progress and pundits have read the trends to conclude that, yes, things are getting better (or, of late, no, not so much).

Why do we do all this work? The argument for the standards movement is pretty straightforward and is best laid out in a now-seminal piece by Marshall S. Smith and Jennifer O’Day called “Systemic School Reform.”¹ Smith and O’Day summarize the school reforms of the 1980s and argue that they’ve mostly failed to achieve their goals of improving schools at scale. They lay out the case for a systemic education policy reform agenda focused on standards. It is the clearest intellectual argument to justify the last thirty years of standards-based reform in American education.

The remarkable thing about “Systemic School Reform” and the argument it advances is that almost the entire first half of it—the part where the

authors catalog the flaws of existing reform agendas and diagnose the structural issues in American education—could be written today with essentially no edits. Smith and O’Day were right about the problems of American education, and their diagnosis of the problems is stunningly accurate and relevant to our current problems thirty years later.

The questions this book sets out to address are straightforward ones. Have standards failed? If they have, why? What can we do to right the boat? Or is it a lost cause and we should cut bait?

What this book argues is that the proponents of standards-based reform—starting with its academic advocates but carrying through to its champions in governors’ mansions, statehouses, and even teacher union headquarters—gave away the farm when they moved from correctly diagnosing our educational woes to designing and implementing a policy to solve those problems. What we’ve ended up with—the standards movement as we know it and have experienced it—is completely inadequate to the goal of bringing about educational equity or excellence. Standards-based reform policies have hardly challenged the very structures that cause educational failure. These policies use almost magical thinking about how educational systems in fifty states and thirteen thousand districts would respond to a reform as weak as standards-plus-tests-and-modest-accountability. The results of this work have been disappointing, and there is no reason to believe that tinkering with policy design will meaningfully change the outcomes.

So what do we do now? If standards aren’t working and will not work, how can we improve teaching and learning at scale? The book makes a two-part argument. First, it argues that only a reform that gets much closer to the classroom—curriculum materials—has a hope of meaningfully moving the needle on instruction. Standards are just too far from actual teaching for us to hope that educators can consistently interpret and implement them in ways that align with the standards’ intent. Second, it argues that even a curriculum-oriented instructional reform will not get us where we need to be if we do not also challenge educational structures that impede reform, segregate students, and deprive our most disadvantaged students of the resources and teachers they need to succeed. These structures primarily include radically decentralized school districts, undemocratic school

boards, and teacher policies that often incentivize the best teachers to teach in the most advantaged areas. In other words, bringing instructional reform down to the classroom through curriculum materials can result in more instructional progress than we have seen, but even that will not be enough to get us where we need to go.

WHAT WAS WRONG WITH AMERICAN EDUCATION THAT STANDARDS WERE SUPPOSED TO FIX?

The Goal—Good Schools for All Children

With at most modest exceptions, the goals laid out in “Systemic School Reform” that animated the standards movement were goals that everyone would still support today. We all want a system that offers effective schools to all children, and hardly anyone could disagree with indicators like the following:

- A fairly stable staff, made up of enthusiastic and caring teachers who have a mastery both of the subject matter of the curriculum and of a variety of pedagogies for teaching it
- A well thought through, challenging curriculum that is integrated across grade levels and is appropriate for the range of experiences, cultures, and abilities of the students
- A high level of teacher and student engagement in the educational mission of the school—not just for the high achievers but for the vast majority of students
- Opportunities for parents to support and participate in the education of their children
- A schoolwide vision or mission and common instructional goals that tie the content, structure, and resources of the school together into an effective, unified whole
- A school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning, that both contains the resources and embodies the common purpose and mutual respect necessary for them to be successful

There are perhaps modest ways in which these goals might be tweaked if they were written today. For instance, cultural relevance and attention to educational equity would likely be foregrounded more directly, as would

nonacademic or social-emotional goals. But in all, almost everyone would have agreed then and would still agree today that if all students had access to schools with these attributes we would be much better off.

OUTCOME PROBLEMS

The reality in the 1980s was seen as quite far from this lofty goal of a quality school for all children. When the standards movement was burgeoning, advocates were driven first and foremost by concerns about student achievement. The famous 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* laid out these concerns bluntly.² The report argued that achievement was low when compared with other countries, and that it had declined since the Sputnik-fueled craze of the 1950s. The report cited large numbers of adults and modest numbers of high school graduates with functional illiteracy, unable to perform even the basic functions of entry-level positions in business and industry. The report concluded in now famously stark terms: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.”³

A Nation at Risk did not focus as strongly on gaps in performance or opportunity (indeed, the word “gap” doesn’t appear in the document), but these gaps emerged as a focus over the ensuing decade, and they featured prominently in 1990s-era thinking about the rationale for standards-based reforms.⁴ As standards-based reforms became folded into federal law through Title I (itself a program aimed at eradicating opportunity gaps for low-income students), the gap-orientation of the policy became more prominent.

THE REASONS FOR POOR PERFORMANCE

So why didn’t we have a quality school for every child, and why, therefore, was achievement not what we wanted it to be?⁵ First and foremost, advocates for standards focused their attention on educational systems and structures, which they decried as fragmented and overly complex. One hundred thousand schools, thirteen thousand districts and school boards, fifty states with both legislative and executive authorities involved, and a federal Department of Education on top of it (not to mention the courts)

are hardly a recipe for coherence and consistency. And these are merely the organizations and structures that have formal authority—there are also informal sources of authority and guidance from teacher education programs to curriculum creators and providers to unions to parent organizations to teachers' own professional networks. Altogether, these structures send teachers myriad—and often conflicting—messages about what they should be doing in the classroom.

Second, advocates argued that the purposes of schooling were not always clear or agreed upon. At the macro level, there are debates about whether the purpose of education is primarily academic, or whether the purpose also extends to social, emotional, civic, or other desired outcomes. At a more micro level, there is of course disagreement about what particular content and skills to emphasize (see, for instance, the well-publicized and never-ending reading and math wars).⁶ There is also more fundamental disagreement about the proper locus of control for decisions about what to teach students—whether it lies with teachers or at a higher level.⁷

Third, advocates argued that the political pressures and realities of education politics get in the way of sustained vision and long-term thinking. For example, school boards are typically elected on short cycles of just a few years (ditto for governors, mayors, and legislators). If they are trying to demonstrate that they have accomplished something worthy of reelection, they will be likely to favor short-term gains and low-hanging fruit over sustained and more difficult forms of reform. This contributes to a quick-fix, silver-bullet mentality, rather than an approach that recognizes the necessity for slow, long-term thinking.

Together, the advocates argued, these weaknesses led to the challenges they observed in the schools of the time. Curriculum materials were weak and diffuse, because publishers couldn't create a more focused and coherent approach if it would apply in only one state or a small handful of districts. Professional development and learning (both preservice and in-service) were limited and focused on general skills because they could not be more focused without clear and common goals. Assessments were poorly aligned with what teachers were actually teaching because it was impossible for them to be otherwise—there was no common instructional core to guide assessment and evaluation of student progress. And teacher supports (e.g.,

time and space to collaborate and reflect) were weak and variable, with the worst supports in the most disadvantaged settings. As a result of all these limitations, American teachers were conservative in their instructional practice—falling back on the content and practices they experienced in their own education and rarely attempting more ambitious instructional reform.

HOW STANDARDS WOULD FIX AMERICAN EDUCATION

How could we fix these large, structural problems and improve American education at scale?⁸ The solution proposed by standards advocates and policy reformers was to exercise the authority of the state, rightly recognizing that reform at scale could happen only through higher-level leadership, and lead with a clear set of goals and visions. At the center of these goals, they argued, must be clear expectations for what students should be learning in school—what we call content standards (the standards in standards-based reform). In short, the theory of change underlying standards-based reform went something like this.

First, states should assemble experts to come together and agree what students should know and be able to do at the end of their educational experience. They should work backward from this end goal to spell out the progression of student knowledge across grades. In early versions of this policy theory, advocates recommended standards be spelled out in four-year chunks, and in the pre–No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era content standards were indeed often constructed in grade spans rather than grade by grade.⁹

Second, states should work to support schools and districts to adopt or create high-quality curriculum materials aligned with the standards. One way to increase the odds of this happening would be for states to hold statewide adoptions where they verified the quality of an approved list of aligned materials. But the advocates argued that states must ultimately leave curriculum adoption decisions (including the decision to purchase a material not approved by the state, or to create materials from scratch) in the hands of local actors.

Third, states would reform preservice and in-service teacher professional learning opportunities. Noting that preservice teacher education was mostly

provided by fiercely independent colleges of education, these early advocates envisioned that states might regulate teacher knowledge of standards through performance assessment of teacher knowledge or competency at the end of their training period. For in-service training, these advocates simply noted that states could either directly create training opportunities aligned with standards or offer contracts or incentives for subunits to do so. Either way, they argued, the amount and quality of preservice professional learning would need to be dramatically increased.

Fourth, states would need to reorient their assessment systems toward the content in the standards and away from more general basic skills assessment. Coupled with modest external accountability policies, standards-aligned assessment would serve two purposes. It would give educators and the general public a clear understanding of student progress toward mastering the content in the standards. And it would send clear messages to teachers about what they should be teaching and offer some external incentive for them to want to teach it. Again, in early versions of standards-based reform, assessment was done in grade spans. In the NCLB era and since, students have been tested more frequently.¹⁰

Fifth and final, depending on the particular instantiation of standards-based reform we are talking about, its advocates envisioned some degree of restructuring of authority among the different levels in the education system. For instance, Smith and O'Day talked about the key roles at the school, district, and state levels in their argument for systemic standards-based reform.

The theory by which this policy will result in better outcomes for children, then, is relatively straightforward. A stylized version is presented in figure 1.1. Standards come first—they set the goal and vision (perhaps not just content standards, but also other standards or expectations for the kinds of outcomes schools should achieve). These are reinforced through curriculum materials, professional learning, and assessments, each of which are aligned with standards. Governance structures are cleared out or simplified as needed to minimize conflicting messages. Teachers implement the standards in the classroom. Students learn the standards and achieve the other goals set out by the system.

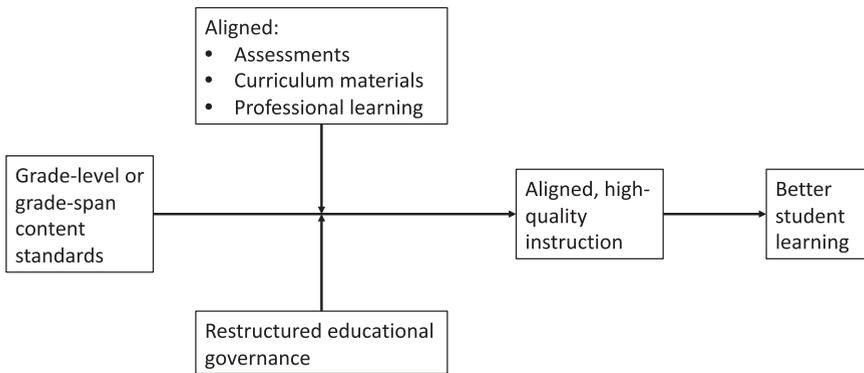


FIGURE 1.1. A stylized theory of change for standards-based reforms.

It sounds simple and straightforward. But it hasn't worked. In the rest of this chapter I offer some thoughts on what's right and what's wrong with this theory of change and lay out the path for the rest of the book.

WHAT'S RIGHT IN THE STANDARDS-BASED REFORM THEORY OF CHANGE

There are many core elements of this argument that were correct at the time they were first being made. And, to a large extent, what was true when these reforms were first put forth remains true today. For starters, student outcomes were not what they should have been. The language of *A Nation at Risk* was surely overwrought, but the principle—that academic performance in US schools was mediocre at best—was certainly true then.¹¹ Just as a few data points:

- In the mid-1980s, only about 74 percent of US adults had high school degrees or higher, and about 21 percent had college degrees or higher.
- In the first wave of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1992, just 29 percent of students scored proficient at fourth- and eighth-grade reading, and 18–21 percent of students scored proficient at fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics.
- On the Second International Mathematics Study, US students scored at or below the international average both in eighth grade and at age 17 on a range of mathematical topics, far behind high-achieving countries like Japan.

While one can quibble with the individual indicators used in *A Nation at Risk*, it is hard to argue with the overall conclusion that educational outcomes at that time were not where they needed to be.

For another thing, instruction in US schools could be improved, and poor-quality instruction almost certainly contributes to the low levels of performance and larger-than-desired gaps that we observe. This was certainly true in the 1980s and 1990s when these policies were first being pushed, and it remains true today. There are a number of dimensions along which instruction fell short around that time. For example, large proportions of students did not have access to the kinds of courses they needed to prepare them for college. Instruction was criticized as “[containing] little depth or coherence, emphasizing facts and basic skills over opportunities to analyze and solve problems.”¹² And heavily tracked schools resulted in sharply unequal educational opportunities.¹³

The diagnoses—the contributing factors to poor instruction—were also largely correct. Educational governance was indeed outrageously complex. In describing the governance structure for California as of 2007 (so quite a bit after the onset of the standards movement), researchers labeled it a “crazy quilt.”¹⁴ Teachers in California’s more than one thousand districts often received instructional or other policy-related messages from their own school leaders, district leaders (in large districts, perhaps multiple leadership committees), school boards, county offices of education, the state department of education, and the state board of education. Other states were no different—authority over teaching and learning was incredibly diffuse, and what concrete guidance did exist rarely got all the way to the instructional core of teaching and learning. Much more often it was focused simply on what courses students should take.

Early standards advocates were also correct that curriculum materials were weak. For starters, they emphasized breadth at the expense of depth, covering dozens or hundreds of topics at a surface level and nothing at a deeper level. Scholars described a curriculum that was “addicted to coverage” or “a mile wide and an inch deep.”¹⁵ At the same time, the books were seen as highly redundant and repetitive—one analysis found that just 30–50 percent of elementary mathematics textbook content was typically “new” material that wasn’t included in prior grades’ texts.¹⁶ The blame for the

poor-quality curriculum materials was in part attributed to the decentralized curriculum authority in the United States—publishers writing books to reach the lowest common denominator because there was no agreed-upon set of content and skills students needed to master.

And of course, professional learning—both in-service and preservice—also had serious limitations. Professional learning opportunities were often of relatively short duration—a few hours to a few days—and often provided inadequate opportunity for follow-up.¹⁷ They rarely engaged teachers in sustained, ongoing learning opportunities in real classroom situations.¹⁸ And they rarely included any kind of serious evaluation, making it more difficult to learn what was working and why.¹⁹

WHAT'S WRONG IN THE STANDARDS-BASED REFORM THEORY OF CHANGE

With so much right about the theory, what's wrong with it? And why do I argue it hasn't worked out in practice? This will be the focus of chapters 3–5, but the simple answer is that the solution to the problems raised—starting with standards and reinforcing them through a few other relatively weak policy instruments, all of which depend on buy-in and action from fifty states and thirteen thousand school districts—is not nearly strong enough a lever to actually address the problems. Indeed, the policy theory of action makes little sense because once it identifies the sources of poor teaching and learning in US schools—structures, governance, conflicting guidance—it hardly tries to address those sources. Standards-based reform accepts that the structures of US education make direct reform challenging—politically and perhaps logistically as well—and rather than trying to change those structures, it just puts forth a policy approach that fits with current structures and hopes for the best. This approach—of ceding all of the important control that might actually lead to change—occurs throughout the theory, and the result is a reform that simply doesn't have the teeth it needs to accomplish what it wants, *especially* given that the structure remains so unbelievably decentralized.

To see this, return to the problems standards advocates identified and their proposed solutions. The question is how to get teachers to teach the content that we want them to teach—that we think is important for students

to know. Essentially, there are three policy instruments proposed. The first is to try to convince teachers to teach the content in the standards through assessment and accountability. This approach is limited in several obvious ways. It assumes we have the testing technology to truly reinforce the standards and not undermine them. It assumes that the accountability incentives will be sharp enough that they will matter to teachers (motivating most or all of them to actually care about implementing them) and not so sharp that they will drive teachers out or produce other negative unintended consequences. And it assumes that teachers who are motivated to teach the standards will have or develop the capacity to do so. There are serious weaknesses in all of these assumptions.

The second policy instrument is to provide teachers with additional support through high-quality curriculum materials (though not to mandate any particular materials, because that's off the table). This approach, too, is limited. The most obvious limitation is that without any kind of requirement from the state, districts can and often do ignore curriculum recommendations.²⁰ Incentives, such as bulk discounts or eased administrative requirements, could induce more districts to sign on, but many will not—then what? A second obvious limitation is that adopting good materials is only half the battle, and maybe not even the hard half. Districts adopting good, standards-aligned materials still need to support or convince teachers to actually use them and use them in the ways intended by their authors. There is really nothing in the policy theory that can overcome this hurdle.

The third is to provide high-quality preservice and in-service professional learning opportunities. This approach is the weakest of them all. In terms of preservice training, the state has close to zero authority over preservice teacher education, and college professors aren't exactly known for responding intently to state policies or modifying their curriculum to suit external suggestions. In terms of in-service training, to get any kind of large-scale consistency there would need to be some state- or other high-level control, but there is little precedent or capacity at these levels to offer that control. And for either preservice or in-service teacher education, it's not clear what you'd actually want to be educating teachers about to get them to implement the standards better. Are you teaching them the content in the standards? Are you teaching them how students should be taught

that content? Are you teaching them how to create or identify curricula to align with those standards? All of these are difficult and hard to imagine thirteen thousand individual districts doing well (or a state stepping up to deliver with any kind of consistency).

So, could it happen that standards implementation would go well? Could the theory of action play out close to how the policy makers and advocates envisioned? Maybe, but it doesn't seem very likely. Everything would have to go just right, really. The standards would have to be good. Teachers would have to want to teach them. There'd have to be good materials available, districts would have to choose them, and teachers would have to want to implement them. Teacher training would have to be strong, so teachers understood the standards and what they were supposed to be doing. And all of this would have to happen across fifty states and thousands of districts, and then persist across decades and through different administrations and leadership at the state and district levels. In short, the system is set up to thwart policy success. And as we will see in the next chapter, standards-based reform policy has not been very successful.

WHY HAVE STANDARDS FAILED? THE USUAL SUSPECTS AND SOME NEW ANSWERS

This book argues that, measured against its own goals, the standards movement is a failure. While standards-plus-accountability has boosted achievement a bit, these gains may have been somewhat illusory, and this reform has not led to appreciable gap closure.²¹ Indeed, the magnitude of socioeconomic achievement gaps on national assessments is just as large in 2019 as it was in 2000. More importantly, there is no reason to believe that any tinkering with the policy—as the Every Student Succeeds Act aims to do—will make the law a success. Simply put, the idea of standards is poorly aligned with the goal of narrowing gaps, and the standards movement uses policy levers that are far too weak to actually achieve the kind of major instructional improvements needed to boost achievement and narrow gaps at scale.

A number of narratives have been offered for the failure of standards, and there is some truth to all of them. I discuss these arguments at length in the next chapter. This book argues that the “usual suspects” that are offered to explain the failure of standards are fine, to a point, but they are

not the main reasons why standards have failed and will continue to fail. Standards are a failure first and foremost because they accept the flawed structures of American education as they are, rather than fundamentally challenging them. The standards movement recognizes the extreme decentralization of American education systems as a serious problem that gets in the way of meaningful improvement at scale. It rightly points out the ways that teachers receive conflicting messages—or sometimes no messages at all—about what they should be teaching and how. It correctly identifies the damning consequences of the (dis)organization of educational organizations, especially for the most disadvantaged students. But, rather than trying to fundamentally change this feature, the movement jerry-rigs a technical solution to the problem—it creates a set of standards and offers modest policy supports to get teachers to buy into and teach those standards.

The standards movement understands that teachers are the ground-level implementers with control over standards implementation, but it doesn't meaningfully grapple with the near-complete authority teachers have once the classroom door is shut. If we know now, and have known for fifty years, that teaching is an isolating profession defined by mostly individual practice, how can a light-touch reform like standards possibly penetrate the classroom in any meaningful way? If we know now, and have known for fifty years, that teachers almost universally choose to use their districts' formally adopted curriculum materials as one tool among many, why would we adopt a reform that is silent about supporting materials in ways that actually get them used? These decisions have doomed the policy to predictable failure.

Given this diagnosis, this book argues that focusing on technical fixes—improving the content of standards, tweaking the assessments, redesigning accountability systems—will not make standards work, because they are not the cause of standards' failure. In the final three chapters, the book offers an alternative approach that starts with high-quality, standardized curriculum materials and dramatic restructuring of educational authority. It argues that without a more radical reform that asserts greater state control over what materials teachers use and how they can be supported to use them, we may as well not bother trying to direct instruction through policy, as our decentralized structures are inherently unable to improve educational

outcomes equitably. In short, the book argues that we have allowed local control to thwart educational improvement and we should stop doing that.

To make this argument, I rely both on reviews of what my and other scholars' research has found and on fresh empirical analyses using a variety of data sources. I describe these data sources in the data appendix, and I introduce them as they are used. This work spans the last half decade and includes both qualitative and quantitative research with a wide array of collaborators and students. The series of projects I report on began with a study of the alignment of widely used textbooks to the Common Core State Standards in the early years of the Common Core movement.²² From there, and recognizing the growing evidence that curriculum materials might be an important tool for supporting teachers to implement the standards, I conducted a series of studies gathering data on the textbooks used in selected states across the nation.²³ That work also had a specific California focus, in light of a recent court case about the adequacy of curriculum materials in the state. I used the data I had collected on textbook adoptions in the state to randomly choose thirty-four districts to study. I interviewed district leaders to understand their textbook adoption policies and practices.²⁴ From there, I selected a sample of middle school mathematics teachers in each district and interviewed them about their involvement with the adoption, their implementation of the materials, and the supports they'd received from their district to implement the materials more faithfully. Next, I co-directed a national study of the implementation of college- and career-ready standards, and I co-led a project to conduct deep-dive case studies in five districts around the country focusing on standards implementation.²⁵ And finally, in the last few years I have joined research teams at RAND and Harvard to conduct and analyze state-representative surveys of both math and English language arts (ELA) teachers about their use of materials and the policy supports they receive.²⁶ I marshal these data throughout the rest of the book.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The remainder of the book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews what we know about the implementation and impact of standards in America's schools. It argues that standards have not affected instruction to nearly the extent called for by their architects, and that the effects on student

achievement have been modest and diminishing. It also argues that these effects have been no better for the disadvantaged student groups that need the most support. I end this chapter with a discussion of the popular explanations for the poor track record of the standards movement. In general, I conclude that existing claims have some truth to them, but that they are totally insufficient for explaining the ongoing failure of the standards movement.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 offer explanations for why the standards movement has failed. Chapter 3 emphasizes structural issues in American education, specifically focusing on the remarkable decentralization and diffusion of authority that characterize our education systems. This chapter uses curriculum materials policies as a paradigmatic example of this decentralization and the ways that it results in poor-quality teaching and learning in American classrooms. It highlights, for instance, the diffusion of the textbook market, the relative lack of state involvement in local curriculum decisions, and the complicated processes by which districts make adoption decisions.

Chapter 4 focuses on the organization of American teaching and the ingrained cultural and structural barriers that impede large-scale instructional improvement. In short, this chapter asks what would happen if we could get quality materials in every classroom—would we see better teaching and learning? The chapter presents evidence that teachers have—and exercise—substantial control over their curricula. It also argues that this control is a central part of teachers' identity and is not meaningfully grappled with by the authors of standards-based reforms.

Chapter 5 focuses on key barriers to effective standards implementation in the area of instructional support for teachers and the coherence of state and district policy systems. In short, this chapter asks if we have the capacity in the system to train or work our way out of the problems identified in chapters 3 and 4. The chapter argues that standards are complicated and hard to understand in a consistent way and presents evidence that teachers often do not understand them in the ways intended by their authors. It also argues that teachers by and large do not teach in districts that provide them with coherent instructional systems to support their instruction and standards implementation. In short, it argues the capacity does not exist in our educational systems at present to deliver standards-aligned instruction at any kind of scale.

The final three chapters offer my thoughts on how we can actually achieve the goal set out by standards advocates—to improve instruction and student achievement at scale. The policy solutions are organized thematically and are arranged in order of increasing scope and ambition. Chapter 6 focuses on teacher-oriented strategies that are relatively feasible even given current systems. The main strategy emphasized here is to ensure all teachers have high-quality core curriculum materials and the supports they need to use those materials as much as possible and in the ways intended by their authors. In short, this chapter argues that only an approach that gets much closer to the classroom—which well-supported curriculum materials can do—has any hope of changing instruction across the system.

Chapter 7 focuses primarily on strategies that must be implemented by the state, including providing much more specific curriculum guidance, creating or adopting standards-aligned materials, and perhaps even mandating that districts adopt from a narrow list of approved materials. This chapter argues that states have the constitutional authority—and therefore, if they want to see real change, the obligation—to more tightly control and support curriculum. In exchange, teachers can reorient their instructional efforts around collaboration and differentiation, which they are better positioned to do than to evaluate and choose materials.

The final chapter gets around to the question of whether any policy can improve US schools at scale in the context of current governance structures. This chapter concludes that decentralization and local control are fundamental barriers to equity and excellence and proposes a more serious reenvisioning of educational structures with an orientation toward a new progressive vision for education. This chapter presents the boldest and most ambitious critique of our educational system, and it also highlights other interconnected social structures and problems that contribute to educational inequities.

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

Having introduced the structure of the book, I think it's important to take a step back and clarify what this book intends to accomplish and what principles it accepts as a given.

First, this book accepts the idea that educational reform must focus on instruction if the goal is to drive improvements in student outcomes. Research and theory make very clear that the teacher-student-curriculum relationship is at the absolute heart of what goes on in schools.²⁷ Further, there is compelling evidence that pedagogical quality and curriculum matter for student outcomes.²⁸ Indeed, this book takes the importance of curriculum materials and quality instruction as established facts—children will not learn more or better unless they are taught better.

Second, the book agrees that education policy—district, state, and federal—matters tremendously for improving education at scale. From civil rights to school finance, there are numerous examples of policies that have improved education. There is no reason that instructional policies can't also accomplish important change, even if it may be more difficult to achieve.

Third, this book views teachers as essential actors, not barriers to the implementation of effective instructional policy. To be sure, the book is quite critical of the policy makers who have designed instructional policies that cannot work in the confines of our educational systems and structure with the teachers we have now. Indeed, I recognize and call out the Herculean task we have given teachers over the last thirty years to read and interpret standards and select curriculum materials to align with those standards. Data make clear that teachers spend inordinate amounts of time and money selecting instructional materials, almost certainly to the detriment of both themselves and their students. The book argues for a course of policy that can ease teachers' workloads and enhance teacher professionalism while still improving instructional content and quality at scale.

What do I hope to accomplish in this book? This book is a synthesis of what we know about the implementation and effects of standards. This book is a data-driven critique of the design of standards policies and an argument about the ways instructional reform might succeed at scale. This book is a challenge to those who try to work through the system for reform and a call for greater effort to fundamentally rethink that system. This book presents an argument that hasn't been made: one that draws on lessons learned from decades of research on a movement that hasn't

produced the kind of change we need to see. The standards movement represented the best-laid plans of well-intentioned policy makers and academics. It's gone awry, and now is the time to set the instructional reform agenda back on track.