

[POLITICS]

# One Nation, One Test

When President George Bush's State of the Union speech and proposed budget for next year were rolled out in January and early February, national standards and tests went unmentioned. But that hasn't stopped proponents from pushing the issue harder—and more successfully—than any time in the past 10 years.

A series of reports and studies has shown that state testing standards vary widely from state to state. A report from Stateline.org recently shed light on states with NCLB pass rates, based on state tests, that varied from 38 percent (South Carolina) to 92 percent (Maine, North Dakota). Most of these state tests are set much lower than the National Education Assessment Program, the nation's report card.

A bipartisan group of education organizations, along with Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Representative Vern Ehlers (R-MI), kicked off the new Congress by introducing legislation

that would fund the creation of new standards and pave the way for national tests. "The country is on an inexorable march toward national education standards," said Michael Dannenberg of the New America Foundation, one of the key proponents of the change.

What remains unclear, however, is whether the nation can finally double-time its way past the practical and ideological roadblocks that have halted it or if it will return to the slow, intermittent march of the past 20 years.

Ten years ago, President Bill Clinton proposed the creation of voluntary national tests in reading and math, but congressional Republicans who worried about federal involvement in local decisions, and others who were apprehensive about its impact on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), stopped the initiative.

This latest proposal, touted by the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the centrist New America Foundation, does its best to avoid as many past pitfalls as possible. It focuses on science and math standards, leaving out the controversies of English and language arts. It calls for creating voluntary national standards—as opposed to tests—and gives states

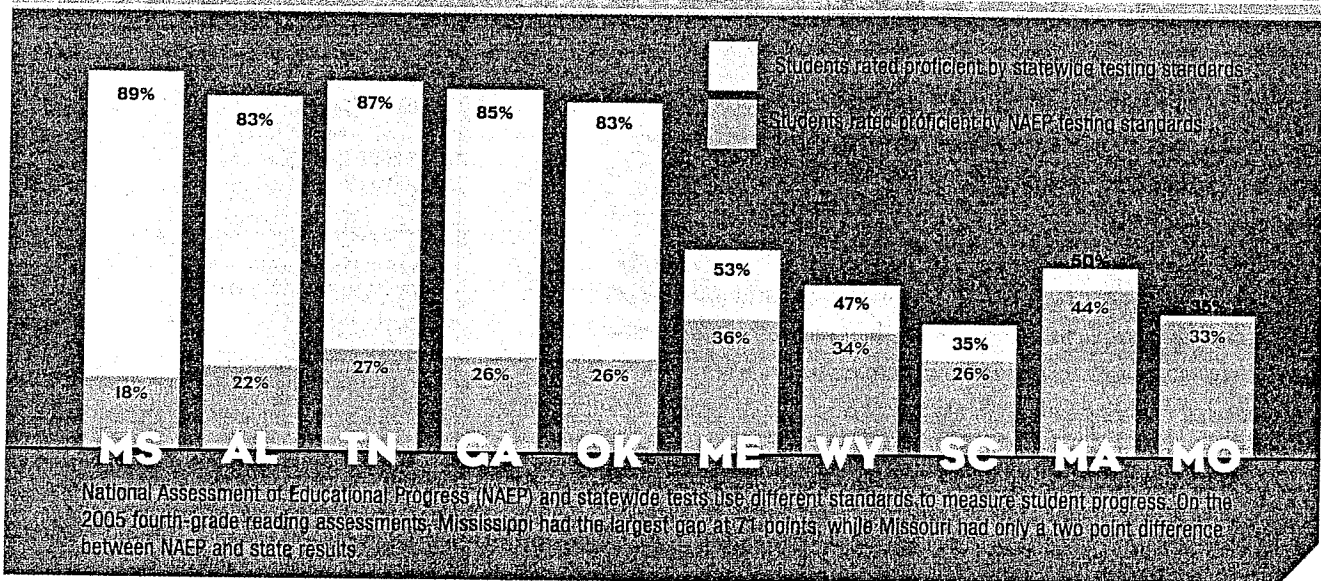
grants for adopting them. Several obstacles remain, according to Kevin Kosar, author of a book about the national standards movement. These include lack of sufficient funding to encourage states to adopt the new standards and renewed controversies surrounding evolution and creationism in science.

Others have pointed out that the U.S. already has national standards in the content areas, so creating new ones would not accomplish much. Standards and testing have also taken a beating during the past few years, through NCLB and various testing snafus. Meanwhile, a consortium of states is working together to develop common standards and tests that might be the nucleus of grassroots national standards.

In the meantime, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings said she "might be willing" to look at a national standards proposal. The House and Senate proposals have begun to pick up cosponsors. In the end, however, the main obstacles may be the oldest ones. "Republicans don't like the word *national*," Checker Finn of the Fordham Foundation (which is now fighting to get them adopted) quipped back in 1997, "and Democrats don't like the word *test*."

—Alexander Russo

## DISCREPANCIES ON WHO'S PROFICIENT



Graphic: Courtesy of Stateline.org