Current Trends in State Curriculum Reform
A comparison of Two Opposing National Models
by Elton Stetson

“Curriculum means whatever is advocated for teaching and learning.” – Schubert 1993

Two Models:

1. **Intellectualist Approach:** (also known as elitist approach) Standards are created by experts in their fields. View curriculum design as a top down approach, where subject matter professionals create the standards and lay public asked to review and recommend changes only after the standards are drafted. Method used in California and South Carolina. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) advocates for this approach.

2. **Experientialist Approach:** (also known as populist approach) A grass roots perspective. Oppose national curriculum standards and view core standards from a populist philosophy. Core curriculum is what is wanted and needed by the students and by the lay public in communities in which those students dwell. In this approach development of core curriculum begins with the lay public with forums conducted statewide. Method used in Vermont and Maine. The National Association for Core Curriculum Inc. (NACC) advocates for this approach.

Four Prevailing Philosophical Influences on the development of curriculum:

1. **Intellectual Traditionalists:** Adhere to ideals of Western intellectual history. The “great books” are important. Emphasis on great ideas derived from the classics. All students should have access to the best ideas the human race has achieved. (rational humanism ?)

2. **Social Behaviorists:** Believe in empirical evidence. Use what successful people do as models for determining how to induct young people into society. Time on task and linking of teaching to test scores important. Believe in systematic needs assessment, detailed planning of objectives and activities to further objectives, scope and sequence.

3. **Experientialists:** Adhere to Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy. Reform begins with the interests and concerns that emerge from learners’ experiences. Teachers and learners together build project to understand more deeply the problems. Curriculum reform is enhanced by grass roots participation of those who will be affected most directly by the reform: the community and the workplace.

4. **Conciliators:** Outgrowth of an attempt to find the middle ground among the three prevailing philosophies: intellectual, behaviorist, and experientialist. The approach most often used today in schools, both in theory and operation.
5 Levels of Standards: (from the National Council on Educational Standards)

- **Overarching Statement**: a general vision of the nature of the standard for the content area.
- **Content Standards**: setting out the knowledge, skills and other necessary understandings that schools should teach to ensure all US students attain high levels of competency in subject matter in grades K-12.
- **Student Performance Standards**: degree or quality of performance in the subject matter.
- **School Delivery Standards**: “opportunity to learn standards” which are able to assess the quality of the schools capacity in providing the challenging subject matter.
- **System Delivery Standards**: set out criteria for the quality of the school system’s capacity and performance in educating all students in the subject matter.

**Opponents of national standards tend to believe such standards could be too centralizing and might constrain states, communities and schools from responding effectively to their constituents.**

**National Standards typically come from experts in the content areas, which suggests a heavy intellectualist perspective.**