
Minnesota's Profile of Learning: A Primer on Why It Still Flunks

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I. The Advent of the Profile

In 1983 a report called "A Nation at Risk" alerted Americans to a serious problem in our education system: too many students were suffering from low expectations and performing well below the level necessary to produce informed citizens and keep America internationally competitive.

Beginning in the late 1980s, many states began to address this problem by writing state graduation standards that specify what young people need to know and be able to do to get a high school diploma. Today, forty-nine states have graduation standards. Iowa is the only state that has resisted this trend.

Minnesota's answer to standards-based education reform is the Profile of Learning. The Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL) began planning the Profile about fifteen years ago, and to date it has cost taxpayers approximately \$152 million. Originally, the purpose of the Profile was twofold: to establish clear, rigorous academic standards for all Minnesota students, and to ensure objective and consistent assessment of students' knowledge and skills, so that parents, colleges, and employers could reliably assess their accomplishments. The idea was to use the same measuring stick across the state, so that meaningful

comparisons could be made among schools and districts.

What Minnesotans were promised is not what they got. The Profile of Learning—adopted by the legislature in 1998—actually works against the two original goals. Today, it is undermining academic achievement in Minnesota schools and requiring teachers to employ time-consuming assessments that are highly subjective and largely meaningless.

Outside reviewers have consistently ranked Minnesota's graduation standards among the worst in the nation. That's because they are standards in name only. They are vague, filled with jargon, and untestable. They take up vast amounts of school time in grades K-12, imposing busywork that often drives out the real substance of education: English, math, science, and history. Finally, they impose a heavy burden of paperwork and record-keeping requirements on teachers and staff, keeping them from more productive work.

II. *The Profile's Flaws*

A. *The Theory*

The primary source of the Profile's flaws is the theory of education on which it is founded. This is the "process"—or "experiential"—theory, which holds that education is not so much about what students know as what they can do in real-life settings. According to the process theory, the goal of education is not to transmit specific knowledge, but to teach generalizable skills, like critical thinking, that supposedly promote lifelong learn-

ing. In this view, process—*how* students learn—is far more important than content—*what* students learn. In other words, it's not important that kids learn about the nine planets in the solar system, or what photosynthesis is. Instead, we need to teach them "how to think like scientists." To do this, we must move away from textbooks and lectures and adopt "discovery learning": hands-on projects and small-group collaboration in which they can discover things for themselves.

The process theory of education is deeply flawed. Research clearly demonstrates that young people cannot develop meaningful intellectual skills in the absence of a core of substantive knowledge. Students can't think critically about something unless they already know a good deal about it. In other words, you can't learn to "think like a scientist" without a good grasp of fundamental scientific facts and principles.

B. *The Profile Standards*

So much for the theory behind the Profile. What about the standards themselves? The Profile is comprised of eleven "learning areas." Each of these areas has "content standards"—all told, about a hundred for grades K-12. Originally, the learning areas had exotic, interdisciplinary names: People and Cultures, Decision-Making, Resource Management, Inquiry, and Read Listen and View. In a recent effort to quell criticism, CFL has adopted more prosaic names: Social Studies, Economics and Business, Inquiry and Research. (Read Listen and View, however, did not become English or Language Arts.)

Each of the Profile's eleven learning areas has content standards that are distributed throughout four groupings: primary (K-3), intermediate (4-5), middle (6-8), and high school (9-12). There are forty-eight high school content standards. The original Profile legislation, passed in 1998, required students to complete twenty-four of the forty-eight in order to graduate. In 2001, however, the Minnesota Legislature bowed to public pressure and decreed that—though all districts must implement all standards—individual districts may choose how many standards to require for graduation. About half of Minnesota's school districts chose to require twenty-four standards for graduation. Many elected to use far fewer, and four districts chose to require no standards at all.

In general, Profile content standards are both vague and untestable. Here, for example, is a fourth grade history standard:

A student shall demonstrate knowledge of historical events and contributions of key people from different time periods through reading and constructing timelines of key events and the actions of important people, the contributions of key historical people and cause and effect relationships of events over an extended period of time to describe a past event from the point of view of a local community member, reconstruct a historical account of an event using primary and secondary sources, describe how technology has changed the lives of people, and give examples of conflict, cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups and nations.

What exactly does this verbiage mean? It could mean a great deal. On the other hand, it could mean almost nothing.

III. The Flaws of Profile Assessments

I've outlined the shortcomings of Profile standards. Not surprisingly, the Profile also mandates a form of assessment that is equally meaningless, and equally flawed. In keeping with the process theory of education, the Profile requires schools to evaluate students' mastery of standards with so-called "performance assessments." These are hands-on tasks in which students are asked to "show what they know" in a real-world setting. (Until recently, CFL called the required assessments "performance packages"; now—to lessen controversy—they're known as "assessment tasks.") Generally, performance assessments require between one and six weeks of class time.

CFL permits schools to design their own performance assessments to evaluate students' mastery of standards. Alternatively, schools can adopt CFL's model assessment tasks, which the department created to guide schools in developing assessments. Many of these model tasks are ideologically freighted, extremely time-consuming, and of dubious educational value.

A good place to start in evaluating CFL's model tasks is the learning area called Social Studies. CFL explains its goals for social studies instruction and assessment in several essays that lay out the Profile's "key student understandings." These essays highlight two of the Profile's fundamental pedagogical

principles. The first is relativism, a philosophy that currently dominates humanities and social science instruction at the university level. In essence, relativism holds that objective truth does not exist. It asserts instead that human beings “construct” their own versions of reality based on their personal experiences and biases. Relativism encourages a reflexive skepticism about one’s own society and its institutions. Such skepticism is apparent in many of CFL’s model assessments.

The Profile’s second pedagogical principle is that human beings and actions should be viewed through the lens of race, class, sex, and disability. Profile standards require even primary students to learn to think in these categories. According to CFL, the Profile prompts primary students to “begin to think about the world beyond their region by examining the ethnicity and national origins of others.” “Race, class, gender” analysis permeates the classroom in upper grades. High school students, says CFL, “look more specifically at ethnicity, gender, social class, disability, culture, citizens, non-citizens, and a variety of other groups when analyzing history, geography, civics, anthropology, psychology, sociology and current issues.”

The best way to learn about the Profile’s effects in the classroom is to look closely at several of CFL’s model performance tasks. The four described below illustrate both the Profile’s ideological bent and its focus on trivial yet time-consuming tasks.

A. The Culture of an Institution in Society

Both the Profile’s relativism and its “race, class, gender” analysis are prominent in a model CFL assessment task called “The Culture of an Institution in Society.” This task satisfies a Social Studies content standard called “institutions and traditions in society,” which is one of the Profile’s elective standards. The standard requires students to demonstrate understanding of a variety of vague concepts, including “how institutions affect continuity and change,” “how cultural diversity affects conflict and cohesion within and across groups and institutions,” and how individuals and groups resolve the “tension between individuality and conformity.”

“The Culture of an Institution in Society” has two parts. In the first section, students divide into teams. (Collaborative group work is a ubiquitous part of Profile assignments.) Each team selects a local institution to study in depth. CFL suggests organizations like sports teams, labor unions, businesses, or government offices. After choosing an institution, students must perform a multifaceted “ethnographic study” of its operations.

CFL’s model task gives the example of “Ernie’s Café,” a restaurant in the small fictional town of Howdyville, Minnesota. The instructions describe the sort of information that students must collect to begin their project:

Ernie’s Café is famous for its homemade pies. Business people often congregate at the café every morning about 10 a.m. and roll dice to see who

“buys.” Ernie’s traditionally serves a 4 a.m. deer hunter’s breakfast during the hunting season each year. . . . Maggie Olson has worked at the café for 20 years and is known for her wisecracks.

To collect background information of this sort, students must visit their institution several times. During these visits, they are to observe and interview the organization’s employees. After collecting data, students make a chart that categorizes employees into groups according to their status, social class, and cultural background. (At a restaurant like Ernie’s, for example, CFL presumably expects students to discover that business customers are white middle-class males, while Maggie Olson is a white working-class woman with a high school degree, and the cook may be a poorly educated noncitizen.) Instructions note that students may perform their observations undercover, without telling the institution’s employees who they are or what they are doing.

Upon completing their observations, students construct a model of their institution’s social structure and explain it in a report. The model must show:

- a) the distinct roles, statuses, social classes and cultural backgrounds of the institution’s members [and]
- b) the member’s [*sic*] various patterns of social interaction, both within and outside the institution and the relationships among the patterns.

Students’ reports must also describe how employees’ cultural diversity “affects conflict and cohesion” (whatever that means), and how various

groups “address the tension between individuality and conformity.”

In the second part of the model task, students must analyze how institutions affect continuity and change. To do this, they perform a “content analysis” of items from their institution. These items—which must represent a span of at least ten years—may include audio tapes, memorabilia, pictures, letters, posters, calendars, meeting minutes, and similar artifacts. Students study the items to learn how the organization has changed over time, and also conduct employee interviews on this subject. In a final report, students must address their organization’s “portrayal of power relationships” and comment on the “presence and absence of data on race, class and/or gender” in the items they studied.

B. All in the Family

In an alternative model assessment task called “All in the Family,” students fulfill a Profile social studies standard by investigating “the tension between individuality and conformity.” The project has three parts and is so time-consuming that it would probably require most of a semester to complete.

Students’ first task is to determine “how the institution of the American family has changed over time.” Initially, class members brainstorm issues that affect family interaction. Then each student takes a recent decade (1950s, 1960s) and examines “family structure/function, roles, typical family activities and social class” during that period. Next, students write papers on their decade. These must consider such

weighty topics as “expressions of the decade including radio, TV shows, clothing, food, colors, music, expressions of status, etc.” In the final part of this task, student teams create a thirty-minute oral presentation with “creative use of props, clothing, music, TV show clips, etc.”

In the model task’s second section, students pool their research to create a “layered timeline” showing how families have changed in recent decades. They also keep journals, where they compile “a cause and effect theory of all the changes you see that have affected families over time.” In these journals, they also reflect on how “culturally diverse” families experience “cohesion and conflict with societal institutions,” as well as how family systems either “conform” to societal influences or “independently” define their structure. Then, working in groups, students must write three scenarios about preventing and managing conflict in families. Each scenario must portray nonviolent conflict prevention strategies and must address questions like “Where do strategies and attitudes toward conflict come from?” Finally, each group performs one of its scenarios for the class.

The “All in the Family” grand finale is a Family Cultural Festival. This event highlights local families’ “cultural diversity.” Each student creates a cultural display, which (needless to say) must include information about families’ roles, status, and social class. In devising their displays, students must consider how families “conform” to social expectations or, alternatively, how they are “individualistic.” CFL encourages stu-

dents to focus their attention on non-traditional families, such as single-parent families, divorced families, families with two working parents, or “other” (presumably same-sex) families.

“All in the Family” has a clear ideological bent. Its message is that no family form is inherently superior to any other, either from the perspective of the individuals involved or of society as a whole. Moreover, the project suggests that “nontraditional” families are brave and individualistic, while traditional families are mere conformists.

C. What’s Your Read on This?

One of the Profile’s three mandatory social studies standards is “Diverse Perspectives.” This standard requires students to “evaluate events and actions from diverse U.S. and world perspectives.” To fulfill the standard, CFL offers a model assessment task titled “What’s Your Read on This?”

“What’s Your Read on This?” has two parts. First, students analyze a documentary about a controversial issue. (Documentaries may include books and films, as well as plays and museum exhibits.) CFL suggests topics like desegregation, poverty, and affirmative action. After reviewing their documentary, students identify the various points of view it includes, and then make an “idea web.” In their web, they draw lines that connect the individuals who appear in the documentary with both their perspectives and their “group affiliations, such as race, culture, class, gender and/or disability.” The project’s message is that human beings’ political positions are largely a

function not of volitional analysis, but of the demographic groups to which they belong.

“What’s Your Read on This?” requires students to answer many questions that reinforce this idea. For example, using their idea web, students must determine how the perspective of each individual in the documentary “align[s] with what you would expect.” (So much for thinkers like Shelby Steele and Linda Chavez, who don’t fit multicultural pigeonholes.) Task instructions also suggest that members of some groups can perceive aspects of the world around them that others, who belong to different groups, cannot. (“It’s a black thing.”) For example, students must use their idea web to explain how each individual’s “group affiliations or personal consequences allow and/or limit him/her to perceive facts, influences and/or possibilities about the event that others may not perceive.”

Students now begin the process of unmasking the biases of the individuals who made and distributed their documentary. In what ways, project instructions ask, might these individuals’ “special interests, group affiliations or personal consequences” have shaped the documentary’s perspective or presentation of information? Did the director use “exclusionary language”? Did he or she employ certain camera angles to subtly discredit certain viewpoints? What points of view were omitted and why? As students assess their documentary’s credibility, they are pressed to adopt a posture of reflexive skepticism about the intentions of its creators. While critical analysis of this

sort can have value, it is highly suspect in the ideologically charged context of CFL’s model Profile assessments.

After presenting reports on their documentaries’ biases to their classmates, students begin the second part of “What’s Your Read on This?” Working in teams, they make their own documentaries about the “diverse perspectives” of members of various demographic groups. These creations can take the form of books, dramas, videos, or multimedia presentations. Again, students use idea webs or “graphic organizers” to identify the connections between individuals, perspectives, and group affiliations. After lengthy note-taking, analysis, and production work, each team presents its documentary to the class.

Significantly, though “What’s Your Read on This?” claims to focus on diverse perspectives, its instructions prohibit students from actually evaluating or comparing the perspectives they encounter. In their own documentaries, students are told not to assess the credibility of the perspectives they feature. According to CFL, student documentaries

must present . . . each perspective on its own without direct confrontation with other perspectives. For example, if you decide to create a drama, you would have two characters with different viewpoints talk to the audience directly about their own perspectives, instead of arguing with each other.

Why is discussion off-limits? After all, weighing competing ideas is the essence of the political process in a

democracy. Most likely, CFL is aware that if students debate ideas, they will come to see that some positions tend to be more persuasive—and better supported by evidence—than others. This would fly in the face of the Profile's relentless promotion of "identity politics," which holds that race, class, and gender are the most important factors shaping human beings' social and political views.

IV. History under the Profile

The Profile's history standards are divided between two learning areas: Social Studies, and Inquiry and Research. Social Studies includes only two history-related standards. The first is "Themes of U.S. History," which requires students to study "key events, concepts and people" of American history, but does not identify what these might be. The second is "U.S. Citizenship," which covers civics-type subject matter.

All the Profile's other history standards appear in Inquiry and Research. These standards include History of Science, History through Culture, History of the Arts, World History and Cultures, and Records of History. All are optional standards. (Students can fulfill their requirements under Inquiry and Research by choosing a nonhistory standard, such as Math Research or Issue Analysis.) As a result, under the Profile, Minnesota students theoretically can complete high school without studying world history at all.

To the extent that students do study history, the Profile's stated goal is to teach them to "think historically." Profile standards do not emphasize (or

even name) the great figures and events of the past. Nor do they suggest that some historical epochs (classical Greece, the Renaissance, the Reformation) are more worthy of study than others. On the contrary, students learn to "think historically" by identifying the biases of past historians, and then by "constructing, interpreting, and recognizing patterns in timelines and historical stories." Their ultimate goal is to "construct" their own version of history. By the time Minnesota students reach high school, says CFL, "they should have a strong sense of how to construct history."

A. Growing Up in America

What does it mean to construct history? A CFL model task called "Growing Up in America" provides an example. The task reflects two central features of the Profile's approach to history: its preference for social history ("history from the bottom up") over political history, and its "presentism," or preoccupation with the recent past.

In "Growing Up in America," students brainstorm historical themes and then interview an adult of their choice about his or her life. Throughout, the focus is on trivial personal details:

Your questions should consist of personal things you want to know about your subject as they relate to your theme and broader questions that relate to key events, concepts and people in the historical development of the United States. For example, if you chose political history as your theme you may want to ask your subject if he/she remembers when President Kennedy was assassinated and if

the feelings and mood of the country were as low and tragic as many books and movies say it was [sic].

After making a general timeline for the period in question, students add a “personal timeline” detailing the “key events, happenings and people” of their subject’s life. (Presumably, something like this: “May 28, 1947, Mrs. Wilson graduates from high school; June 25, 1950, North Korea invades South Korea with 135,000 troops; June 26, 1950, Mrs. Wilson gets married; June 27, 1950, President Truman orders the Seventh Fleet to Taiwan.”) Students then present their findings to their classmates, “comparing your subject’s experiences to the broader context of history that you have learned about in class.” CFL recommends analysis of the following kind:

Does your subject’s experiences [sic] compare with or conflict with what popular historians have written about in books, magazines and shown on videos? . . . What key events, concepts and people does your subject say happened or remember like the textbooks say and what does your subject disagree with in terms of the broader context of history?

“Growing Up in America” may enable Junior to spend some “quality time” with Grandma, but it is difficult to see how such a project can repay the time invested in it, or significantly enhance students’ understanding of American history.

B. An Ideological Agenda

The Profile’s ideological agenda is both obvious and troubling. But CFL’s

model assessments have two other serious shortcomings. First, they elevate process over content. As a result, students are unlikely to acquire much broad-based, factual knowledge. In addition, the assessments often impose a burdensome load of busywork. “All in the Family,” for example, instructs students to produce the following eight “evidences of learning”: “informational file, identified issues, written paper, reflection journal, presentation, multiple layered time line, role plays [and] family cultural festival.”

V. Profile Evaluations and Critiques

A. Outside Reviewers

It’s easy to see why national education organizations that have reviewed the Profile have almost universally panned it. When the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation evaluated the standards (as part of its nationwide standards evaluation project), its experts gave Minnesota a D minus. The American Federation of Teachers also found the Profile to be unacceptably flawed.

In 2001, CFL invited Achieve, Inc., a national standards organization, to perform a comprehensive evaluation of Profile standards. Achieve is an independent bipartisan organization created by governors and business leaders in 1996 to assist states in crafting world-class academic standards. In their review of the Profile, Achieve’s experts identified a host of problems.

According to Achieve, the Profile’s language arts standards are “far below” the level of sophistication of high-

quality standards in other states. Reading standards for early grades are “particularly worrisome,” while high school writing standards exhibit a “low level of expectation.” Achieve’s reviewers pointed out that English standards do not increase in difficulty as students grow older. Indeed, what’s expected of high school students is often “strikingly similar” to what’s expected of elementary students.

Achieve described the Profile’s math standards as equally disappointing. The standards’ rigor is hard to determine, because they are frequently so vague that “it is difficult to tell what is really being asked for.” In crucial areas like algebra and geometry, “important content is sometimes completely missing.” Science standards are also woefully inadequate. For example, students can meet requirements with “a very limited range of knowledge” and may end up engaging in “cookbook labs that do not result in improved student learning.”

Achieve had particularly strong criticism for the Profile’s social studies and civics standards. In these areas, reviewers pointed out, “content is drastically underemphasized,” while the Profile’s “excessive focus on ‘diverse perspectives’ ” has a political tone. At the primary level, the Profile requires activities that may “bore” students. At the high school level, students may receive no exposure whatever to crucial concepts of citizenship such as majority rule, federalism, and the evolution of the Constitution.

In response to the criticism of Achieve and other groups, CFL has

moved to create “curriculum frameworks” for a variety of Profile subject areas. These are unlikely to have much influence in Minnesota classrooms since they tend to be lengthy and attempt to layer new curricular material on top of a deeply flawed foundation.

B. Minnesota Critiques

1. Early Reviews

Minnesota teachers have severely criticized the Profile since its inception. In 1998, as implementation began, the St. Paul Federation of Teachers asserted that the Profile had “become synonymous with exasperation, frustration and exhaustion.” In early 2000, a poll by Education Minnesota, the state teacher union, found that 39 percent of teachers surveyed wished to eliminate the Profile entirely, while 51 percent favored major changes. Only 9 percent believed that the Profile should continue in its present form. In addition, many teachers expressed fear that the Profile’s bizarre interdisciplinary learning areas and vague content standards would leave large gaps in students’ knowledge. (According to one teacher, though students might be micro-smart, they would be macro-ignorant.) Teachers also complained bitterly about the Profile’s burdensome paperwork and record-keeping requirements.

Today, teacher dissatisfaction seems to have abated somewhat. It’s not hard to see why. Since 2000, local control has increased substantially. Teachers are under less pressure for two reasons: districts can now choose which (if any) standards to require for graduation, and

teachers theoretically can now design their own performance assessments without state intervention. Finally, though districts are supposed to imbed all standards in their curricula (whether they require these standards for graduation or not), many districts have exercised “creative noncompliance” in this regard. CFL has hesitated to supervise the process closely in order to avoid generating more hostility toward the Profile.

2. The University of Minnesota Study

Nevertheless, teacher unrest remains widespread. This became clear in May 2002, when the University of Minnesota’s College of Education and Human Development released a study about teacher attitudes toward the Profile. The study, by Patricia Avery, Richard Beach, and Jodiann Coler, was titled “The Impact of Minnesota’s ‘Profile of Learning’ on Teaching and Learning in English and Social Studies Classrooms.” It presented the results of a survey of more than 1,200 English and social studies teachers, as well as a summary of in-depth interviews with 140 teachers.

According to the U of M study, some Minnesota teachers gave the Profile positive marks in three areas. About half the teachers surveyed indicated that, in their view, the Profile had improved students’ “higher order thinking.” In addition, about one-third believed that it had prompted better coordination of curriculum across grade levels. Finally, about two-thirds of social studies teachers reported talking more with colleagues about instruction

and assessment since the Profile’s implementation. (The study’s authors point out, however, that many of these conversations probably centered on complaints about the Profile.)

Despite these potentially positive findings, the U of M study found that Minnesota teachers were “far more likely to make negative comments about the Profile than positive comments.” Two-thirds of the teachers surveyed stated that the Profile had either made no difference in the quality of their students’ work or had actually lowered its quality. Moreover, 53 percent reported that the Profile had decreased their enjoyment of teaching.

Teachers also complained repeatedly about the Profile’s inordinate demands on their time. Four-fifths reported that their classroom “prep time” had increased substantially. In addition, many objected to the time they must devote to grading Profile assessments. One teacher offered an example: “Each [Create a Nation] project takes between 45 and 90 minutes to fully evaluate.” Another complained, “I can’t write out a checklist for every learning task for every student and still maintain the quality of instruction.” Some teachers also pointed out that they have to sacrifice teacher conference days to help parents resolve the frustrating scheduling difficulties that the Profile often creates.

Teachers were particularly incensed by the Profile’s burdensome reporting requirements. “It’s the incredible numbers,” said one. “It’s a hassle in terms of recording the numbers.” Another summarized the problem this way:

This extra time the teachers need to put in does not improve the students' education in any way. I see it as busy-work, paper work, unnecessary bureaucratic requirements.

Not surprisingly, some teachers stated that the Profile's hands-on assessments have cut into the time they have for lectures and class discussions. Many reported that they have had to drop important academic content—sometimes whole chapters or units—to make room for Profile-related busy-work. One social studies teacher gave this example:

We had to cut out units on the executive branch and judicial branch so that we could fit in packages. The executive and judicial branch are what these kids should be learning—the three branches of government—rather than a weak attempt to try to change something they feel content with in the first place.

In such cases, says the U of M study, “teachers were not only dismayed over the loss of content but also concerned about the usefulness of the time spent instead on performance packages.”

3. How the Profile Affects Students

a. Graduation Problems

Minnesota parents and students have complained about the Profile since it first invaded the classroom. Scheduling has presented particular problems. Students with special interests—like music, art, math, or a foreign language—have often found it difficult to pursue advanced courses while still meeting Profile requirements. Instead

of taking Spanish IV, for example, they may need to fulfill standards like New Product Development or Natural and Managed Systems.

In May 2002 the Minneapolis-based *Star Tribune* ran an article about the way that the Profile had threatened to impede the graduation plans of the Class of 2002. The article stated that though some districts—like Chaska and South Washington County—had exempted seniors from Profile requirements, others were “scrambling to figure out how many will flunk because they haven't done the work.” According to the article, despite years of preparation, Profile requirements were catching many districts off guard as the class of 2002 neared graduation.

Problems in the Anoka school district were typical. Two years earlier, counselors there had discovered that fifty to sixty sophomores had passed a tenth grade physical education course, many with A's and B's, but hadn't completed the Profile standard that went along with the class, which involved writing a lifetime fitness plan. The plan was a small part of the class work, but without it, seniors could not graduate. Both students and teachers worked after school to complete the project, but two years later, not everyone was finished. Three weeks before graduation, a number of students' diplomas were in limbo.

b. The 2002 Math Exam

CFL's most recent Profile-related debacle was a statewide test of Minnesota eleventh graders' math skills. The department announced the test's

results in October 2002. The test—which supposedly was aligned with the Profile’s math standards—baffled parents and teachers alike. CFL had set no passing score. As a result, the department could not explain to the public how many students had performed satisfactorily and how many had performed unsatisfactorily. According to the *Star Tribune*, “testing directors with several districts noted that it will be hard for parents to figure out how their children are doing.”

CFL used Profile standards to interpret test scores. The department divided eleventh graders into three groups, according to the number of math standards they had completed. (The Profile’s five high school standards are Shape, Space and Measurement; Chance and Data Analysis; Discrete Mathematics; Algebraic Patterns; and Technical Applications.) Students with three to five standards (“most likely including algebra”) were labeled as taking “more math.” Those with two or three standards (“most likely not including algebra”) were categorized as having “some math.” The rest fell into the “little or no math” category. Interpreted this way, the results of the math test were hardly surprising. CFL announced that students with “more math” had performed significantly better on the statewide test than those with “little or no math.”

Yet even this conclusion—which should have been self-evident—was marked by confusion because CFL’s three categories did not seem to correlate with students’ actual exposure to mathematics. For example, the New

Prague school district categorized 100 percent of its students as having “little or no math,” while Rockford listed 100 percent of its students in the “more math” category. In Minneapolis, where many minority students performed poorly, 68 percent of students were labeled as having “more math,” while none had “some math,” and 32 percent had “little or no math.”

CFL has promised to set proficiency levels for next year’s eleventh grade math test. But even Profile supporters have questioned the value of this year’s exam. “It sounds like they have some bugs to work out in the system,” said Senator Sandra Pappas, a longtime Profile proponent. “That’s a lot of time and energy to put into an accountability system that isn’t accountable.”

VI. What Can Be Done?

Every year since 1999, the Minnesota House of Representatives has voted to scrap or replace the Profile of Learning. Each year the Minnesota Senate has refused to go along. In 2002 the Senate finally split, thirty-three to thirty-three, on a proposal to repeal the Profile. But the chance for repeal ended when the Senate appointed two of the Profile’s staunchest defenders, Larry Pogemiller and Sandy Pappas, to the conference committee that considered the matter.

Thus far, Minnesota’s attempt to craft graduation standards has proved disappointing. Indeed, at this point, it’s fair to say that the state has no real statewide standards at all, since districts can choose which standards to require and can use widely differing criteria to

measure mastery of the standards they do require. But other states that began with poor standards have worked successfully to improve them. In the past few years, for example, Indiana and Arizona have transformed mushy, process-based standards into clearer, more rigorous academic requirements. Today, these states have higher quality standards in place, and their students are beginning to reap the benefits.

VII. Why Good Standards Are Vital

After their experience with the Profile, some Minnesotans are becoming disillusioned with the very idea of state standards. Yet good state graduation standards remain imperative. Nearly twenty years ago, “A Nation at Risk” articulated the reason: we must raise our children’s academic performance and set the same high expectations for all young people, whether they live in urban centers, affluent suburbs, or rural communities.

A. Students’ Lack of Knowledge

Many Americans know that our nation’s schools are in trouble. They tend to believe, however, that their local school is in good shape. National and international tests indicate otherwise. For example, the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS)—administered to students across the world in 1995 and 1999—yielded disappointing results. Though American fourth graders performed relatively well, our nation’s eighth graders did quite poorly. In 1999 they scored on a par with students from Latvia and Bulgaria,

and were far behind students from many Asian and European nations. American seniors, tested only in 1995, performed abominably. They scored below the international average in both math and science, and exceeded the performance of students in only two nations. A separate examination of advanced math and physics compared American seniors taking advanced math and physics with their peers elsewhere. Once again, advanced students in this nation performed close to the bottom of countries participating in TIMSS.

On the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam on U.S. history, 57 percent of U.S. high school seniors scored “below basic” in their knowledge of American history. These students lacked even a rudimentary understanding of the major figures and events of our nation’s past, and knew little or nothing about its founding principles and institutions. A mere 30 percent of seniors, for example, could identify the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which has been the linchpin of American and European military defense for the past fifty years.

Things were not much better in the lower grades. Only 7 percent of fourth graders who took the NAEP test could identify “an important event that happened in Philadelphia in 1776.” Little over half knew that the Civil War was fought, in large part, over slavery. Only 39 percent of eighth graders knew that the biggest factor leading American colonists to form the First Continental Congress was frustration with Great Britain.

Students at our elite colleges are also woefully deficient in their knowledge of American history. In 2000, a survey at fifty-five top schools revealed that only 22 percent of students knew that it was Abraham Lincoln who said that America had a “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” Ninety-nine percent of those questioned, however, could identify the rap singer Snoop Doggy Dogg. If American primary and secondary schools had rigorous academic standards, surveys like this would probably yield very different results.

B. The Racial and Ethnic Learning Gap

There’s another reason for good state graduation standards. Nationally, there’s a yawning gap between the academic performance of white and Asian students on the one hand, and black and Hispanic students on the other. Too many schools have one set of expectations for middle-class kids and another for low-income kids. The extraordinary gap in academic performance is one of our nation’s most pressing problems. Without good state standards and assessments, we can never hope to address it.

VIII. The Characteristics of Good Standards

What do good state standards look like? Needless to say, they look nothing like the Profile of Learning. Instead of

being grouped in clumps (K-3, 6-8, 9-12), good standards are organized grade by grade. They indicate clearly what students are to learn and when they are to learn it. Good standards are organized by disciplines and cover core subjects like English, math, science, history, and geography. They are rigorous and rich in content, as well as clear and jargon-free. In addition, good standards are carefully sequenced: what students learn in one grade builds on the knowledge and skills they acquire in previous grades. Examples of exemplary standards include Massachusetts’s language arts standards, and California’s history, science, and math standards.

Finally, good standards are used in conjunction with objective assessments. Because these assessments are carefully aligned with standards’ content, they can measure students’ progress accurately. They can also pinpoint where remediation is needed and help policy makers and teachers direct their resources most effectively. In this way, they can ensure that schools and teachers—not just students—are held accountable for what goes on in the classroom. Here in Minnesota, one of the major priorities of the next legislative session must be to repeal the Profile of Learning and to adopt the clear, rigorous standards that our children need in order to excel. ■