

# **The Iowa Council for the Social Studies Journal**

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# FORWARD

This issue of the Iowa Council for the Social Studies Journal focuses on the Theme: PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT ACADEMIC STANDARDS. The impetus for this theme came from the fall 2009 ICSS conference program where Linda Lantor Fandel of the Des Moines Register addressed the conference attendees on the theme WORLD CLASS SCHOOLS FOR IOWA? Her address focused on an anecdotal review of her recent experience visiting schools in both Finland and Alberta. Her purpose for these visits was to determine how teachers and schools in these locations produced the world's highest performing students as measured by standardized tests. She asserted that students in the US achieve at a much lower level than students in Finland and Alberta when scores on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are aggregated and compared nation to nation.

In an online article found at the Des Moines Register site <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/> Fandel generalizes about Iowa schools based on what she believes to be true regarding schools across the entire US. She asserts, "...there's nothing stopping Iowa - or the nation - from adapting other approaches that are making a difference in Finland and other top-performing countries on PISA, including:

- Careful selection and lengthy preparation of teachers.
- A clear, rigorous national curriculum.
- Constant, enthusiastic help for struggling students.
- Ongoing, even daily, review of how to improve education.

With the exception of the recommendation for a national curriculum, these suggestions for improving schools are not controversial and would be supported by most educators. However, in her speech in the fall of 2009 she made assumptions about the low estate of schools in the US and applied those generalizations to the schools of Iowa. Clearly, Iowa is not a microcosm of the United States. This leap of logic beckons an old proverb: "He (or she) who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him." In an effort to "examine" Ms. Fandel's assertions regarding education, this issue of the ICSS Journal includes four articles targeting myths and realities related to the challenges of national standards, fears about failing schools, the competition for test scores and the importance of educating the whole child in the face of increasing accountability measures.

We begin our discussion of standards with Mary Kennedy's article titled, *The Problem with Solutions*. Kennedy tackles a systemic problem faced to one degree or another by most teachers in across the country—reform fatigue. She offers suggestions for averting the undo pressures reform efforts impose on classroom teachers, administrators and even parents.

Joel Best addresses the long-standing perception that schools in the United States are academic and social failures. This perception in turn leads to fears that a deficit of academic achievement threatens our national security. Presenting specific examples where schools in the US are actually achieving at a higher level than in previous decades, he frames and debunks three criticisms supporting the claim that America's schools are failing.

Building on Best's work, Barry Wilson offers a five-point critique of claims that schools across the country are failing. Again, citing the long-standing perception that America's schools are regressing, Wilson addresses problems with international rankings, misperceptions regarding test scores and the global economy, the impact of poverty on academic achievement, and myths related to the supremacy of mathematics and science.

Finally, Clare Struck addresses the current overemphasis on standardized tests, punitive accountability systems, and rigid educational mandates. She suggests that these excesses have replaced student-centered, instruction-driven delivery models that focus on teaching and learning while meeting the needs of all students, both in and out of school.

Lynn E. Nielsen, Editor  
ICSS Journal

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Volume 23

Fall 2010

Number 1

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## *Perceptions and Misperceptions about Academic Standards*

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. **THE PROBLEM WITH SOLUTIONS**  
By Mary Kennedy.....7
2. **UNDERSTANDING FEARS ABOUT FAILING SCHOOLS**  
By Joel Best.....11
3. **EDUCATION IN AMERICA: LET THE COMPETITION BEGIN**  
By Barry Wilson .....17
4. **EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD IN THE 21ST CENTURY**  
By Clare Struck.....23