# Standards-Based Reform Movements

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The standards-based educational reform movement began in the 1980s with the publication of the landmark report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983. The report was a culmination of “fears and criticism of the American educational system” following the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik and the College Board’s 1975 release of declining SAT scores in the nation ([Kenna, 2018, p. 28](https://cultureandvalues.org/index.php/JCV/article/view/2/3)). After the report was released, President George H.W. Bush met with 49 out of 50 state governors during the nation’s first National Education Summit in 1989. This meeting, co-hosted by Bill Clinton (then Arkansas governor and the National Governors Association chair), argued for measurable education goals and accountability. It is unsurprising, then, that President Clinton reauthorized President Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) by enacting the *Improving America’s Schools Act* in 1994. Under this act, states were required to establish standards for every subject and grade level. However, on January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), which was an update of the ESEA that held schools accountable for student outcomes.

The NCLB law—which grew out of concern that the American education system was no longer internationally competitive—significantly increased the federal role in holding schools responsible for the academic progress of all students. And it put a special focus on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students, such as English-language learners, students in special education, and poor and minority children, whose achievement, on average, trails their peers. States did not have to comply with the new requirements, but if they didn’t, they risked losing federal Title I money. (Klein, 2015, para. 5).

**Figure 1**

Signing of NCLB



Under NCLB, states were required to test their students in math and reading in grades 3 through 8 and then once in high school, bring all students up to “proficient level” by the 2013-2014 school year, meet “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), and ensure that their teachers were “highly qualified” (meaning they had a bachelor’s degree in the subject matter they were teaching and state certification).  As Kenna & Russell (2018) summarize,

In 2007, NCLB was up for reauthorization by Congress, who failed to rewrite it. This lack of reauthorization; however, did not exempt states from meeting the goal of having all students at a 100 percent proficiency level in reading and mathematics by 2014 (what many critics deemed the toughest part of NCLB). In the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised to release states from the 2002 law. On February 17, 2009, shortly after Obama became president, he signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). The ARRA would lead to what is referred to as Obama’s Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative [….] Race to the Top sought to provide $4.35 billion to states but the funds would be awarded through a competitive grant program. States then competed with each other to showcase their acceptance of and ability to meet certain educational reforms, such as adopting new college and career standards and utilizing student test data within the teacher evaluation process. (p. 36)

In the fall of 2011, two years into his first term, President Barack Obama began issuing waivers to states, which offered states not reaching the achievement targets flexibility from key NCLB mandates in exchange for implementing redesign priorities (such as setting standards to prepare their students for higher education and the workforce). And on December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the new [*Every Student Succeeds Act*](https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/the-every-student-succeeds-act-an-essa-overview/2016/03) to replace NCLB. Under this new law, states were still required to submit accountability plans, but they could pick their own goals (graduation rates, testing proficiency, etc.). In addition to other requirements regarding school interventions, testing, and accountability systems, states were required to adopt “challenging” academic standards—which could be the [Common Core State Standards](https://learning.ccsso.org/common-core-state-standards-initiative) but did not have to be.

Figure 2

Signing of ESSA.

### **References**

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