

States set school standards

In his otherwise interesting July 6 editorial "Summer school," W.C. O'Donovan perpetuates a popular misunderstanding about the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

He claimed that No Child "is supposed to monitor achievement with national standards." That is untrue. Among other things, the act does require states to guarantee that all students in Grades 3-8 are proficient in reading and math by 2013-14. However, it relies on states to set two types of standards that are essential for reaching that goal.

First, states get to define what students should know and be able to do. The

content of a fourth-grader's math exam, for example, is completely determined by state policy-makers, not the federal



government. Second, states also are responsible for specifying performance standards. In other words, the federal government does not define what it means to be proficient in reading or math. Proficiency in sixth-grade math may, and likely will, mean one thing in Virginia, but something else in other states.

It is true that the federal government does periodically administer an examination to students in all states known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Even though No Child requires all states to participate in the assessment, it examines only a sample of students in each state, and there are no policy consequences or financial sanctions attached to the results. The bar for proficiency that matters for the National Assessment is something that states get to set.

Perhaps the nation will someday adopt a type of national curriculum with a single national test. That sort of unified system is a common practice in other countries, many of which we consider to be our top educational and economic rivals. For now, the United States continues to cling to its traditions of allowing states and local governments to determine what American students learn and how well they need to learn it. No Child Left Behind has done nothing to change that.

Paul Manna, Assistant Professor
Department of Government
Thomas Jefferson Program in Public Policy
College of William & Mary

* Note: Newspaper copy editing error. Should say "No Child." P.M.