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National standards The time is now for Washington to heed the call

By Alan I. Leshner

President Bush just signed the America Competes Act, overwhelmingly approved by a bipartisan Congress pursuing a first-rate science and mathematics education for all children at a time when American youngsters lag behind many of their peers abroad. With the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act up for renewal, an essential next step is clear: Scrap the crazy-quilt pattern of wildly differing tests and proficiency thresholds that currently vary from state to state.

Revise NCLB to set voluntary nationwide education standards.

Science literacy is, after all, no longer merely a luxury for the gifted and wealthy, but in fact a baseline requirement for any student hoping to compete for jobs in the 21st century.

Though sometimes criticized for its emphasis on students' math and reading scores, the NCLB approach is working. A recent study confirmed better student test scores in most though not all regions since enactment in 2002.

At least two NCLB revision bids are in play. Rep. George Miller, California Democrat, proposes changes to increase funding, fairness and flexibility in measuring progress. Earlier, Sens. Joe Lieberman, Connecticut independent, Mary Landrieu, Louisiana Democrat, and Norm Coleman, Minnesota Republican — pitched their All Students Can Achieve Act to help close the performance gap between white and minority students.

The core concepts of both bills are on the mark. Whether they're rich, poor, white, black, Hispanic, male, female or in any other category, all children deserve our very best efforts to teach them science and mathematics. Moreover, keeping America competitive will require tapping every potential talent pool and bringing them to the highest possible levels of achievement, which again points to the need for a coherent, uniform set of national science standards.

Nationwide, the performance gap between math and reading test scores for white versus minority youngsters has narrowed since 2002, but the

problem persists in some regions, the Center on Education Policy reported. In Washington state, the achievement gap actually has widened. Even where the gap is shrinking, it often remains unacceptably wide — up to 40 percentage points in some states. The trend is even worse when researchers look at average test scores, rather than the percentage of students meeting different state proficiency levels. These disparities are dramatic and discouraging, particularly as American students overall continue to score worse than students in other industrialized nations.

It's no wonder. U.S. standards and learning goals vary from place to place, whereas most other industrialized countries do have nationwide educational standards. So, American children deemed proficient in science and math in one state might miss the mark if their families move.

The importance of nationwide standards may become painfully clear during the upcoming school year, when NCLB will require science testing at least once in each of three grade spans (third-fifth, sixth-ninth and 10th-12th).

Earlier this year, Sen. Chris Dodd, Connecticut Democrat, and Rep. Vernon Ehlers, Michigan Republican, floated the Standards to Provide Educational Achievement for Kids Act, or SPEAK, calling for voluntary, nationwide standards in science and math, to be developed by the National Assessment Governing Board with public input. The American Association for the Advancement of Science applauded the bill, which sadly remains pending. Now we're holding out hope for elements of subsequent proposals, especially for consistent science standards.

There's no need to cook such standards up from scratch, either.

They could be based on well-tested, widely accepted guidelines set forth by Project 2061 at AAAS, the National Research Council, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Policy-makers clearly see scientific discovery and science education as keys to the nation's health, economic and security challenges: When the president signed the America COMPETES Act, whose formal title is the Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education, and Science Act, he authorized an additional \$33.6 billion over the next three fiscal years for science, technology, engineering, and math education programs. But one critical piece is missing. Let's seize the positive momentum and move now toward voluntary nationwide science standards as well.

Alan I. Leshner is CEO of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and executive publisher of the journal Science.