

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

School standards needed

By ALAN I. LESHNER and JO ELLEN ROSEMAN

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Larry LeDoux, Alaska's commissioner of education, has defended the state's decision to resist uniform K-12 learning goals in reading and mathematics. LeDoux argues that the performance of many students in Alaska is so poor — nearly one third never earn a high-school diploma — that any improvement in achievement must trump consistent learning goals.

We commend LeDoux for his candor, and also for taking steps such as hiring a rural education director and creating publicly funded preschools.

But his position misses the larger point. Alaska's children could be left behind in the global economy because it is one of only a few states — along with Texas, Missouri and South Carolina — that have declined to support national education standards.

The broader education community is virtually united in the belief that adopting national standards would help education greatly, both nationally and locally. Officials in 46 other states and the District of Columbia agreed June 1 to move toward standardizing K-12 education. Those who signed onto the plan were reminded that the federal economic-stimulus package includes a \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund.

South Carolina should be a part of the effort, spearheaded by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The initiative also needs to be expanded to include science as well as math and reading.

As we think about national standards, we must not overlook the central role that science plays in all aspects of modern American life, particularly the U.S. economy. From pre-school through high school, we need to teach science more effectively so that all students are prepared for the science- and technology-based 21st century economy. Virtually all future jobs will require at least some familiarity and comfort with science and technology.

In a 2007 report, U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 21st among students in 30 developed nations in science — behind Iceland and ahead of the Slovak Republic, on the Programme for International Student Assessment. On the U.S. Department of Education's most recent national report card, some 34 percent of all U.S. fourth-graders, and 43 percent of eighth-graders, scored below basic achievement levels in science. Even among college freshmen, nearly 30 percent need remedial science and math classes.

Top-performing U.S. science students are still among the world's elite. But many other young people are lagging. That's bad for the U.S. economy: McKinsey & Co. consulting firm said that closing the science gap between U.S. and international students could have increased America's gross domestic product by \$1.3 trillion to

\$2.3 trillion in 2008. Closing the racial gap in science scores among U.S. students might have added another half-trillion dollars, the firm reported.

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LeDoux hinted that the timeframe for developing national standards might be too tight. But a clear roadmap for improving science-learning standards has already been set forth. Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., and Rep. Vernon Ehlers, R-Mich., just re-introduced their SPEAK Act (“Standards to Provide Educational Achievement for All Kids”). This bill would provide incentives for states to adopt robust, well-tested national science standards developed by the National Assessment Governing Board.

Preparing a math- and science-literate workforce will, of course, require more than uniform standards. Adequate funding will also be essential. America further must improve teacher pay and classroom support, provide consistently high-quality textbooks and make science “cool” again. President Barack Obama, his education secretary and bipartisan leaders in Congress are showing leadership, but they need encouragement and support to persist.

Voluntary, nationwide education standards in science, along with reading and math, are the next logical step, promising dividends for tomorrow’s workforce and for our economy. Alaska should get on board.

Alan I. Leshner is the chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and executive publisher of the journal Science. Jo Ellen Roseman is director of Project 2061, the AAAS science-literacy initiative.

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