Despite the current hype, this face-off isn’t new. Standards and customization have been battling it out—and compromising—for the past 100 years.

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Consider the following dilemma, which has troubled educators for more than a century. Many practitioners (and the public) highly value standardizing curriculum and instruction for students. They believe that a uniform curriculum will lead to improved test scores and higher graduation and college admission rates while closing achievement gaps between minorities and whites. Common standards and instruction, they believe, will produce equal opportunity—a value dear to most policymakers and educators, and to Americans in general.
Yet educators and the public also prize individual excellence—cream rising to the top. Differentiating the curriculum for students—for example, for gifted students, students in advanced placement courses, English language learners, and students with special needs—enables schools to customize learning opportunities and cultivate individual achievement. Differentiating instruction through such approaches as small-group learning, individual projects, online instruction, and student choice helps students achieve academic excellence, become valedictorians, and enter universities. Without such differentiation, a uniform curriculum taught in largely the same way to all students in the name of equity can frustrate both high-achieving students and their classmates who need extra help in mastering academic content and skills.

Tensions arise over these competing values because there are insufficient resources in terms of time, money, and people to achieve them. So educators try to reconcile them by embracing one value and holding the other at arm’s length for a while or by striking compromises—satisfying one a little by sacrificing the other a little.
The Values Pendulum

This tendency to swing back and forth between values and to figure out sturdy compromises has been around for more than a century. Major education reforms in the 1890s, for example, produced high school graduation requirements and uniform curriculums that had all students taking four years of English, science, math, and history in classrooms in which teachers delivered mostly teacher-centered lessons to the entire class.

Two decades later, reformers dumped the common academic curriculum in favor of differentiated curriculums aimed at college-bound students, average students, and those who would enter the job market immediately after high school graduation. That tripartite curriculum, filled with admonitions to teachers to use student-centered and individualized activities as well as small-group projects, lasted until the 1970s.

At that time, another generation of school reformers argued that differentiated curriculums and instruction had sent U.S. schools downward in international rankings on tests; through the 1980s and 1990s, they pressed for uniform curriculum standards, common assessments, and tough accountability rules for schools, teachers, and students. In each instance of reform, practitioners also figured out compromises, adopting and adapting reforms to fit their schools and classrooms, blending the old with the new. (For a history of these reforms, see Kliebard, 2004.)

In this current moment of school reform, when nearly all states have adopted common core state standards in English and math, reformers once again tout customized learning. They look to charters, magnets, and virtual schools as ways of individualizing teaching and learning. They champion blending classroom learning with online lessons. They exhort teachers to broaden their teaching repertoires to include both teacher-centered and student-centered lessons. Again, uniform curriculum standards compete with customized choices. And again, hybrids of old and new emerge.

Why has this struggle over conflicting values occurred time and again? Because schooling is a value-loaded enterprise. Americans see schooling as the pathway to the “good” life, but no unanimity exists on what it means to live a “good” life. So it’s inevitable that competing values surface.

The Purpose and Context of Schooling

In addition to the fact that reform-driven policies are complex interventions often containing rival values, three factors add a layer that further complicates policy implementation.

Conflicting Purposes

Public schools seek to achieve social, political, and economic goals while promising each student individual success. Most district and school goal statements include such familiar purposes as preparing students for economic self-sufficiency, fostering civic engagement in the community, and promoting equal opportunity and individual well-being. In the United States, the historic expectation that public schools serve social ends while promising parents that their sons and daughters will earn diplomas that will lead to personal success has been tension-filled.

Why tension-filled? Because districts with limited resources—money, people, and time—have to negotiate compromises by developing policies that give a little on one value while getting a little
on the other, often leaving reformers and their followers dissatisfied (Labaree, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Responsibility for National Improvement
In the past, political coalitions of influential leaders have placed responsibility on schools to solve national political, social, and economic problems ranging from segregation, to Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union, to the United States’ current economic struggle as it competes with global rivals. Currently, a political coalition of civic and business leaders in league with foundation officials and entrepreneurs see public schools as principal agents for U.S. economic growth through producing skilled and knowledgeable graduates. These leaders value schools as an arm of a growing economy (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004).

The Social Organization Called School
These conflicting purposes and the historic placing of responsibility for national improvement on schools have been channeled into a once-innovative organizational structure imported from Europe in the early 19th century. This organizational innovation—the age-graded school—eliminated the then-dominant one-room schoolhouse in the United States. The social organization of the school—so commonplace that even mentioning it often produces a “huh?”—has been the primary structural vehicle for achieving competing values embedded in compulsory schooling for U.S. children and youth for the past 150 years.

The Coming of Age of the Age-Graded School
Beginning in the mid-18th century, rural and urban one-room wooden schoolhouses dominated what little public education was available in the United States. By the late 19th century, however, with the growth of tax-supported public schools in New England and the middle Atlantic states, one-room schools, although still common in rural America, were slowly being replaced in cities by an imported innovation called the age-graded school (Angus, Mirel, & Vinovskis, 1988, Tyack, 1974). New buildings that housed eight or more classrooms were constructed. In these separate classrooms, teachers taught students of about the same age—for example, 9-year-olds in the 3rd grade—for scheduled periods of time, with 50 to 75 students in a class at the height of immigration in late-19th- and early-20th-century schools. Each week, teacher and students covered portions of the curriculum so that by the end of the school year, all students had studied the prescribed content.

Because these self-contained classrooms contained crowds of students who had to be taught within a daily time schedule, teachers had to swiftly learn how to maintain classroom order. Managing groups of students was (and is) an essential condition for teacher survival and for any formal learning to occur. Once teachers could satisfactorily manage a group of students, they used frequent assignments, daily interactions with students, and exams to determine whether individual students would be promoted or retained.

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Typically, in age-graded schools, teaching was done with the “whole group,” except in elementary grades, where, by the mid-20th century, more individual and small-group instruction occurred. Teacher talk dominated instruction in the form of giving directions, asking questions, explaining content, and going over the text. Teaching practices, then, reflected both the conflicting purposes of schooling and the social organization of the school.

As early as the late 19th century, however, reformers saw the flaws inher-
in the 1930s, which had small groups of students work together; the growth of gifted education; the mandate for special education since the 1970s; the spread of English language learning efforts in recent decades; and the contemporary “everyone goes to college” movement in urban schools.

These historical efforts to reconcile uniformity with differentiated curriculum and instruction occurred within the structure of the age-graded school. They have aimed at customizing—not abolishing—the standardization implicit in the age-graded school.

Old Dilemma, New Face
It’s within this context that the thorny and stubborn dilemmas facing policymakers and practitioners have arisen time and again. And so, in the second decade of the 21st century, reform efforts to both standardize and customize curriculum and instruction present themselves anew.

Carol Ann Tomlinson (2000) has taken the stance that there is no contradiction between effective standards-based instruction and differentiation. “Curriculum tells us what to teach,” she writes. “Differentiation tells us how to teach the same standard to a range of learners by employing a variety of teaching and learning modes” (p. 6).

Tomlinson, of course, is correct in the abstract, but practical realities intrude. When state tests with strong consequences for students and teachers come into play, as they do in every state now, practitioners are pressed to ensure that all students learn what will be on the test. Many teachers scale back their efforts to differentiate lessons because poor student test scores may end up shaming the school, harming students’ progress, and influencing teachers’ evaluations and even compensation.

Again, the question of competing values arises. As Jay McTighe and John Brown (2005) put it, “How can teachers address required content and grade-level performance standards while remaining responsive to individual students?” (p. 234). Now as before, teachers and entrepreneurs give up a little and take a little as they figure out ways of reconciling uniformity with customization of teaching.

Consider the new approaches of blended learning and hybrid schools. In places such as School of One (http://schoolofone.org/concept.html) and Rocketship schools (www.rsed.org), students spend part of their day working on individualized online lessons consistent with state standards. For example, at Mateo Sheedy Elementary School, a Rocketship school in San Jose, California, students spend 100 minutes each day in a computer lab, working on math or reading lessons geared to their individual academic profiles. They practice fundamentals and work on exercises at their own pace, without taking up valuable class time. They spend the rest of the day with teachers in classrooms covering reading, math, social studies, and science lessons aimed at meeting curriculum standards. As one journalist noted, “Rocketship’s hybrid structure . . . becomes a compromise worked out between uniformity and differentiation” (Abramson, 2010).

In addition to hybrid schools, teachers have developed repertoires that blend whole-group instruction with individualized activities (see “A Blend in Action”). In these ways, schools and teachers try to finesse competing values to lessen the pinch of the ever-present dilemma of standardization versus customization in teaching and learning.

It’s in Our Hands—Again
We can’t erase the professional dilemmas that inevitably arise from trying to implement rival values. But we can manage them. Like contemporary educators, previous generations of reform-minded teachers and principals had to cope with these same dilemmas. This awareness makes it possible for us to be smarter about working out compromises that fit the limits of the age-graded school and the constraints of scaled-back resources for schooling. Whether reform-driven policymakers will convert that awareness into smart decisions that will help teachers and principals manage these dilemmas, however, is anyone’s guess.

References
A Blend in Action

Veteran teacher Carol Donnelly teaches five classes of biology in her high school: one honors class, one regular class, and three biology classes for English language learners (ELLs). She uses the same basic lesson for all her classes. However, she parcels the content out in smaller quantities for her ELL classes while going into greater depth in her honors class.

Every Wednesday is laptop day. (All students in the school have laptops.) Donnelly begins the class with a review of yesterday’s material on photosynthesis. Afterward, students open their laptops to watch animations of photosynthesis that Donnelly has loaded on their computers. A pop-up quiz appears after the animations. Donnelly walks around and checks student scores. She then summarizes the concept of photosynthesis by questioning students. Finally, she collects the homework.

In her senior honors class, students usually start off by opening their laptops and working on their individually designed science fair projects. This is the most highly differentiated area of instruction among her classes. Donnelly also goes on to lecture on the Calvin cycle of photosynthesis. In other biology classes, however, she has truncated this lecture and supplemented it with explanatory text.

One laptop lesson on plasma membrane ends up extending over three days for Donnelly’s English language learners. Using Kerpoof multimedia software, students draw and label parts of the plasma membrane, view videos and research information on the Internet, and complete a worksheet that Donnelly has created to accompany the lesson.

Donnelly also has another way of differentiating her lessons: She encourages students to blog. Donnelly reads the blogs and comments but gives no grades on entries. After one prompt that she gave her regular and honors students concerning Thanksgiving and tryptophan—a sleep-inducing amino acid found in turkey—students, after reading the links she had provided, continued to blog on the chemical and about what it does in the human body.

Technology has been a plus in terms of differentiation. When Donnelly asked students to compare the features of a cell with anything they wanted—such as school, family, friends, or a sports team—they wrote stories, took photos off the web, created digital videos, and developed a digital presentation using Keynote.

For nonlaptop days, Donnelly does traditional science lessons that include conducting a wet lab experiment with pairs of students working together; lecturing; and having students take notes, view video clips, and complete worksheets drawn from chapters in the textbook that are aligned with the state standards in biology.

Students become engaged with this combination of animation, lectures, videos, and text that Donnelly skillfully integrates with content. Although she remains within the tradition of teacher-centered instruction in her different classes, she has customized her lessons and created a mix of instructional approaches.

Author’s note: The teacher’s name is a pseudonym. This description is based on my observations in this teacher’s classroom in 2009–10.