mandates. Thus far, the enabling legislation says that the federal government will not mandate a particular standard and that states and school sites should develop their own.

In fact, the encouragement of local discussions of standards has been one of NCTE's reasons for participating in a federal funded standards project. Beginning in 1994, states have been funded to develop their versions, and NCTE's draft standards are one of the documents being used by states. In the 1995–1996 year, local school sites will receive 90% of the available funds for site discussions of their standards, and again NCTE's draft standards, along with other NCTE materials, will be used by sites to reflect about their English and English language arts programs.

NCTE has long recognized that one of its central purposes is to sponsor a forum among English teachers at all levels of schooling. The standards project is one of those efforts which can build a strong bridge between secondary and post-secondary teachers of composition. CCC members need to recognize that the issues in the K–12 standards movement are also central issues in university composition programs across the country. Those programs, too, are asking “What do we really mean by ‘writing to multiple audiences’ or ‘writing in multiple modes’ or ‘engaging in collaborative writing’?”

A brief final comment on the present status of the federally funded English standards project: Because of strong differences of opinion between NCTE/IRA and the FIRST department of the Office of Education, federal funding was terminated in March, 1994. In December 1994, after a letter writing campaign by NCTE and IRA opposing funding of another English project, the federal government decided not to fund another group to write English standards. NCTE and IRA are completing the project and documents will be available at the 1995 convention in San Diego. In the meantime, CCCC members who are interested in participating in the standards discussion should contact Miriam Chaplin, president of NCTE, at NCTE headquarters.

The Problem of National Standards

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Miles Myers argues from the liberal belief that national standards will provide America’s “have nots” with the necessary arguments to demand a better education for themselves. He sees national standards as an opportunity to solve the literacy crisis and offer millions of Americans their right to the intellectual resources of our culture. While I agree with Myers’ desire, I find his solution in NCTE’s involvement to be just another diversion which oversimplifies the multiple and various reasons why schooling
has failed so many Americans. It isn’t a matter of our making plain what every American needs to know and be able to do. We’ve made it plain in our ongoing debates within countless professional journals and scholarly texts and in our production of teachers on all levels. In their introduction to their introduction to *Contending with Words*, Patricia Harkin and John Schilb offer a more complicated and compelling explanation of the literacy crisis. Basing their understanding of “crisis” on Paul Noack’s work, they see the literacy crisis as a necessary conflation of many competing and diverse human needs so as to be “managed” by institutions. “The extent to which institutions are successful at maintaining the state of crisis, they will succeed in maintaining themselves” (3). The liberal impulse to offer solutions to such crises is, according to Foucault, humanism’s “desire to change the ideological system without altering institutions” (qtd. in Harkin and Schilb 6). The development of national standards, I submit, is thus another way in which the literacy crisis is being managed and maintained, a crisis arising from the tension between America’s promise to the individual that he or she will have full access to intellectual resources and the needs of capitalism to have a differentiated, stratified workforce.

Patrick Shannon and others (see, for instance, Noddings) make similar arguments. Shannon sees the national standards movement “as part of a coordinated effort by corporate America to discredit public schools in order to reduce the costs of social services in the United States, and thereby, significantly reduce the tax burden on business. Standards, vouchers, two-tiered certification, privatization, reductions in enrollments due to IQ qualifications and citizenship status, and total quality management are all pointed at public schools like loaded guns ready to rob them of the few resources under which many already suffer.” The standards debate, however, as you might imagine, has not been taken up in these terms. Rather, as Shannon notes, proponents of national standards have appropriated progressive educators’ language in such a way so as to make them appear to be anti-teacher and for failed schools. The debate appears to be between conservatives and liberals about whose standards will become the national standards. The conservatives, for example, want to insure individual privacy so they are opposed to journals and personal responses to literature while the liberals want to liberate the imagination and so journals and reader response are a necessity. The federal government, meanwhile, wants to insure intellectual neutrality, and so will have the final standards approved by a politically appointed body of some 19 people, chosen by the President (and after the November ‘94 election, the possibilities for those with liberal or progressive ideas isn’t strong). All through the mandate is the claim that national standards are voluntary, that they form a base out of which state standards can be elaborated or explained. But one doesn’t
have to look very hard at federal programs to understand what "voluntary" means. What is likely to happen is that federal standards will not only form the basis for the development of textbooks and for teacher education curriculum, but will also be part of the authorization or reauthorization of any federal educational programs, albeit with limited and probably decreasing federal funds. The special irony of Myers' argument is that he implies that NCTE's cooperation with standards can lead to increased federal spending on public education at a time when, if anything, the government is headed in the opposite direction. The "Contract with America," as many states already correctly perceive, will reduce, not increase, federal spending on such social programs as public education while local taxpayers will continue to pay increasing property taxes to make-up the differences. The standards will be formulated by distant agencies like NCTE or the Department of Education—while parents, teachers, and other local taxpayers continue to pick up the tab.

NCTE's early involvement in the development of national standards, its acceptance—with the International Reading Association (IRA) and the Center for the Study of Reading (CSR)—of $1.8 million in federal funds, and now its losing of that federal contract half-way through the development of the standards (the only group to be denied continuation of their funding), has limited the possibilities for teachers and for all of us as members of NCTE, to offer organized dissent. Had we opposed the development of standards from the start and took the opportunity to educate members of the House and Senate about the complexities of teaching English, we might be better prepared to resist this federal intrusion. But the executive committee of NCTE chose to join forces with IRA and CSR (the crowd that gave us basal readers) to write the federal content standards. This joint commission received over $500,000 and proceeded to draft a document that was, in every draft I saw, frankly, embarrassing.

The federal government withdrew its funds because the joint commission of NCTE, IRA, and CSR offered what the feds called generative standards rather than prescriptive standards. (A generative standard might be: students should write to a variety of audiences in a number of genres. A prescriptive standard would be: students should write a narrative essay to students in their classroom in the third grade.) The federal reviewers also objected to the joint commission (NCTE, IRA and CSR) insisting on delivery standards (on what the government, federal or state, would need to provide schools to realize the standards). These two criticisms of the joint commission were no surprise—since the prescriptive nature of standards (their being coupled with performance testing) and the fact that the states opposed any federal requirements for funding schooling differently, were all there from the start. But NCTE chose to read the federal guidelines
as offering us “free” opportunity, no strings attached, to develop the standards in any way we felt appropriate.

Now, NCTE is involved in a rear guard action. Our leadership of NCTE has approved the spending of 500,000 dollars of NCTE’s money (when they don’t usually pay for the work of its various commissions and committees) to continue to develop standards as an alternative to the federal standards. NCTE has now joined forces with other professional organizations and the College Board (supposedly a neutral party because of their not-for-profit status) to resist the politically appointed board that will approve the final document. But the fact remains that the federal government can now maintain that they gave us a chance to produce what they wanted and that we failed to meet their high expectations.

The problem with NCTE’s position on standards, and I’m sure the eventual standards developed by the federal government, is its oversimplification of the social nature of language and learning. NCTE saw the development of standards as a way to articulate its liberal agenda within very conservative federal structures. Students were going to be asked to read and write only for aesthetic and practical purposes. The debate was supposed to focus on how. The underlying political project of having students read or write for pleasure was never articulated or engaged. Opposing views—“reading and writing as a method of critique,” or “reading and writing as work,” or “reading and writing as deconstructing the ideological frames”—were suppressed.

Reader response theory of the sort that arises from humanist assumptions and that unproblematically celebrates the individual consciousness underlies much of the NCTE’s work with standards. I am sure a conservative federal panel would find this liberal agenda problematic. So by not engaging the politics of reading and writing, NCTE can not account for the critiques of the humanist subject that have been mounted by various forms of feminism, cultural theory, and marxism. If humanist reader response theory is the governing frame for NCTE’s standards, then what is the position of those who critique this position. Are they substandard? above standard? beyond standard? If, on the other hand, literature is understood as a mirror of experience with a kernel of truth locked into the words on the page as the conservative federal agenda might require, what happens to struggles over meaning, to the idea of literature as a social practice, to the debate over what is literature in the first place? The conservatives, who wield great influence on federal priorities these days, don’t want us to intrude on the private “experiences” of students. The NCTE document is filled with student “experience” as the “ground” for interpretation. In both cases “experience” is unproblematically there as something one has either to be hidden or to be explored, but never critically engaged as a place to
question our constructed positions in language. Would those who question the category of “experience” be above or below standard? And what of the teacher? Who is she in these documents?

Perhaps one example will illustrate how NCTE is now implicated in maintaining and managing the literacy crisis. The standard I have chosen is one of the better ones, having been adapted from the work of Nancie Atwell, a nationally recognized expert in the teaching of writing in the middle school. What happens in the standards document is that Atwell’s work is taken out of the context of her argument about the teaching of writing and is used as model behavior to illustrate how a teacher might best go about teaching the standard. The standard that is being illustrated is: “Students show growth and increasing sophistication in writing for a variety of purposes and audiences and in a variety of genres.”

The vignette places Nancie Atwell with her students. She asks the class to write papers where they address a particular problem and offer a solution. One of her students decides to write a paper to the school board on the problem of motorcycles not being allowed on school grounds. He requests that he and others be allowed to ride their motorcycles to school because school is boring and it is the only enjoyable part of their day. In his writing group, the students agree that he shouldn’t tell the school board that school is boring. The teacher concurs with the children’s views. And he redrafts his paper deleting that sentence and substituting, “I wish you would give my idea some consideration.”

One might agree with the NCTE standards writers that the purpose of writing in the middle school years is to teach students to follow directions and conform to the demands of those in authority (the values that appear to underpin this particular vignette). One might also agree that the teacher’s role in the classroom is to listen to children discuss a writer’s paper and agree with their conclusions. And if so, one might find the story pleasing and supportive and self-evidently “true.” The standards writers certainly see this vignette unproblematically, and see no reason to argue for its representation of normative, standard behavior of teachers in schools. I find, however, this representation very troubling as an illustration of how students and teachers are supposed to interact. The vignette seems to demonstrate that there can be no challenge to authority by a student and no potential for student writing to intervene in the perpetuation of school life. The student isn’t challenged to elaborate just why school is boring and why he sees his motorcycle as the only enjoyable part of his day. He isn’t asked to explore how his relationship to schooling (why school is boring) is a socio-historical construction. He is not encouraged to pursue any sort of intellectual analysis so that he might speak back to the school officials—and he doesn’t because the teacher is out of the picture, merely a supporter and an orchestrator, not a transformative intellectual. The vignette con-
cludes with the idea that it is much more important for students to be polite and not criticize—a position supported by the invisible teacher who privileges the peer group's insistence that students should obey the rules and, merely, plead for consideration.

I invite you to read the vignettes of teaching, and ask yourself, who profits from telling teachers (over 65% of who are women) that they should be listening more, nurturing more, supporting more and becoming more invisible in their classrooms. What would have to change for teachers, particularly women teachers, to take an active role as intellectuals in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Why is NCTE uncritically engaged in perpetuating these kinds of stories about teaching? What is at stake in how the stories we tell about teaching get read? And how are teachers enjoined by standards to enforce stories being read in ways that demand the teacher's own invisibility?

I call on everyone who reads this response to Miles Myers to take whatever action possible to insure that no matter who produces the standards that all teachers' rights to academic freedom are maintained. Standards, even those we agree with, even those that are constructed with good intentions, can and do turn into repressive dogma. We must all fight to insure the rights of conscience, intellect, and dissent. We must all fight to insure that teachers are treated as professionals: that they have due process protection against job loss, discrimination, censorship, or other penalties derived from political pressure backed by content-based government requirements. We must protect the rights of expression and of inquiry (for a similar call to action see Arons).

As I write this, we do not know whose ideas of writing, reading, teaching, and learning are going to be inscribed as the new national standards. But we do know that NCTE continues to be involved. What should that involvement be? I encourage all of us to question our leadership about how our resources are being spent. I encourage us all to engage the debate on whatever level, to actively resist this kind of imposition on teachers, and work to insure that their academic freedom, due process, and their freedom to speak, to speak against national standards and for a national focus on equity and access to education, are maintained.

Works Cited