Foucault would likely say that ‘standards are dangerous,’ and many in the educational research community would agree – though not always for the same reasons. Kip Tellez (2003) argues that it is the acceleration, or rapid “gaining of inertia” (p.10) in regards to standards that makes them dangerous to teaching. As per Newton’s Laws of Motion, changing the course or stopping an object with considerable mass is difficult – doing so with an idea, can be even more troublesome. If that object were to be moving within a fluid flowing in the same direction as its motion, it would constantly receive miniscule ‘pushes’ from its surroundings. This can clearly be the model for the persistence of ideas within a society that reinforces those ideas. Though there is always some friction with the fluid, the general trend opposes some ideas more than others, and sustains some ideas more than others. Tellez suggests that this fluid is not always representative of the greater society, and therein lies the danger. When one small subsection of the population has the means (financial, political, etc.) to control its flow – and therefore sustain, encourage, or deny any idea inherently – issues of power become even more central to the questions we need to ask ourselves.

Christine Sleeter (2003) extends this argument about standards as not necessarily bad, but dangerous. Her argument continues and expands up that of Tellez by raising the issues of dialogue silencing and individual atonement for more structural malfunctions. By changing the standards for teacher preparation, the states are quite realistically altering the curricula of universities by proxy. The question of “whose knowledge should be taught” (p.20) is not up for grabs when the seemingly-static backdrop of dominant culture within our society is assumed to be the standard. Furthermore, not recognizing the “racial and class stratification [that] permeates schooling itself” (p.27) seems to be an aim within the standards movement. Instead, students are to simply absorb and achieve – forget about the cultural significance of the curriculum and other problematic structural difficulties that may get in the way. Their inertia is certainly making standards dangerous, yet one must reflect on the possibly nefarious nature of the societal fluid in which they move – where does it come from, who does it represent, and why is the current so strong? The current gets strong when vectors align. Teacher education is a vector, too. Some teacher education activists think it’s more effective to push in the opposite direction of the flow, but any quick vector analysis (especially one done with some knowledge of sailing) shows a cross current gets more action.

In her contribution to this overall discussion, Ann Berlak (2003) continues with the idea that ratcheting up standards reduces the level of teacher, and teacher educator empowerment – and those who covet the power to do so are often not including the educational community in the decision. It is precisely that “particular interests and perspectives shaped the Teacher Preparation Program Standards, TPEs, and TPAs” (p.33) which Berlak warns about – not because these things are shaped, mind you, but because the shaping forces are questionably unrepresentative of the larger society and greatly outmatch any other subset in regards to power. It is against these forces, like the Business Roundtable, that Berlak sees resistance being effective. After all, even if we could muster the effort required to halt the massive ‘standards movement’ (which is highly doubtful), it would immediately begin again if the surrounding fluid is still moving along in the same direction.

Rich Gibson (2003) ups the ante by suggesting (in a very logically fashioned argument) that “schools are now the central organizing places of North American life” and therefore “teachers are also able to exert the most creative control over their jobs” (p.47). Furthermore, he suggests that the current which directs the standards movement, though it could certainly be resisted by much of the educational community (he especially has it in for the teacher unions), is not opposed nearly enough on an internal level while being “thrown into high gear” (p.51),
echoing Tellez. Unfortunately, it does seem that many of the structural difficulties which Gibson tersely tells teachers and schools to ‘just get over’ are similar to the obstacles which Sleeter discusses.

It seems to me that there is not a clear agreement as to whether standards are powerful or not. There is (happily or unhappily) considerable irony to this. Proponents of standards think standards are not powerful, so they need all kinds of assessment and benchmark bolstering as well as policing. Teachers, who can (and) do pretty much whatever they want behind closed classroom doors, think the standards are powerful. Go figure…

I fear truly altering the course of the standards movement, while necessary, will take more than the courage and wisdom that Gibson calls for, or the communities (virtual or otherwise) of resistance that Berlak seeks. It is a massive juggernaut which requires attention – yet so does the subtle social/power current that maintains and increases its momentum. Lest we be deceived any more, however, the act of analyzing and recognizing is almost always a process of discovery – there is more to this beast than we may have ever imagined. In fact, we’re awash in it.