



Information about Common Core Standards

Catholic Diocese of Wichita Catholic School Office

Introduction

There are some who are worried about the adoption of the Common Core Standards. This article is intended to address some of those concerns. There are three key statements that underline all of the answers below. First, the Catholic schools would never agree to anything that threatens our values or keeps us from passing on our faith to our children. Second, as long as we are State Accredited it would be wise to be knowledgeable about the common core standards. We believe that the advantages of being State Accredited are many and we plan to stay accredited until such time the negatives outweigh the positives. Third, the current state standards are not rigorous enough and do not go into the depth necessary to ensure the success of our children.

Below is a list of some of the common concerns about Common Core:

Concern: This new national curriculum is going to force us to teach unchristian values and indoctrinate our children with socialist and/or left wing rhetoric.

This complaint begins with a faulty premise, namely, national standards lead to a national curriculum. The Common Core standards are just that - standards. They give us a guide to where our students should be by the end of each grade level. It does not tell us how to teach it or what to teach. In fact, it is actually less prescriptive than the current Kansas state standards. We have more latitude to teach what we want than we did before. You can find suggested texts on the list, like alternate lifestyles or causes of global warming, that you might be opposed to, but remember this is a suggested list, not a required reading list. You can also find Common Core resource websites (often cited is Cengage Learning) that are clearly left leaning. But again, there is no requirement that we use those websites or that we would use left-leaning resource materials. Our schools will continue to have independence in regards to what we teach.

Concern: But with the required testing, decreasing number of textbook companies and increasing government influence this is just the first step and eventually there will be a national curriculum.

First, Kansas education officials have had a major impact on the creation of the new SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) test. We have representatives on all major subcommittees and are influencing the test in significant ways. Second, textbooks have never been written for Kansas. All major textbooks are written for New York, Texas or California and our teachers know they cannot blindly follow the textbook. This will still be the case with Common Core. Our teachers will never just blindly teach a lesson because they found it in a book or on a website, they will teach what is relevant and Christian based. Finally, if the worst-case scenario happens and there is a national curriculum that conflicts with our Catholic values, then we would always have the choice to withdraw from state accreditation.

In the 1950s, the four bishops in our state agreed that all Catholic Schools in Kansas will be State Accredited. There have been several times over the years that we have considered withdrawing from state accreditation and if the situation ever warranted it, we could withdraw. This would make it more difficult for our rural schools to use public schools busses, for our schools to hire and keep accredited teachers and for all of our students to be accepted into a four year college, but if it became absolutely necessary, we could do it. There is no proof that common standards will lead to a national curriculum and therefore currently the positives of being state accredited far outweigh the concerns.

Concern: There was no state input into the passage of the common core. It was pushed through by “two Washington D.C. based official-sounding trade organizations, the NGA and the CCSSO” but the timeline of Race to the Top Grant applications forced state legislatures to adopt it without having time to really study it.

First, the two trade organizations are the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Offices. So the governors reviewed it and the Secretary of Education from each state reviewed it multiple times. There was plenty of research done before this decision was made. Second, while Race to the Top money may have influenced some states, it did not influence Kansas. Kansas did not even apply for Race to the Top money. The 10 members of the State Board of Education appointed four people each to serve on a committee to review the standards. Forty representatives, reflecting a wide range of political beliefs, including our own Superintendent, Bob Voboril, served on the committee and spent over a year researching and discussing the Common Core standards. It was only after this research was completed that KSDE recommended that the state adopt Common Core.

Concern: If we do not like what is being taught, neither you nor any official in the state will have any power to change it or have anyone to call.

Again, this goes back to standards versus curriculum. The standards just tell us that fractions should now be taught in 5th grade rather than 4th grade and students should be able to critically evaluate an article for accuracy or bias. If you have an issue with how fractions are being taught or what articles students are being asked to critically evaluate, you will still be able to talk to your teacher and principal about this implementation of the standard. This concern is only valid if the standards turn into a curriculum. If somehow the government tries to force a national curriculum on our schools, then we would have to critically evaluate it for compliance with our values, but that is not close to happening yet.

Concern: The common core standards are no good. Dr. Stotsky considers the English Standards “empty skill sets” and they are cutting out literature and replacing it with reading manuals.

It is inconsistent to argue that the ELA standards are “empty skill sets that are not fully developed enough to prepare kids for college” and, at the same time, to say that this is really a national curriculum where they are telling us exactly what to teach. It cannot be both. While Dr. Stotsky says the skills are not stringent enough, many professionals believe it is a significant improvement in rigor. The teachers and administrators in the Diocese of Wichita have been working with Common Core for two years and concur with the majority that it is a step up in the amount of research, analysis, grammar, writing and speaking than the current Kansas State standards.

Critics say English teachers are required to teach 50% informational text and that this drop in literature and is a detriment to the free- thinking ability of our students. This is inaccurate. The Common Core standards do state that 50% of reading analysis and comprehension should come from informational text but you do not get there by reducing the amount of literature. A teacher gets to 50% by increasing the amount of Social Studies primary sources and scientific journals that are read, not by decreasing the amount of literature. Nowhere in the Common Core does it encourage or require a decrease in the amount of literature taught.

Concern: Dr. Milgram of Stanford refused to sign off on the math standards because they force Algebra to 8th grade, drop essential skills, and the method of teaching Geometry is experimental and has never been proven to work.

Although Dr. Milgram does not believe in the standards, many professionals believe it is a significant improvement in rigor. The teachers and administrators in the Diocese of Wichita have been working with the Common Core for two years and concur with the majority that it is a step up in mathematical fluency and problem solving. The current state standards are a mile wide and an inch deep. They cover a wide range of topics but few of them in depth. The Common Core standards teach fewer topics but cover them in much greater depth. The concepts are to be taught to a level of understanding rather than a level of knowledge. So one assertion is that Common Core drops essential skills; for example, there is no standard about converting

fractions to decimals or vice versa. The Common Core would say you do not need that standard written out specifically because if a student truly understands fractions and decimals then they already know how to convert between the two. Another great thing about the Common Core is the return of fluency. This means there are some things students just have to memorize (adding within 1-20, multiplication tables, etc.) and that they need to be able to do these things quickly.

It is inaccurate and irrelevant to say Algebra is being forced down to 8th grade. The current state assessment is given after a student completes Algebra I and Geometry. The new assessment will be given after the student completes Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II. So no matter when you take Algebra I, the test will require everyone to complete Algebra II rather than just Geometry. This is a major step up. Finally, the accusation about Geometry being taught using an experimental method seems to be one of those “facts” on the Internet for which you can’t find the source. It is repeated on every website I looked at but I could never find the source; although I could confirm that Dr. Milgram never made this assertion. These are standards so there is no method in them at all, experimental or otherwise. They are just a list of things students need to know about by the time they complete geometry.

Concern: Common Core is going to be very expensive, particularly because it requires computerized testing.

It is true the Common Core will probably require teacher training and new textbooks. But teachers are always utilizing professional development and schools are always using a textbook adoption rotation, so neither of these costs is above and beyond the norm. Second, most of the figures you see about the expense of Common Core has to do with the increased technology needed to give computerized assessments. The state of Kansas went to mandatory computerized testing three years ago, so this is an expense that has already been accrued here.

Concern: Common Core requires a massive student database that will collect over 400 data points to track everything about children and their families.

Common Core is not requiring this collection data because it is illegal for them to do so. They are requesting that the states collect certain information and provide it to them. Thus far, Kansas has allowed nonpublic schools to opt out of most of this information. While public schools report student grades to Kansas, Catholic schools report attendance. While public schools submit their teacher evaluations to Kansas, Catholic schools submit the fact that they are complete. The schools try in every way to safeguard the privacy of our students and their families. Again, if it ever got to a point that the State was demanding too much information, the Bishop of our diocese would have to consider withdrawing from State accreditation.

Conclusion

All of this is not to say that the Common Core standards are perfect, that implementation will be painless, and the results will be breathtaking. This is also not meant to be an exhaustive response to every concern about Common Core. Rather, it was designed to address the most frequently cited concerns. Finally, there are legitimate concerns about the fear that the Common Core could be the first step down a slippery slope. However, our schools are embracing these new standards with our eyes wide open. Our teachers will never blindly teach a lesson just because it is labeled Common Core. Everything we do, including Common Core, will be done through the lens of our Faith. We will continue to evaluate everything the State of Kansas and the federal government requires of us, and if we ever determine that forfeiting state accreditation is warranted, then we will thoughtfully and prayerfully consider that option, but at this point we see the Common Core as a step up in rigor that helps our students become prepared for their next educational step.

If you have any other concerns, please feel free to contact Jamie Finkeldei, at 316-269-3950 or finkeldej@CatholicDioceseOfWichita.org