

How Common Core is Affecting Private Christian Schools?

Common Core Education Standards Generate Catholic Concerns (5887)

The academic quality of the new federal standards is insufficient, according to critics.

by CHARLOTTE HAYS 06/17/2013 Comments [\(26\)](#)



WASHINGTON — Common Core State Standards — a set of [federal education](#) standards adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia — have fervent supporters and just as many fervent opponents.

Supporters tout the advantage of national educational standards that are intended to help students acquire specific skills at each grade level rather than relying on 50 different standards in each state. Opponents of Common Core question the [academic](#) quality of a single standard and express concern over the top-down approach.

Meanwhile, Catholic [schools](#) and dioceses across the country will have to decide whether to adopt the CCSS. Although the [National Catholic Education Association \(NCEA\)](#) isn't endorsing the controversial Common Core State Standards, the NCEA is helping Catholic [schools](#) across the nation prepare for CCSS implementation.

“What we have done at NCEA is develop what we call the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative,” said Presentation Sister Dale McDonald, who holds a doctorate in educational administration and serves as director of public policy and educational research at the NCEA.

The NCEA is scheduled to host a [Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative Conference](#) for Catholic educators from around the country June 30-July 2 in Nashville, Tenn. Sister Dale said that Catholic educators will discuss, for example, how to introduce Catholic ideas into what is being studied.

The NCEA website characterizes the standards as a “call for excellence in academic programs,” adding that “one way” many schools are “ensuring excellence, appropriate challenge and relevance in their curriculum is by utilizing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).”

In many states, Catholic schools that get money from [vouchers](#) already are required to participate in standardized state tests to continue in a voucher program. If those states have adopted the Common Core State Standards, those standards will become the basis for state tests, replacing previous tests that were based on statewide standards.

The Aims of Common Core

In an effort coordinated by the National Governors Association, the [Common Core State Standards \(CCSS\)](#) were developed by state education officials. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made [grants](#) of \$150 million to support work on the standards, and the Obama administration is aggressively pushing for CCSS.

So far, only the standards for English language arts and math have been promulgated — and they have stirred up intense reactions. The standards don’t direct that certain text books must be used — though a list of “exemplars” for English [classes](#) is provided — but focus instead on what skills every student is expected to acquire in every grade.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, a longtime advocate of education reform; William Bennett, former Ronald Reagan secretary of education; and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, whose motto is “advancing educational excellence” and is led by education guru

Chester Finn and Rod Paige, former George W. Bush education secretary, are examples of prominent supporters of Common Core.

But not everybody is convinced. "I think that the Catholic schools think Common Core is so rigorous that they have to adapt [to the Common Core] to keep up. They are buying the snake oil," said Sandra Stotsky, a professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas who is one of the most outspoken critics of Common Core.

Stotsky, who helped develop the highly praised standards for schools in Massachusetts that led to higher test scores but will be superseded by CCSS, has written that Common Core will have a "devastating impact on literary study and analytical thinking" — in other words, just the opposite of what Catholic parents and educators may be hoping.

'Informational' Texts

Stotsky argues that the academic quality of the English, math and writing skills is insufficient. Of particular interest is the Common Core's emphasis on more of what it calls "informational" texts that critics worry could edge out good literature.

One eighth-grade English teacher in Fayetteville, Ark., already has complained to *The Washington Post* about this. Jamie Highfill, who was named Arkansas Teacher of the Year, said that she had eliminated short stories to be able to include essays by Malcolm Gladwell from his social-behavior book *The Tipping Point*. The Gladwell book — included in a list of works designed to assist English teachers in developing their courses — is an "informational text."

"I'm struggling with this, and my students are struggling," [Highfill told the Post](#). "With informational text, there isn't that human connection that you get with literature. And the kids are shutting down. They're getting bored. I'm seeing more behavior problems in my classroom than I've ever seen."

One "exemplar" (suggestions for texts to be assigned) on the English language list has attracted rueful mirth from some quarters: a publication by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency bearing the title "[Recommended Levels of Insulation](#)." Also curious is a 1950 speech by the almost forgotten late Maine congresswoman Margaret Chase Smith,

who chides Congress for a lack of civility, calling it “a forum of hate and character assassination.”

Raising Standards?

“The opponents of the CCSS say that the standards aren’t high enough,” said Michael Petrelli, executive vice president of the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#). “They say that the standards are designed just to get into a community college. What I’d say is that the state standards before this were incredibly low.”

Both Sister Dale of NCEA and Petrelli stressed that the suggested works for English classes are there merely to help teachers develop curricula, not to establish a curriculum. There is no obligation for teachers to build their classes around the Common Core list of exemplars.

Stanley Kurtz, a senior fellow at the [Ethics and Public Policy Center](#) in Washington, who has written extensively on Common Core, is skeptical.

“It’s true that the literature choices are exemplars only,” said Kurtz, “but many will be adopted by teachers as the path of least resistance. Other teachers will use the requirements for informational texts to slip in politicized material. Sure, teachers already try to politicize things, but the informational-text requirement makes this easier to do. And the really troubling stuff has yet to come. The Common Core hasn’t yet announced its history/social-studies standards. This is a way of saving the really controversial stuff until after Common Core has already been adopted by the states.”

Math Criticized, Too

The math standards have also been criticized.

James Milgram, an emeritus math professor from Stanford University, who was a national reviewer of the standards, found them wanting. In testimony before the Texas Legislature, Milgram said that the standards are “in large measure a political document that, in spite of a number of real strengths, is written at a very low level and does not adequately reflect our

current understanding of why the math programs in the high-achieving countries give dramatically better results.”

Texas is one of the states that have not adopted CCSS.

Jason Zimba, on the other hand, a former Bennington College math professor and a member of the team that wrote the math standards, said he sees the CCSS as a “once-in-a-lifetime chance” to raise the level of math achievement. He is so enthusiastic that he now works for Achieve the Core, a nonprofit devoted to promoting CCSS.

But it was the quality of her son’s math homework that led one Catholic mother to become involved in a fight to block CCSS in her state.

When Erin Tuttle, an Indiana mother whose son was enrolled in a Catholic elementary school, looked at her son’s third-grade math homework in 2011, she was immediately concerned.

“What struck me was the difference between what my daughter had done three years ago in third-grade math and what he was doing,” she said. “That set off alarms.”

Tuttle was also concerned about the reading material. Instead of poetry or fiction appropriate for a third-grader, her son was coming home with children’s versions of popular magazines.

Tuttle and a like-minded friend, Heather Crossin, who had also been concerned about what her children were — or weren’t — learning, organized the group Hoosiers Against Common Core, which proposed legislation blocking implementation of CCSS without more review. Indiana Gov. Mike Pence signed the bill into law on May 11.

“Thank heavens Heather and I have thick skins, because this wasn’t fun,” Tuttle said, noting considerable pushback against their efforts from CCSS supporters. “We were outmanned, had no money and no lobbyist — and yet we came out ahead.”

Second Thoughts

Several other states appear to have cooled on CCSS.

Pennsylvania's Board of Education adopted the standards but, after a public outcry, Gov. Tom Corbett has agreed to push back the implementation date to allow for further discussion.

Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction adopted Common Core, but lawmakers are now re-evaluating the move because of criticism from the public.

In addition to concerns about the quality of the standards, Tuttle said that she doesn't welcome more federal input into Indiana's education system.

"I think our concerns are that the Common Core imposes top-down, centrally controlled, one-size-fits-all standards," Tuttle said.

"It changed education from what we traditionally think of as education," said Tuttle, who believes that adoption of the CCSS will deal a death blow to the classical education many Catholic parents regard as the defining characteristic of Catholic education. She called CCSS "a radical shift" in American — and Catholic — education.

Stotsky, meanwhile, said that the real Common Core State Standards are designed to have the effect of raising the performance of those at the bottom of the academic scale while not providing enough for the academically talented.

But Fordham's Petrelli insisted that the gifted would not be held back. He added that "Stotsky and others have been engaged in willful disinformation."

Stotsky believes otherwise.

"Common Core is designed, as I saw in a very early version, as a set of social-justice standards," Stotsky contended. "The goal is to close the demographic gap. That in itself is a worthy goal, but depends on the means to the end."

Said Stotsky, "Common Core makes no accommodation for an academic track or for different types of learners — some who learn faster than others; some who learn slower than others; some who like to read and write; some who prefer to work with their hands."

Charlotte Hays writes from Washington.

Read more: <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/common-core-education-standards-generate-catholic-concerns/#ixzz2Yb50vMMk>