

Christian Schools and the Common Core

By Sheri McDonald

Standards-based education is nothing new in the United States. Even prior to the federal law passed in 1996 requiring states receiving Title I monies to develop standards, educators have sought to assess student performance in meaningful ways. It is impossible to measure student growth if there are no clear targets for what students are expected to know and be able to do. Standards provide a measure that allows teachers and administrators the opportunity to reflect on instructional practice and make decisions about curricular strengths and weaknesses on the basis of assessment data. If common standards are used, comparisons can be made within a school, district, state, or country to assess elements of program effectiveness. By no means does this single data point tell the entire story, but it provides valuable information in the continuous improvement cycle for schools striving for excellence.

The question becomes, What standards? Much of educational reform in the United States over the last 15 years has centered on the development of state standards and the subsequent assessments to monitor mastery of said standards. Schools could compare student progress with other schools on these objective measures, but proficiency across states could not be compared because of different standards and criteria for "mastery." It has been difficult to evaluate how schools are doing in comparison to schools across the nation or even internationally. If students are to be successful in the post-secondary world, in college, and in their careers, they must be prepared on a level that serves them well wherever they may go.

Developing national standards has been problematic on many levels. There has always been and will continue to be debate over what is considered the nonnegotiable body of knowledge that defines a quality education. Experts within a given field, various cultures, and different countries all may have different expectations for what constitutes that core knowledge base. Who gets to make the final decision, and can organizations opt out of implementation? For Christian schools, there is the added layer of consideration for the spiritual development of students. The integration of biblical truths must undergird

the educational experience for students. This creates the bedrock in which to anchor content knowledge, which allows deep roots in faith while attaining high levels of academic rigor: critical thinking, problem solving, and other twenty-first-century learning skills that are essential for students to develop.

For public education in the states, this debate currently revolves around the development and implementation of Common Core State Standards. Most states have chosen to adopt the Common Core, and critics have expressed concern that they have only done so because of potential strings to federal monies for which they would otherwise be ineligible. Others are concerned it may lead to more governmental control. While public schools should weigh in on these issues and help determine appropriate parameters for implementation, these same concerns are really nonissues for private schools, Christian or otherwise, who are not bound by the same mandates or regulations as public systems. There is no federal funding attached to private schools nor any requirement to implement the Common Core. Private schools have the luxury of weighing the value of the standards on the basis of their own merits. The issue becomes more about what role, if any, these standards should have in a student's course of study. Are they worth paying attention to, and should they play a major role in guiding curriculum choices for private schools because they are of value? It is simply a question of truth: "Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master" (St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II.18.28, www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.xix_1.html). Are there truths within the standards that should in fact be a part of that nonnegotiable body of knowledge that makes up the core of what should be taught in Christian education to best serve students? In his *Philosophy of Biblical Integration in School Curriculum*, Greg Bitgood, pastor of Christian education for Kelowna Christian Center Society, states it this way: "We can know truth outside of the Bible and in fact, to seek truth exclusively within the confines of scripture would be to rob the reality and splendor of such statements in

scripture as: *The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.* Psalms 19:1–2" (3).

Where the Common Core Standards fall short of this standard of truth, private schools have the ability to modify and adjust to ensure integrity within the curriculum. Biblical integration is not at odds with content standards, and it should remain in the forefront for planning a solid course of study to develop both spiritual understanding and academic excellence: "Nothing ... will be taught—without first working through the lens of a Christian worldview perspective. This rigorous process is what Christian Education is ultimately about—regardless of the 'world's' content, Christians must filter that content through biblical criteria to discern whether or not it is to be rejected, accepted, or transformed" (Reichard 2013, 3).

One School's Perspective

At Mariners Christian School, with Blue Ribbon honors, we believe that academic excellence does not have to be sacrificed in favor of spiritual development. Rather, we strive, in whatever we do, to "do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV). The majority of our students matriculate into public high schools, so we must be aware of and aligned to the expectations for our students in various content areas. We understand the challenges of developing strong believers who will go forth into this world as future doctors, lawyers, missionaries, teachers, designers, scientists, athletes, programmers, and so on. In their excellence, they bring glory to God. In an ever-changing society that relies more heavily on a student's ability to communicate, work with others, think deeply, and bring content from multiple disciplines to bear on solving real-world problems, the Common Core Standards provide a framework for us to monitor our students' growth on these critical objective measures connected to twenty-first-century learning.

With a heavy focus on reading increasingly more complex text, the standards themselves do not dictate how to teach or even what text to use, allowing our teachers to exercise their professional judgment and training in biblical integration to meet or exceed the standards in their instructional practice. For example, a second-grade reading standard includes a comparison of two or more versions of the same story by different authors or from different cultures. Teachers can just as easily do this using the varied accounts of Jesus' life and ministry

through the Gospels as they can using different versions of the Cinderella story. We use the Common Core as a baseline (not a ceiling) for challenging our students to high levels of achievement while thoroughly integrating biblical teaching.

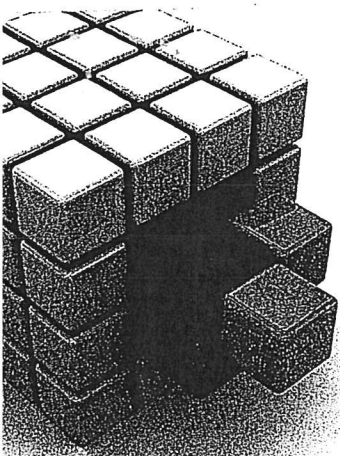
Technology and social media have forever changed the amount of information students have access to and must sift through to determine truth. The critical thinking skills necessary to do this kind of evaluation are the same skills we want our students to possess in order to "be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [them] to give the reason for the hope that [they] have" (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). The release of the Next Generation Science Standards (in April 2013) has afforded us the opportunity to model for our students how to think through statements potentially at odds with our faith. We are anticipating issues in connection with differences in our belief of intelligent design versus evolution, but these will be easily managed. In doing so, we help students understand the need to respond intelligently to the beliefs of others knowing we have truth on our side. We will do the same when standards are released for social studies. In cases in which we disagree with the truth behind the content, we will continue to train our students to respond with logical arguments that account for their beliefs.

In the end, Common Core Standards are a step in the right direction to support the academic needs of our students in relation to the skill sets and knowledge they need to be successful in the twenty-first century. To ignore Common Core Standards completely is to miss the potential for developing students into the leaders of this next generation—leaders who stand for Christ while attaining high levels of academic achievement, which will open doors to make an impact on the world for His kingdom.

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Going Beyond the Common Core

By Dan Beerens

Over the past three years I have frequently been asked what I think of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in education. I suppose it goes with the territory; as part of my professional work, I have had one-on-one conversations with over 130 Christian schools that were trying to determine whether or not to align to the CCSS. The vast majority chose to align, not because of my urging, but because of the desire of these schools to continue to make helpful changes for student learning. When I agreed to write this article, I decided that what might be most helpful is to offer perspective rather than position or politics. I will offer a broader frame of reference in this article, and I am not going to suggest that we get tied up in knots about the CCSS in Christian schools. Just so you know where I am coming from at the outset, I believe that the CCSS overall are helpful tools and a worthwhile addition to strengthen our schools. They are a piece of the puzzle but not the ending point of our goals in Christian education.

① The Bigger Picture

What do I mean that they are a piece of the puzzle but not the ending point? In Christian education we acknowledge the importance of knowledge, but in order to meet our missions we must challenge students to go beyond knowledge—to understand the wisdom of God as revealed by Jesus Christ. The espoused aim of public education is for two primary purposes: economic gain and citizenship. Christian education seeks to go beyond benefit to man or society, to advancement of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Christian education looks at humankind holistically, including our reason for existence, our function as spiritual beings and image bearers of God, and our need to worship. The stated goal of the use of CCSS is to prepare students with the necessary skills to be successful in college and careers. There's nothing wrong with that, but it is just incomplete! The Christian student should understand that it is not primarily about success but service, not about winning but worship, and not about having it all but living in harmony with God, neighbor, creation, and self.

Christian education, if done faithfully and well, starts and ends in different places from public education. We should start with a different view of the child, of the world, of our neighbor, of how we know anything—not simply man's investigation but God's revelation. We should end in a different place with students—replacing personal success and economic gain with a deep understanding of what it means to be gifted and called by God to serve and worship Him in this world. The journey should also look a bit different for the student in terms of what we assess and how we assess student progress and helping the student with perspective and priorities with time, talents, and treasures. Excellence is to be understood as a by-product of our desire to love God with our minds, hearts, and bodies—a pouring out of ourselves, not as an end in itself. Excellence is what results from devotion, determination, curiosity, creativity, persistence, and personal application in the learning process. The CCSS can help in this learning process, but these standards are only a part of the larger journey and outcomes we seek for students in Christian education.

② Impressions of the CCSS

So, what about the CCSS standards and benchmarks? I am encouraged by their emphasis on thinking, reasoning, writing, informational text, and asking students to support a stand. Any efforts to move us out of our overemphasis on the lower portion of Bloom's Taxonomy (60 percent of classroom instruction according to a recent research study) into the upper half—evaluation, analysis, synthesis, and creation—should be most welcome! These standards give our students some common expectations across a global and mobile society. They are not the end-all; the CCSS received an A- and a B+ in the Fordham Institute rankings (whereas certain state standards have received an A), but they are a marked improvement and they convey a higher degree of rigor than many states that received a B grade or below (Fordham 2011). We can expect that their perceived weaknesses will be improved over time, and we also know that states have the liberty to add up to 15 percent of their own content to the CCSS

set. It is important to keep in mind that they are descriptions of desired student results, not the means to attain those results. The CCSS are not a curriculum, but they are clear goals and expectations. Additionally, these standards have stimulated a national educational focus and discussion like I have not seen in my lifetime, and that is a healthy thing! As I consider their merit, these questions run through my mind: (1) Do they have the potential to produce "better fruit" if used appropriately by schools? (2) Can our students benefit from and achieve these standards? (3) Can they help Christian schools improve our teaching and learning for our students? I believe that the answer is affirmative to each question.

③ Christian Educators—Copycats or Creative Forces?

Sometimes in Christian education we pay too much attention to what is happening with our neighbors, and sometimes not enough! In this case I think that we should not waste too much time or energy on critiquing and politicking about the CCSS. We should adopt thoughtfully and use well what is worthy from the CCSS, but we should recognize their incompleteness. What we should be spending time on is a discussion of the outcomes that go beyond CCSS—the ones that help us to develop our missions and our distinctiveness. We should be spending time on "whole child" and "flourishing" outcomes and how we might understand student progress in these areas. I have proposed that the outcomes we should be most concerned about are the ones that point to how we reflect God's image and how we can live in harmony with God, neighbor, creation, and self (see the list below). If you asked most parents and educators, I believe that these

are the true outcomes we desire for students at the end of their K-12 educational journey and the real reasons Christian schools exist in the first place. (You can read more about what is intended by each of these outcomes on the Nurturing Faith blog, <http://nurturingfaith.wordpress.com>). These outcomes will demand that we assess different things with our students and provide different experiences along the journey—a truly uncommon core!

These standards are only a part of the larger journey and outcomes we seek for students in Christian education.

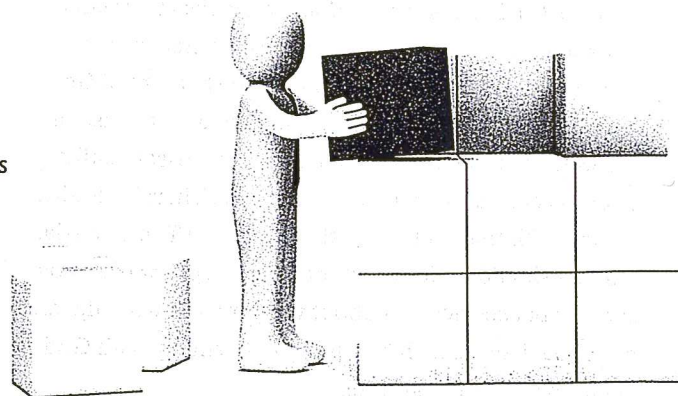
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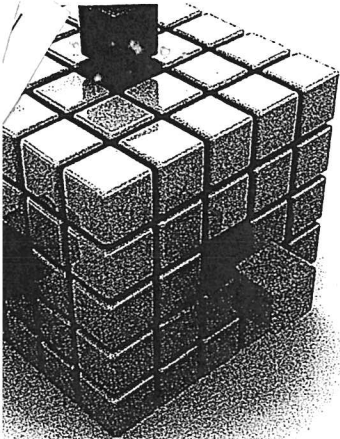
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The Flourishing Index (Desired Student Outcomes for Christian Schools)

- Passion for learning
- Desire to serve and make a difference
- Ability to see connections
- Blooming where planted
- Thinking divergently and creatively about problems and solutions
- Ability to demonstrate empathy for others
- Desire to act morally and ethically across all aspects of life
- Understanding of how God has gifted and called them
- Demonstration of effective life habits and spiritual disciplines
- Determination to bring joy and hope into the lives of others





So, What About the Common Core State Standards?

Unless you have just returned from a two-year trip to Mars, you are keenly aware that the education world is abuzz with yet another hotly debated issue, namely the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). And hotly debated may be too much of a nicety to describe some of the discourse that has erupted. To say the CCSS have had a polarizing effect would be an understatement. But it is not the purpose of this article to add to the debate. Rather than adding fuel to an already raging inferno, ACSI will present a reasoned response from which you can develop your own talking points since you will, no doubt, have to answer CCSS questions from your school's constituency.

It is important to begin this response with a bit of the history. The CCSS Initiative is a joint effort between the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The stated goals for the initiative in 2009 were as follows:

- Upgrade the standards used by the states to reflect the needed rigor and demands.
- Align the standards with the most rigorous education in the international community.
- Utilize the standards to better prepare teachers for the classroom.
- Provide accountability that will be useful to schools, districts, and states.
- Serve as a basis for assessing students by international benchmarks.

These groups established collaborative partners to "provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce" (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2012). In June of 2010, the first of the CCSS, English language arts, was rolled out. Since then, standards for mathematics and science have been developed, and most state boards of education in the United States have accepted the CCSS as the guiding standards for their respective states.

Almost immediately, criticism began to fly about the CCSS, including the following:

- The standards reflect a "lowest common denominator" for the various states.

- The standards overemphasize skills over content knowledge.
- There are specific curriculum directives, especially in the language arts standards.
- The U.S. Department of Education is leveraging acceptance of the standards with federal funds.
- Gains, particularly in mathematics, would be lost by following the standards.
- National standards are an unnecessary intrusion into education, which is primarily a state and local issue.
- No private school associations, groups, or educators—sectarian or secular—were invited into the discussions and development of the CCSS.

More recently, criticisms of the CCSS have centered on the assessment process to measure student progress in relation to the CCSS. Some states have even initiated action to allow for more time to prepare for these common-core-aligned assessments.

The assessments for the CCSS are being developed by Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Sample questions are available on the Web for mathematics and English language arts. In addition, the College Board has endorsed the CCSS, and it is in the process of aligning its testing with the standards. And standardized testing vendors are already in the process of aligning current test items and new tests in development with the CCSS. Test results reporting will also be adjusted to identify the level of mastery by students on the aligned test items.

While the CCSS have been initiated by the business community and supported by CCSSO and the NGA Center, the secretary of education has indicated that individual states would continue to control educational decisions for their state and that federal funding would weigh toward states that adopt the standards. Sister Dale McDonald of National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) noted, "Maintaining the independence of the private schools in their choices of curricular and program designs may become more difficult as these schools struggle to balance

the demands of their mission and the expectations of their constituents and the wider education community" (2011, 66).

Doug Reeves, highly respected educator and the founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, gives a reasoned presentation on the CCSS, in which he recommends the following actions for schools (2011, 23):

- Find the common ground between present curriculum standards and the CCSS.
- Appreciate the push to some best practices such as more informational writing.
- Prioritize the important standards and ensure that they are being met.
- Embrace the idea of formative assessment as critical to effective evaluation.
- "Use the standards as a floor, not a ceiling."

It is the position of ACSI that the CCSS are a reality to be carefully and thoughtfully faced. School educators will need to be generally aware of the impact they will have on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The CCSS are not comprehensive, but more a list of guidelines for what a student should know or be able to do. There is no indication, at this point, that the CCSS will be imposed on Christian or other private schools, but as the CCSS become the "national consensus" it is expected that parents and supporters will begin to ask about how the school curriculum and achievement results align with the standards. And not surprisingly, the conversations about CCSS have become highly politicized.

ACSI recommends the following for Christian school leaders and educators:

- Ensure that the philosophical foundations of Christian school education are used to evaluate the CCSS, including your school's responsibility to effectively educate all students.
- Filter the CCSS through a biblical worldview as the highest standard, and only align with CCSS to the extent that your school's mission and worldview are uncompromised, while being prepared to identify and explain the points of conflict.
- Make yourselves aware if your state has adopted the CCSS, and whether or not your state has adopted the CCSS, review the standards and become familiar with them including the coding of standards, clusters, and domains for the various subject areas.
- Separate the CCSS content and skill statements into priorities and determine to what degree they match with your school's grade-level scope and sequence.

- Evaluate your school's grade-level curricular standards, and determine to what degree they generally match, exceed, or fall short of the CCSS.
- Don't adopt the CCSS as a wholesale benchmark for curricular quality in your school.
- Use the standards as an informational piece regarding the national and global educational context in which you are preparing our students.

Welcome back from your trip to Mars if all of this is new information. If not, let's agree to work together for the very best education possible for the children that God has given us the educational responsibility for in the school in which you serve Him. It might be easy to get caught up in the political rhetoric that is accompanying this issue, but let's not let that detract us from the mission to which God has called us.

Resources for Further Review

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