



A Christian Education Perspective on the Common Core

What is Common Core (CC) and Where Did It Come From?

The CC is a new set of curriculum standards for Math and Language Arts designed nationally to improve education in America. The standards are intended to be more challenging than most current state standards and better prepare students for jobs and college. There are fewer standards overall and they emphasize problem solving skills over memorization of facts. Ohio is developing its own set of new curriculum standards in the subjects of Science and Social Studies.

According to the published literature, the movement was initiated by the college and business communities who claim that most students do not have the skills they need upon HS graduation to succeed in today's world. The standards were created from a joint effort between the National Governor's Association (NGA) for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in 2009 and were released in 2010. Over 40 states, including Ohio, immediately accepted the new standards. States were given a financial incentive to adopt the standards through the possibility of receiving competitive federal "Race to the Top" grants.

Expressed Concerns with the Common Core

National reaction to the CC seems to be dividing the issue into two parts. First and most strident, are the concerns that this is a movement toward a nationalized education system, absent of state or local control, and based on standardized testing. Second, the content of the standards themselves has raised questions about their validity and potential political agenda. Other published criticisms have included the following (ACSI resource):

- The standards reflect a "lowest common denominator" for the various states.
- The standards overemphasize skills over content knowledge, especially in the primary grades.
- National standards are an unnecessary intrusion into education, which is primarily a state and local issue.
- The US Dept. of Education is leveraging acceptance of the standards with federal funds.
- There are specific curriculum directives, especially in language arts standards.
- Academic gains, particularly in mathematics, would be lost by following the standards.
- Teachers in states such as Ohio will clearly "teach to the test" as they are graded on performance measures.
- No private school associations, groups, or educators were invited to the discussions of the standards.

Pursuing a 21st Century Education

Two points of emphasis for the standards are worth noting as they relate to better preparing students for jobs and college. First, the appropriate and ethical use of technology in both academic and real world settings represents a sensible shift of focus. There is no debate that technology has transformed our society. Most jobs, even traditional "blue collar" jobs such as automotive technicians, skilled laborers, and farmers are realizing significant changes to their workplace via technology. In terms of future employment, we agree with the Ohio Dept. of Education that, "Jobs and careers in the 21st century will demand even more technologically savvy students, creative and innovative thinkers, and young entrepreneurs who can communicate and collaborate across cultures, countries, and continents." Understanding and using technology to advance the human condition is a worthy pursuit for Christian education and the ability to continually improve our lives through history (i.e., surgical procedures, curing diseases, transportation...) speaks to the amazing minds created for us by God.

Second, instructional shifts designed to promote deeper understanding of content have focused on the importance of the "Four C's for a 21st century education:" critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. While these ideas are not new and should always be the goal of a quality education, their emphasis is the logical and realistic result of living in an increasingly complex world. The abilities to solve challenging problems, work together, and communicate clearly have expanded to include those around the world, not just our local communities. Teaching and learning these skills have always been essential to our progress as a nation and Christian education further recognizes and develops such life skills as central to our testimony and effectiveness in living for Christ.

Red Flags

Despite such emphases on providing an education that is relevant for today, several of the concerns with the CC movement are persuasive. For instance, new standards always drive curriculum change and companies are feverishly creating new materials for schools to purchase. The shrinking number of textbook publishers nation-wide means fewer options for schools and similar texts across states. While the designers of the standards are touting the importance of the soft skills (The Four C's) or how things are learned, there is no question that what is learned (the content of these texts) will become equally significant from state to state. National standards, like the federal government and the textbook companies, will be subject to enormous pressure to represent the causes of special interests groups. For private schools that exist to serve a mission not shared by such groups, maintaining independence will be even more challenging as they scrutinize and measure new content against the Christian worldview.

National curriculum changes motivated by the comparison of global standardized test results and the need for the business community to fill jobs is questionable. It is well-documented that standardized test preparation is the primary goal of the centralized, government-run education systems in those countries identified as top performers. Yet, it is American-educated adults that are most often responsible for many of the world's greatest advances in the 20th and 21st centuries. Driven by a culture that values local control of schools, the American system shows respect for individual talents, encourages creativity, and fosters innovation in both students and teachers. Why abandon this successful approach simply for better test scores? (Read, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, by Yong Zhao for more on this premise). Further, new performance-based evaluation measures based on standardized testing for public schools and teachers will certainly force educators to give more time and attention to what will be evaluated or risk losing their jobs. Judging teachers on test results fails to account for the enormous impact of other variables on student performance such as parent support or resources. Such a practice is highly uncommon in Christian schools where educating the "whole child" is paramount to standardized testing.

Getting to the Core

Common Core has gained attention because it is a national education movement supported by the federal government. The idea of school standards based on some common public consensus is not new however. Each state has been writing its own standards driven by businesses, textbook companies, colleges, and professional associations, and then passing them on to the schools. These standards have long ignored the Christian perspective, hence the need for Christian schools and Christian curriculum. A movement to national standards is a larger version of what we already have, and the contextual consideration is now the global marketplace (world), rather than the state or region. There is no federal funding attached for private schools nor any requirement to implement the Common Core. Private schools will decide what role, if any, these standards should have on a student's course of study.

Currently, the values that drive common or public education in this country show no regard for the biblical worldview. Unfortunately, God and His Word are treated as irrelevant to the learning experiences of students by a curriculum intended to be "religiously neutral." Parents of public school children pay their property taxes for schooling determined by some public group that may or may not share their family values – this is the dilemma for parents in America – who decides what will be taught? You get what you pay for in this case and if you want the Christian perspective in our country, you must pay for private school or choose to home school.

Christian school educators need to be generally aware of the impact the standards will have on curriculum, instruction, textbooks, and assessments. Accordingly, teachers need to know the content standards for Ohio, students need to know what is on the standardized tests, and our school systems need to address essential 21st century learning skills. However, at schools such as VCA, the common core standards will be used as a floor or baseline, not a ceiling. True education comes as we reach for the ceiling, meaning those outcomes that are most important to our Christian faith. "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)

God created the world and all truth is God’s truth. Our curriculum reflects this standard as our highest aim, not the standards created for us by a state or national group that treats religious beliefs as personal matters to be kept out of school. Inevitably, standards that do not include the truth of God’s Word will pull students further from the Lord, and Christian schools will be forced to guard their missions closely in the days to come.

Dr. Cy J. Smith, Sept. 2013