



Understanding Common Core

What Parents Need to Know About the National K-12 Standards

written by:
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FOR HEATHER CROSSIN, AN INDIANA MOM OF FOUR, THE FALL OF 2011 WAS AN ODYSSEY OF HOMEWORK FRUSTRATION. HER THIRD GRADER ROUTINELY BROUGHT HOME WORKSHEETS FEATURING “FUZZY MATH” WITH ODD APPROACHES TO PROBLEM SOLVING. HEATHER COMPLAINED TO SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, ONLY TO LEARN THAT HER PRIVATE CATHOLIC SCHOOL—REQUIRED TO ADMINISTER STATE TESTS THROUGH ITS PARTICIPATION IN A VOUCHER PROGRAM—HAD ADOPTED THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS AND MATH STANDARDS KNOWN AS COMMON CORE. A FEDERALLY FUNDED TEST FOR STUDENTS WAS ON THE WAY.

An epiphany followed for Heather: “I realized that the locus of control was so far removed from my little school,” she says. “Rather than bang my head against the wall there, I decided to take it to where I thought the power resided, which is down at the state house. I discovered that Indiana had actually forfeited that power to entities outside the state—private trade associations—who could care less what I think. That concerned me.”

Heather, who had never tweeted, leveraged social media to share information. She and friend Erin Tuttle printed an informational tri-fold at Kinko’s, marshaled support from pro-family groups, and

spoke at political gatherings. Her state senator—who sat on the Senate Education Committee—knew nothing about Common Core, but agreed to craft legislation after learning more. In 2013, Indiana lawmakers voted to “pause” Common Core; in March 2014, Indiana’s governor signed legislation officially dropping the standards.*

Heather had no “master plan,” but says she felt compelled to share the facts. “We were just so frustrated that no one knew this had happened... If I had really been asked, ‘Do you think you can stop this?’... I would have laughed. I wasn’t thinking in those terms,” Heather explains. “I was just [thinking], ‘I’m not going to let them do this without telling people.’ It was shocking to me that something as large as this had happened, and [that] such a huge shift in power had occurred, and literally, nobody knew anything about it!”¹

Origins of Common Core

So, what, exactly, is Common Core, and how did it get here?

Common Core is a set of K-12 standards or benchmarks in mathematics and English that stipulate what students should know at every grade to be ready for college and work. According to its mission statement, Common Core is intended “to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.”² To date, 45 states, including North Carolina, have adopted Common Core’s math and English standards for their public schools.

Spearheaded by a small cadre of education influencers, the development of Common Core began in earnest in 2009 as a venture between the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, along with the help of Achieve, a nonprofit directed by governors and business leaders. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided millions in funding.

David Coleman, now president of the College Board (publisher of the SAT), led the standards-writing process through Student Achievement Partners, an organization he co-founded with fellow Common Core writers, Susan Pimentel and Jason Zimba. Groups comprised primarily of university professors, state officials, and representatives from testing companies and education organizations helped develop and review the standards.³ The validation process was closely guarded: committee members were instructed to keep discussions confidential.

Three months before final release, the standards’ developers solicited public comment. Some 10,000 individuals—almost half of them K-12 teachers—responded. Feedback, condensed into a skinny nine-page document, was depicted as largely favorable, yet noted that “few respondents believe the current

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education system is well prepared to meaningfully implement” Common Core.⁴

Nevertheless, on June 2, 2010, the final standards were released. North Carolina was one of the first states to sign on: at its June 2010 meeting, the State Board of Education voted to adopt Common Core. The North Carolina General Assembly later moved to codify Common Core in state statutes.⁵

Public Response

Despite palpable enthusiasm from governors and state school officials, many key stakeholders have remained uninformed about Common Core. A 2013 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll revealed that 62 percent of Americans and 55 percent of public school parents had never heard of Common Core.⁶

Still, early opposition began to harden during 2012-13, the first year of implementation in North Carolina and in a number of other states. Parents

and elected officials began asking questions. In July 2013, North Carolina Lieutenant Governor Dan Forest sent a letter to State Superintendent of Public Instruction June Atkinson, requesting answers to 67 questions about Common Core’s development and implementation.⁷

Critics’ concerns cut a wide swath: How will states fund implementation costs? What will happen if states back out? Will data-collection invade student privacy?

The most fundamental and pervasive criticisms of Common Core, however, are that the standards diminish local control; are developmentally inappropriate for young students; lack rigor in the upper grades; and reduce education to workforce preparation.

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The stakes are high indeed.

Diminished Local Control

Despite ongoing claims that Common Core is a “state-led” effort, the standards embody a centralized approach that diminishes local control. Common Core leaves little room for innovation: states adopted the standards in full, with a small margin for additions. Washington, D.C.-based associations retain “all right, title, and interest” in and to the standards.⁸

While the federal government did not develop the standards, it manipulated states into adopting them. The Obama Administration’s \$4 billion-plus Race to the Top competitive grant program tied receipt of federal dollars to adoption of common standards. (North Carolina received \$400 million through Race to the Top.) States seeking waivers from the *No Child Left Behind* law were required to show they had adopted common standards, or standards approved by higher education institutions. The U.S. Department of Education has funded the two consortia writing national tests, and implemented a technical review process to supervise test development.⁹

What troubles critics most about such centralized control? The U.S. Department of Education is prohibited by law from “direction, supervision, or control” over curriculum.¹⁰ While Common Core is a set of standards, not curriculum, it *will* drive curriculum. Assessments will also shape classroom content, as instructors teach to the test.

In a 2012 report, Robert Eitel and Kent Talbert, a former Deputy General Counsel and General Counsel of the U.S. Department of Education, concluded that Common Core standards and tests:

will ultimately direct the course of elementary and secondary study in most states across the nation, running the risk that states will become little more than administrative agents for a nationalized K-12 program of instruction, and raising a funda-



mental question about whether the Department is exceeding its statutory boundaries.

Common Core will deepen the divide between distant decision-makers and classrooms, further eroding the autonomy of those closest to students—those who know and serve them best. Local school boards, principals, teachers, and parents are thus disenfranchised.¹¹

Developmentally Inappropriate

Additionally, critics say Common Core pushes young children to demonstrate skills that are developmentally inappropriate. Common Core's mathematical practices, for example, require students to "reason abstractly" beginning in kindergarten. But children cannot engage in abstract thinking until age 11 or 12, according to child clinical psychologist Megan Koschnick. In a speech, Dr. Koschnick noted wryly:

They say that teachers wear many hats: they're mentors, they're mothers, they're fathers.... But after reading these standards, I'm afraid that they're going to have to wear another one. And that would be the hat of magician.¹²

All conjuring aside, experts have been sounding the alarm on Common Core for several years. More than 500 early childhood health and education professionals signed a 2010 statement expressing "grave concerns" about Common Core's K-3 draft standards, which "conflict with compelling new research ... about how young children learn, what they need to learn, and how best to teach them in kindergarten and the early grades."¹³

Lacking in Rigor

Paradoxically, while Common Core accelerates academic pressures for younger students, it makes school less rigorous for older students. The only mathematician on Common Core's validation committee, Dr. James Milgram, refused to approve the final math standards, saying he could not certify that they kept pace with high-achieving countries. Moreover, Dr. Milgram noted that "no solid research" supports Common Core's approach to teaching geometry, and the standards make "no provisions for eighth grade algebra."¹⁴ Finally, Dr. Milgram and others have indicated that Common Core includes very little trigonometry, "no precalculus or calculus," and will not prepare students for selective colleges or higher education coursework in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).¹⁵ In English, critics worry that the standards minimize classic literature. Common Core stipulates a 50-50 split between informational and literary texts in elementary school, and "substantially more" nonfiction than fiction in middle and high school.¹⁶ The seminal books of the Western canon must thus defer to high school informational

Why Not Common Core?

Common Core:

- Diminishes Local Control
- Sets Developmentally Inappropriate K-3 Standards
- Lacks Rigor in the Upper Grades
- De-emphasizes Classic Literature
- Fails to Prepare Students for College Coursework in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics)
- Exalts Workforce Preparation over Truth and Knowledge

texts, such as "Recommended Levels of Insulation" by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or an article in *The New Yorker* about exorbitant health care costs.¹⁷

What will be lost from English classrooms? Dr. Sandra Stotsky, the English language arts standards expert on Common Core's validation committee who refused to approve the standards, explains:

We will lose a lot more from Common Core's de-emphasis on classic literature than we realize at present. First, we will lose some of the complex literature written in the English language in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (and earlier). Classical curricula, such as those in charter high schools featuring a classical curriculum, are not compatible with curricula that, for accreditation, must address test items in English language arts tests that require students to relate earlier works studied to a contemporary work....

Second, secondary English teachers may be compelled to teach only excerpts from long works because of Common Core's emphasis on informational texts in the English class. Use of excerpts from, or summaries of, literary works is already happening in many classes, according to anecdotal reports.

Third, students will lose opportunities for developing analytical thinking when the study of complex literary works is reduced. Analytical thinking is developed when English teachers teach students how to read between the lines of a literary work.¹⁸

Workforce Preparation Over Knowledge

Most fundamentally, Common Core's functional focus exalts workforce preparation over the acquisition of truth and knowledge, despite the fact that education has historically served nobler ends. Skill sets necessary for the modern marketplace are

What Can You Do?

- Get informed. Access the Common Core Toolkit at www.stopcommoncorenc.org
- Join networks on social media to share information
- Learn more about the work of the North Carolina General Assembly's Committee on Common Core State Standards. Access the committee's website here: <http://www.ncleg.net/gascripts/DocumentSites/browseDocSite.asp?nID=242>

pushed down all the way to early elementary school. In addition to reading traditional texts, for example, young students who are just discovering the joy of learning must read and understand “technical texts” beginning in second grade—presumably because they will one day encounter such dense, dreary material at work.¹⁹

Perhaps nowhere has debate over the purpose of education stirred more emotion than in the Catholic community, where many of the nation's private Catholic schools are implementing Common Core. This development prompted the Cardinal Newman Society to launch a “Catholic is our Core” initiative, rejecting Common Core as a “woefully inadequate set of standards” that “limits the understanding of education to a utilitarian ‘readiness for work’ mentality.”²⁰ This fall, more than 130 Catholic scholars signed a letter to every U.S. Catholic bishop, calling the standards a “recipe for standardized workforce preparation.”²¹

But a precocious teen has presented the most blistering critique of all. In a five-minute speech on Common Core before the Knox County, Tennessee School Board in November 2013 (since watched by millions on YouTube), Ethan Young said:

Everything is career and college preparation. Somewhere our founding fathers are turning in their graves—pleading, screaming, and trying to say to us that we teach to free minds, we teach to inspire, we teach to equip. The careers will come naturally.²²

What's Next: Common Core in N.C.

Debate over Common Core will intensify, as public awareness and dissatisfaction grow. According to a recent poll of registered North Carolina voters, 53 percent want to “slow down or halt” Common Core implementation; 55 percent believe the State Board of Education did not solicit “sufficient feedback from teachers, parents, and educators” before adopting Common Core.²³

Statewide, a closer look at Common Core is underway. In the spring of 2013, the Raleigh-based Civitas Institute and other concerned citizens launched the joint project, Stop Common Core

North Carolina (SCCNC). The purpose of SCCNC is to equip North Carolinians with accurate, current information about the Common Core standards, and efforts across the state and nation to oppose them. National consortium tests will garner extra scrutiny: a provision in the 2013 budget requires the State Board of Education to obtain legislative approval before purchasing new assessments. Additionally, the State Board has voted to use North Carolina-developed Common Core tests through 2015-16. And in recent months, state lawmakers solicited and reviewed expert and public opinion on Common Core through the work of a Legislative Research Commission study committee.

Efforts to “move beyond” the flawed Common Core standards should be judicious, transparent, and informed by the perspectives of numerous key stakeholders, according to Terry Stoops, Director of Education Studies at the John Locke Foundation. In his February testimony before the legislative study committee, Dr. Stoops proposed that the state legislature create commissions to review Common Core standards, and to offer feedback on testing and curriculum.²⁴

Lawmakers listened. At the study committee's final meeting April 24, members proposed draft legislation (titled “Replace Common Core to Meet NC's Needs”) to remove Common Core from state statutes and establish an Academic Standards Review Commission to evaluate Common Core. The Commission would make interim and final recommendations about changes to the standards.²⁵

So what should concerned parents do? Take heart—and action. Connect with like-minded parents. Talk to local and state school board members. Most importantly, communicate concerns to elected representatives in the North Carolina General Assembly. Replacing Common Core (and implementing the study committee's recommendations) will require the passage of legislation by the General Assembly.

Above all, activist parents in North Carolina need patience and perseverance, as Heather Crossin learned. “[In Indiana], we have watched public officials change—even ones who voted for [Common Core] when it was first adopted,” she says. “But it didn't happen immediately. It takes patience to move the debate. You have to be in it for the long haul.”

But, as Heather's efforts proved, what a punch impassioned parents can pack—even against a formidable foe. “It is amazing and shocking,” says Heather, “what a difference a few people can make.”

**Education activists (including Heather) have expressed concern that Indiana's new standards replacing Common Core are inadequate. Heather's fight for rigorous standards continues. ❖*

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Understanding Common Core

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