



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.

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.

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 claim. Any efforts to move us out of our overemphasis on the lower portion of Bloom's Taxonomy (80 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.

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

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



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.

Reference

Thomas B. Fordham Institute. 2011. Standards central: Fordham's reviews from the U.S. and abroad. <http://standards.educationgoadfifty.net/>.

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