

Common Core and Diocesan Catholic School Leadership

Organizing Committee of the Los Angeles Superintendents Conference

As Catholic school leaders across the country have learned, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a national topic of debate. This was not lost on a group of Catholic school superintendent during the 2013 meeting for Chief Administrators of Catholic Education (CACE) when several Diocesan school leaders entered into a discussion regarding the CCSS and its impact in their schools.

Advocates for the CCSS believe the standards are long overdue and provide a clear avenue for K-12 students toward career and college readiness. Those who oppose the CCSS believe the standards remove local control of a school system and are ambiguous in their implementation. They also sense the CCSS will result in federal overreach into schools, loss of parental rights, a dumbing down of academic rigor, and a diminishment of a school's Catholic identity. Not surprisingly, the CCSS have become a political issue as opposed to an educational matter. This disparity has resulted in some misinformation and misunderstanding that has made meaningful dialogue about the CCSS within academic and Catholic circles challenging.

As a result, a group of 45 Catholic superintendents, representatives from USCCB and NCEA, and educational vendors accepted the invitation to meet at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles for in- depth discussion of the CCSS.

During the conference, presenters provided evidence and data on the CCSS, including but not limited to a comprehensive overview the standards, their current application in Catholic schools across the nation, and their impact on the need for more instructional resources.

Catholic Schools have been, are, and will remain Catholic

Standards are not new to Catholic schools. (Arch)dioceses have reviewed, adapted, adopted and/or rejected standards for nearly as long as there have been Catholic schools. Each (arch)diocese has responded to state standards with the intention of meeting the needs and common good of the schools in the (arch) diocese. It is recognized that our Catholic Church provides Catholic schools with the latitude to meet the unique needs of their students. As determined by the local ordinary, this philosophy of subsidiarity provides each diocesan Catholic schools office the opportunity to ensure that its schools strive to meet the needs of their students.

Catholic schools are distinctive because we can attain that goal. Catholic schools do not compartmentalize the education of the whole child into the religious and the secular. Instead, we aim to achieve a true education through a Catholic worldview that sees education - religious and secular - through the lens of our ultimate end. It is with this in mind that each Catholic school student receives an integrated and whole

education, as well as the fullness of instruction that is the distinctive charism of the Catholic school.

That distinctive charism of the Catholic elementary and secondary school is the child's moral right to be provided with an integrated and whole education as well as fullness of instruction. This full integration is what makes a Catholic school different from any other educational enterprise in the United States.

The Reality of Implementing Standards

As part of the conference, one diocese explained its experience with the Common Core outlining the process from curriculum alignment and professional development to the assessment and results based on the Common Core Standards. The journey was three years in the making.

In year one, emphasis was placed on instructional shifts, preserving Catholic identity, and building the capacity of instructional leaders and the understanding of teachers. This included professional development for principals and teachers through various modalities. The other component for its first year was the creation of English-Language Arts and Mathematics unit plans. In year two, instructional specialists were engaged to provide a multitude of resources and to help capture the work of the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative. The two challenges were getting teachers to shift from using the textbook as a curriculum to using the textbook as a resource and aligning four Mathematics textbooks as a resource to the unit plans and standards.

In its third year, there was a new form of assessment that used different types of questions to assess student academic progress. In preparing for the new assessments, interim assessments that were aligned to the Common Core were implemented, as well as an increase in the instructional time for Mathematics. Based on its experience, it was recognized that the Common Core challenges included:

- deconstructing the standards
- reviewing all materials for Catholic appropriateness
- funding and time for quality professional development
- differentiating professional development for schools and teachers that are now at different places along the transition continuum
- meaningful use of the assessment results to improve teaching and learning.

The Impact of Instructional Materials

One of the greater challenges in implementing academic change hinges on the availability of excellent instructional resources. Publishing quality scholastic materials is a three year process. It may take publishers 2-3 years to provide the classroom teacher with a text and aligned resources able to address the standards in a comprehensive and formidable manner.

Currently, there are consumable products that can be distributed more quickly. However, in order to meet the academic integrity expected by Catholic schools, reputable publishing companies conduct a systematic research, writing, and editing processes that require a serious investment of time and resources on their behalf and therefore, patience from Catholic school leaders.

Growth = Leadership + Innovation

Understanding the transition to implement any change at the diocesan level is also recognizing the critical need for leadership excellence at both the (arch)diocesan and building level. Professional growth of this caliber requires a willingness to disrupt the professional status quo and rededicate efforts to ensure an academic environment focused on the best interests of students.

Catholic school leaders facing change are encouraged to focus on strong and clear Catholic Identity (Faith), rigorous academics (Excellence), and active stewardship. With specific emphasis on academic growth, educators are being asked to be innovative and focus on what and how their students learn.

Collaboration, Solidarity, Collegiality

The attendees culminated their time together discussing three important questions.

- 1) What is it that you want people to know and understand about the Common Core?
- 2) What is it that you want people to know and understand about implementing standards in Catholic Schools?
- 3) What do you believe about the Common Core?

After much discussion and debate, the group reached consensus regarding the CCSS and offer the following comments to Catholic school leaders.

As Executive Diocesan Catholic School leaders, we believe that

... Catholic communities should know that there is substantial distinction between standards and curriculum and that Catholic school curricula is built upon the mission of the church, diocese and school, and are informed by academic standards.

... regardless of any standards, the development of curriculum and assessments are built upon our mission and Catholic identity and that implementing academic standards have been and will be a careful and deliberate local process in each diocese to ensure academic excellence.

... the Common Core State Standards call us to renew our commitment to excellence and equity, to continue to provide a curriculum that is rigorous and relevance in our schools. As executive leaders of Catholic schools, we recognize that change is necessary for maximum student achievement and we will continue to answer this call, while maintaining our faith tradition, mission, and Catholic identity.

This new and singularly-focused meeting format directed by and to Catholic school leaders was well received by those in attendance. Comments such as: “the fact that superintendents can get together to discuss urgent topics is great”, and “people came from all over the country each with their own particular needs and circumstances yet you left feeling supported and resolved as you move forward.”

There was certainly an agreement among the participants that we face a multitude of challenges on a daily basis and that there is a definite need for collaboration, solidarity, and collegiality to address these issues as a unified group of Diocesan Catholic school leaders. With such high marks for the conference format and the seemingly endless list of topics, discussions are in process for a second meeting to address a different Catholic school topic in February 2015.