



Association of Christian Schools International Position Statement on the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI)

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a reality that will affect all U.S. schools. They have been adopted by most states. Christian school educators will need to be generally aware of the impact the standards will have on curriculum, instruction, textbooks, and assessments. The CCSS are not comprehensive for each content area, but they selectively identify standards that are common to many states and the content standards of the professional associations. There is no indication, at this point, that the CCSS standards will be directly imposed on Christian or other private schools, but as the CCSS become the “national consensus core curriculum,” parents and supporters will ask about how the school curriculum and achievement results align with the standards. The conversation has become highly politicized in areas of state and local control, federal funding, and particularly assessment of the CCSS. This intense discussion of standards is an opportunity for Christian educators to express the distinctive value of a biblical worldview applied to an academically rigorous curriculum and to participate in a gracious, thoughtful, and rational response to this movement.

Background on the Common Core State Standards

The CCSS Initiative is a joint effort between the U.S. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). These groups established collaborative working groups to “provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce” (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2012a). Most of the states have accepted the CCSS as the guiding standards document for their state instructional standards. The standards, to this point, have been developed for mathematics, English language arts (ELA), and science.

Mission and Goals for the Common Core State Standards Initiative

The mission of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) is to “provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed 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. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy” (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2012b). The stated goals for the initiative in 2009 were as follows:

- Upgrade the standards used by the states to reflect the needed rigor.
- 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.

Responses to the Common Core State Standards

Criticism

- 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.
- Internationally benchmarked national standards are an unnecessary intrusion into education, which is primarily a parental, local, and state issue.
- No private school associations, groups, or educators—sectarian or secular—were invited into the discussions of the CCSS.

Comments

Doug Reeves 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.”

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 the 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 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 educational community” (2011, 66).

Karen Prior, an education professor, notes the following: “Despite my own skepticism toward the countless education reforms I’ve seen in almost 25 years of teaching, the Common Core reading standards hearten me not only as an educator, but more so as a Christian who recognizes the centrality of words to our faith.” She continues, “My colleagues and I in higher education see the deficits in reading comprehension far too often in the college classroom. The kind of sustained, deep reading taught through Common Core will require more discipline—on everyone’s part—but the rewards will have exponential results” (2013).

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. The College Board has endorsed the CCSS, and it is in the process of aligning its testing with the standards. The standardized testing vendors are already in the process of aligning present test items with CCSS and developing reports that indicate the level of mastery by students on the aligned items.

Recommendations for Christian School Leaders and Educators

- Ensure that the philosophical foundations of Christian education are used to evaluate the CCSS.
- Filter the CCSS through a biblical worldview as the highest standard, and only align with CCSS to the extent that the 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 in a CCSS state or not—review the standards for familiarity including the coding of standards, clusters, and domains for the various subject areas.
- Separate the standards' content and skill *statements* into priorities and determine to what degree they match with the school's grade-level scope and sequence.
- Evaluate the school's curriculum and determine to what degree it generally matches, exceeds, or falls short of the CCSS.
- Don't adopt the CCSS as a wholesale benchmark for curricular quality in the school.
- Use the standards as an informational piece regarding the national and global educational context in which we are preparing our students.

This statement has been affirmed by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), Christian Schools International (CSI), Oral Roberts University Educational Fellowship/International Christian Accrediting Association (ORUEF/ICAA), and the National Christian School Association (NCSA).

Resources for Further Review

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