

The Common Core and California Catholic Schools

A Statement by the Superintendents of Catholic Schools in California

“Educating the young generations...in the Catholic school is a serious commitment that must not be taken lightly. It must be duly prepared and sustained through an initial and permanent project of formation that is able to grasp the educational challenges of the present time and to provide the most effective tools for dealing with them within the sphere of a shared mission. This implies that educators must be willing to learn and develop knowledge and be open to the renewal and updating of methodologies, but open also to spiritual and religious formation and sharing. In the context of the present day, this is essential for responding to the expectations that come from a constantly and rapidly changing world in which it is increasingly difficult to educate.”

(Congregation for Catholic Education, 2007)

Catholic schools have a long tradition of providing a rigorous academic education in an environment where faith is taught, nurtured and grown. As Catholic school superintendents in California, we take our responsibility to ensure that this tradition is maintained very seriously. While the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were created primarily for public schools we have concluded after much research, thought and discussion that the rigor and clarity they provide will benefit our Catholic school students and will allow them a better opportunity to excel at a high academic level.

While we recognize the independent value of the CCSS, we also recognize and hold sacred the tremendous responsibility we have as Catholic educators to pass on the faith. The Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative (CCCII which can be found at www.catholicschoolstandards.org) assists Catholic elementary and secondary schools in integrating elements of Catholic identity (Christ’s Gospel message, Catholic values, Scripture, Church social teachings, encyclicals, etc.) into curriculum and instruction based on the CCSS. In every sense, the CCCII goes “beyond” the Common Core State Standards. Embracing the goals of the CCCII we support the implementation of the Common Core State Standards within the culture and context of a Catholic school curriculum; an approach which will infuse the Common Core State Standards with the faith, principles, values, and social justice themes inherent in the mission and Catholic identity of our schools.

Standards in Catholic schools are not new. Since 1997, most Catholic schools in California have provided instruction based on the California State Standards. Thus, standards should not be seen as intrusive or novel but should be welcomed by all those who support effective teaching that leads to student achievement and growth. Standards are a roadmap of educational benchmarks – the destination where we want students to ultimately arrive. They are not curriculum, which is a specific course of study, and can be viewed as the vehicle we drive to reach the destination. In our professional view, the CCSS provides a clear roadmap of academic expectations, allowing students, parents and teachers to collaborate in reaching these goals by choosing to implement the curriculum they deem most effective for their individual school. This maintains another wonderful tradition in our schools that of autonomy and local site decision making.

We strongly support the CCSS because they add clarity to the teaching and learning process while also adding more rigor as articulated by university readiness standards, most notably the UC system. Not teaching to these new standards will put our students, collectively, at a disadvantage in the college testing and application process. They more clearly align what is taught from grade to grade in order to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for our students to collaborate and compete with their peers. The CCSS do this, in part, by providing for deeper analysis, text-based responses, and critical thinking for English Language Arts (ELA) and an integration of conceptual understanding, computation, and application for math. The CCSS give guidance and a clear direction to best prepare our students for success in college and careers.

We want to stress that Catholic schools are not, and have never been, mandated to use state curriculum or resources and they will continue to choose their own texts and materials in accordance with Catholic values. Catholic Schools in California have always ensured that the standards that guide instruction in the classroom are infused with our Catholic faith. All we do in Catholic schools is within the context of our individual and communal relationship with Jesus Christ and all that is taught in Catholic schools is from a Catholic worldview and infused with strong Catholic identity.

As professional educators who are committed and dedicated to Catholic schools, we have spent years researching, studying and analyzing which resources and materials are most effective in engaging students in the learning process, both from an academic perspective and a faith perspective. The CCSS infused with the CCCII will provide our teachers and schools greater opportunities to provide rigorous academic instruction in the nurturing environment of our Catholic faith. Most importantly, they will better prepare students to achieve their individual, God-given potential and become leaders in both our Church and society.

Kevin Baxter, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Elementary Schools
Archdiocese of Los Angeles

Msgr. Sal Pilato
Superintendent of High Schools
Archdiocese of Los Angeles

Maureen Huntington
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Archdiocese of San Francisco

Rick Sexton
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Fresno

Kathleen Radecke
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Monterey

Sr. Barbara Bray, SNJM
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Oakland

Greg Dhuyvetter
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Orange

Rick Maya
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Sacramento

Patricia Vesely
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of San Bernardino

Tom Beecher
Director of Schools
Diocese of San Diego

Kathy Almazol
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of San Jose

John Collins, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Santa Rosa

Tom Butler
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Stockton



November 21, 2013

Letter to Members of the Committee on Catholic Education
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Recent private and public (media) discussions have left some confusion in the minds of many, including bishops and Catholic educators and parents, about the place of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Catholic schools. We strongly believe that this confusion, if allowed to remain unchallenged, could lead to a lessening of the excellence we have come to expect in Catholic schools as well as diminishment of their very Catholic identity. As a university that has invested significant resources and talent for more than a decade in support of excellent and authentically Catholic PK-12 schools, we feel obligated to offer these considerations to the members of the USCCB Committee on Catholic Education so that any decisions coming from you and the USCCB are more fully informed.

As you are well aware, Church teachings and Canon Law specify that Catholic schools must be both academically excellent in every way (Code of Canon Law, Canon 806 #2) and deeply infused with and focused on encounter with the person of Jesus Christ and fostering a life of virtue. Archbishop J. Michael Miller in his book, *The Holy See's Teachings on Catholic Schools* (2006), speaks often of the core responsibility of Catholic schools to integrate faith, culture, and life. He speaks of the need to recognize that they are *schools* and thus carry a responsibility to prepare students for professional life as well as the virtuous life of followers of Jesus.

Throughout Church documents on the Catholic school and Catholic education, one finds no mutual exclusivity between standards and authentic Catholic identity. For decades, Catholic schools in this country have been using state and national standards to develop academically rigorous curriculum integrated with Catholic values, beliefs, teachings, and tradition. In more cases than not, Catholic schools have used these standards *to go beyond the standards* in designing and implementing their curriculum. Why won't or can't Catholic schools achieve the same or greater excellence and Catholic identity if they now use the CCSS instead of previous state and national standards?

The claim of opponents that the CCSS are less rigorous is simply mistaken. Compared to most previous state standards, CCSS require more higher level thinking, both analysis and synthesis; more problem solving; more careful argument tied closely to textual evidence; more reading, writing, speaking, and listening; and deeper understanding of mathematical concepts to support problem solving in new situations. These are skills all children need not only to succeed in college and life, but also to transform the world on Gospel terms.

Opponents claim that the CCSS will dictate what Catholic schoolteachers must teach and how they must teach, and that CCSS will require texts that undermine Church teachings and/or prohibit important classics that nurture students' inner lives. This claim is also mistaken, resting on a misunderstanding of the difference between standards and curriculum.

Both standards and curriculum are two very different components of excellent education. They are intertwined, but they do not serve the same purpose and cannot be substituted one for the other. A school or district can embrace and publish standards, and yet not have a defined curriculum. A school or district can develop a curriculum that is not based on outside published standards. Neither course of action would be wise or effective, but it is possible. Standards describe the broad endpoints of a projected learning sequence (in this case K-12 schooling). They typically describe what students should know and be able to do at the end point and also at benchmarks along the way (often grade levels). As they are stated, standards are typically too big and too vague to define what teachers will do to teach their students today, and tomorrow, and the next day. That is the curriculum – what to teach specifically, how to teach it, and how to ask students to demonstrate that they have learned what was intended.

For example, one of the fourth grade Common Core State Standards for reading literature states: “Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.” (RL 4.1) It does not specify which text or how the teacher will guide students to be able to do this close reading. Another standard states: “By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, in the grades 4–5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.” (RL 4.10) Again, the standard does not specify which texts to use or how they will be taught.

Many opponents of the CCSS point to Appendix B as proof that objectionable texts are required and that some classical texts are prohibited. **The concern that Catholic schools won't be allowed to use their own texts is a misread of the Common Core State Standards. No Catholic school is required to use any of the texts in Appendix B and they may add other texts.** For a Catholic school to follow the standard here requires only that the texts the school uses be on the level of text complexity appropriate for the grade. Surely, intelligent, faithful, and concerned Catholics cannot oppose Catholic children reading a text closely for accuracy and meaning, making reference to evidence from the text. Nor would they be opposed to setting the expectation that all children are reading texts at or above grade level. The standard specifies what students will be able to do with an appropriately complex text. The school and the teacher choose which texts they will use.

To believe that Catholic schools can and must continuously improve in their integration of faith, culture, and life is worth working for. It is not, however, to conclude that they cannot effect this integration while adapting the CCSS. They can and they will. The standards can move all of us to better education and demonstrate the viability and excellence in Catholic education required by Canon Law and passed down as a legacy from generation to generation.

In order to eliminate confusion about the common core and Catholic schools, we urge you to look to the true experts -- those *practicing educators* in all levels of Catholic education

who are actively and reflectively engaged in the actual design and implementation of excellent and authentically Catholic curriculum using the common core. Before deciding the common core is antithetical to the mission and identity of Catholic schools, ask these educators and the parents to show you what their children are learning and how. You will be pleased.

Finally, we are sending this letter to members of the Committee, copied to superintendents, in a spirit of honest, concerned communication. Much of the rhetoric and allegations offered by the opponents of the CCSS in Catholic schools are factually and professionally incorrect. The FAQs available on the national website (www.cccii-online.org) and also on many archdiocesan websites provide some assistance. Perhaps you will invite Catholic educators in your own archdioceses to develop additional well-informed references. Sr. John Mary could assist in convening a qualified consultative group.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters more fully as the dialogue continues. Thank you for your support of excellent, authentically Catholic schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michael J. Garanzini".

Michael J. Garanzini, S.J.
President and CEO
Loyola University Chicago

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michael E. Dantley".

Michael E. Dantley, Ed.D.
Dean, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lorraine A. Ozar, Ph.D.".

Lorraine A. Ozar, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Catholic School Effectiveness
School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

cc. Superintendents of Catholic Schools