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Common Core: Catholic school community gives standards mixed grade

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The Common Core State Standards -- expectations for students to master in each grade level -- have a love/hate/ambivalent relationship with the American public.

The state-led initiative -- adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia -- has been embraced by many educators, viewed with distrust by some parents and also gone unnoticed by much of the American public.

A poll released Aug. 21 by Phi Delta Kappa International and Gallup found that 62 percent of the American public has never heard about these standards that are changing the way students are taught almost nationwide.

A number of Catholic school parents hardly fall in this uninformed category. Instead, they are very aware of the standards and not happy about them.

Many have expressed outrage that Catholic schools are, or might be, implementing them and have signed petitions and joined letter-writing and email campaigns to tell school principals, diocesan school superintendents and bishops their complaints.

They feel the standards will "dumb down" Catholic schools or require them to use materials that go against Catholic teaching. They also suspect this learning approach is federally mandated and simply a tool to access students' personal data.

Some have threatened to pull their students out of Catholic schools to home-school them, but they also are concerned such standards will encroach upon their home teaching. The Seton Home Study School, a network for Catholic home-schoolers based in Front Royal, Va., said parents do not have to comply with Common Core.

The standards -- developed in 2007 by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers -- emphasize critical thinking and problem solving and are touted as a means to better prepare students for college and the job market. Although states decide if their public schools will use them, they have some financial incentive to do so since it enables them to apply for competitive federal education grants.

The Common Core standards were released in June 2010 for math and English. They have not been developed for other subjects yet.

Private schools can use the standards or not, but implementing them has no bearing on whether those schools can tap into federal grant money.

Joe McTighe, executive director of the Council for American Private Education based in Germantown, Md., said private schools are "all over the lot" with this. Some are embracing Common Core; others are tapping into some of its resources; and some view it as beneath what they already do. He said nationally, the Catholic school

community has included the standards' material more than other private schools.

According to the National Catholic Educational Association, 100 dioceses have been looking into implementing aspects of Common Core into their curriculum.

Last year, the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness at Loyola University Chicago's School of Education developed the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative to help Catholic educators incorporate Catholic identity into the standards.

The NCEA has not endorsed Common Core but has provided workshops to help Catholic schools if they wish to implement them since they are now part of new textbooks, teacher training and testing, and will be part of the revamped SAT, the traditional college entrance exam.

In a statement issued in May, the NCEA emphasized that this teaching approach "is not a national curriculum" but provides benchmarks to guide "the way that instruction takes place in each classroom, allowing the Catholic school to develop its own curriculum content."

Sr. Dale McDonald, a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the NCEA's director of public policy and educational research, said the difference between standards and curriculum is key. For example, when the standards highlight reading and understanding nonfiction passages, Catholic schools can choose the material to achieve this goal; they do not have to follow recommended texts.

She also told Catholic News Service Aug. 22 that standards are by no means new since many dioceses have adopted state standards into their own curriculum for years.

Dominican Sr. John Mary Fleming, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Catholic Education, stressed that Catholic schools are not federally mandated to implement the Common Core standards, nor do they have to supply the government with student data.

She also noted that curriculum decisions are filtered through Catholic school superintendents.

In recent months, many superintendents have tried to allay parents' fears in statements and letters stressing that Common Core is not mandatory for Catholic schools nor is it being adopted in full or as a curriculum.

An Aug. 19 statement issued by Catholic school superintendents of Illinois stressed that Catholic schools will "determine what to adapt from the Common Core standard according to what best fits our unique mission. We will never allow the faith and the education of our children to be comprised."

Jim Rigg, superintendent of schools in the Cincinnati archdiocese, said in a letter to Catholic school parents that Catholic schools in that archdiocese "are adapting, not adopting" the standards and would be making them more rigorous by "infusing them with the Catholic faith."

He said parents' concerns about the overreach of the federal government or its data mining efforts turn Common Core into a political issue.

"As private schools, we can harness the benefits of the Common Core while avoiding any potential political entanglements," he said.

Similarly, Dan Peters, superintendent of schools for the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., said in an Aug. 27 statement that the diocese will review its curriculum on a regular basis and will only adopt aspects of Common Core that support the Catholic school mission.

Superintendents' statements have not been enough for Coleen Carignan, one of the founders of the group Pittsburgh Catholics Against Common Core. She said she and members of her group met with a diocesan official who was "cordial but dismissive" of them, which she said has happened to other Catholics across the country.

She said the group continues to gain attention online from Catholics with similar concerns and she is convinced the issue will continue to gain momentum as the grass-roots effort puts it "on the forefront."

Her fear is that Catholic schools' long "tradition of academic excellence and moral development" will be replaced with "institutionalized mediocrity" with adoption of the Common Core.

Emphasizing Catholic schools' excellence is something Fr. Peter Stravinskas, founder of the Catholic Education Foundation, said needs to be highlighted in talking about the standards.

The Rochester, N.Y.-based Catholic Education Foundation is co-sponsoring a conference in November called "Catholic Concerns About the Common Core" that he hopes will "come up with concrete suggestions of how to work with it, around it and through it."

As he sees it, "Catholic educators have something to offer the broader education community" and should not be afraid to do so.

Stravinskas, who spoke to CNS on Friday from Ireland, where he was speaking at a conference, said Catholic educators should look at the Common Core with neither "blanket condemnation nor blind acceptance" but with ideas on how to implement it or not based on their own high standards.

On a practical note, he indicated that the standards were not going away and whether or not Catholic schools use them, "our students will be held to them."

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