

## Statement on Common Core in Catholic Schools

*The fundamental difference between religious and other forms of education is that it's aim is not simply intellectual assent to religious truths but also a total commitment of one's whole being to the Person of Christ." (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, The Catholic School #50)*

Catholic schools have a long-standing tradition of academic excellence and a deeply held commitment to the full moral development of their students in the context of the Catholic faith. Parents have made tremendous personal and financial sacrifices to provide this opportunity for their children. Catholic schools have a success that is the envy of the public school system as well as other secular private schools. With this in mind, we are troubled as to why our present Catholic educators seem so willing to betray this proud history by embracing the mediocrity of the Common Core State Standards.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a set of national education standards written and copyrighted by the National Governors Association and the Chief Council of State School Officers (CCSSO), both private trade organizations. These groups were heavily financed by wealthy entities such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. They are not "state led" as the proponents claim. Unfortunately, 45 states agreed to adopt these standards, in exchange for the promise of "Race to the Top" funds and waivers from "No Child Left Behind". The Common Core State Standards were never voted on or approved by any legislature. They were quietly agreed to by unelected bureaucrats in the states' departments of education without the knowledge of the elected representatives or voting public.

*"Catholic Schools need to pay attention to the fact that Common Core Standards and assessments are here and it is important to get on board," - Lorraine A. Ozar, Ph.D, founding Director of the Loyola University Chicago, Center for Catholic School Effectiveness.*

The Common Core State Standards are being pushed into Catholic schools under the guise of The Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative (CCCII). Not all schools are using CCCII, and are solely using the secular Common Core Standards. The CCCII is a collaborative program written by a team that is lead by Dr. Lorraine Ozar. It was developed to assist teachers and principals in implementing the Common Core Standards. This initiative is aggressively marketing its Exemplar Templates to Catholic schools as a way to graft Catholic Identity and values into the secular Common Core Standards. Unfortunately, the National Catholic Educational Association has been actively promoting CCCII through conferences, online programs, and trainings.

The Common Core State Standards is purported to have been designed to address the severe deficits in the public education system. The advocates Common Core have promoted the standards by using such glowing terms as state led, rigorous, internationally benchmarked, voluntary, college readiness, and evidence based. We oppose CCSS because we believe that in reality, the Common Core Standards do not fulfill any of these promises.

**Pittsburgh Catholics Against Common Core** was founded by a concerned group of Catholic parents united by our profound belief that the imposition of the Common Core Standards in our Catholic Schools will be a great detriment to them and our children. We firmly believe that if these standards are agreed to and the curriculum is aligned to these standards (by using CCCII or

not), then the quality of Catholic education both academically and spiritually will be diminished. Unlike the National Catholic Educational Association, we find many flaws in the CCSS and disagree wholeheartedly with their assessment that these standards “can and must connect to Catholic schools”. We object to Common Core and the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative on numerous grounds, chief among them are:

- Academic Standards Will Be Lowered. The Pioneer Institute’s white paper entitled, “Controlling Education from the Top”, does an excellent analysis of Common Core and states that “The Common Core Standards are of mediocre academic quality.” Proponents of the Common Core Standards “have conceded that the Standards are clearly inferior to those of several states and no better than those of about a dozen states. More objective analysts have concluded that in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, the Common Core Standards are deficient.” This directly contradicts the NCEAs contention that “The Common Core State Standards are a set of high-quality academic expectations that all students should master by the end of each grade level.”

*“Common Core’s focus on skill sets rather than true content is unlikely to genuinely educate students in English, reading, rhetoric, or composition.”- Dr Sandra Stotsky, Common Core Validation Committee*

The English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum clearly diminishes the importance of classic literature in favor of non-fiction informational texts. The standards dictate that by fourth grade only 50% of the students’ reading assignments are fictional literature and by the time students are in their senior year, the required ratio of informational texts to literature is 70% to 30%. CCSS emphasizes less reading assignments and more re-reading of texts, or “close reading”, less vocabulary words and more studying of the “webs” around the words most frequently used in conversation.

*[W]hat appalls me most about the standards ... is the cavalier contempt for great works of human art and thought, in literary form. It is a sheer ignorance of the life of the imagination. We are not programming machines. We are teaching children. We are not producing functionaries, factory-like. We are to be forming the minds and hearts of men and women.---* Dr. Anthony Esolen, editor of *Magnificat* and English professor at Providence College

Dr. Sandra Stotsky of the University of Arkansas, a member of the Common Core validation committee, and developer of the Massachusetts standards (considered to the best in the country) refused to sign off on the Common Core English Language Arts curriculum. She has been very critical of the ELA standards stating they are “empty skill sets”...and that they “weaken the basis of literary and cultural knowledge needed for authentic college coursework.” Dr. Stotsky invalidates claims made by proponents of CCSS that the standards create “college readiness” and the NCEA’s contention that the “standards establish consistent learning goals for all students that focus on preparing them to succeed in college. She analyzed examples of high school complexity in Common Core and found that the “average reading level of passages on the common tests now being developed to determine ‘college readiness’ may be at about the 7<sup>th</sup> grade level”. This is hardly “college ready” by any standard.

*“I kept asking for information on the research base for the English Language Arts standards that were being developed... and I couldn't get any information at all. There was no evidence from any kind of research that a stress on informational reading and writing would prepare students better for college level work than an emphasis on... complex literary texts.” - Dr. Sandra Stotsky.*

The Common Core Math standards have been described by math experts as a “bitter disappointment” and they fall far short of what we should be offering our children. By the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, students will be two years behind their counterparts in comparable developed countries. The mastery of many math skills has been pushed back to later grades. For example, CCSS do not require proficiency in addition or subtraction until grade 4, multiplication until grade 5 and division until grade 6 all of which are a full grade behind states with more rigorous standards. Algebra is pushed back from 8<sup>th</sup> grade until 9<sup>th</sup>, which will make it very difficult for students to fit calculus into their schedules before they graduate high school. In addition, the CCSS do not teach common denominators in fractions, fail to teach conversions between fractions, percents and decimals, and redefine algebra by cutting back on traditional algebraic manipulations. But what is also interesting about the math standards is that they actually push developmentally inappropriate concepts down to the lower grades, including algebraic concepts, and heavy word problems that children in younger years are not neurologically capable of understanding. This is all done in the name of “rigor”, but there has been no research or evidence to suggest that these shifts are valid and even achievable for children and teachers. This is where the notion of “experimentation” on our children is applicable.

Professor R. James Milgram of Stanford University and the only mathematician on the Validation Committee also refused to sign off on the CCSS math standards because they were so poorly written. Professor Milgram concluded that the Standards simply do not qualify as “comparable to the expectations of other leading nations.” He states that “In most high-performing countries, calculus is a high school graduation requirement. It’s almost a joke to think students [who master the common standards] would be ready for math at a university.” The Pioneer Institute’s analysis agrees and concludes that “college readiness” as defined by Common Core refers not to a four-year university but to a nonselective community college.

*“The Church herself in particular looks with confidence and trust to Religious Institutes which have received a special charism of the Holy Spirit and have been most active in the education of the young. May they be faithful to the inspiration of their founders and give their whole-hearted support to the apostolic work of education in Catholic schools and not allow themselves to be diverted from this by attractive invitations to undertake other, often seemingly more effective, apostolates.” (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, The Catholic School #89)*

- The Common Core Standards are experimental and NOT internationally benchmarked. One of the ways CCSS have been sold to educators and the public is by claiming that they are internationally benchmarked to other comparable nations. However, no supporting documentation was ever given to the Validation Committee to support these claims. According to Christopher H. Tienken, the only “hard” evidence the CCSS supporters have to show are “two homegrown documents” entitled “Myths vs. Facts” (NGA 2010) and the “Joint International Benchmarking Report” (NGA, 2008). The Myths document bases its claims on the “Benchmarking for Success” report that was conveniently created by the NGA and the CCSSO, the writers of the CCSS. One could hardly call this an independent research paper. A review of

the research relied upon in the “Benchmarking for Success” report only produced four studies actually related to national education standards. The rest of the cited research consisted of newspaper and op-ed pieces, magazine articles, and telephone interviews; clearly this does not represent any real hard science. The “International Benchmarking report” used as its primary source of information, “The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development”, a research report that is terribly flawed in logic and methodology.

Clearly, the CCSS are experimental and untested. It is irresponsible to roll out CCSS and their aligned curriculum across the country, in such a short and urgent time period, when they have never undergone a trial run anywhere. In fact, Kentucky started using the math standards and they have seen the test scores of their students fall dramatically. The math proficiency test scores of their students fell from 73% in 2010-2011 to 40.4% in 2011-2012 under Common Core.

- Common Core Standards will threaten religious liberty and lead to social indoctrination of our children. The writers (NCEA) of CCCII claim that its purpose is to “design and direct the implementation of the Common Core standards within the culture and context of a Catholic school curriculum” and “to infuse the Common Core standards with the faith/principles/values/social justice themes inherent in the mission and Catholic identity of the school.” Unfortunately, when we looked at the curriculum being promoted on the CCCII website, we find that these statements are inaccurate and misleading. Some of the approved books included in the CCCII Exemplar Unit templates promote the homosexual agenda. Books such as “Who’s in a Family” by Robert Skutch and “The Family Book” by Todd Parr, appear on the 1<sup>st</sup> grade reading list. These books highlight gay and lesbian partnerships along with a variety of non-traditional families. We would like to know why the authors of the CCCII curriculum feel that this topic is not only appropriate but also perfectly acceptable to teach at the first grade level in Catholic schools? Another optional text that is provided via a website link in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum is “Gay America: Struggle for Equality” by Linas Alsenas, which misrepresents the gay movement as a civil rights matter. There are also banned books recommended in CCCII, named “Go Ask Alice” (about drug addiction and deviant behavior), “I am the Cheese” (about depression and psychological problems) and “Daddy was a Number Runner” (sexual abuse), as a way to infuse Catholic Identity and teach about the 7 Themes of Catholic Social Teachings.

Why are Catholic educators and the NCEA embracing this curriculum that clearly promotes controversial books that do not exemplify Catholic moral teaching and overtly advance dark and disturbing ideas to young souls?

*“Catholic Schools in collaboration with parents and guardians as the primary educators, seek to educate the whole child by providing an excellent education rooted in Gospel values.”—The National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools.*

CCCII Exemplar Templates along with CCSS promote a disingenuous form of social justice; they purport to advance traditional Catholic teaching while furthering an extreme left political agenda. The Templates contain many links to websites that support socialist activities, and liberal book lists. These types of resources will confuse the students and hamper the ability of the teachers and parents to provide a strong moral foundation consistent with the true Catholic teachings and catechesis.

In one Exemplar, the students are directed to make a mock Facebook page to learn about social networking. This is not a rigorous or classical education that we would like to see in our Catholic schools, yet the NCEA is promoting this very content.

In the CCCII, the 4<sup>th</sup> grade unit entitled, “Making Waves”, distorts Catholic social teachings and is focused on molding the child to become radical activists and “community organizers” in the name of Social Justice. This brand of “social justice” is similar to the Liberation Theology movement from Latin America that was later admonished by the Vatican. It focuses on wealth redistribution and fairness over true growth in the person and holiness. In essence, the CCCII curriculum effectively reduces the Church to a mere social and political organization that is being used to serve an agenda that would ultimately dilute Church teachings and confuse Catholic parents, teachers, and children.

It should be noted that if a school or Diocese is NOT using CCCII as a resource, they are still members of the NCEA and are being exposed to these ideas and methods via their memberships benefits, teacher conferences, and superintendent conferences and meetings (through CACE, an affiliate of NCEA that the superintendents are members of). Further, if they are not using CCCII, they are solely using Common Core and relying on their own tools to implement Common Core. If this is the case, then parents and teachers are finding exemplars and book lists that are even more disturbing, that include book lists that have pornographic themes and content. This has all been documented by parents across the country. We are hearing school administrators say that they will not use these books and that they are optional. But the PROBLEM lies in the very idea that Common Core is supported, created, and promoted by groups and people that BELIEVE that this material and these methods are OK for our children. *Why would the Diocese and our Catholic leaders even consider aligning and partnering with anyone or any group that promotes this insidious material for our schools?*

*Bipartisan Common Core defenders claim their standards are merely "recommendations." But the standards, "rubrics" and "exemplars" are tied to tests and textbooks. The textbooks and tests are tied to money and power. Federally funded and federally championed nationalized standards lead inexorably to de facto mandates. Any way you slice it, dice it or word-cloud it, Common Core is a mandate for mediocrity. Michelle Malkin, journalist*

- Common Core State Standards effectively eliminate school choice. American Parents have always had freedom of choice when it comes to deciding where their children would attend school. Many choose Catholic schools over public, private, cyber or home schooling because they value the moral and religious instruction as much as the academics. Often times, this decision required significant financial sacrifice on the part of the parents but they willingly shouldered this burden because they deemed their children’s education to be worth it. The Common Core curriculum is mandated at the federal level and the local school boards will NOT be able to make changes. They may layer only 15% onto the curriculum – not change it. This takes away local control of education by not allowing parents, administrators, educators, and school boards to adapt where they see fit. We believe that this 15% falls far short of what the Catholic schools will need for their curriculum. The NCEA will argue that they are not beholden to the federal rules, however if the tests align with CCSS, then the curriculum will have to be followed for students to excel on them. This will leave little room for such classes as religion, Latin, and philosophy that are so steeped in Catholic tradition. In fact, we have been told by an administrator in the Diocese that they were not allowed to use a specific textbook because it was

deemed “too religious” by the state.

*“When the tests are aligned to the Common standards the curriculum will line up as well”--Bill Gates*

We fear that the implementation of CCSS is a back door way of ending school choice. The NCEA states “The Common Core State Standards are not a curriculum. A curriculum includes what is taught, when it is taught, how it is taught and what materials to use”. We believe their reasoning is flawed.

All standardized tests will be aligned with the Common Core Standards, e.g. the SAT, ACT, and Keystone exam. This essentially nullifies school choice because all textbooks will have to fall into line with Common Core and educators will have no choice but to align their curriculum to the standards so their students perform well on their college entrance exams. With this, the distinction between private or Catholic schools and public schools will be minimal since all will be beholden to the Common Core Standards. We fear that if the diocese does not reject CCCII and effectively eliminate the influence of CCSS in our schools that they will be willing participants in the demise of Catholic schools.

The CCCII and NCEA are promoting an exorbitant amount of resources, materials, and guidelines to Catholic educators across the country. These resources are nothing BUT content and they teach how to use the Common Core standards, down to the types of questions that the teachers should be asking their students and how to change their behavior for their desired outcome. The guidelines are so complex, that it would almost be impossible for the teachers to not become dependent or reliant on them. But yet, the NCEA continues to state that Common Core is voluntary.

- Common Core will erode our privacy rights by instituting a student data mining system. The recent revelations of government tracking of phone calls and emails, and the harassment of chosen groups of people by various government agencies has left many Americans with a profound sense of distrust of the very people we have chosen to serve us. These allegations make this aspect of Common Core all the more disturbing. Common Core requires all states to institute a longitudinal data mining system that tracks over 400 data points on every student from pre-school to age 20. The data mining is a concept that has been advocated and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. They have put hundreds of millions of dollars into promoting this. The personal and sensitive data collected on students AND their families will be widely available to other government agencies and most anyone affiliated with the school and education.

The computerized tests children take in school provide a bridge that allows for collection of their personal information. This data will be tracked in the educational data mining system and sent to the Department of Education. The type of information they are allowed to collect is frightening...biometric data (fingerprints, iris patterns, retina, and voiceprints), school bus times, homework completion, family income, religious affiliation, voting records, nicknames, extracurricular activities, athletic teams, blood type, medical and psychiatric history. This issue is very serious. We are not sure of the status of data collection in Catholic schools. However, we have seen presentations by the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness that contemplate how and where to collect data from. Further, assessments inherently serve the purpose of

monitoring behavior and then providing feedback on the assimilation of desired knowledge and skills and how well that child is adapting to that desired outcome. These new standards and accreditation agencies are now very focused on digital learning and assessments. We are guessing that it won't be long before this creeps in to Catholic schools.

In light of the federal requirement for the data mining, the current administration has "conveniently" relaxed the FERPA (Family Education Rights and Privacy Act) laws so much that just about any government agency has access to our children's information. The school is allowed to give our children's information out to third parties without the parent's consent or knowledge that the information is being released. Our parental rights are being trampled. So with this, the question is, what is the technology plan for the Diocese and how will teaching, and testing be incorporated into that?

*"Pope Benedict XVI [Emeritus] says Catholic agencies must sometimes refuse partnerships that would even indirectly support activities opposed to the Christian view of the human person."*

The Department of Education's February 2013 report "Promoting Grit, Tenacity and Perseverance" calls for the collection and analysis of this data in order to develop psychological programs to promote Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance. These are the traits the bureaucrats in Washington deem to be desirable in our children. This type of secretive data tracking and psychological manipulation of our children should certainly be decried by our Catholic leaders in a loud and unified voice. The federal government has absolutely no standing when it comes to shaping our children's character, personality, and moral compass. That is our job as parents and one of the primary reasons why we send our children to Catholic schools.

Those who advocate for Common Core State Standards and the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative do so on the basis of academic rigor and real world relevance neither of which we found to be present in the standards. As of yet, there has not been any standards available for evaluation related to the character forming traits they propose to espouse. Since we find the Math and ELA standards so lacking, we hold out little hope for the social studies, science, and history standards, which are more vulnerable to distortion and anti-Christian agendas.

Pittsburgh Catholics Against Common Core stand with the thousands of parents across the country who oppose the Common Core State Standards and the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative. Parental opposition has been so strong that four states have temporarily halted Common Core. Pennsylvania put the implementation of the standards on hold, and has recently voted to implement PA standards. With this, we ask the Diocese of Pittsburgh to halt any alignment with the Common Core State Standards and use of NCEA materials, and cease rewriting the standards to include Common Core. We also support the numerous House Bills that were written in opposition to Common Core, especially HB1522 which prohibits the imposition of CCSS on Catholic, Private, and home schools.

*"Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble." – Luke 17: 1-2*

If Catholic schools align our standards to the secular schools, we foresee a mass exodus from the

Catholic schools. Could this be a desired effect by Common Core proponents? What is the point of parents to continue to make substantial financial and personal sacrifice for the same academics as public schools that emphasize secular and modern trends? Parents make these sacrifices so that their children can experience a classical and spiritual education regardless of what modern pedagogy dictates. We fear that if the Diocese continues to embrace Common Core, they will do so at their own peril. Across the country, and especially amongst Catholic parents, the movement against Common Core is substantial and growing. We have been in contact with many upset and frightened parents in various cities who are currently trying to get Common Core stopped in their Diocese. With this, it is encouraging to know that Catholic parents are on the same page. The consistent feeling from these parents is that this will determine the future of our Church.

If the argument is to be made in favor of CCSS that our schools already exceed the standards (as the NCEA and the Diocese of Pittsburgh have espoused), then what is the basis of improvement? Is this not conformity rather than continuous pursuit of excellence, which is distinguishable from all other forms of teaching? We look to the church not to institutionalize mediocrity but to embrace her rich history and encourage all her children to strive for the best our Lord has put within us.

*Should we not be in a position of setting the example and proposing our historically excellent academic standards and moral education to the secular community rather than the reverse?* The church is so often vilified as being archaic and irrelevant in this modern world. Pope Francis recently spoke on our “daily martyrdom which does not result in death but is also a loss of life for Christ.” We embrace this adversity as part of our “daily martyrdom”. We believe God has presented an opportunity for the church not to accede, but to lead; not to assent, but to **shine**.