



# Christian Schools and the Common Core

By Sheri McDonald

Standards-based education is nothing new in the United States. Even prior to the federal law passed in 1996 requiring states receiving Title I monies to develop standards, educators have sought to assess student performance in meaningful ways. It is impossible to measure student growth if there are no clear targets for what students are expected to know and be able to do. Standards provide a measure that allows teachers and administrators the opportunity to reflect on instructional practice and make decisions about curricular strengths and weaknesses on the basis of assessment data. If common standards are used, comparisons can be made within a school, district, state, or country to assess elements of program effectiveness. By no means does this single data point tell the entire story, but it provides valuable information in the continuous improvement cycle for schools striving for excellence.

The question becomes, What standards? Much of educational reform in the United States over the last 15 years has centered on the development of state standards and the subsequent assessments to monitor mastery of said standards. Schools could compare student progress with other schools on these objective measures, but proficiency across states could not be compared because of different standards and criteria for “mastery.” It has been difficult to evaluate how schools are doing in comparison to schools across the nation or even internationally. If students are to be successful in the post-secondary world, in college, and in their careers, they must be prepared on a level that serves them well wherever they may go.

Developing national standards has been problematic on many levels. There has always been and will continue to be debate over what is considered the nonnegotiable body of knowledge that defines a quality education. Experts within a given field, various cultures, and different countries all may have different expectations for what constitutes that core knowledge base. Who gets to make the final decision, and can organizations opt out of implementation? For Christian schools, there is the added layer of consideration for the spiritual development of students. The integration of biblical truths must undergird

the educational experience for students. This creates the bedrock in which to anchor content knowledge, which allows deep roots in faith while attaining high levels of academic rigor: critical thinking, problem solving, and other twenty-first-century learning skills that are essential for students to develop.

For public education in the states, this debate currently revolves around the development and implementation of Common Core State Standards. Most states have chosen to adopt the Common Core, and critics have expressed concern that they have only done so because of potential strings to federal monies for which they would otherwise be ineligible. Others are concerned it may lead to more governmental control. While public schools should weigh in on these issues and help determine appropriate parameters for implementation, these same concerns are really nonissues for private schools, Christian or otherwise, who are not bound by the same mandates or regulations as public systems. There is no federal funding attached to private schools nor any requirement to implement the Common Core. Private schools have the luxury of weighing the value of the standards on the basis of their own merits. The issue becomes more about what role, if any, these standards should have in a student’s course of study. Are they worth paying attention to, and should they play a major role in guiding curriculum choices for private schools because they are of value? It is simply a question of truth: “Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master” (St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II.18.28, [www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.xix\\_1.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.xix_1.html)). Are there truths within the standards that should in fact be a part of that nonnegotiable body of knowledge that makes up the core of what should be taught in Christian education to best serve students? In his *Philosophy of Biblical Integration in School Curriculum*, Greg Bitgood, pastor of Christian education for Kelowna Christian Center Society, states it this way: “We can know truth outside of the Bible and in fact, to seek truth exclusively within the confines of scripture would be to rob the reality and splendor of such statements in

scripture as: *The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.* Psalms 19:1–2” (3).

Where the Common Core Standards fall short of this standard of truth, private schools have the ability to modify and adjust to ensure integrity within the curriculum. Biblical integration is not at odds with content standards, and it should remain in the forefront for planning a solid course of study to develop both spiritual understanding and academic excellence: “Nothing ... will be taught—without first working through the lens of a Christian worldview perspective. This rigorous process is what Christian Education is ultimately about—regardless of the ‘world’s’ content, Christians must filter that content through biblical criteria to discern whether or not it is to be rejected, accepted, or transformed” (Reichard 2013, 3).

## One School’s Perspective

At Mariners Christian School, with Blue Ribbon honors, we believe that academic excellence does not have to be sacrificed in favor of spiritual development. Rather, we strive, in whatever we do, to “do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV). The majority of our students matriculate into public high schools, so we must be aware of and aligned to the expectations for our students in various content areas. We understand the challenges of developing strong believers who will go forth into this world as future doctors, lawyers, missionaries, teachers, designers, scientists, athletes, programmers, and so on. In their excellence, they bring glory to God. In an ever-changing society that relies more heavily on a student’s ability to communicate, work with others, think deeply, and bring content from multiple disciplines to bear on solving real-world problems, the Common Core Standards provide a framework for us to monitor our students’ growth on these critical objective measures connected to twenty-first-century learning.

With a heavy focus on reading increasingly more complex text, the standards themselves do not dictate how to teach or even what text to use, allowing our teachers to exercise their professional judgment and training in biblical integration to meet or exceed the standards in their instructional practice. For example, a second-grade reading standard includes a comparison of two or more versions of the same story by different authors or from different cultures. Teachers can just as easily do this using the varied accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry

through the Gospels as they can using different versions of the Cinderella story. We use the Common Core as a baseline (not a ceiling) for challenging our students to high levels of achievement while thoroughly integrating biblical teaching.

Technology and social media have forever changed the amount of information students have access to and must sift through to determine truth. The critical thinking skills necessary to do this kind of evaluation are the same skills we want our students to possess in order to “be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [them] to give the reason for the hope that [they] have” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). The release of the Next Generation Science Standards (in April 2013) has afforded us the opportunity to model for our students how to think through statements potentially at odds with our faith. We are anticipating issues in connection with differences in our belief of intelligent design versus evolution, but these will be easily managed. In doing so, we help students understand the need to respond intelligently to the beliefs of others knowing we have truth on our side. We will do the same when standards are released for social studies. In cases in which we disagree with the truth behind the content, we will continue to train our students to respond with logical arguments that account for their beliefs.

In the end, Common Core Standards are a step in the right direction to support the academic needs of our students in relation to the skill sets and knowledge they need to be successful in the twenty-first century. To ignore Common Core Standards completely is to miss the potential for developing students into the leaders of this next generation—leaders who stand for Christ while attaining high levels of academic achievement, which will open doors to make an impact on the world for His kingdom.

## References

- Bitgood, Greg. n.d. All truth is God’s truth: Heritage Christian School’s philosophy of biblical integration in school curriculum. [www.heritagechristian.ca/uploads/downloads/all\\_truth\\_is\\_gods\\_truth.pdf](http://www.heritagechristian.ca/uploads/downloads/all_truth_is_gods_truth.pdf).
- Reichard, Joshua. 2013. A response to the conspiracy theories surrounding the Common Core Standards. Unpublished paper.

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