



## **CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS INTERNATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS – ALIGN OR ADOPT?**

Jeff Blamer, Vice President of Member Services

In 2013 Christian Schools International prepared and published a position paper related to the Common Core Standards. Our position as described in the position paper has not changed. Therefore, the paper is copied at the end of this new report. The position paper was jointly prepared and published by Christian Schools International with three of our accreditation coalition partners: ACSI, ICAA, and NSCA.

We at Christian Schools International believe that Christian schools should be committed to instructional standards, because we believe that God is glorified when we seek to be excellent as we prepare and equip his children. Standards are a means for the Christian school to measure and assess its effectiveness and its performance. Standards serve an important purpose and have great value to the school as it prepares its school improvement goals and plan. Standards are a tool for accountability.

### ***Which curriculum standards should the Christian school adopt?***

The true and simple answer is that the school should adopt the standards that best enable the school to carry out its mission. Christian Schools International cannot prescribe to the school which standards are best for that school. These decisions require the staff and the board of the school to be deliberate, intentional, and discerning.

One thing is almost certain. There is likely no packaged set of standards that will completely align with the Christian school's mission and vision. Therefore, no set of standards should be adopted in a wholesale way.

When considering teacher association, state, regional or national standards, it is likely that many will be educationally appropriate. Schools will certainly be able to align with some if not most. But it is also as likely that some will not pass the test of mission alignment. It is almost impossible to expect secular standards to meet the test of alignment with the mission of the Christian school. It is not likely. We should not expect it.

### ***Should Christian schools in the U.S. adopt Common Core?***

The answer is an unequivocal "no!" Yet Christian schools should adopt standards that are aligned with the school's mission. (See the accreditation program guidelines that follow in this report.)

At the same time, it is better for the Christian school to become very familiar with the Common Core Standards and align with it when the standards do not conflict with the school's mission.

According to the CCSS website, the goal of the initiative is to ". . . provide teachers and parents with a common understanding of what students are expected to learn. Consistent standards will provide appropriate benchmarks for all students, regardless of where they live...These standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers."

(<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards>)

### ***Should Christian schools in the U.S. reject the Common Core standards?***

The answer is an equally resounding "no!"

We understand that the very mention of Common Core energizes some individuals and elicits strong feelings. Unfortunately, the conversation about educational standards has become fueled by politics and rhetoric, which has led some to shun Common Core without fairly examining it.

Nationalized educational standards are not a Democrat or Republican issue. Every president since Ronald Reagan has moved the U.S. closer to national standards. This is a national issue that has as many roots in President Bush's *No Child Left Behind* as in President Obama's *Race to the Top*. Politics fuels the fire of controversy, and that is an irony. Criticism and support are coming from both the political right and left in the U.S. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/17/nyregion/new-york-early-champion-of-common-core-standards-joins-critics.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/17/nyregion/new-york-early-champion-of-common-core-standards-joins-critics.html?_r=1)

### ***Standards: Align rather than adopt***

The position of Christian Schools International is that every Christian school that seeks to be excellent to the glory of God and seeks to continuously improve should adopt standards, but only standards that are aligned with the mission of the school. Neither Common Core Standards nor any other standards written from a secular viewpoint should be fully adopted by the Christian school. Unless standards are written from a biblical foundation and worldview, they can only inform the school as it works toward alignment. They cannot be adopted without close examination to insure that they are aligned with the mission of the school.

The operative word for Christian Schools International is *align*, not adopt. Alignment requires diligent effort on the part of each school. Continuous school improvement should be rigorous. As Christian schools seek to identify the standards that are aligned with the school's mission and that will best lead to instructional improvement and educational excellence, the school must seek to be well informed.

The Christian school must view and study standards with discernment. State standards and the standards of the Common Core must inform the school in its process to set its own standards. The Christian school will do well to align its standards with those of the region and the Common Core.

### ***The Christian school's response to the movement to reject Common Core***

Certainly the Common Core has its legitimate critics. Some of the criticism is justified. Some seems exaggerated. Some is politically motivated. Some is stirred by national media figures.

Christian schools would do well to sift through the rhetoric and discern. It is legitimate to question whether the standards of Common Core are watered down. Some are, but many are not. In general, Christian schools will likely have standards that match or exceed Common Core standards in rigor and expectation. Christian schools should not be satisfied with mediocrity, because God deserves our best.

A perspective on the watering down of math standards is offered by Dr. James Milgram, a NASA mathematician and Stanford University professor who was originally involved with the Common Core math standards but who later refused to sign off on them, taking the position that they had become watered down. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FluV9qOmsGM>

The Common Core has been criticized by some who have the view that the standards for early childhood are not developmentally appropriate. This link is one that addresses that concern.

<http://truthinamericaneducation.com/common-core-state-standards/early-childhood-standards-of-common-core-are-developmentally-inappropriate/>

The developers of the Common Core standards are criticized for a secular, political agenda. In regard to some standards, that is likely true. This link is a sample of the fear of national control of the educational system. It is included here as a sample of the emotion that is driving the politics around the Common Core standards.

<http://www.newswithviews.com/Hoge/anita104.htm>

Common Core was not developed with Christian education in mind. But neither are many of the textbooks that our schools use. Both are influenced by a national and secular agenda. In an increasingly mobile society, there is some wisdom in national standards. There is also a legitimate concern in the area of personal liberties when national standards are imposed. For our Christian schools, the area of greatest concern should be neither the national agenda nor personal liberties, but assurance that the standards of the Christian school reflect both the school's mission and our reformed biblical worldview.

Christian schools who are members of Christian Schools International need not operate from a position of fear. Our schools were not formed in protest of public education. Our schools were and are rooted in the belief that life is not pluralistic. Our world belongs to God and neither education nor any other aspect of life can be separated from honoring and obeying him. We serve God. Our mission is to glorify God, to advance his kingdom, and to equip students for a life of discipleship. Where strong instructional standards can be aligned well with the school's mission and worldview, they should be aligned. Where standards conflict with mission or worldview, they should be rejected, replaced, or revised to so that the school's mission and worldview prevail. There is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater when mission and worldview guide our processes and when we discern.

Christian schools should make decisions about instructional standards based on alignment with biblical standards, the Christian school's mission, and our biblical worldview. We must always be discerning as we to seek the best to the glory of God.

### ***Additional Resources***

The resources cited in this paper are samples. The internet contains a plethora of articles, YouTube video presentations, and commentaries on the topic of standards specifically related to the Common Core.



## **GUIDELINES FROM THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION PROGRAM**

Bob Van Wieren, Accreditation Program Director

### **Alignment to standards**

Christian Schools International Accreditation requires schools to align their curriculum to outside standards. There are several reasons for this:

- Assures a comprehensive curriculum. Subject-specific standards are written by teachers, researchers, and experts in the education of a specific subject.
- Assures that all aspects of a subject area are taught at age-appropriate levels.
- Encourages gap and overlap analysis of the school's curriculum, avoiding redundancies and making certain nothing is missing.
- Prepares students for standardized tests and assessments, many of which are aligned with the very standards your school is evaluating.
- Builds the necessary skills and knowledge into student learning for future education and life as a kingdom citizen.
- Encourages higher-order thinking skills. All sets of state, provincial, and national standards go beyond facts and include analysis, synthesis, application, and other higher-order thinking skills.
- Enables your school to determine what to assess.
- Enables the faculty to evaluate the vertical alignment of the school's curriculum. This is a necessary study for both smaller schools and larger schools to conduct.

### **Alignment versus adoption**

CSI Accreditation encourages schools to align their curriculum to a set of identified standards for each subject area, not just wholesale adoption of the standards (see Jeff Blamer's article above). There are several reasons for this:

- Most sets of standards identify minimal competencies and knowledge. Simple adoption of standards may miss the heart of what your school believes an educated Christian should have included in his or her education.
- Most schools do not have the time to teach all of the standards of a given subject area. The faculty must analyze and discern what should be taught at each grade or level. So aligning is picking and choosing and combining based upon your mission and learner goals.
- Most standards are not from a Christian worldview. Christian schools ought to be adding, subtracting, repositioning, and rewriting the standards they have chosen to align their curriculum to be able to reach their mission. Simple adoption does not enable a faculty to evaluate or study the standards to determine where and if they belong in their school, or if they need to be rewritten or combined with others to align with the school's mission and biblical worldview.

- Your own students' learning needs might be different than the set of standards you choose to align to. Christian schools should be analyzing standards according to your students' learning needs based on data gleaned from standardized assessments and who they believe the child or young person to be before his or her Creator.

**To what standards should you align your curriculum?**

- Those that fit your mission best
- Those that fit your learners' needs best