



SECRETARIAT OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS APRIL 21, 2014

Purpose and Background: The history of Catholic schools in this country is diverse and expansive. Our schools have educated millions of young people over the years by providing them a superior academic background, always pointing the way to eternal life. The success of Catholic schools in handing on the faith, generation after generation, is a bright light in the history of the Church in the United States. Catholic schools located in urban settings, in small towns and rural communities continue to challenge students to use their gifts. Teachers in over 6594 Catholic elementary and high schools in the United States do an excellent job preparing over 1.9 million young people for the challenges of higher education in a competitive world. 99% of Catholic school students graduate from high school on time, and 85% of Catholic school graduates attend college.¹

Because the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were not developed specifically for Catholic schools, there are growing concerns about the effect of these standards on Catholic schools in our country. Questions about the applicability of the CCSS are being raised in Catholic schools across the country. These Frequently Asked Questions are intended to respond to some of those concerns.

The CCSS are a set of K-12 public school standards developed in English language arts and mathematics. There has been a great deal of local, state, and national debate about the origin, quality, purpose and effect of CCSS. There appears to be

¹Dale McDonald and Margaret M. Schultz, *The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing: United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2013-2014* (Arlington, VA: National Catholic Education Association, 2014), x.

wide disagreement over the CCSS. Proponents believe that CCSS provide a set of common, career-ready internationally benchmarked standards. Opponents believe that CCSS have resulted in federal overreach into schools, loss of parental choice, and a loss of academic rigor. The disparity of these views has created confusion, misinformation and misunderstanding and has made meaningful dialogue about CCSS difficult.

Concerns about CCSS have been publicly addressed to the Committee on Catholic Education by parents, educators, and concerned individuals within the Catholic community. These concerns include the fear that the CCSS were adopted too hastily, in some cases, and with inadequate consideration of how they could change the character and curriculum of our nation's Catholic schools. In order to respond to these concerns, it is essential to consider them through the broader lens of the purpose and mission of Catholic education and the principle of subsidiarity.²

1. What is the purpose of a Catholic education?

The Declaration on Christian Education reminds us that “a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and the good of the societies of which he as man is a member and in whose obligations as an adult he will share” (1).³ In order to achieve the aims of a true education, the Church freely establishes schools that intentionally promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the purpose of forming Christian men and women to live well now so as to be able to live with God for all eternity. Catholic schools should be in dialogue with culture providing contributions through a Catholic world view, forming character through a basic respect for the dignity of the human person, developing intellectual and moral virtues, and fostering the formation of Christian discipleship through the sacraments

²*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.), Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana- United States Conference of Catholic Bishop, 2000), nos. 1885 & 1894; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana- United States Conference of Catholic Bishop, 2004) nos. 185-191.

³*Declaration on Christian Education, Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican II, October 28, 1965)
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html

and the Catholic liturgical tradition. The orientation of a life centered on Jesus Christ is the filter of the quality of a Catholic school. The document, *The Catholic Schools*, states: “The specific mission of the school, then, is a critical, systematic transmission of culture in the light of faith and the bringing forth of the power of Christian virtue by the integration of culture with faith and of faith with living” (49).⁴

2. Who is responsible for education in general and Catholic schools In particular?

Parents are the first educators of their children as a God-given responsibility. They are the first to introduce the faith to their children. Parents exercise this fundamental responsibility with the aid and support of both the Church and civil community. Both have a vested interest and responsibility in education of the young. Parents possess the fundamental right to choose the formative tools that support their convictions and fulfill their duty as the first educators.⁵

The Catholic Church, through the authority of the local bishop, establishes schools to be of assistance to parents as the primary educators of their children as well as to fulfill her duty to assist people to live the fullness of the Christian life.⁶ Schools can be diocesan, parish, regional, and private. The diocesan bishop has the right and duty of oversight and visitation for Catholic schools with the support and assistance of the Catholic community. The bishop employs the gifts and talents of parents and the professional educational community at all stages of establishing and operating Catholic schools at the local level. The instruction and formation in the Catholic school must be grounded in the principles of Catholic doctrine.

⁴*The Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, March 19th, 1977) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html

⁵See *Code of Canon Law*: Latin-English Edition: New English Translation (Codex Iuris Canonici [CIC]), (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998), canon 793; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 240.

⁶See *Code of Canon Law* (CIC), cc. 794; 796 §1.

3. What role do standards play in Catholic schools, and who is responsible for their development?

Standards are not new to Catholic schools in this country. The Catholic educational community in the United States has been in dialogue about standards in education at the state level for many years. Dioceses have reviewed, adapted, adopted or rejected state standards when creating and implementing diocesan guidelines. Each diocese has responded to state standards in light of the needs and common good of the schools in the diocesan area.

At the diocesan level, the Office of Catholic Education, in consultation with the diocesan bishop, pastors, teachers, and parents, is responsible for guidelines and standards for curriculum implementation in the Catholic schools. Superintendents or Directors of Catholic schools are to take care that the instruction given in Catholic schools is “at least as academically distinguished as that in the other schools of the area.”⁷ Superintendents and administrators are often in the position of balancing the mission of the Catholic school with the expectations of the parent community that our schools be academically superior to the area public and private schools. This requires knowledge of academic standards surrounding our Catholic schools.

Catholic schools must consider standards that support the mission and purpose of the school as a Catholic institution. Attempts to compartmentalize the religious and the secular in Catholic schools reflect a relativistic perspective by suggesting that faith is merely a private matter and does not have a significant bearing on how reality as a whole should be understood. Such attempts are at odds with the integral approach to education that is a hallmark of Catholic schools. Standards that support an appropriate integration should be encouraged.

One of the strengths of Catholic schools is that there is great latitude at the local level related to standards, curriculum, textbooks, teaching methods and

⁷ See Code of Canon Law (CIC), 806 §2. “Directors of Catholic schools are to take care under the watchfulness of the local ordinary that the instruction which is given in them is at least as academically distinguished as that in the other schools of the area.”

implementation in the classroom. Catholic schools, and the teachers within Catholic schools, typically take account of the academic environment in which they find themselves both nationally and locally. This allows teachers to prepare and challenge students who will be transferring to secondary and higher education institutions.

In addition to helping students to succeed academically, Catholic schools are intimately concerned with teaching young people the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This takes place in an environment that communicates a love of learning and the excellence of the good moral life as taught in the Catholic tradition. This is accomplished through developing excellent habits of mind and heart, a respect for the dignity of the human person, and the love of the sacramental life of the Church. If you have questions about the local diocesan guidelines, please consult the diocese's website or the diocesan Catholic schools office.

4. Are Catholic schools required to use the Common Core State Standards?

Because Catholic schools are private schools, they are not required to use CCSS. If a Catholic School at the local level has chosen to implement the standards in whole or in part, it is because it has judged them to be of assistance to the academic quality of the Catholic school without detriment to its mission and purpose. If, by contrast, a Catholic school at the local level has chosen not to implement those standards, it is because it has judged them, for a variety of reasons, not to be of such assistance.

The CCSS should be neither adopted nor rejected without review, study, consultation, discussion and caution. Catholic schools must take into consideration the horizon of the local, state and national education landscape and the influence and application of the CCSS. To ignore this would place our students at a significant disadvantage for their post-secondary education, which is not an acceptable option for our families. For example, the SAT and ACT assessments, as well as other

standardized tests, will be geared to the CCSS. Such realities are among the factors that must be taken into account when judging whether it is best to adopt, adapt or reject the CCSS. In preparing our students for the future, Catholic schools must constantly emphasize creativity, critical and analytical thinking, and real-world application in light of Catholic culture and teaching, and be always intent on guiding our students to academic success.

5. Why is the principle of subsidiarity important in the discussion of standards in Catholic schools and CCSS in particular?

In the Church, the principle of subsidiarity directs that human events are best handled at the lowest possible level, closest to the individuals affected by the decisions being made.⁸ In the matter of education, this involves the competent authority at the diocesan and local levels. This principle provides a great strength for Catholic schools as it gives the local diocesan and school community the ability to make decisions at the school level related to guidelines and curriculum. It also allows for adjustments and adaptations to be made by teachers and administrators for the children under their care. This is the great strength of Catholic schools. They control and direct their own curricula.

The importance and effectiveness of this principle is well illustrated in the varied approaches utilized by Catholic dioceses in addressing CCSS in Catholic schools. Each diocese, in consultation with the members of the local educational community, has decided on an approach to the CCSS that takes into account these local circumstances and the needs of their schools in light of the mission of Catholic schools. This has been decided after consultation, review, study, and discussion of the impact of CCSS at the local level. And because the situation and needs of each diocese is different, so have been the responses to CCSS. Some dioceses have:

- (1) Found the academic rigor of the diocesan guidelines to exceed the CCSS;

⁸See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no.1883, "The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of subsidiarity, according to which 'a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.'"

- (2) Considered the CCSS as one resource among many in developing diocesan guidelines and standards;
- (3) Judged that the adoption of the CCSS does not support the goals and academic needs of the school communities;
- (4) Referred to the CCSS only as a reference to improve the curricula they already have;
- (5) Adapted parts of the CCSS; and
- (6) Adopted the CCSS as a primary source for implementation of diocesan standards.

Many dioceses have already published a rationale and statement regarding their position on the CCSS which is extremely helpful to the local community in understanding the reasons for the position and any action taken.

Because each bishop has the duty to establish and oversee the Catholic Schools in his diocese, the Committee on Catholic Education respects the right and duty of each bishop and those who, collaborating with him, have responsibility for the direct supervision of Catholic schools in the diocese, to direct the discussion related to CCSS at the local level.⁹ The Committee encourages a rigorous discussion at the local level that reinforces a solid understanding of the philosophy and mission of Catholic schools with a clear rationale for the standards and guidelines implemented by the diocese.

6. Does participation in CCSS require Catholic school students to participate in student data collections, assessments, or mandated textbooks?

Catholic schools decide which assessment they will use. Many Catholic schools have used a variety of nationally normed tests to measure and assess student progress. Standardized tests are beneficial because they provide parents, teachers,

⁹Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus* (Vatican II, October 28, 1965) http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html (14).

principals and other administrators with important information about the effectiveness of instruction in our schools and student preparation for success in high school and college. Participation in the CCSS does not require Catholic schools to participate in longitudinal data base collections or assessment. Participation in standardized testing does not require that our schools collect data on children or their families. In keeping with privacy acts, Catholic schools never share or publish individual test scores without parental permission and report scores only in the aggregate.

Some of our Catholic schools have voluntarily participated in state and national assessments such as National Assessment Education Progress (NAEP). The performance of our students on these assessments often positively impacts the perception by parents and community stakeholders of how well our schools perform. Catholic schools have consistently performed well on these national assessments. In addition Catholic schools carefully monitor textbook and resource materials. In some instances the purchase of textbooks can be supported by state subsidies and the schools have the ability to choose from a number of publishers and materials. Principals and teachers in our Catholic schools are acutely aware of the importance of a very careful review and selection of textbooks that support its mission and purpose.

7. Why is this discussion so important?

The Church recognizes that the civil government has the responsibility to assist parents in fulfilling their obligation and right to educate their children. The Church applauds any effort by the state and federal government to ensure that an excellent education is available for all children in the United States. The CCSS was developed for a public school audience. But the CCSS is of its nature incomplete as it pertains to the Catholic school. Our schools have resisted the need to adopt educational trends while addressing the ever changing needs of children in education. We have tried to integrate the best in education while leaving behind what is not appropriate to the Church's educational mission. As our world becomes

increasingly secularized, it will be a task of the Church through an appropriate education to help parents and families sift through the realities and difficulties of the culture and provide a solid foundation and basis for living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The bishops who attended the Synod on the New Evangelization said: “*If evangelization is to be true to itself, it cannot take place apart from education; it is directly related to it.*” Catholic schools are an integral part of the New Evangelization. The school is a critically important community by which our families are supported in living a life centered on God.