

Ideas in Action



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COMMON CORE IS JUST ONE MORE TOOL

by Alva Swafford Striplin

The 183,000 teachers in this state have been entrusted to educate the future leaders of our country, our state and our community. Whether their students are destined to lead a medical team around an operating table or manage a team of waiters and waitresses at a restaurant, it is the task of educators to expose students to the highest academic standards that will help them succeed.

I am a teacher, and Common Core state standards help me and other teachers prepare students for the college and the workforce.

Common Core has merit. The truth is, educational standards should be high enough so that kids who pass through the K-12 system with satisfactory marks may go to college without remediation or enter a vocational program to pursue a career.

In my middle-school math classes, the implementation of Common Core standards has simply meant encouraging my students to think analytically and changing the way that I approach instruction in order for students to be able to comprehend and explain mathematical concepts in real world situations.

RAISE THE BAR OR FALL BEHIND

by Paul Cottle

At Gov. Rick Scott's request, the state Department of Education will hold three public hearings on the Common Core, the multistate standards in K-12 math and English language arts that are now attracting controversy — three years after they were adopted by the state Board of Education. It seems certain that the hearings will attract crowds of parents and others who will argue about the future of Florida's schools. One of those hearings will be held in Tallahassee on Thursday.

When I was in high school 35 years ago, even relatively unskilled high-school graduates (and many dropouts) could achieve a middle-class lifestyle by getting a manufacturing job or a clerical job. But those jobs are mostly gone. Even our nation's recent manufacturing renaissance is being driven by technology and is bringing back only one-tenth of the jobs that disappeared years ago. And those few jobs are going to highly trained individuals who are good at math, know enough science to understand the technology with which they work, and are able to express themselves well. Not being a "math person" or "a writing person" are no longer options.

Striplin, cont.

Common Core has pushed instruction away from the pencil-on-paper mode and promotes our students to debate why and how they solved a problem. Instead of giving students a picture of a rectangle with the dimensions defined and instructing them to calculate the perimeter, I am asking them to draw a picture of their backyard dream pool and determine how much brick they will need around the perimeter. Students approach the task with different perspectives, and every pool is different.

I stand in awe at the attention to detail, such as adding steps or a hot tub. These special features increase the complexity. The room is buzzing with cooperative conversation that deepens the understanding of the concept being taught. My pupils have begun building their own knowledge, while cultivating critical thinking skills. For that, I thank Common Core.

The second point of merit arising from Common Core is the word “common.” Consistent standards will provide appropriate benchmarks for all students, regardless of where they live. As a parent of Leon County School students, I would like my children learning generally the same material as that of their counterpart in Bismarck, N.D., or Paradise Valley, Ariz.

However, this is where national control should end as it relates to curriculum and instruction. While outlining a common benchmark or standard is beneficial, it is not advantageous to require states to participate in a mandatory and costly standardized assessment. The state of Florida has more than 100,000 experts in the field of education, teachers. Why not look to the state’s experts to develop end-of-course exams or standardized assessments? Who better understands Florida’s students than Florida’s teachers? If we are going to spend tax dollars on standardized assessments, why not involve our teachers in that process?

I commend state Senate President Don Gaetz and Speaker of the House Will Weatherford for hearing the concerns of educators, parents and

Cottle, cont.

Hence the Common Core, which will rip the cover off the inadequacies of the students of our state and others by setting the bar high and ruthlessly measuring each child against the competition from Massachusetts, China, Singapore and Finland — the same kids against whom our children will be competing for their entire lives.

Think Florida’s bar is already high enough? Think again: Florida says that 51 percent of its eighth-graders are proficient in math (earning an FCAT score of 3 or higher). Massachusetts — the reigning national champ in K-12 achievement — says that 55 percent of its eighth graders are proficient in math.

Seems like Florida is doing OK, right? Not so fast. There is a common yardstick — the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. NAEP says that, in 2011, 51 percent of Massachusetts eighth-graders — but only 28 percent of Florida’s eighth-graders — were proficient in math. That’s because Florida’s FCAT eighth-grade math proficiency bar is too low.

That’s what Common Core — and the multistate assessment programs that go with it — will solve.

Seems like a good thing, right? Yes, until you realize that half of the students in Florida who are now being told they are proficient in math will be told they are not proficient once the multistate Common Core assessments are implemented. The new standards will put more pressure on kids — and more pressure on the parents who watch their kids struggle.

The most commonly voiced objection to the Common Core and the associated multistate assessment programs is that they represent a federal takeover of K-12

Striplin, cont.

administrators and advising the Department of Education to take a second look before committing our state to yet another costly wave of reform and testing. Florida's education system has seen a multitude of changes in a very short time, from Sunshine State Standards and the FCAT to Next Generation Sunshine State Standards and FCAT 2.0 to Common Core and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.

Raising the bar for our students in the classroom has been positive, but our students need time to adjust to these common standards. Not to mention, the state and local school boards need to insist on the control to decide how best to move forward. Finding adequate resources will remain an obstacle for full implementation of Common Core. While open dialogue and communication will hopefully lead to a solution, let's continue to support the implementation of more rigorous standards in our classrooms.

I want to assure parents who are overwhelmed by the cloud of political rhetoric surrounding Common Core that the academic day in Leon County schools is focused on best practices and a rigorous curriculum. Students still enter our classrooms, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, take notes, take tests and turn in homework. Teachers present material, teach strategies for learning, slow down when necessary, offer guidance and support and encourage success.

It is unfortunate that educating Florida's future has come down to "for Common Core" or "against Common Core." Education should not be about politics. We must not lose sight of what is important: giving the best education possible to the students in Florida.

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Cottle, cont.

education, which has traditionally been a local and state function. There are ideological zealots who are willing to ignore the historic failures of the present K-12 system for the sake of tilting at the windmills of federal overreach.

But perhaps just under the surface of the backlash against the Common Core are the parents who worry that their kids will experience failure when measured against out-of-state competition for the first time.

Start by thinking about your child's first heart-rending fall from a bicycle after the training wheels came off. Despite the scrapes, you encouraged your kid to get up and do it again. And again. Because it seemed important.

If riding a two-wheeler was important, then how much more so is becoming a productive member of society? Kids will fall off the Common Core bike. Then they'll get up and try it again. It will be agony for many of parents. But the alternative — letting our next generation flounder without an economic ride — would be much worse.

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