

Perspectives on the new National Curriculum in England and Wales (2014).

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Notes - in the UK the school years are divided into 4 Key Stages which lead on to a further 2 years of A Levels to prepare for higher education, or to technical and vocational training.

Stage 1 - Reception to Year 2 (ages 4-7)

Stage 2 - Years 3 to 6 (ages 7-11)

Stage 3 - Years 7 to 9 (ages 11-14)

Stage 4 - Years 10 and 11 (ages 14-16)

[NC = National Curriculum]

View from the outside - the new NC from the perspective of a parent and governor

As a governor I have seen the new NC come into our primary school, and followed the changes and implications for the school. As a parent I am now beginning to see and feel the effects of that in my children. Mine are now in Year 3 (*age 7/8*) and Year 6 (*age 10/11*). This means that the younger one did not follow the new curriculum last year, as she continued on the old system and did old style SATS. (*In the UK SATS is a nationally assessed progress test in English, maths and science.*) My older daughter has gone into Year 6 on her second year of the new curriculum and will be among the first group of children to be assessed on the new Year 6 SATS.

Curriculum Change

In governors' meetings, I have listened to our head teacher and staff talking about the new curriculum. The overwhelming sense that we get from them is that they are excited about it. This stems from the freeing up of much of the curriculum, allowing schools to choose their topic areas and how they will deliver the new requirements, and a freedom to select themes that are appropriate to the school and area. So, for example, if the local town is celebrating a key event, the school can choose to use that event as the centre of its curriculum for an appropriate time period. It is a welcome change, giving the initiative back to schools and teachers, and bringing the curriculum back to a more child centred approach.

An example from our school is the selection of a value based curriculum, which focuses on attitudes and values such as friendship and tolerance. They have also chosen some whole school themes - for example, in September 2014, World War 1 was a whole school theme, running across the curriculum, reflecting the 100 year commemorations which were countrywide. As part of this there was an emphasis on community involvement, and parents and grandparents were invited to take part. I think the increased flexibility of the new NC helped to facilitate this.

On the other hand, the new curriculum has pushed many concepts forward, so that concepts that used to be taught in Year 3 are now required to be taught in Year 2. The expectations are high, and it is not yet clear if they are achievable. The new curriculum states what has to be covered by the end of each Key Stage, but allows the school to be flexible as to when they are taught within that. However, there is a suggested curriculum for each year, which seems to be the template for most schools.

Mastery

This is one of the key words of the new NC. The shift towards 'mastery' means that the government want children to learn in depth, rather than just rushing through the 'levels' in a superficial way. The children should be extended more broadly and in depth before addressing further content, so for a year 1 child, where the NC asks for mastery of numbers to 20, it is not just about addition and subtraction, but aims to widen their knowledge with money, word problems, multiplication, division, shapes, games and so on. The idea is that pupils who grasp concepts rapidly should be challenged through being offered rich and sophisticated problems before any acceleration through new content. This is a really good change, as it lays solid foundations for the child, and should build confidence too.

However, there appears to be a misinterpretation of this emerging in some schools (and via some Local Authorities), which is that they are told they are *not allowed* to teach further content. This is not what is actually written in the new NC documents; if a child has covered the Year 1 content in breadth *and* depth, it is entirely appropriate to give them the next challenge. Unfortunately not everyone sees it that way.

Levels

The most noticeable change, for the parent trying to see how their child is progressing, is that the old NC levels have gone. This means that it is no longer possible to see the progress that a child is making in easy-to-measure steps. For a parent it was very reassuring to see their child progress in some definite, measurable way. However, levels have always been a mixed blessing. They are difficult to understand. For example, Level 4 did not equate to Year 4, and the subsections labelled as parts a, b and c were confusing. In addition, they were often a blunt tool, reduced at times to a tick box exercise. For example, if the child could demonstrate three required skills in a piece of writing, they were deemed to have achieved the required level, but that did not necessarily reflect the creativity or imagination of the work (or lack of it). So on the whole, I am positive about the removal of the levels, as I think that it will move assessment away from tick boxes and promote a more rounded approach to teaching.

The problem for parents then is how to understand if their children are doing well, or whether they are falling behind, and by how much. Here lies another key change. The schools now have a choice about how replace NC levels. They can choose which system they use for assessment, and, apart from Year 6 SATs tests, it will be very difficult to compare one school with another, as each uses its own methods. Some schools have chosen to continue with NC levels. This is poor practice, as the curriculum has changed so it no longer fits against the old levels.

Age related

This is another buzz expression. The emphasis is all about whether or not a child is working at the level expected for that age, working towards that level, or extremely confident at that concept. This should be a good clear way for parents to understand their child's progress. For academic children though, this feels restrictive. It is being used as the basis for a new assessment system in some schools.

Year 6

The end-of-Key-Stage-2 (Year 3 to Year 6) SATS test has changed completely this year. There is still very little information about the content of the new test will be and how it will be assessed. While this is causing problems for the schools, it has also meant that Year 6 has in some respects changed for the better. Under the old system there was consistent pressure throughout the year to get the children up to the next level. This involved a lot of test practice and drilling. My daughter is having a completely different Year 6 experience from my son's of two years ago. I am very glad to see the end of intensive SATs preparation, and that she is getting a full, broad education instead. Of course, once the new exam is established, there is no guarantee that the school will not engage in a new form of intensive preparation.

On the whole I think the new curriculum is going to be good for our children's education. My girls have been positive about the changes so far, the standard of work is good and they are enthusiastic about the themes used to deliver it. As always though the delivery will vary from school to school.

Recent changes to the US Education System (Part II)

Written by Gill Bryant, WEC International MK Consultant. Gill worked for many years at Bourofaye Christian School in Senegal and is a trained and experienced ESOL teacher.

The most recent (June 2015) edition of Educare featured an article on the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), a nationwide education reform movement in the United States. Most of the feedback received from our readers suggests that it was helpful to be made aware of the new standards. However it has also been pointed out that they have had a very mixed reception across the U.S.

For this reason I have now researched into several areas - attitudes to the new standards, their strengths and weaknesses, and the effect and nature of their implementation. It is hoped that those who wish to learn more will follow the relevant web links and references.

As before, this topic will be considered under a number of headings.

1. Are changes needed in the U.S. education system?

Summit, an educational Christian ministry which exists to respond to the current post-Christian culture, has the following statement on its website:

"It is a painful — and costly — truth that the majority of students who leave high school are not college ready. Sixty percent of students entering four-year colleges are required to take remedial courses in English or mathematics, while a whopping 75 percent of students entering two-year colleges need remedial instruction in one or both of those subjects."

[<https://www.summit.org/blogs/summit-announcements/what-should-christians-think-about-common-core/>]

Christian Educators' Academy, an online Christian school based in Florida, has this to say:

"The Common Core Standards are designed to build upon the most advanced current thinking, preparing all students for success in college and their careers. They are designed so that a credit earned in one state means the same thing in every other state, giving a sense of consistency nationwide. This is a major advantage when colleges begin to evaluate transcripts and SAT scores for the private school child, as it makes the playing field equal. We need college and career ready standards because even in high-performing states, students are graduating and passing all the required courses and tests, yet still require remediation in their college work. Students are often required to take both math and English college entrance exams because of the lack of uniformity nationwide in teaching these core subjects. Common Core addresses this concern."

2. What are the different views on Common Core?

Attitudes to Common Core and opinions about the true agenda behind the changes are varied amongst Christians and non-Christians alike. When considering the different views, it is important for us as Christians to be Christ-like in words and behaviour. The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) describes the debate over the standards as

"...an opportunity for Christian educators to express the distinctive value of a biblical worldview applied to an academically rigorous curriculum and to participate in a gracious, thoughtful and rational response to this movement."

[http://www.williamsburgchristian.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ACSI_Position_on_Common_Core_State_Standards.pdf]

At one end of the spectrum, opposition to the CCSSI is firmly entrenched, and this is linked to one or both of two strongly-held convictions. The first is that the Federal government should not interfere in education, as it is the responsibility of each individual state. The second is that the right of parents to be involved in and influence the education of their children eclipses all other considerations.

The Christian home schooling community is strongly opposed to the changes. However, thorough research has been conducted by some in the community into the extent to which different home schooling programmes have been aligned with Common Core. More details about this can be found at <http://hsroadmap.org/master-lists/> (The Home school Resource Roadmap).

Amongst the reservations expressed by Christian home schoolers are their fears about the ever-increasing secularisation of the curriculum, and the potential for a higher degree of accountability to, and interference from, the state education authority.

Fear of an imposed secularisation of the curriculum is not solely the preserve of home schoolers, but of Christian educators across America. This is of particular concern when it is borne in mind that 93% of Americans are educated in public schools. [Source: Karen Swallow Prior at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october/three-views-do-common-core-standards-endanger-religious-fre.html?start=2>]

In a summary of criticisms of the standards, ACSI makes the observation that

".....the U.S. Department of Education is leveraging acceptance of the standards with federal funds" [source: as above]

and this is also pointed out by other sources, such as classical Christian education proponent Dr Duke Pesta [see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-htDV60CjkA>].

A third major objection to the standards has been that neither Bill Gates, who has funded the CCSS, nor David Coleman, the writer of the standards, are teachers. This objection is shared by Christians and non-Christians alike, and would no doubt resonate with teachers from many other countries who are obliged by law to introduce non-teacher designed, government-led changes in the classroom. In the UK, for example, very few Ministers of Education have been trained or experienced teachers, and yet the changes that they devise are regularly implemented nationwide.

Three different views on Common Core are ably expressed by Karen Swallow Prior, a professor of English, Kevin Theriot, from Alliance Defending Freedom, and Kristen Blair, an education writer, in Christianity Today [<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october/three-views-do-common-core-standards-endanger-religious-fre.html?start=2>]

(Please note: access to this magazine requires a subscription after the first reading).

While two of the writers express strong reservations, Karen Swallow Prior sees the Common Core not as a threat, but as a unique opportunity for Christians. She also cites Samuel Rodriguez, president of the Hispanic National Christian Leadership Conference, who feels that the Common Core will be helpful in raising educational standards in under-privileged Hispanic communities.

3. What are the plus and minus points of Common Core?

The plus and minus points are well expressed on the 'About Education' website at <http://teaching.about.com/od/assess/f/What-Are-Some-Pros-And-Cons-Of-The-Common-Core-Standards.htm>

Ten pros and then cons are listed and explained by Derrick Meador, an experienced science teacher and school principal. This is a very helpful, informative and commonsense introduction to Common Core - highly recommended. Other, related articles are also available at this site.

Positives have been identified in the reading standards by Karen Swallow Prior, who describes them as rich in vocabulary and based on evidence.

In the writing standards, Derrick Meador explains the difference between the writing style that has been expected in the past and the new style required by Common Core.

"The writing component in the Common Core assessments will require teachers to become more focused on teaching critical thinking skills and [putting]... thoughts into coherent sentences and paragraphs on paper."

"The types of writing that most teachers and state assessments require from their students currently are creative essays as compared to the critical thinking and analytic essays that will accompany the Common Core."

[<http://teaching.about.com/od/assess/a/Writing-And-The-Common-Core.htm>]

According to Meador, much more analytical and critical thought will be required than previously.

4. How is the implementation progressing?

The implementation of the changes has been and continues to be a huge challenge. Stephen Sawchuk from the Smithsonian Institute is in favour of the new standards, saying that

".....they are designed so that, in theory, a student who masters them by the end of high school will be able to succeed in college or an entry-level job without remediation."

However, he also says that

".....if the standards survive immolation on the altar of politics, they could face the slower death of bad implementation."

[<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/what-to-make-of-the-debate-over-common-core-3900291/?no-ist=>]

Derrick Meador, already quoted above, believes that

".....the Common Core Standards will be a tremendously difficult adjustment for students and teachers initially. It is not the way many teachers are used to teaching and not the way that many students are used to learning.

[Also] the Common Core Standards will likely cause many outstanding teachers and administrators to pursue other career options. Many veteran teachers will retire rather than adjust the way they teach."

There is a concern that very few school textbooks, even those supposedly designed to be so, are truly in alignment with the Common Core standards. This means that

".....when textbooks lack required Common Core material, the onus falls on teachers to assemble, from scratch, lesson plans and materials, such as assignments and evaluations, that teach Common Core standards."

[<http://www.newsmax.com/US/common-core-standards-textbooks-federal/2015/07/08/id/654013/>]

Bobbie Faulkner, an experienced Elementary School teacher in Oklahoma, is positive about many aspect of Common Core, but has found it to be a very big adjustment and a great deal of work for both teacher and students. More details about her experience can be found in the interview she gave at the following web link.

<http://teaching.about.com/od/assess/a/Teaching-The-Common-Core.htm>

5. How should Christian schools and educators respond to Common Core?

ACSI have produced a very helpful short set of guidelines on this subject, as below.

Recommendations for Christian School Leaders and Educators

- Ensure that the philosophical foundations of Christian education are used to evaluate the CCSS.
- Filter the CCSS through a biblical worldview as the highest standard, and only align with CCSS to the extent that the school's mission and worldview are uncompromised, while being prepared to identify and explain the points of conflict.
- Make yourselves aware if your state has adopted the CCSS, and - whether in a CCSS state or not — review the standards for familiarity including the coding of standards, clusters, and domains for the various subject areas.
- Separate the standards content and skill statements into priorities and determine to what degree they match with the school's grade-level scope and sequence.
- Evaluate the school's curriculum and determine to what degree it generally matches, exceeds, or falls short of the CCSS.
- Don't adopt the CCSS as a wholesale benchmark for curricular quality in the school.
- Use the standards as an informational piece regarding the national and global educational context in which we are preparing our students.

The full statement from ACSI may be found at

http://www.williamsburgchristian.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ACSI_Position_on_Common_Core_State_Standards.pdf

The second point on the ACSI list has been carefully addressed by Christian educators, including Christian Educators' Academy, an online school which seeks to align their

teaching to the maths and English standards. At the same time, however, they claim that their Christian teachers

".....have the ability to edit, substitute, add and encourage Christian morality, integrity, and standards that agree with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Science teaching is a cause of concern for Christian educators, not least because in public Americans schools, evolution is taught as scientific fact.
The CEA says that

".....in most Christian private schools, including CEA, evolution is explained as a theory in order to meet accreditation standards and prepare students with the necessary background knowledge for college studies. At CEA "creationism" is expressed and discussed, allowing students to have answers to scientific questions requiring debate, thought, and discussion."

[<http://christianeducatorsacademy.com/concerns-about-common-core>]

In addition, CEA offers the alternative of the Christian-based Apologia science course, but they state that in practice few take up this offer, the implication being that parents are satisfied with the way that science is taught by them even without specifically Christian textbooks.

As with the previous article, feedback and comments are welcomed. It would be especially interesting to hear from those who have experience of Common Core - including, but not limited to, curriculum development staff, teachers, students and parents.

Gill Bryant October 2015

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