



DIOCESE OF FALL RIVER

CATHOLIC EDUCATION CENTER
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
423 Highland Avenue
Fall River, Massachusetts 02720-3791

OFFICE of
SUPERINTENDENT

Statement of the Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Fall River on the "Common Core"

Background

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are the result of a state-led initiative to develop a set of educational standards for kindergarten through grade 12 in English language arts and mathematics. These standards have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. CCSS is not a federal program, although the presidential administration has publicly supported the effort. In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks serve as the educational standards for the state. In 2011, Massachusetts revised its standards to be in accord with CCSS. There has been some controversy surrounding CCSS, which has led to requests for clarification of how these standards, the Massachusetts Frameworks, or any other standards, are used in Catholic schools.

Controversy

Supporters of CCSS claim that these "college and career ready standards" offer students a more rigorous education than what most have had in the past. They state that the standards are internationally benchmarked, require higher level thinking, foster deeper understanding of concepts, and will provide clarity and consistency for student learning across the country. Supporters state that these standards were developed as a result of concerns expressed by college professors and employers that students were not being well prepared for college and career success. Unsatisfactory performance by United States students on international tests was also cited as a motivating factor to increase the standards for educating students across the nation.

Opponents of CCSS have expressed concern that local control of education may be eroded. Some believe these standards were adopted by the states too hastily without adequate local review. They raise a related question of whether other standards yet to be developed, in science or social studies for example, could be adopted without adequate time to consider academic or moral issues related to those fields of study. The emphasis of CCSS on assuring that students read an appropriate amount of "informational" text has led some to be concerned about whether this could result in a decline in the study of great works of literature. Concerns have also been raised about the moral content of certain recommendations for reading contained in the appendices and model lessons, which are supplementary to the actual standards. More recently in the news have been some negative reactions to the potential use of test results related to CCSS standards for public school teacher evaluations.

Many in the educational community take a moderate view of CCSS, seeing the standards as a potential opportunity to advance educational practices, while also recognizing the need to monitor and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of CCSS as it is implemented. They view the standards not as a radical change but as a step forward in better defining expectations for students and teachers. To give one example, in the Massachusetts Frameworks a former 7th grade standard (MA.7-8 L.5.16) stated, "Distinguish phrases from clauses." The new standard (CC.7.1) now reads "Explain the function of phrases and clauses in general and their

function in specific sentences.” Some may prefer the earlier language, but those who revised the Frameworks in 2011 believed the updated statement provides a stronger focus toward the educational goal.

Catholic Schools and Standards

In the Catholic community, there is no “consensus” about the Common Core. For example, some university professors from prestigious Catholic universities have criticized the standards while others within the same academic communities of higher education have been strong advocates for the standards. A number of Catholic schools have adopted CCSS outright, while others have selected components of CCSS and adapted them in the development of their own standards. Some claim they will not use CCSS at all, although many of these same schools will likely use textbooks and other materials highly influenced by CCSS.

Standards in the Diocese of Fall River

The standards for Catholic schools in the Diocese of Fall River are developed through the Catholic Schools Office in collaboration with committees comprised of principals and teachers. These standards are officially entitled “Learning Outcomes” and are found on the Catholic schools website (www.dfrcec.com or follow the link from the Diocese of Fall River website).

The Common Core State Standards have never been "adopted" as the standards for the Diocese. For many years, the primary guide for the development of Diocesan Standards has been, and continues to be, the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Even then, any standard from the Frameworks is accepted only following a review by our diocesan committees and approval by the Catholic Schools Office. Any standard that could conflict with Catholic Church teaching, such as some standards in the state’s health curriculum, have been rejected and are not included in our standards. The Diocese may also revise a standard or add a new one it may feel important to include.

In 2011, when the Massachusetts Frameworks were revised in English/Language Arts and Mathematics the Diocese of Fall River Catholic Schools Office then proceeded to fully implement the review process described above, examining each standard in the revised Massachusetts Frameworks and making a determination regarding each one. The Diocese also added some standards. For example, cursive writing was kept in the grade three Diocesan standards, even though it was not in the Massachusetts Frameworks. The diocesan standards were revised in English/Language Arts for grades Pre-K through eight and in Mathematics for grades Pre-K through ten, while other high school standards are still undergoing review and development.

There is no doubt that CCSS has had an impact on the Massachusetts Frameworks, as well as textbooks and other educational materials that are used by Catholic schools. However, the freedom of Catholic schools to develop their own curriculum, combined with our Catholic schools’ academic focus far beyond minimum standards, allows our schools to benefit from any of the positive elements of CCSS, or other standards, without being tied to any of the restrictions or requirements related to CCSS that public schools experience.

Standards and Curriculum – Two Highly Different Roles in the Educational Process

A key reason for misunderstandings about the use of standards in Catholic schools is the failure to distinguish between “standards” and “curriculum.” In Catholic schools “standards” are intended to reflect minimal levels of achievement expected for every student. Standards define the basic levels of skills and understandings that teachers must assure that every student acquires. The value of such standards is that they ensure that our Catholic schools will, at a minimum, meet or exceed the standards of other schools in the region (a requirement of

Canon Law), while also assuring that each student, even the student who “struggles” academically, will achieve foundational skills and understandings for college preparation. The understanding in the Diocese of Fall River, and in most dioceses, is that standards should be regarded not as a ceiling, but as a floor. The curriculum, on the other hand, embodies the rich content and process of engaging students in learning experiences focused toward enabling every student to attain his/her highest level of achievement.

In Fall River, as in most Dioceses, “standards” are developed at the diocesan level with principal and teacher involvement, while the “curriculum” of each Catholic school is primarily developed at the local school level, often in collaboration with other Catholic schools. In our Catholic schools students regularly study the classics. Poetry and Shakespearean plays are studied in all four years of high school. Teachers in our schools are called to collaborate in preserving the rich, historical approaches of Catholic education that are grounded in classical traditions, while capitalizing on opportunities in other subject areas such as science and social studies to utilize informational texts. An appropriate balance of classics and narrative fiction with informational texts is maintained by each school’s curriculum oversight.

An example of how the Diocese incorporates Catholic teachings and distinguishes itself from state standards is reflected in a process related to the Health standards. After examining the Massachusetts Frameworks in 2003, and finding them lacking in ways that did not align with some teachings of the Catholic Church, the Catholic Schools Office undertook the rewriting of a complete new set of standards using the Framework of the State, but engaging other departments of the Diocese (Catholic Social Services, Pro Life Apostolate, a diocesan priest, Catholic nurses, bioethics trained teachers, Theology teachers, science teachers and principals). The Pro Life Apostolate continues to support these standards with personnel and materials. We systematically update this document to keep abreast of the new health issues.

Success and Growth

The academic environment of the Catholic schools of the Diocese of Fall River is evidenced by the schools’ accomplishments. Our Diocese is one of only 33 school districts in Massachusetts to have achieved the 2013 Advanced Placement District Honor Roll status. Our high school SAT scores averaged 1632 last year, surpassing the state average of 1526 and national average of 1500. In our elementary schools, the average composite score percentile of all of our students was 66%. The curriculum followed by these students was developed by our Catholic schools, in alignment with the Massachusetts Frameworks, and this continues to be the case.

The Catholic schools of the Diocese of Fall River plan to continue to keep abreast of ongoing developments in technology, curriculum development, teaching methodologies and other areas that may have an impact on education in the 21st century. At the same time, the academic and faith traditions on which our schools have been established will continue to guide our efforts in preparing young people for success, service and leadership in society and the Church of tomorrow.

Michael S. Griffin, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools
Diocese of Fall River

September 1, 2014