

Understanding Common Core State Standards

"Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning." — Benjamin Franklin

Enter the Common Core State Standards. In 2009, after years of declining student achievement, rising high school and college dropout rates and students entering but unable to

OTHER VOICES

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compete in the global job market, these new, national standards were offered to states as a way to place our students on an equal path toward academic success and college and career readiness.

The standards were informed by the best state standards already in existence, the experience of teachers, content experts, states, leading thinkers and feedback from the public. On Aug. 2, 2010, the California State Board of Education adopted the standards after lengthy discussion and public input.

These new standards differ from the California standards we've known for the past 17 years because they ask us to focus on evidence of student learning, helping students raise their literacy levels, teaching higher-level thinking skills, fostering learning confidence and independence, and teaching fewer concepts more deeply at each grade level.

As educators, we hear from parents and community members every day, and everyone wants the same thing for their children: to learn the skills necessary to be prepared for college or career, to be competitive in a 21st Century global market and to become competent thinkers and contributing members of our society. This is exciting, since this is exactly what the Common Core State Standards emphasize.

What are the Common Core Standards? They are a set of expectations that students are expected to learn at each grade level. The standards are *not* a curriculum. In a recent article published by The Union, Jan Collins was quoted as saying, "The curriculum should be under local control because nobody knows our children and our students more than the teachers that teach them every day."

We could not agree more.

Lucky for us, the Common Core Standards establish what students need to learn but do not dictate the curriculum used or how teachers should teach. Those decisions are determined

solely by our local districts.

How will our students benefit from a national set of standards? For decades, students in every state have been held to vastly different sets of expectations, some states more rigorous than others. As a child who moved to five different states during her K-12 education, as many in our military are required to do, Shar can tell you that it has a profound impact on a student's ability to transition successfully into new learning environments. Parents have concerns that our students are not entering the work force or college prepared to compete globally, and yet we have not held our students to the same set of real-world expectations across our United States. These standards unite our states with a common set of expectations but leave the curriculum and how those standards are taught to local control.

Are the Common Core Standards abandoning classical literature and basic arithmetic? Absolutely not. In fact, the English language arts standards require analysis of rich literature, as well as developing skills in critical thinking, reading, writing and speaking across the curricular areas. The emphasis of teaching literacy does not fall solely to English teachers. In math, the Common Core Standards focus on procedural and problem-solving strategies while demanding mastery and automaticity with basic facts, algorithms and the understanding of critical arithmetic skills. By focusing on fewer topics in a more in-depth way, students learn to think, not just memorize and regurgitate facts.

Our job is to educate our children for tomorrow's challenges. To quote an unknown author, "You can't expect to meet the challenges of today with yesterday's tools and expect to be in business tomorrow." The Common Core Standards are an example of a transformative and powerful change for our students.

As Benjamin Franklin and our Founding Fathers discovered, great change can bring a peak of unease, frustration and resistance but is often tempered by the promise of amazing possibilities on the other side: the possibilities for "improvement, achievement and success."

Shar Johns is associate superintendent for educational services and Kathleen Kiefer is director of curriculum, instruction and accountability with the Nevada County Superintendent of Schools Office.

Common Core opponents pack town hall meeting in GV

By Ivan Natividad
Staff Writer

More than 200 people packed Grass Valley's Elk's Lodge Tuesday night for a town hall meeting hosted by Common Core Concerns, a local group opposing the new state-initiated educational standards.

"We believe it's your right as a parent, a teacher and a community member to know both sides of the issue," event organizer Jan Collins told the audience. "That's what we're here for."

The event featured guest speakers who publicly spoke out against Common Core, airing all of their concerns and negative experiences with the new standards for community members to hear.

Guest speaker Dr. Sandra Stotsky said she served on the initial Common Core Validation Committee as an English and language arts specialist and refused to sign off on the new standards.

Stotsky said Tuesday that Common Core was never a state-led process but a federal one, and that the standards were not created by educators but by nationally appointed experts with no experience in teaching.

"If you were developing high school curriculum for students to be college ready, wouldn't you get feedback from teachers and educators that are actually teaching these students?" Stotsky said.

"No teachers, from high school or college, were used in the process of developing Common Core."

Stotsky also claimed that the new standards being implemented in schools stress skills-based curriculum over content-based learning, adding that "They want to stress writing over reading. We know from over 100 years of research that good writers have been good readers. Reading creates good writers and should take priority over writing."

Also speaking at the event was California educator Lydia Gutierrez, who has more than 20 years of experience as a teacher in schools across the state. Gutierrez, who is currently running for State Superintendent of Public Instruction, told the crowd that Common Core has been labeled as a standard but it is actually an untested theory.

"At 7 years old, my child was told to write a three-page opinion paper," Gutierrez said. "They don't know what they are doing. A child that age can't be told to do something like that."

Gutierrez also claimed that Common Core was rushed through the evaluation process on a national level, and that the validation committee only took six months to approve the new standards.

"Theory has to be tested before you implement it as a standard," Gutierrez said.

"They want our students to rely on a computer, to create that as a communicational skill. If a child is using this as their only form of communication, they do not learn the importance of discussion, they do not learn the tonation of vocabulary."

Brad Dacus, president of the Pacific Justice Institute, also spoke at the event and stressed to the group that Common Core is a breach of parental trust that asks students about personal information, and that parents can opt their children out of the standards and testing.

"That's your right as a parent to opt out," Dacus said.

"You have a reasonable expectation of privacy that your child's personal information does not end up going to the federal government."

The meeting also included an appearance from a Sacramento parent, Katherine Duran, who made national news recently after being suspended from her son's school after he passed pamphlets out telling parents to opt their kids out of Common Core standards.

"They told me it was inappropriate behavior. My child's rights were violated," Duran said Tuesday. "If you're in favor of Common Core, you either stand to gain financially from it or you don't have enough information. It's a terrible, terrible thing."

As the event's final speaker, Duran also led a Q&A that allowed community members to ask the panel of guests questions about Common Core and how it will affect their children's education.

Celeste Blackmon's son is in kindergarten, and she plans to opt him out of the Common Core standards at his school.

"I'm really concerned what they are implementing in our schools, it is very scary," Blackmon said.

"It wasn't really talked about a whole lot, it just started happening at his school with a lot of implementation, without a lot of explanation. So I plan to opt him out of it."

Shannon Briggs is a parent of three and said that she had done research on Common Core, but she wanted to get more information at the town hall on Tuesday.

"I have a lot invested in education and the direction that education is taking, and I need to be informed about what is happening, and why it's happening, and how it can impact my children's future," Briggs said.

Briggs said her children are home-schooled, but she still plans to opt them out of the Common Core testing standards, saying that "I think Common Core is detrimental to our nation and our children's future."

Associate Superintendent for Educational Services at the Nevada County Superintendent of Schools office Shar Johns, though, claimed that there is misinformation circulating around about Common Core that is not true.

"I do believe there is some misinformation out there," Johns said.

"Common Core is a set of standards, so that is a set of expectations that students at all levels are expected to know when they finish and complete a specific grade level. And so it gives us some benchmarks and framework of where students should be in their educational career so they can be career and college ready."

Johns says that the Common Core standards are not curriculum that teachers have to use but goals they should meet.

"I think there is some confusion about the difference between what standards are and what curriculum is," Johns said.

"Curriculum is the material and instructional strategies — the way teachers teach and the material that they use in order to get information out to students to help them learn. The standards are what they need to be learning."

Johns added, "By third grade, a student should know how to multiply, but how a teacher gets to that point is definitely up to the teacher, and the curriculum and materials that they use is completely controlled by our district."

But Stotsky said Tuesday that Common Core standards force teachers to use specific curriculum that is required to be used for a school to be funded. Stotsky, though, added that Common Core's future is in the hands of the parents, and they can be the ultimate decider of whether or not it will continue to be used.

"If enough students opt out in the next three years it kills the validity," Stotsky said.

"So these next few years are very important."

For more information, go to www.commoncoreconcerns.com

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