

Common Core: Promises and Challenges

Chairman Holloway, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to have the opportunity to speak this morning. After 30 years as an educator, I've seen a lot of educational reform. I'm here to give you my perspective on this latest, the Common Core.

Last week I was in a classroom where students were writing an opinion paper. The prompt was to express their opinion on whether the Titanic tragedy could have been avoided. They had to document reasons from their reading to support their opinion. They had to have proper grammar and spelling, and they had to have correct structure for their paper with supporting details for their topic sentences. These children are 9. Their teacher showed her creativity in understanding that she had to teach historical events but also had to teach students how to analyze literature. She integrated both into a writing lesson that was probably harder than students in the past had to complete in the same grade level. This is an example of the Common Core State Standards in action. I have three of the essays with me today if you'd like to see them. We hear the word "rigor" in reference to the Common Core. A synonym for "rigor" is "inflexibility." This is the opposite of the Common Core, which gives teachers the flexibility to create within.

Common Core State Standards were created to teach students to think creatively, read and write critically, and complete math problems that are relevant to the real world. They were created to enable our students to compete in a world market, with skills that will help them be successful in college and careers, including collaborative skills so important in places like the Silicon Valley and the Research Triangle. They are aligned with national tests such as the SAT and the ACT. This is a good thing, since in 2013, North Carolina students ranked 38 out of the 50 states in SAT scores. CCSS require students to use technology naturally as a tool. Needed? Seniors in our high schools were 6 years old when the Blackberry hit the market. Children have grown up with computers in their hands. The Common Core State Standards address the growing technological expertise of our children. With my Master's Degree in Technology in Education, I see this as essential to student progress.

The Common Core may be the curriculum whose time has come. Who can argue with having high expectations of learning for each and every student in our schools? Who can argue with a curriculum that is based on the Higher Order thinking skills in Bloom's Taxonomy, relevance to a technologically charged world, and the ability to think critically and solve multi-step problems with ease and confidence? This is the promise of the Common Core.

Challenges to the Common Core:

Full implementation of any change is not without its challenges, and the common core is no exception. I find it interesting that every concern in education right now is being attributed to the common core. It's like the blind men and the elephant; whoever you talk to, their understanding of the common core is different. To some it means new tests. To others it means technology. One person may think it's about "new math". Another may think it means that students always have to work in partners. This is to be expected with any change, but especially with a change this big. Implementation of the common core is not just a change in the curriculum but is a fundamental change in how we "do school". The issues surrounding the implementation also have more to do with other changes in education that are

occurring at the same time as the move to the common core. These changes are neither correlation nor causation, but simply coincidence in that they're happening at the same time.

In retrospect, the implementation should have been more gradual, allowing for time between the different changes that were necessary for complete implementation of the common core. The issue of time to get used to the change is one aspect of the implementation dip. The challenge is that we have not been allowed to have a dip in our implementation; no time was given to the schools to adjust to the more rigorous demands. The first round of testing showed educators in our state where we had to adjust to bring our students to proficiency towards the more stringent standards. However, testing our students more often with mandated assessments has taken away instructional time from teachers without giving them the feedback they need to determine what their next steps need to be in instruction. We need to trust our teachers to create tests that will give them the information they need. Our teachers work together every day in teams to look at strategies, plans, and best practices for each student, and they rely on immediate information to determine student needs, not the results of a test taken too late to help children.

The high stakes nature of the tests is another issue with the implementation of the common core. In the McKinsey report of 2007, the city of Boston was considered to be an up and coming school system. After implementing educational reform, Boston increased the number of students meeting the MCAS standard from 25% to 74% in math, and from 43% to 77% in English, which is amazing growth! It took them six years. Should we not allow time for our state to make equal or even better growth? Using the test scores now to grade schools and teachers will not lead to greater progress. According to the report, "Improvement comes from building capacity, and harnessing the motivation that teachers and schools already have. Additional pressure just leads to regressive behaviors (for example teaching to the test, drilling students on examination questions...)." Certainly we should look for growth over time, but we should also allow for the dip in scores that will come when teachers take professional risks to add value to their students' education.

Another challenge that we face with the implementation of the common core is the lack of available resources. Sites such as Pinterest and TeachersPayTeachers.com have proliferated in the last two years as teachers have developed common themes and units and collaborated on strategies and activities with teachers across the country. Teachers are working in collaborative groups more now than ever. Collaborative planning has become a necessity for teachers with limited time. This is not a bad thing, but the scramble for resources has become a hardship for our profession. There is a sense of building the boat while we're sailing it. Teachers need a reliable place to find the resources they will need to teach the new curriculum. For teachers who are passionate about doing things the right way and making sure that each child's needs is met, this struggle to find resources is leading to burn out and pressure for our best and brightest teachers. And the funding for these resources has stretched school budgets. Additionally, the need for increased technology has put a burden on already-tight budgets. The next generation of testing will require students to access technology that many schools do not have. The Common Core is dynamic, changing to keep up with the times, and the times are changing. It is estimated that over the next 30 years, 70% of today's jobs will be automated.

In conclusion, Common Core State Standards will bring North Carolina schools into the future. As one teacher said in an NCAE poll, "I see positive changes being implemented as a result of the Common Core Standards. Teachers are being challenged to rethink the way they teach to be sure their lessons are

relevant, and are truly building conceptual knowledge and understanding for students. Students are being challenged to rethink the way they learn. They are defending and justifying knowledge gained, which is making them more accountable for their actions in the classroom.”

The challenges of the Common Core are not insurmountable, but they need to be addressed carefully and fully to help our children realize their full potential in this changing world.