

LRC Study Committee on Common Core State Standards
February 20, 2014
Comments by Tim Barnsback

PENC Members

In June 2013 and February 2014 Professional Educators of North Carolina (PENC) presented a thoughtful survey to our 7000 members focused on familiarity with the standards, effectiveness and quality of training, availability of resources, value as a learning tool, and confidence in NC's ability to successfully implement the standards.

In essence: The majority of our members indicated that not only do they feel unprepared to teach the standards, largely due to average to low quality training (~80%) and a lack of resources; but they do not feel confident that NC is adequately prepared to implement the standards (44% moderately, 51% NOT).

Not surprisingly, as a result, ~90% of teachers responded that they do not feel all students in NC are prepared to master the CCSS.

Despite what points toward opposition, when asked if NC should continue to implement the CCSS, the answers were surprisingly neutral, leaning positive. Although ~40% called for an end to implementation, MANY were supportive, given some very specific and reasonable changes, primarily focused on teacher involvement at every step, equal access to resources for all students, and an end to bad tests.

Personal Experience

My perspective as a classroom teacher will differ greatly from most that you hear from today, because I have never taught under the CCSS, and this is by personal design. For 14 years I taught MS SS and filled my class with rigorous lessons based on human development through a clear and coherent understanding of the lessons of the past, and how they shape our present and eventually drive the future. Because I had no standardized test I was offered the "thing" that very few public educators are allowed: Autonomy. The freedom to teach the curriculum in a meaningful way that engaged my students as contributors to the process of self-discovery and made them feel the classroom was centered around their individual needs led to skills such as adaptability, perseverance, teamwork, and creativity. Essentially I was told what to teach, not how to teach it, and my students benefitted in their tested areas because they understood the cognitive process of learning and could apply their standardized knowledge in meaningful ways. They could see through the clutter of ABCD choices.

When CCSS began to creep into my Social Studies classroom, and took considerable time away in order to help prepare them for their standardized tests in other subjects, I realized that I needed a different avenue for my style of teaching and learning. Fortunately, Burke County has begun an investment in Project Lead the Way, and I have found my new home in a program that allows me to produce innovation ready leaders because I am among the best trained and highly supported teachers in NC. I have intense standards, but no test. My autonomy is my accountability because I am solely responsible for how I teach my classes, and my effectiveness is measured in nurturing an understanding of critical thinking, problem solving, and fostering an interest in gaining the STEM skills necessary to change the world in which my students live. And then I want them to come back to Burke County, and help it continue to grow. That will be the true measure of my value.

Common standards are good for a state, but they should clarify the needs of the people, and direct education in a manner that meets those specific needs. I believe this is why the 10th Amendment is fundamental to education. Education should be immediately actionable and relevant.

What happened to Common Core was the perfect storm of false accountability in exchange for relief from very difficult economic times. In NC we were already reeling from the impact of NCLB and RttT. CC was supposed to be the force to calm the storm, make standards more rigorous and relevant to the 21st century, and lead education in a direction of coherence and clarity. Unfortunately, we turned STANDARDS into a RIGID CURRICULUM when we unpacked them, set them to a pacing guide, cut funding for training and materials, and linked student gains and teacher effectiveness to multiple choice tests that kill creativity and comprehensive understanding. Test fatigue has destroyed a love for learning and teaching. Students have been used as pawns in a game of numbers with tests that are not tied to truly intelligent goals.

Teacher input has been scarce. Field testing was forsaken for speed. Poverty and social conditions were ignored and we began conducting an experiment on our children with little foresight as to the potential outcomes. Once trusted to craft meaningful lessons that rewarded the individual talents of their students, teachers often feel as if they have become little more than program facilitators and testing proctors. It should come as very little surprise that we aren't buying in.

I believe that a relevant and comprehensive set of standards that includes teachers in its development, supported by high quality training and equal resources would be widely supported. If a test is necessary it should be a smart one. Graded by humans, and not attached to the worth of the student or the value of the teacher.

Parent

My son Miles is in 2nd grade. He loves school and does very well academically. He'd better. His Mom's a teacher too. He is also creative, energetic, and emotional. In third grade, a choice is made for him: Achievement over enjoyment. I have no experience in elementary education, but the Dad in me worries he isn't ready for what is going to be expected of him and his creative growth will suffer. What I fear the most is that he won't connect learning to enjoyment. He's lucky though, lots of support at home. Many of the students in his class aren't so fortunate. I hope their teacher is a superhero.

Fiscal Conservative

As a public school teacher, I have to follow the money at home pretty closely. So, I also like to keep an eye on it in my profession and as a tax payer. Public Education should never be viewed as a source of corporate revenue. Yet, when you trace the footsteps of influence, they lead to a few groups and companies who are looking to create earnings from our vulnerabilities. If we don't find meaningful ways to challenge and properly assess our kids, without focusing our already lean resources on scripted curriculums and tests pushed by for-profit companies, those opportunists will come into our state and take over. I think transparency and true intent are important to all North Carolinians, not just teachers, when it comes to sound education policy.