

# THE COMMON CORE AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

*by Christopher Perrin, Classical Academic Press*

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When I first heard the Common Core discussed in a news report, I had a schizophrenic reaction. Being an ardent advocate for the classical tradition of education, I responded positively to its captivating name. Classical educators love and support the idea that there is a “core curriculum” —a core (even a canon) of great books, great ideas, and great arts that should be studied. We also support the notion that these great ideas should be the common study and treasure of the entire nation. Much of this thinking is embedded in E.D. Hirsh’s Core Knowledge curricula, for example. But then I had another reaction: what I heard of this Common Core, turned out to be nothing like the classical tradition, but rather something quite uncommon to it. As I read and listened, it became clear that the Common Core Standards (CCS) were progressive education theory with a classical name. The name connotes or suggests something that it is not—at least to anyone familiar with traditional and classical education.

In this brief essay, I cannot address every point made by Common Core advocates and refute them all. There are hundreds (if not thousands) of proponents and critics debating the Common Core on a weekly basis.

There are hundreds of books published, hundreds of websites in the fray. What can I add? Simply a response that looks at the Common Core through the lens of the classical tradition of education and its ongoing renewal in the U.S.

Let me offer from the onset what I think describes the entire exercise of the Common Core endeavor: educational fatigue and weakness. The entire proposal betrays our lack of vision, health and confidence to educate our children. Why do I think this? The Common Core focus is almost entirely on efficiency—the sure sign of weakness. We (they) do not talk any longer about the aims and ends of education—a cultivated, humanized, free human being and citizen. No, the extent of our vision of educational health is “career and college readiness.” This, frankly, spells the end. With no robust vision for the end of education, education ends. What do we have in its place? Technical training. Technical training never was, and never will be, an education. Many of you will understandably scratch your head at this idea—naturally, because for 50 years we have been trained and not educated, and think training IS education. And most of us did not thoroughly enjoy our

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20 or so years of “education.” I recall a friend of mine, a physician, standing up before a group of parents joining together to start a classical school and saying, “I am very highly trained and very poorly educated.”

Traditionally, education is the cultivation and nourishment of a human soul on truth, goodness, and beauty by means of the seven liberal arts, such that students realize their *humanitas* and acquire wisdom, virtue, and eloquence. This is almost completely absent from the standards (and their associated goals) of the Common Core—and so what we have left is a program for educational training. We have the parts, not the whole; we have pearls (yes, some of the standards are good *per se*) without a string; we have analysis and numerical data and machine-readable assessments.

Without a vision for seeking after truth, goodness, and beauty, this is what is left—efficient training exercises of some sort. You have scholastic anesthesia. Watch the teachers become technicians. Watch the students go to sleep.

Let me appeal to someone greater than I (than us all) to confirm this point. Here is what G. K. Chesterton says about efficiency and health:

When everything about a people is for the time growing weak and ineffective, it begins to talk about efficiency. So it is that when a man's body is a wreck he begins, for the first time, to talk about health. Vigorous organisms talk not about their processes, but about their aims. There cannot be any better proof of the physical efficiency of a man than that he talks cheerfully of a journey to the end of the world. And there cannot be any better proof of the practical efficiency of a nation than that it talks constantly of a journey to the end of the world, a journey to the Judgment Day and the New Jerusalem. There can be no stronger sign of a coarse material health than the tendency to run after high and wild ideals; it is in the first

exuberance of infancy that we cry for the moon. None of the strong men in the strong ages would have understood what you meant by working for efficiency.

The Common Core program is likely the largest “process program” in the history of education. The apt metaphors for this program are not the apprentice, coach, guide, mentor, or master. The appropriate metaphors are the factory, the lab, technician, and the manager. We will talk now endlessly about efficiently attaining hundreds of standards, grade by grade, because we are weak and have forgotten what a healthy, educated human being is.

Are standards evil? No, they are not. *Some* standards are worth articulating to guide teachers that are masters of their art or discipline (best set by the master teachers themselves). But without a vision for education, standards are all that's left; they become our focus, and thus they subdivide and multiply. In another vein, Chesterton said, “When you break the big laws you do not get freedom. You do not even get anarchy. You get small laws.” We have broken one big law of education. The big law says “you shall cultivate and nourish a human being on truth, goodness and beauty.” We have said, “We shall train workers for the global economy” (career readiness), and “We shall train them to get further training” (college readiness). What do we get? Many, many small laws that we call “standards.” Clipboard ready?

There are several important aspects to Common Core that can be stipulated, as they are well established. In all my recent reading, I did not learn much that was new that touched on the heart (yes, I wanted to say *core*) of the matter. I don't think I have much to add to the debate about many of the particulars such as

- The genesis of the CC: Private experts well-funded by the likes of the Gates Foundation worked

through trade associations like the National Governor's Association to create standards.

- The main political controversies: Education without representation, since no state legislatures approved the Common Core standards for any given state; the rush and incentive created by Race to the Top funds slipped into the stimulus package passed by Congress.
- The privileging of “informational texts” (non-fiction) over fiction and constructivist math in the standards.
- The fact that these standards have never been piloted, tried, or tested in any schools or school districts.
- The fact that these standards are copyrighted by a private group such that I can't post them, and such that a state must subscribe to every single standard and make no modification to them.

Whatever else Common Core is, it certainly is an attempt to institute a national and consistent set of standards amounting to a national curriculum. It is all legal, despite the fact that various acts of Congress expressly prohibit the enactment of a federal curriculum (see in particular the Department of Education Organization Act of 1979). How is this possible? It is possible because it was the states (via the states' departments of education) that adopted the standards. All this has been meticulously documented and hotly-contested, with “Stop Common Core” organizations working in almost every state in the union (only five states—Alaska, Virginia, Nebraska, Texas, Minnesota—have not adopted Common CoreS; about 30 states have pending challenges to all or part of CCS). As someone within the classical education renewal, I can only add a few observations springing from my ongoing study of the classical tradition.

- **Common Core is just the latest move by thoughtful, intelligent people who are not able or interested in educational solutions from the classical tradition.** They simply will not look to that treasury for aid; it has been ruled out and is off the radar. There are many reasons for this (its own story), but I believe this is a fact. Any solutions for these progressives—must be in the future not the past.
- **Common Core co-opts classical language about education.** A “core curriculum” is a hold-over concept from the classical tradition that assumes there is a “canon” of great literature and learning that has been handed down and should be preserved and handed down to the next generation. Ironically, while using “core” language, it refers not at all to a received collection of great books or traditional learning. The word common has similar overtones, as the “common life” of a great nation would normally assume a common set of books and arts to be known by all educated citizens. Like so many other moves to appeal to an esteemed tradition, it retains hallowed words with novel meanings.
- **Excessive analysis becomes an autopsy.** It is possible to analyze something . . . to death. Teachers who do relentless deep dives into the granular details of a subject they know well, generally bore their students to tears. Great teachers know how much analysis a student can take, and know when to switch back to the big picture that inspires students with beauty, purpose, and the point of it all. Endless dissections of the learning enterprise into minute steps of instruction turn teachers into technicians who must follow the manual, paragraph by paragraph (the standards). This is not what naturally gifted teachers imagined they would do—essentially act as educational

bureaucrats, checking off a list of standards before a class of bewildered and likely bored students. The standards themselves are highly analytical, and will therefore turn teachers into keepers of lists. What's lost, even if inadvertently? The love of math, history, literature, science—the love of these things in themselves and the ability to encounter them and experience them as wonderful facets of truth, goodness, and beauty.

- **Common Core assessment ensures anesthetizing, analytical teaching.** Standards are not bad in and of themselves, and I think many of the standards to be sensible and laudable. But regular standardized assessments (that prove teachers are teaching the standards) reduce teachers to technicians who will feel compelled to teach to the test and thus engage mainly (certainly far too much) in test-prep during class. Ask yourself—do you enjoy test prep? Do you think eighth graders are going to lean forward in their seats for more test prep exercises? No longer can the teacher (easily anyway) be the master of her craft, imparting her knowledge and skill to students according to the wisdom she has acquired as a master of her art. No, she will follow something much like a checklist of standards that will be embodied and scripted in Common Core aligned textbooks. No longer the coach, the guide, the mentor . . . no, she is the one with the clipboard, textbook, and checklist. It is harder now for her to inspire; she must inspect.
- **Too much poor teaching drives the push for CCS.** One legitimate cause for CCS: pervasively bad teaching in too many schools. For the last 30 years, there has been a decline in the quality of public schools (not all of them—some have managed to be admirable in many ways) largely related to yet other progressive educational policies (test prep being one of them). Our nation's

teachers, for example, are not generally trained to be well-rounded masters of several disciplines, but specialists who cannot integrate, say, biology with history or literature with music. Fragmented themselves, they can offer only a fragmented education to their students, and to be honest, have probably not even imagined that education could be anything other than taking one unrelated course after another. Such teachers can't easily inspire students and some (too many) settle into moving through their curriculum in checklist fashion, with little accountability to anything else. The result—students don't learn well, and don't perform well on various standardized tests set up by the states themselves. Scores fall, hands are wringed. Something must be done. Common Core is the current thing that is being done to address poor teaching and student performance. We will have the same set of standards across the nation; teachers will be required to teach these standards; students will be assessed with the same (standardized) assessments across the nation to demonstrate that teachers are indeed teaching and students are indeed learning.

- **Implementation of CCS will produce less of what it seeks.** The great irony: while this response to increase learning and accountability seems rational and understandable, I believe it will produce precisely the opposite effect. Why? Because teachers as dissectors and inspectors cannot inspire learning, and without inspiration, students cease being students. More and more students must be compelled to academic work, because they lack an internal drive to seek after truth, goodness, beauty, and knowledge. Again, why? Because the Common Core architects do not understand what education truly is. Having jettisoned the classical understanding of education, they retain only a modern conception of education.

Truth, goodness, beauty? They are not to be found in the Common Core standards. To them education is a science—the right application of a tested method to produce predictable results. We don’t need a “master”—we just need someone who can apply the tested techniques consistently upon a group of humans (made up of the same stuff no matter where you find them) to “effect” learning. Teachers are technicians, the inspectors, and the more careful and consistent they are the better. The Common Core standards emphasize that they do not specify *how* teachers teach just *what* they are to teach. But that is verbal gobbledygook. When academic standards are as highly specified as the Common Core standards are, they in effect become a pedagogy. In addition, the mere fact that regular assessments will be used to verify the teaching of these standards will affect pedagogy—they will compel the teacher to engage in test prep. Test prep will become both the curriculum and the pedagogy, largely defining both what will be taught and the general methods of teaching.

All the important reforms of Common Core are characterized by a modern understanding of what education is. Given that understanding, these reforms are rational and consistent. Chesterton remarked that all reform has reference to form. What form of human being do the Common Core architects have in view? What form, therefore of education? I have said it already: they view education as the science of the right application of method and technique to effect predictable learning responses or results. They may not know nor may they care what the classical understanding of humanity and education is. For them, that understanding was discredited a century ago, and revisiting it is probably laughable.

For me, however, the classical conception holds true, and is a rock that the tide and waves cannot diminish. Human beings are above the animals as conscious

beings capable of apprehending and knowing truth, goodness, and beauty as eternal realities. They are best taught by wise, eloquent, and virtuous teachers who have themselves been cultivated by a study of language, history, literature, mathematics, music, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and theology. Teaching is an art and relationship (of love and kindness) in which a teacher imparts herself to a student, so that after being fully trained a student will become like his teacher. The standards and assessments of this relationship are largely personal, that of a master and apprentice. Is Common Core the roar of a tide coming in or going out? I am not sure, but classical education will remain steadfast and intact, as it has for 2000 years.