

Common Core Curricula

The following are questions posed by Pastor Tom Aubrey and answered by Casey Shutt, PhD. Dr. Shutt is the Head Master at Morning Star Academy, Bettendorf, Iowa.

Question #1: What should pastors and parents know about Common Core?

The education of our children sparks a collective anxiety. Lately, there's been this sense that we're not performing well, and globally American schools tend to be pretty average (see [Amanda Ripley's The Smartest Kids in the World](#)). This unease has produced lots of programs and initiatives over the years and the latest is the Common Core. The main goal behind the Common Core is to improve students' critical thinking skills. Accordingly, there's an emphasis on processes, not so much content, in the standards.

See recommended resources below.

Question #2: What are the issues of concern and strengths of Common Core?

The goal of the Common Core (to improve education standards, particularly improve critical thinking skills) is good. Education needs to be more demanding and students need to learn how to think well and critically.

The means for reaching those goals (in MSA's opinion) are the problem. For example, in the English standards there is the desire for students to read more nonfiction. Some Common Core aligned textbooks suggest having students read a US Dept of Energy report. This does not seem like the best way to get students to enjoy reading. We believe that our students already lack a desire/interest to read (thanks in large part to how pervasive image-based communication is). Trying to pique interest with a government report does not seem wise, or helpful. Additionally, we believe these English standards neglect the importance of forming a student's moral imagination. Students need a moral compass, and good stories provide that.

Cheryl Headley, Head of Lower School, Morning Star Academy added her thoughts:

It is hard to sum up all the Common Core difficulties and potential pitfalls succinctly. There are overarching concerns that the federal government based on the U.S. Constitution has no business imposing a national curriculum as those powers not expressly given to the Federal Government are left to the states and the people. And, of course, biblically speaking we believe that it's parents who are directly responsible for the education of their children not the state.

Then there's the fact that the folks who created the Common Core also seem to be working hand-in-hand with the textbook publishers and the test designers. The main problem here is that while the Common Core claims to be only a set of standards, we all know that schools and teachers tend to "teach to the test". If schools want to appear successful by achieving high standardized test scores then of course they will gravitate toward textbooks that claim to prepare them for those same tests. Many busy teachers' default mode is to use the scripted teachers' editions of the textbooks and that's one pretty easy way to wind up with the philosophy of the Common Core's designers finding its way into every classroom.

*The Common Core standards are written in such a way that it's hard to tell what they actually mean in practice. That alone raises a red flag for me. Should what we're teaching be so complicated that the average parent can't tell by reading through a set of curriculum standards? I enjoyed reading Terrence Moore's book, *The Story-Killers* because he has spent a lot of time examining the Common Core aligned textbooks to see what is actually being taught based on the Common Core standards. He makes a convincing case that at least in the English standards the Common Core does nothing to improve what is happening in our nation's classrooms. On the contrary, adherence to the standards-based textbooks create students who have no interest in reading and who have never had the opportunity to engage through books and discussion with "the best that has been thought and said and done and discovered".*

Moore makes the point that if we really want to have a "common core" then these standards should have prescribed those books and stories and documents that all of us as Americans should read in common. Those essential, time-honored stories that help us to have a conversation with each other about what it means to be human and Americans.

Question #3: How should parents respond? What actions are advisable?

Parents should pay attention to what their children are learning. Parents should (in fact, they are commanded to) be the primary educators of their children (Deut 6.4ff). So, I believe that parents should be just that. Churches and pastors should equip parents on the importance of doing daily family devotions, prayer, reading, etc.

If parents send their students to public schools, they must be all the more alert and active to supplement and correct what may or may not be taught. A book that I'd encourage any parent to read is **Susan Wise Bauer's, *The Well Trained Mind***. It is a practical guide to how parents can teach their children. It is written for home schoolers but could apply to families that send their children to public schools.

I think Christian parents should investigate options when it comes to the education of their children. See this video, for example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-5ctVGD_Fo

Question #4: How might we support Christian educators?

I think the church should support private Christian education, home school families, and public school families and teachers. The church should teach families what the Christian faith has to say about education (Paul David Tripp's DVD series, *Your Christian School: A Culture of Grace?* would be a good resource for families to consider). If families or teachers are in an educational environment that is more challenging for Christians, the church should give particular attention to equipping those families to be thoughtful and shrewd.

The Bible calls our children arrows in the quiver. The education those "arrows" receive will largely shape how far and effectively they fly, and whether they hit their intended target. I believe churches should convey to parents their role as Christian educator and support them in the education of their children.

Morning Star views itself as a servant to the Church. We know that churches do not have the time/resources to run a school or fully educate their children. That's why we are here. If you have members of your churches that are concerned, we are happy to provide input, guidance, etc. We spend a lot of time thinking about education and believe we are educating in a distinctively Christian manner.

Additional Resources:

This Atlantic article highlights what has happened in Kentucky since the standards were embraced their several years back: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/what-kentucky-can-teach-the-rest-of-the-us-about-the-common-core/280453/>

The next two links come from the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), a large organization of Christian schools:

<http://pubs.royle.com/article/So,+What+About+the+Common+Core+State+Standards%3F/1497095/173903/article.html>

[http://www.williamsburgchristian.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ACSI Position on Common Core State Standards.pdf](http://www.williamsburgchristian.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ACSI+Position+on+Common+Core+State+Standards.pdf)

The Association of Classical and Christian Schools (the group that Morning Star Academy identifies with) has the following article on Common Core (note: click "common core" on sidebar):

http://www.accsedu.org/school-resources/about_classical_education

Terrence Moore, a classical school educator and Hillsdale professor, has written a book on Common Core standards. He is interviewed in several videos at the following link:

<http://dailycaller.com/2014/01/19/common-core-is-taking-aim-at-the-souls-of-our-children-says-a-classical-educator-video/>