



Common Core optional but embraced by some VT independent schools

By Bruce Parker
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Heads of Vermont's independent schools say federally mandated Common Core tests are optional, but that hasn't stopped one school leader from going full speed ahead into the new, new math.

"I just introduced, purchased and am training my teachers on a brand new math program by Houghton Mifflin, called Go Math. It's built and based on the Common Core standard," Patricia Stanley, head of school at the Mountain School at Winhall, told Vermont Watchdog.

THE NEW MATH: Like the old "new math" of the 1960s, the new math of the Common Core is raising questions over the usefulness of federalized testing and curriculum standards.

"The fact that it's built upon the Common Core principles is a huge plus for me. I want those incorporated in our curriculum."

Stanley, who became Mountain School's new leader in July after overseeing Indian Mountain K-5 lower school in Lakeville, Conn., is one of about 100 independent school principals in Vermont deciding whether to implement federal Common Core standards.

Unlike public schools in 43 states, Vermont's publicly funded independent schools are not required to participate in either the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) — federal tests that assess Common Core knowledge.

Scattered across 93 "tuition" towns that lack public schools, independents are free to develop curricula according to the institution's mission, as determined by teachers, parents and heads of school. About 4 percent of Vermont schoolchildren attend independent academies.

Stanley's decision to implement Common Core at the Mountain School comes as a recent poll revealed collapsing support for Common Core among the nation's schoolteachers. According the school-reform journal Education Next, just 46 percent of teachers support the adoption of Common Core standards, down from 76 percent one year ago.

Despite waning support among teachers, Mountain School's new head praised Common Core for standardizing learning across all states.

"In this country it was a bit of a patchwork quilt — state by state everything was different. I think it's meant to be that great equalizer," Stanley said of Common Core.

"We have people who move here from other places at differing grades. What a wonderful thing that a child can come from a school from Colorado, New Hampshire or South Carolina and be able to jump into our math, science or language arts program. Even though it's not the same, necessarily, if it had Common Core principles in it, they're going to be in relatively the same place as our kids."

This one-size-fits-all sameness across all states is precisely what Neal McCluskey, associate director at Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, finds objectionable about Common Core.

"It says every child should be doing essentially the same thing at essentially the same time. That flies in the face of basic human reality that all kids are individuals," McCluskey told Vermont Watchdog.

ERASING INDIVIDUALITY?: Neal McCluskey, associate director at Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, said federal standardization of education could erase individuality of schools and students.

"Communities are different, and even states are different, and it really doesn't make sense to say states should be doing the exact same thing at the exact same time. Common Core is really the opposite direction of where we should go. Instead of going for more centralization, we need to go for more decentralization, ultimately to where schools are autonomous, and parents who know their kids best can find the school that's best for them."

McCluskey found it surprising that independent schools would adopt Common Core given the academic freedom they are afforded.

"Independent schools can tailor what they do more to the unique subsets of kids. And for that reason you wouldn't want to say all schools, including independent schools, should have to use Common Core. By having independent schools, kids who might learn math more quickly than English, or have a real ability in art versus traditional academic subjects, can find a school that is tailored to their needs."

Tom Martin, head of school at the Village School of North Bennington, said his independent school won't be adopting federal Common Core tests and standards this year.

"One of the things that's important is we allow kids to find their own particular skill strengths. We really emphasize the idea of creativity and imagination," he said.

“One of the dangers that Common Core can present, if not implemented properly, is a drive for conformity. This is where independence serves us well — we’re certainly not interested in trying to make kids conform to a national expectation.”

Martin said his school is not opposed to standards or a discussion of what kids need to know, but he said local educators and parents, not federal bureaucrats, should determine a school’s curriculum and standards.

“We decide (curriculum). It’s very much related to our mission, and very much related to the community, parents and children we serve. What we teach is a collaborative decision based on our population, our staff and the talent they bring to the program.”

Asked if he thought Common Core would be implemented in the future, Martin said, “Not likely.”

“The idea that we’re going to go out and purchase a national curriculum and force it into our classrooms with a corporate developed test, that’s not the way it will be done for us at all. I think that’s true of most independents.”

SMALL ENROLLMENT, BIG FREEDOM: Vermont’s independent schools may be small, but they have big freedom when it comes to developing a curriculum consistent with the interests of parents and educators.

“The real concern is over a kind of hierarchical, bureaucratic structure being imposed in the implementation of Common Core ... We’re going to create a great deal of distance for ourselves from that aspect.”

Stanley said she is especially fond of the Common Core’s teaching methodology, which she sees as a welcome departure from rote learning methods of past decades.

“It’s the whole idea of kids really understanding math, not just regurgitating it on pages and pages of problems that were presented in the old-fashioned math textbooks. In this new idea and the core standard program I just adopted, kids have to be able to explain their thinking,” Stanley said.

While saying the new teaching methods require a lot of retraining for a typical 25-year veteran public school teacher, she said it was necessary to modernize education.

“Teachers should not be standing up in front of a class of kids sitting in rows for an hour at a time lecturing. That’s not 21st century education. A teacher should be more of a facilitator, and there should be more hands-on problem-solving and active learning going on.”

Detractors say even if some Common Core standards and methodologies are effective, it doesn’t justify the creation of a federalized teaching system.

“Any time you have essentially a monopoly on what schools have to teach, you don’t get competition from other standards or other ways of organizing schools and learning. So this is actually going to be bad for innovation and improving education moving forward,” McCluskey said.

“Even if Common Core were great standards — and that is heavily in dispute — they are certainly not the greatest standards that could ever exist. Human beings have finite knowledge, and we don’t know what the greatest standards are. The way we advance knowledge is by letting different ways of doing things compete with each other.”

McCluskey cited other worries, such as federal coercion, which, he said, was evident in the Obama administration’s decision to impose No Child Left Behind on Oklahoma for withdrawing from Common Core.

He also said centralizing power through federal tests and standards gives special interests “disproportionate political power,” a worry echoed in a recent Washington Post expose on Bill Gates’ involvement in the creation and promotion of Common Core.

McCluskey agreed many Common Core standards have merit, but he added that special interests have “taken those high bars and standards and have pulled them down, so they’re easy to get over.”

When asked what she thought about controversies surrounding Common Core, Stanley said, “It’s a shame that it’s come across as a big scary monster,” and she noted that “change is very difficult for adults.”

But she said she appreciates having the freedom to implement Common Core however she sees fit in Vermont.

“As a school in the 21st century dealing with standards, it has to be a part of what we’re doing. But I can’t tell you that someone is dictating that to me. I’m dictating that as head of school because it’s best practice in education.”

“In order to be current and up to speed with the best practices in education, it behooves all of us to be paying attention and integrating these principles to differing degrees in our own curriculum.”