

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## The Call of the Common Core



By **CAROL THOMAS**

If Big Brother were behind the new academic standards for public school students in 46 states, you would expect private schools these days to be reveling in their independence. But as I work in Florida to build parent engagement in the nation's largest tax-credit-scholarship program for economically disadvantaged students, private educators in the state are tugging at my sleeve with a remarkable request: Let us use the Common Core State Standards.

These are not idle musings. Our nonprofit, Step Up For Students, oversees the scholarship program, which will serve more than 60,000 low-income students this fall in more than 1,400 private schools in the state. Three-fourths of those schools are faith-based, and all of them covet their educational independence.

As part of our outreach to scholarship parents and schools, we are conducting a pilot project to find ways to promote stronger relationships between parents and teachers. To help educators chart the progress of each student, we have built an online tool that ties their conversations to the benchmarks described in the common core. We have no relationship with the common-core developers or the consortia that are preparing the related tests, and, frankly, we have kept our distance from the political developments in Florida public schools. Our main motivation is practical. We wanted a rigorous set of standards that could be shared across these schools.

For example, the 3rd grade literature standard is: "Compare and contrast the themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters." In our "student learning compact," the teacher selects the teaching methodology and the specific parent and student responsibilities that

are related to mastery of the standard.

Our target for the state pilot was to find 100 scholarship schools that would volunteer to participate. We already have more than 140, and my phone is still ringing. These principals aren't calling to lecture me on state sovereignty or intrusive regulation. They are calling because they think the common standards will help them guide the learning plans in their schools.

We call our pilot the "Success Partners" and have toured the state to spread the word to schools. In a recent meeting with principals of Seventh-day Adventist schools, 13 of the 15 attendees had decided to enroll their schools in the program before I could even finish the presentation. Catholic diocesan schools throughout the state are moving forward with the standards, and many of the teachers are also signing up for state-run workshops that were intended primarily for public school teachers. In one Christian school, after learning about the common core, the headmaster purchased a laptop computer for every teacher to use for his or her own research about learning and implementing the standards.

Suzette Dean is the principal at Bible Truth Ministries Academy, a small mission-driven school in Tampa that serves mostly African-American students. Of the common core, she emailed me with her reaction: "Finally, we are all on the same page [with the standards], our teachers know what to teach, and the parents know what their children should be doing in school. Sure, it is a change, but it is real change that is needed if we are going to prepare our students for college and a successful future."

The teachers with whom I now work, like the teachers in public schools with whom I used to work, really do just want what is best for the students. They recognize the standards are more complex and will require work to implement. But they say they want the challenge in order to

motivate students and to keep their schools competitive with other private schools. They also tell me they are reassured by seeing the standards tell them what to teach, not how to teach.

At a recent meeting in an inner-city Catholic school, teachers were eager with their questions and left me with encouraging comments. "Boy," one wrote, "I could have used these standards in my parent conference." Another, "Why don't we just use the standards profile as our report card? It certainly lets us know more about what the students are learning than a single grade." And a third, "Wow, I can focus on helping my students understand, not just memorize!"

I'm no newcomer to the standards debate. Before joining Step Up two years ago, I spent 30 years in Florida's Pinellas County public schools—the nation's 26th -largest district—where I was everything from a classroom teacher to an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction to an area superintendent. So I've seen more than my share of fads and state and federal edicts. But the common core is a bipartisan effort, led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers and imbued with genuine academic research. It mostly tries to ensure that students are held to high standards, and that they won't get lost in the maze if they move from one school or one state to another.

If there is anywhere I would expect to experience pushback on what is being described in some quarters as a federal government mandate, it would be within the private school sector. But what I'm finding is quite the contrary. The common-core contrarians would do well to pay these schools a visit.

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