



Common Core and Catholic Schools

For over a year now I have been following the increasingly spirited debate over the Common Core project to establish national academic standards. A number of you have expressed concern to me about Common Core's impact on our Catholic schools in Ontario, La Grande, The Dalles, Redmond, and Bend. With this column I want to respond to that concern and explain the perspective the Diocese of Baker is taking toward Common Core.

Common Core emerged out of a multi-year collaboration of advocates for educational reform, the National Governors' Association, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as a boost from the Federal Department of Education to encourage states to adopt it. Forty-one states have done so, Oregon among them. So, regardless of what the future may bring—four states have withdrawn from the effort; others are under pressure to do so—Common Core is now a fact of life in Oregon public education.

However, the sub-par standards and low achievement levels which Common Core set out to elevate are not to be found in Catholic schools. Throughout the nation Catholic schools have the well-deserved reputation for high academic standards and high academic achievement. Catholic schools develop their own standards and design their

own curriculum; they are not subject to the State of Oregon's decision to adopt Common Core.

Nonetheless, we cannot simply ignore the coming of Common Core; for we must be sure that our Catholic standards are at least as high as, and not lower than, those at which public schools aim. Since we have no Catholic high schools in this diocese, we need to know that our 8th grade graduates will be fully prepared to meet public-school expectations when they go on to high school. Out of concern for their educational future we must take the Common Core standards into account as we design our own and develop a curriculum around them.

As things stand today, however, there are more than a few reasons to be cautious about adopting Common Core. Several highly regarded educators involved in drafting the standards for math and literature now critically reject the final versions their committees produced. The informed reaction of these respected scholars draws attention to a deeper and more troubling deficiency: no one knows what standards Common Core will propose for history, health education, and social studies. These subjects treat hotly contested matters of the highest moral importance for the formation of young minds: the character of the American people, sexual development, and the nature of marriage—to say nothing of birth control, homosexuality, or abortion. Why should parents assent to the adoption of Common Core *before* its standards for history, health education, and social studies have even been made known? As bishop I cannot endorse a program that might undermine the very values which Catholic

parents expect Catholic schools to impart to their children.

Common Core standards have only recently been implemented in Oregon, and more time will be needed to assess their effectiveness. The Diocese of Baker, therefore, will not adopt the Common Core State Standards as a whole. Instead, we will monitor them against national testing and public high school entrance requirements and develop our own standards accordingly.