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Standards and Vouchers – Seize the Day!

Over the past month two of the major forces shaping public schools, the common core standards movement and the school privatization movement, have been given a boost. Both of these movements could be a blessing or a curse to students, parents and teachers depending on the manner in which they are implemented. As Christian educators you can influence on how these movements are implemented in your school.

Common Core Standards Receive Boost from the College Board:

On May 16 David Coleman, an instrumental figure in the development of the Common Core State Standards (www.corestandards.org), was named President of the College Board (www.collegeboard.org). Coleman was one of the writers of the language arts standards and as the standards were rolled out he became a major and very articulate advocate for their adoption by states. To date 45 states have adopted the standards with only Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia holding out.

The College Board oversees the development and administration of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the Advanced Placement (AP) Tests and a host of other education programs focused on access to higher education. The SAT and AP assessments are the most important assessments administered to college bound students across the nation. Coleman's commitment to the Common Core standards is very likely shape the AP courses and tests of the future and may also impact the SAT. This will add significant fuel to the fires burning in schools across the nation to align all curriculum and instruction with the Common Core State Standards. While the AP and SAT assessments are optional and administered only to juniors and seniors the pressure will not just be on High School teachers to "deliver the goods" on proficiency in the common core, there will be significant pressure on all teachers, K-12, to ensure that their teaching is aligned with the Common Core Standards at their grade level. Because AP tests and the SAT are administered in all states even teachers in the five "hold out" states will be affected.

The common core standards will be a very good thing for students if they are implemented thoughtfully by empowering classroom teachers with appropriate instructional materials and time to meet with colleagues and revise lessons and units of instruction. However school boards and administrators are already being heavily lobbied by professional development and text book providers to spend huge sums of money on their products. While some new classroom materials will be necessary for effective implementation, securing teacher time to collaborate with each other and do the real work of implementation – instruction and lesson planning – is far more important. No packaged curriculum or slick professional development session will replace teachers rolling up their sleeves to unpack the standards and take ownership of the content.

Romney Comes out In Strong Support of Vouchers

A week after the College Board announcement Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney delivered a [major address](#) on Education before the US Chamber of Commerce's Latino Coalition's Annual Economic

Summit in Washington, DC. One word would summarize the content. **“Choice.”** Romney said, “I will give the parents of every low-income and special needs student the chance to choose where their child goes to school. For the first time in history, federal education funds will be linked to a student, so that parents can send their child to any public or charter school, or to a private school, where permitted. And I will make that choice meaningful by ensuring there are sufficient options to exercise it.” Romney also issued a major policy white paper explaining his thoughts on education, [A Chance for Every Child: Mitt Romney’s Plan for Restoring the Promise of American Education](#) . Since Obama has also supported school choice (particularly through Charter schools) it is safe to say that regardless of whether Obama or Romney is our next president there will be a growing school choice movement in our country. Will this be good for students and teachers – or not so good? Again, it all depends on implementation.

Far too often school administrators when confronted by competition from charter or private schools have adopted a simplistic, “please the client,” approach. This approach leads to schools being tossed to and fro by the desires of parents that differ from family to family. Such shifts in emphasis lead to frustration among teachers and make a coherent educational experience for children impossible to achieve. However, if school leaders use the choice movement to shape individual schools that employ the passions and strengths of school staff and focus them on a unique school mission statement that the staff supports, the result will be more effective schools. In such a model parents would choose a school whose mission statement is in alignment with their own values resulting in schools that better meet the needs of families and provide a more unifying educational experience for children. Administrators who have the wisdom to adopt this approach to school choice will need teachers to engage with them in shaping and implementing a vision for their school.

If choice is implemented in this manner parents, will be able to choose their children’s schools from a variety of schools with different mission statements and core values. It is even possible that some schools could adopt a “traditional values” mission statement that Christian parents and teachers would feel more comfortable with, than the secular progressive agenda that permeates many public schools.

Through engaging in the important implementation work associated with the Common Core Standards and School Choice movements we can shape the education of students in a way that will help students to develop skills and values that do not conflict with their faith. We can take this opportunity to engage in the work and live out our calling to be salt and light in our culture.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

If you have thoughts or comments on this issue or other federal education issues please share them with us. You can address your thoughts and comments to JMitchell@ceai.org .

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