

“Common Core” under fire from conservatives

By Jim Nowlan

Educators face challenges in adapting their teaching to the new, putatively higher Common Core State Standards that have been adopted in in 45 states, including Illinois. While a strong majority of teachers appears to like the new standards, which are being implemented over several years, many conservatives see a liberal agenda behind the scenes from the Obama Administration.

First, teachers have it tough today. It used to be that teachers simply taught the content and could feel good about themselves.

Today, in addition to content, teachers often have to be surrogate parents and sociologists to dysfunctional families, provide for special needs children and offer individual attention to students. Further, they are guinea pigs for teaching to ever changing high-stakes tests and new pedagogies such as the Common Core.

Teachers do this within a new context of pension cuts in Illinois—longer years of teaching, to 67 in Illinois for new hires, before receiving smaller pensions and much less overall than before because of the combination of the two new realities. According to the state Report card, teachers in my rural district average \$51,000 a year while those statewide are at \$66,000.

And the teachers have the stress of new evaluations that will use the performance of the somewhat uncontrollable variable of their classroom students to determine if they indeed will have a career in teaching.

No wonder 46 percent of all new teachers drop out after five years in the classroom, according to a 2011 article in Forbes magazine.

I think the lengthy background above is important to topics like the Common Core. There is a lot on the shoulders of teachers in addition to becoming accustomed to a challenging set of new learning standards.

[And teachers are understandably hesitant to invest too much in a new approach from on high that may be replaced with yet another new approach in a few years.]

The new standards require higher order thinking skills, says Sunny Nolan, an English teacher in my home district (not a relative). For example, after reading a selection, the new standards call for more than identifying the main character but also for articulating what he or she means.

Sunny says she is pulling out old Advanced Placement English textbooks because that is the level at which regular students will be expected to read and understand.

“Our biggest fear,” says Sunny, “is finding the time to teach the greater depth of the material.”

Although the standards have ostensibly been developed by the National Governors’ Association and chief state school officers, apparently the impetus came largely from the Obama Administration.

[States are not required to adopt the Common Core, which standards are still being developed, but the Obama Administration holds out the carrot of federal funding for those that do adopt. (It is fascinating that the paltry 10 percent of all local school funding that comes from the federal government can call the tune for state and local school policies.)]

Conservatives from the Heritage Foundation criticize the new standards for emphasizing the use of informational or nonfiction reading in place of literature in the reading and English classrooms. The Common Core does this by having 10 new standards for informational reading and only nine for literary reading at every grade level.

Prof. Sandra Stotsky, who played a leading part in developing Massachusetts' highly regarded reading standards, decries the likely loss of "a meaningful range of culturally and historically significant literary works before graduation. . . .and may lead to a decreased capacity for analytical thinking."

On the other hand, teacher Sunny Nolan says she has long included substantial nonfiction reading in class "because that is what most students will be reading during their working lives."

Another complaint from conservatives is that the standard writers are going to use the informational reading selections for purposes of political propaganda. One blogger cites, for example, the recommendations of an environmental policy reading that he says is a sop to the left and an excerpt from an essay on health care that he says lauds Obamacare.

I am no student of how to establish learning standards. I wish I had read more complete literary works as a student. Yet the challenge is to engage students so they will want to read literature throughout their lives and to stimulate them to think and write clearly.

States will need to evaluate the standards closely as they roll out. Lusting after federal dollars should not be the basis for adoption. Higher standards are good, yet vigilance is needed to see that non-fiction English selections are not loaded toward one ideology.

[And where implemented, we will have to wait several years to see if the new standards accomplish important objectives.]