

SNG-Common Core here-8-4-14

Common Core is here in Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

After five years in the works, the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for American education are here.

Near the end of the 2014-2015 school year, students in Illinois and 40 other states will be tested according to new learning standards. The standards are about what K-12 students should know in English and mathematics at the end of each grade.

By 8th grade, for example, students will be able to do linear algebra and linear functions.

Based on talking with teachers in my locale, I sense that some are confident while others are deeply worried about how things will go in this first year of testing to what most observers consider more rigorous standards.

Controversy continues to swirl around the new standards, which were sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Many tea party activists lament what they consider a loss of state and local control in education, while business groups like the Illinois Business Roundtable laud the initiative.

The primary objective of the CCSS is to prepare high school graduates for college and careers.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) observes that only one in four students graduates from high school ready for college or a career, and that only 29 percent of Illinois students who begin high school will ever earn a 2- or 4-year college degree. We have to do better.

I thought I would try to make sense of what this all means by zeroing in on the CCSS for mathematics.

According to ISBE, “The Common Core calls for greater focus in mathematics. Rather than racing to cover many topics in a mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum, the standards ask math teachers to narrow and deepen the way time and energy are spent in the classroom.”

But how does this all change the teaching and work in the classroom.

I talked with Connie Stoner, a respected teacher of grade school math at my local school in Stark County.

“When I was a kid, we listened to the teacher and then did our work at our desks,” recalled Stoner. “Now students in my classroom work in groups of three or four, talking about how to solve math problems.

“One student may come up with an idea and another builds on it. It is better to work collaboratively to find more than one way to solve problems.

“Students used to try to solve problems on their own, then ask for help, and the teacher would walk the student through the steps. Students don’t retain much if they are just following steps.”

Take a very simple example of multiplying $\frac{2}{3} \times 15$. In the old way, one would simplify and then multiply to get 10.

Yet another way might be to create three piles of five marbles each and then select two of the piles as the answer.

“Students then share methods, critique reasoning and end up with a deeper understanding of what $\frac{2}{3} \times 15$ represents.”

Stoner is also thinking about following some of her fellow teachers who have “flipped” their classrooms. That is, students watch short instructional videos out of class and then do homework and problem-solving in the classroom, where the teacher is available for support.

Stoner, who has been teaching to the Common Core standards for two years, says there is more “real world” work in the math than before. For example, in 7th grade her students translate meters per second to miles per hour.

The tests will be different as well, according to ISBE, moving from the old fill-in-the-blank “bubble tests” to an assessment that gives students a chance to solve real problems and also to show how they arrived at their answers.

“I would have liked a staggered approach, beginning with the early grades,” observed Stoner about CCSS. “It’s difficult to teach new standards without students having a background in those standards.”

Instead, all students and teachers are thrown into this at the same time, so it may be tough sledding for a while.

I think American education needs a jolt to the system. The Common Core State Standards will be just that.