

Aiken Standard

Column: Clarification needed with Common Core

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A recent morning news program featured an interview with a Louisiana parent who was upset about a school assignment. The parent described a question given to her fourth grade daughter dealing with a rap song called, “Po Pimp.” The teacher and the school wrongly placed blame for the inappropriate question on the Common Core state standards. The interviewer expressed outrage and used the incident to criticize Common Core and characterize it as some kind of big government scheme.

This is an example of the kind of misconceptions some people have about Common Core. There are a myriad of websites and companies who claim to have products aligned to Common Core. That teacher in Louisiana may have gotten her “Po Pimp” question from such a site, but ultimately, it is the responsibility of the teacher and the school to use professional judgment in choosing materials. They made a poor choice, blamed it on the new standards, and Common Core opponents jumped on the opportunity to fan the flames.

The concern by members of the public is understandable. People are usually uncomfortable when confronted with something new. But, how new is Common Core? While the expectations for students’ performance are greater, Common Core state standards are essentially what standards have always been – a framework of what students should know and be able to do. One important difference is that Common Core does actually represent the true meaning of the word “standard.” Since states collaborated in the development of the standards, the expectations for a student in South Carolina are the same as the expectations for a student in California and 43 other states. That uniformity is critical since accountability measures have been used for years to compare educational quality among the states.

Another important difference is that Common Core has narrowed the number of standards, but increased the levels of complexity and depth at which our students are expected to show mastery. Most states, including South Carolina, were comfortable using standards that often addressed primarily surface-level learning. This shift in rigor is critical in preparing our students for college and careers in the 21st century.

While it is true that a higher percentage of reading and writing will be informational and technical in nature, some critics wrongly believe that classic literature is excluded from the Common Core. Students will continue to read drama by Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams, novels by Mark Twain and Ernest Hemmingway, poetry by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, and

short stories by James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. Informational text will include great historical documents such as the Constitution and Bill of Rights, Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" and Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Our teachers understand the importance of striking the right balance in the use of informational and narrative text to support the development of 21st century literate citizens.

In mathematics, we will continue to teach our students the critical components of a strong math curriculum including: operations and algebraic thinking, fractions, measurement, data analysis and geometry. The difference rests in Common Core's focus on developing conceptual understanding of mathematical ideas. The careers we are preparing our students for require them to be adept at problem solving, constructing viable arguments, and defending their ideas with sound reasoning. With these shifts in mathematical understanding comes the development of analytical and critical thinking that will enable students to compete globally.

Finally, Common Core is not a national curriculum. It is a list of accepted common expectations for students. Aiken County's teachers have been preparing for this transition since the Common Core state standards were adopted by South Carolina in 2010. We have enlisted teams of teachers, collaborated with USC Aiken and Aiken Technical College, and cooperated with the South Carolina Department of Education to develop a research-based, rigor-infused curriculum to meet the needs of all of our students. Local educators, not big government bureaucrats, determined our priorities, developed the sequence of instruction and created tools for teachers to use in the classroom.

Our teachers and administrators will continue, as they always have, to make instructional choices that are in the best interests of our students while leading them towards college and career readiness.

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