

# **AFTER THE FALL**

## **CATHOLIC EDUCATION BEYOND THE COMMON CORE**

*by Anthony Esolen, Dan Guernsey, Jane Robbins, and Kevin Ryan*

*Preface by Raymond L. Flynn and Mary Ann Glendon*



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## PREFACE

BY AMBASSADORS RAYMOND L. FLYNN AND  
MARY ANN GLENDON

“You can get all A’s and still flunk life,”<sup>1</sup> wrote the great 20th-century Catholic novelist Walker Percy. The authors of this paper have done Catholic educators and families a tremendous service by explaining precisely why the secularized Common Core national standards, which were devised primarily for public schools, are incompatible with and unsuited for a traditional Catholic education.

There are many similarities between Catholic schooling and its public K-12 educational counterpart, but the two have fundamental and profound differences. In addition to providing students with the academic knowledge and skills they need to prosper, Catholic schools have a unique spiritual and moral mission to nurture faith and prepare students to live lives illuminated by a Catholic worldview. It is that religious focus that makes the Common Core standards particularly ill-suited for Catholic schools.

Realizing that combining humanities and the arts with religious instruction aids spiritual development, Catholic schools have traditionally provided a classical liberal-arts education that generations of grateful parents and students have prized. Through tales of heroism, self-sacrifice, and mercy in great literature such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and the works of Charles Dickens, Edith Wharton, Dante, and C.S. Lewis, they seek to impart moral lessons and deep truths about the human condition. The moral, theological, and philosophical elements of Catholic education that are reinforced by the classics have never been more needed than they are in this era of popular entertainment culture, opioid epidemics, street-gang violence, wide achievement gaps, and explosive racial tensions.

Common Core, on the other hand, takes an approach that is contrary to the best academic studies of language acquisition and human

formation. It drastically cuts the study of classical literature and poetry, and represents what Providence College English Professor and Dante scholar, Anthony Esolen, calls a strictly utilitarian view of mankind, “man with the soul amputated.” It is devoid of any attention to “the true, the good, the beautiful.” It eliminates the occasions for grace that occur when students encounter great works that immerse them in timeless human experiences. Instead, it offers stones for bread in the form of morally neutral “informational texts.”

The basic goal of Common Core is not genuine education, but rather the training and production of workers for an economic machine. We see this in the reduced focus on classic literature, and in the woeful mathematics standards that stop short of even a full Algebra II course – giving students just enough math for their entry-level jobs. The goal is “good enough,” not academically “excellent.”

The narrow aims of Common Core would undermine the historic achievements of Catholic education. As 132 Catholic scholars wrote in a letter to the U.S. Catholic bishops, Common Core is “a recipe for standardized workforce preparation”<sup>2</sup> that dramatically diminishes children’s intellectual and spiritual horizons. Rather than triggering imaginations and nourishing souls through the wonder of sustained encounters with works that have inspired generations, Common Core’s “cold reading” method for informational texts transforms literacy into little more than a content-empty “skill set.” Also, its mathematics framework locks children – except those whose parents are savvy enough to supplement their basic Common Core training – into a substandard education that will not prepare them for serious college coursework in science, technology, engineering, or math.

Catholic education by contrast seeks to maximize the intellectual and spiritual potential of every child. Following Pope St. John Paul II, who wrote, “[t]o contemplate Christ involves being able to recognize him wherever he manifests

himself,”<sup>3</sup> Catholic education looks for the face of Christ in every person. All students ought to read Dante, Shakespeare, and Flannery O’Connor; those who do are better for it, regardless of whether they plan to become philosophers or welders. All students ought to study, or at least be given the opportunity to study, mathematics that allow them a sustained and detailed scientific investigation of creation. But Common Core seems to view “overeducating” students as a waste of resources, or, as its proponents say, “human capital.” In what looks like an effort to define human beings as mere objects or beasts, it aims to provide everyone with a modest, utilitarian skill set; those with more ability, or more access to private tutoring, can access a real education in college (although higher education is itself largely bankrupt of these larger purposes, meaning many students will never enjoy them).

Common Core lowers expectations for all children. Even when its appendices include great works of fiction and poetry, the standards encourage “cold reading” methods and excerpts rather than complete works — an approach that strip these works of their power. In math, even supporters concede that Common Core prepares students only for community-college-level work.

Common Core’s shift away from the moral and cultural patrimony of Western Civilization comes at a most unfortunate time, when increasing marginalization of religion in our society is taking a severe toll on the moral culture that sustains our American democratic experiment. Religion plays a pivotal role in sustaining our freedoms, upholding the rule of law, creating a culture of compassion for the disadvantaged, and fostering social cohesion. Even the professed atheist Jürgen Habermas recognized that Western culture cannot abandon its religious heritage without endangering the great social and political advances grounded in that heritage.

As the influence of religion diminishes, for the sake of our civilization itself, it becomes more urgent than ever to find ways to provide children with the fundamental intellectual,

spiritual, and moral ideals necessary for humans to flourish. But Common Core moves in the opposite direction. Sterile informational texts and workforce training will not help children to learn how to be good human beings. And no free society can survive for long without cultivating character and competence in its citizens and public servants.

The introduction of Common Core comes at a difficult time for Catholic education. Research tells us that since 1990, 300,000 students have been displaced from Catholic schools and that an additional 300,000 or more could lose their schools over the next two decades.<sup>4</sup> In 1965, 5.2 million students attended Catholic schools. Today that number is closer to two million.<sup>5</sup>

Catholic schools have fallen upon hard times even in heavily Catholic Boston. In 1942 the Archdiocese of Boston had 225 parish, grammar, and high schools; today there are 124.<sup>6</sup>

The reason for the decline is largely not that Catholic schools aren’t delivering adequate college preparation. Boston Catholic schools accurately reflect the city’s demographics, yet archdiocesan schools outperform state and national averages on tests administered by both public and Catholic schools.

On SATs, Boston Catholic schools beat national averages and dramatically outperform the Boston Public Schools (BPS). And while BPS’s graduation rate is less than 80 percent, Archdiocese of Boston schools have a 96 percent college-matriculation rate.

Catholic schools also provide a safe environment that is a refuge for many children who lead otherwise chaotic lives, sometimes in violent neighborhoods. The schools also provide moral and religious education, and discipline. Those characteristics don’t just appeal to Catholics; fully 20 percent of students in Archdiocese of Boston schools aren’t Catholic.

Many of Catholic education’s problems are the result of trends outside its control. Some are

financial. For example, in 1960, three-quarters of Catholic school staff were priests or nuns who worked either for free or very cheaply. Today, with far fewer people entering religious orders, the number is down to 4 percent.<sup>7</sup> Although Catholic-school teachers do sacrificial work and are generally paid less than their public-school counterparts, they need to make a living, and that translates to higher costs.

In addition, many families who once sent their children to Catholic schools have moved to the suburbs, where they often place their children in the public system. Yet while potential students have moved to the suburbs, about two-thirds of local Catholic schools are still in Boston.

Despite all these difficult circumstances, Catholic schools are still making the American Dream a reality for thousands of families by providing a quality education to those who can't afford private-school tuition or a house in the suburbs. Few Catholic-school students come from families who can afford the full cost of tuition. Many can't pay anything, but the schools still raise money to accommodate as many needy students as possible.

Catholic schools certainly face no shortage of challenges. But they must resist the Common Core "solution" that would cause them to lose the distinctiveness that attracts families to them in the first place. Catholic schools should continue to maximize the intellectual and spiritual potential of every student; in fact, they must carefully re-evaluate the education they provide to ensure that it adheres to the best of Catholicism's timeless principles. Each child deserves to be prepared for his or her God-given life of the imagination and of the spirit, one that provides a deep appreciation for knowledge, goodness, beauty, truth, and faith.

The classical Catholic understanding of human flourishing is too precious, and great literature, drama, and poetry too intertwined in the academic and moral underpinnings of a Catholic education, to be sacrificed. It is to be hoped that

the present study will help American Catholics to better understand what's really at stake.

*Raymond L. Flynn is a former three-term Mayor of Boston and a former United States Ambassador to the Holy See.*

*Mary Ann Glendon is the Learned Hand Professor of Law at Harvard Law School and a former United States Ambassador to the Holy See.*

## OVERVIEW

A way forward for Catholic schools in a post-Common Core world entails understanding where the Catholic educational community currently is in relation to the Common Core, how it came to be there, and how the Common Core fails to meet the needs of Catholic education. Such an inquiry will further an important conversation on the mission of Catholic education and how Catholic educators can best accomplish that mission in the larger educational landscape.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, the majority of the nation's public schools have adopted an educational innovation called the Common Core. This effort to nationalize the standards of close to 100,000 public schools across the nation began in Washington, D.C. in 2008. Consultants hand-picked by private trade associations and foundations created a set of English language arts and mathematics standards designed, supposedly, for superior college- and career-preparation. These standards were then pushed onto the states as part of a competitive grants program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The stated purpose behind this national effort has been to establish uniform and rigorous educational standards throughout fifty states. Many Catholic elementary and high schools have adopted or adapted these standards. This paper takes a critical look at the issues and principles behind the Common Core movement and, in particular, the standards' effect on and suitability for Catholic schools.

The paper opens in Part 1 with a chronology of the relationship between the Common Core and Catholic schools. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), which claims to represent the nation's Catholic schools, very early on urged Catholic schools to get on board with the Common Core lest they miss out on this promising change in American education or possibly fall behind the public schools. Although many followed their advice, voices of concern

within the Catholic community began to speak up. In 2013, a group of 132 Catholic scholars sent a letter to the American bishops warning against adopting the Common Core, asserting that to do so would be detrimental to the mission of Catholic schools. Since then, the opposition to the Common Core, in both religious and public-school circles, has only grown.

Having explored how Catholic schools have arrived at where they are today with the Common Core, and before addressing the academic and moral insufficiency of the Common Core for Catholic schools, the paper, in Part 2, addresses pragmatic concerns related to secular pressures that have led some Catholic educators to support the Common Core. Eight of the most common arguments for adopting the Common Core are presented and then refuted. The eight arguments are as follows: [1] The Common Core standards are high-quality, and for self-preservation reasons Catholic schools must adopt them in order to stay competitive with public schools; [2] Some states require Catholic schools to take state-derived tests, which will be based on the Common Core standards; [3] College admission tests will be based on the Common Core standards and thereby threaten the competitive position of Catholic-school graduates; [4] Teachers, both in their initial preparation and in-service developmental work, will be trained in the Common Core standards, and thus their training will be misaligned with the curricula of non-Common Core Catholic schools; [5] Most textbooks and materials will be based on and derived from the Common Core standards; [6] The criticism of the Common Core is based on political objections rather than educational principles; [7] Catholic schools can safely adopt the Common Core by simply "infusing" Catholicism into the existing standards; and [8] Since the Common Core standards are not a curriculum and therefore will not really affect what, when, and how Catholic schools teach, there is no serious objection to their adoption.

Having dealt with such pragmatic issues, in Part 3 the paper shifts to a presentation of more philosophical concerns about the use of the Common Core and its effect on the goals of Catholic education. The paper focuses on three primary concerns. First, the paper reveals that the Common Core is undoubtedly and unacceptably workforce-oriented, thereby misinforming student character and impoverishing academic content. Second, the paper exposes the severe inadequacy of the Common Core's approach to literature by drawing attention to its complete misunderstanding of the nature of man and the nature of literature in the life of man. Third, this part of the paper exposes how the Common Core's stunted utilitarian approach to education affects not just reading, but other disciplines as well.

In its presentation of the philosophical insufficiency of the Common Core for use in Catholic schools, this section begins with examining the school's role in forming good character. Essentially, the mission of character education is to help students form virtues, or good habits, that lead to a well-ordered and flourishing life. Historically, character education was a primary responsibility of tax-supported schools in America, with biblical Christianity serving as an integral part of the schools' efforts to promote character. This era is long past, and currently the public schools' tepid efforts in character formation rest on little but an appeal to students' self-interest. In contrast, Catholic schools typically embrace character education and rely heavily on language arts, history, and religion curricula as crucial means to educate and inspire students toward a virtuous life. Adopting the new standards may seriously compromise this essential effort.

The paper next documents how the Common Core's initiators and architects see "workforce-development" as the proper goal of education, and how much of the standards' political support is founded in that belief. The workforce educational model currently being promoted by the government relies heavily on the concept of

training. It aims to train students in certain skills of information-processing and mathematical abilities that transfer rather directly to today's world of work. Training consists of learning how to accomplish a task and "getting the job done." At the heart of the Common Core agenda is a century-old dream of Progressive educators to redirect education's mission away from engaging the young in the best of human thought and focusing instead on preparation for "real life." While a reasonable but quite secondary goal, workforce-development is dwarfed by Catholic schools' transcendent goals of human excellence, spiritual transformation, and preparation for "the next life" as well.

The paper next tackles this disconnect as it compares the effects of commandeering the educational experience for secular self-gain to those of celebrating education in the name of authentic human flourishing. This disconnect is perhaps most clearly seen in how a community understands and approaches the study of literature and the language arts. This section explores the soul-shaping and soul-expressing power of literature and the language arts against the Common Core's eviscerated, one-dimensional approach of simple skills-development detached from truth, beauty, and human excellence.

The paper next explores how the Common Core's misunderstanding of the humanities is not limited to literature and threatens to dehumanize other subjects. Lacking a sense of what a fully alive human is, the Common Core also necessarily misunderstands all of the humanities: their power and their purpose. Even though the Common Core is primarily focused on the academic disciplines of English and mathematics, its truncated and errant view of education affects all aspects of schooling including history, science, and the arts. This section not only begins to highlight what is lacking in the Common Core, but turns proactively to the tremendous insight the Catholic intellectual tradition has always offered into the wonder, value, and glory present in all of God's creation. Authentic academic

inquiry and a fuller understanding of the human experience are completely fulfilled in the Catholic educational experience. Catholic schools have a distinct insight and a competitive advantage over public schools because of this.

Finally, in Part 4, the paper builds on the long Catholic educational tradition, including recent Church and papal writings, to present a positive foundation for moving Catholic schools forward in a post-Common Core world. In particular, the lens of the transcendent and universal attributes of truth, beauty, and goodness is suggested as a way to highlight the unique contribution of Catholic schools and distinguish them from their more limited public-school competitors. Beauty can help evoke wonder and delight, which are foundations of a life of wisdom and inquiry. Goodness teaches about the perfection of being and the enduring goals of each of us. Truth is to know reality, and proper schooling provides the tools to reason and to gain access to the true nature of reality.

The paper concludes that this attractive, unified, transcendent, and receptive approach to knowledge cannot be adequately explored or engagingly presented in a Common Core cage. The Common Core has, through its insufficiencies and lack of insight into the nature of humanity and education, shed light on the advantage and importance of Catholic education for a meaningful life in the modern world. Specifically, the paper calls for further development of curricular standards for Catholic schools to match their specific mission and their key insights into the nature of reality. Such standards should address elements of intellectual development and moral reasoning and dispositions that are a critical part of a Catholic school's mission in every academic field. The advent of the Common Core has not only provided clarity to the unique value of Catholic schools, but also offers the opportunity for their advancement and the articulation of their competitive advantage. Never were they more attractive. Never were they more needed.

*The school is a center in which a specific concept of the world, of man, and of history is developed and conveyed.*

*-Congregation for Catholic Education*

*The State did not own men so entirely, even when it could send them to the stake, as it sometimes does now where it can send them to the elementary school.*

*-G.K. Chesterton*

*The Common Core is of its nature incomplete as it pertains to the Catholic school.*

*-United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

## **PART 1. A CHRONOLOGY OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS' INVOLVEMENT WITH THE COMMON CORE**

The Common Core is the public schools' latest attempt to articulate nationalized education standards. These national standards purport to provide consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do for college- and career-readiness in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Before the Common Core, each state developed its own standards, but in 2009 the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State Schools Officers, with encouragement from the federal government, publishers, and philanthropists such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, commissioned a small group of educational consultants to draft a set of national standards that the states would then all agree to follow, supposedly voluntarily. In June of 2010 the completed national standards were released for state review, and by 2011, 46 states had adopted them – more than 90 percent of them trying to secure federal Race to the Top funding, which pursuit was advanced if they adopted the Common Core.

Central to the discussion of the Common Core is an understanding of the purpose of the national standards. As stated, the goal of the Common Core is “college- and career-readiness.”<sup>8</sup> Whether standards that are focused solely on this goal (even if they were well-designed to accomplish it) are compatible with Catholic education is the question at hand.

Before the Common Core initiative, Catholic educators in each state interacted with government standards locally. At first, it seemed that the Common Core was just business as usual for Catholic schools, seeking to adapt to the latest state standards that had come their way, only this time the scale was national. Previously, some dioceses had followed their individual state standards closely, in some cases not so closely, and many Catholic educators and parents did not overly concern themselves with their state's standards.

The nationalization of state standards, however, seemed to call for a national response from Catholic schools. The *de facto* national voice of Catholic education is the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), a private membership organization to which about 5,500 of the some 6,500 U.S. Catholic elementary and secondary schools belong.<sup>9</sup> The NCEA's early position was to recommend that Catholic schools get on board with the seemingly ubiquitous and inevitable Common Core. Everyone seemed to be embracing it: 46 states had signed on, and the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers seemed to support it, as well as 76 percent of teachers.<sup>10</sup> NCEA officials as early as May 2012 were encouraging Catholic educational leaders to adopt the standards, warning Catholic schools that textbooks, educational materials, state testing, college-entrance exams, teacher training, and teacher resources would all now be Common Core-based, and therefore Catholic schools should plan and adapt accordingly.

By spring 2013 the NCEA and various dioceses around the country were in significant “ramp up” mode and began to marshal materials, trainings, in-services, resources, and guidance to assist Catholic-school teachers and administrators. The NCEA released a statement on the Common Core standards characterizing them as “high quality academic standards” and assuring Catholic schools that “[t]he Common Core State Standards in no way compromise the Catholic identity or educational program of a Catholic school.”<sup>11</sup> Praising the Common Core as “consistent” and “clear” and able to make “it easier for parents to collaborate with teachers in helping their children achieve success,” the statement seemed to affirm the excellence of the Common Core and assure Catholic schools they could use it without serious concern. The Common Core would not affect a Catholic school’s ability to control “what is taught, when it is taught, how it is taught and what materials to use,” the statement assured, and also promised that the NCEA would develop resources to help schools “infuse the standards with the faith, principles, values and social justice themes inherent in the mission of a Catholic school.”

As the NCEA continued to develop resources over the summer and provide guidance as to how Catholic schools might interface with the Common Core, a backlash against the national standards from both Catholic and non-Catholic critics was building rapidly. More and more parents were becoming aware of the scope and nature of the Common Core about to be unleashed full-scale throughout the country in the fall 2013, and many were not happy.

Early signs that trouble might be brewing for the Common Core in both Catholic and public schools came from two Catholic-school mothers in Indiana.<sup>12</sup> Like a few other states, Indiana requires state-based testing for Catholic-school students under certain circumstances (*i.e.*, when a Catholic school has certain forms of accreditation, or when it accepts even one student with a public voucher, in which case that school must administer the state test to all its students).

Concerned about their students’ performance on state tests, Indiana Catholic schools were early and aggressive in attempting to adjust to the Common Core. In 2012, Indiana mothers Erin Tuttle and Heather Crossin, after experiencing growing concerns about the changes in the statewide curriculum which also affected their Catholic-school children, co-founded “Hoosiers Against Common Core” to delay or stop implementation in all private and public schools in their state. Their early grassroots effort brought national attention to the Common Core and served as an initial resource for exposing concerns about the national standards among both public and Catholic schools. It quickly inspired similar grassroots efforts in several other states and in other dioceses.

Classical Catholic schools—often small, independent, and deeply committed to the liberal arts—were also among the first to raise the alarm in Catholic circles. In August 2013 leaders of the Catholic Education Foundation, the National Association of Private Catholic and Independent Schools, and the Cardinal Newman Society planned a conference<sup>13</sup> to articulate growing Catholic concerns about the Common Core. The fall conference in New Jersey was attended by Bishop George Murry along with ten Catholic diocesan superintendents and other Catholic educational leaders. Over two days they listened to presentations from various speakers, including Dr. Sandra Stotsky, a professor, standards expert, and member of the original Common Core Validation Committee who in the end refused to validate the Common Core once she realized its serious academic deficiencies.

Two weeks later the New Jersey conference organizers shared a summary of concerns about the Common Core with 19 bishops who attended a sponsored breakfast during the November annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).<sup>14</sup> While in the past, the particulars of an individual state’s standards probably seldom made it to the bishops’ desks, the national nature of the Common Core was generating consternation in many of their dioceses and quickly gaining their attention.

The concern among some bishops at that time was likely exacerbated by a letter signed by 132 Catholic scholars timed for release just before the USCCB annual meeting.<sup>15</sup> Coordinated by Gerard Bradley of the University of Notre Dame Law School and Robert George of Princeton University, the letter urged the bishops of the United States to remove the Common Core from Catholic schools. The signatories thought it was hastily adopted by many schools and threatened to “change the character and curriculum of our nation’s Catholic schools.”<sup>16</sup> The scholars warned that the Common Core was quite likely a step backwards and that “this ‘reform’ is really a radical shift in emphasis, goals, and expectations for K-12 education, with the result that Common Core-educated children will not be prepared to do authentic college work.” More importantly, they highlighted their concerns that “every student deserves to be prepared for a life of the imagination, of the spirit, and of a deep appreciation for beauty, goodness, truth, and faith,” and expressed their belief that the Common Core was not suited to this goal.

Five months later, in April 2014, the Secretariat for Catholic Education of the USCCB issued the document, “Common Core State Standards FAQs.”<sup>17</sup> The document advised that the Common Core “should be neither adopted nor rejected without review, study, consultation, discussion and caution.” It also stated that in considering the Common Core, “Catholic schools must take into consideration the horizon of the local, state and national education landscape.”

In wading into the Common Core confusion afflicting Catholic schools, the USCCB sought to view and respond to the Common Core through the broader lens of the purpose and mission of Catholic education. The document emphasized the principle of subsidiarity and the expectation that local “consultation with the bishop, pastors, teachers and parents” should be undertaken by the diocesan schools’ offices and by the schools themselves – a process possibly short-changed in the early rush and hope of the Common Core. The document also stated “the CCSS is of its

nature incomplete as it pertains to the Catholic school,” which “aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and the good of [society].” The document also recommended that schools develop their own Catholic standards that “support an appropriate integration” of Catholic understanding in each discipline.

As the year went on, so did growing concerns about the Common Core, not just in private schools, but also in public schools. One effort at damage control attempted by some Common Core proponents was to remove reference to “Common Core” without removing the standards themselves. Of the 42 states still using the Common Core today, about half have since re-named the Common Core standards in their states to distance themselves (at least cosmetically) from the negative view many now have of the Common Core. In fact, the “withdrawal” of some states from the Common Core was more cosmetic than real. For example, the “Florida Sunshine Standards” are essentially identical to the Common Core, but the Republican governor signed a bill that eliminates all references to the Common Core standards in Florida law.<sup>19</sup>

Similar obfuscation occurred in (at least) Florida Catholic schools. In the summer of 2013 the Florida Catholic Conference had stated that “[t]he Catholic school superintendents and Florida Catholic Conference education staff have deliberated carefully upon the Common Core State Standards. . . . our schools are adopting a blended version of the CCSS.”<sup>20</sup> But by the late fall the Conference’s statement had changed to remove all reference to the Common Core and emphasize instead that “Catholic schools develop their own rigorous academic benchmarks or diocesan standards.” Many of the Florida dioceses continue extensive use of the Common Core, just without drawing attention to the fact.

Thus, the early attempts to embrace the Common Core as a useful guide for Catholic schools seemed to devolve into downplaying the

Common Core's importance. Catholic schools began emphasizing that they were "adapting," not "adopting," the national standards. The nature of what was "adapted" out of the Common Core or what was included in addition to it is often hard to discern and is in need of further exploration.

*You can get all A's and still flunk life.*

*-Walker Percy*

*The Student will appreciate that literature and the arts [...] aim to penetrate our true nature, our problems, and our experience as we strive to come to know and to develop ourselves and the world; they endeavor to discuss our situation in history and in the world, to throw light on our distresses and joys, needs and strengths, and to point to a better destiny for mankind.*

*-Gaudium et Spes*

*The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.*

*-C.S. Lewis*

## **PART 2. PRAGMATIC CONCERNS ADDRESSED**

This paper will explore the academic and moral insufficiency of the Common Core for Catholic schools. However, before doing so, it is expedient to first address some of the utilitarian and secular pressures that have been used to justify insertion of the Common Core into Catholic schools.

Otherwise a pragmatist might agree with the premise that the Common Core is insufficient, but hold that Catholic schools must use it because there is no other option if the schools wish to survive.

Among pragmatic arguments for using the Common Core in Catholic schools are these: They are high-quality, and Catholic schools will be outdone by the public schools if they do not adopt these "better" standards; Catholic-school students will be left behind on state and college-entrance testing, which will be based on the Common Core; teaching materials and teacher training will all be Common Core-based; critics' arguments against using the Common Core are political, not educational, and ultimately all moot

since these are just standards, and we can just infuse them with Catholic identity. As discussed below, none of these arguments has merit.

### **2.1. Catholic schools need to adopt the Common Core standards because they are high-quality standards that will keep test scores high and enable Catholic schools to compete with public schools.**

The Common Core was purportedly designed to meet the perceived academic crisis in public schools.<sup>21</sup> But no such crisis existed in Catholic schools. Catholic schools have been outperforming public schools by double-digit margins for the last 20 years on federal National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math tests (often referred to as "the nation's report card").<sup>22</sup> Catholic-school college preparation is outstanding, with over 99 percent of students graduating from high school and 84 percent going on to four-year colleges (almost double the public-school rate).<sup>23</sup> Once they get to college, Catholic-school graduates are twice as likely as those from public schools to graduate from college within eight years of high-school graduation (62 percent vs. 31 percent).<sup>24</sup> These



be developed, it is reasonable to assume that excellent instruction on a topic will be reflected in any valid test of knowledge and skills properly designed to test that topic. But again, only about 10 percent of states require taking a specific Common Core-based test, so this should not be a major issue for most Catholic schools.

### **2.3. Catholic schools need to adopt the Common Core standards because they will influence college-entrance exams.**

Catholic-school marketability depends in part on high college admission test scores. If the ACT and SAT are changing to match the Common Core, then it seems prudent to use those standards to ensure Catholic-school students perform well on the tests. This concern about college admission test scores was heightened when soon after helping to develop the Common Core, chief architect David Coleman assumed leadership of the College Board in 2012 and began overseeing its significant overhaul of the SAT. With the average Catholic-high-school tuition now exceeding \$9,600 per year,<sup>30</sup> Catholic schools must be able to assure parents that the investment will pay off in improved preparation for college admission.

For some Catholic-school leaders, changing the standards and curriculum to match the perceived changes in college testing seemed prudent at first. However, upon reflection, it becomes apparent that the value of the SAT and ACT is their ability to predict college success. This is why the colleges use them. And that changes the calculation about whether those tests should dictate high-school standards and curricula.

Consider first the ACT. The ACT's value and market is to higher education, specifically the predictive value it provides to colleges trying to determine admissions. It is not designed as a graduation test to determine how well students did in their high-school courses; it is designed to predict how well they will do in their college courses based on decades of data. In fact, in its most recent report ACT draws attention to the fact the the Common Core according to most

high-school and college instructors is not aligned to college expectations. According to the 2016 ACT National Curriculum Survey, while in 2009 and 2012, 26 percent of college instructors reported that their incoming students were well prepared for college-level work, by 2016 that the percentage had dropped to 16 percent. ACT also found that of those college instructors who reported a degree of familiarity with the Common Core, a full 60 percent reported that the Common Core expectations were not "completely" or "a great deal" aligned to what the professors expect of their college students. After noting this disconnect, ACT draws attention to the fact that "[t]he recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Act requires states to implement 'challenging academic standards'; however, the Act gives each state the latitude to define that term for itself."<sup>31</sup>

So while Common Core supporters may emphasize that the standards try to replicate the skills ACT is attempting to measure, that goal seems to have eluded them.<sup>32</sup> From ACT's perspective, the distinction is key:

ACT was pleased to offer information about readiness to the Common Core development effort, but we should be clear that ACT's college and career readiness assessments have always been based on its own empirical research and longitudinal data.

ACT is not beholden to the Common Core. It is beholden to its data-based predictive capabilities related to college success.

The Common Core may perhaps help some students with ACT preparation. But it is also possible it will not. Thus, a Catholic school's ACT scores should not change in a post-Common Core environment unless the school decides on its own to change its standards and curriculum. If a Catholic school has historical success on the ACT (on average Catholic-school students score a 23.2 versus 20.8 for public-school students<sup>33</sup>), it should hesitate to change its successful formula or rush into a new and untested curriculum based on new and untested standards.

The SAT is a different story. That test has been steadily losing market share to the ACT and just this year has undergone a major revision to make it more like the ACT.<sup>34</sup> The predictive value and reliability of the new SAT test still has some unknowns, but Common Core architect David Coleman himself has gone on record saying:

As president of The College Board it is my conviction that a child excellently trained in traditional liberal arts will do superbly on relevant sections of the SAT and other aspects of Advanced Placement work:

Rest assured.<sup>35</sup>

Because it is not in the College Board's interest to have private-school students shift from the SAT to the ACT, the College Board presumably will ensure that the new SAT will not disadvantage those students.

The value of the SAT will be not how well it measures the successful delivery of the Common Core to high-school students, but rather how well it predicts college performance of *any* high-school student, regardless of the type of K-12 education he received. If students (a.k.a. customers) who otherwise would have been successful in a college are unduly excluded by a limiting test, it is the test that will have to change or die.

The limitations of the predictive ability of both tests had been well noted even pre-Common Core. As concerns about validity continue, more institutions of higher education are foregoing high-stakes test scores and looking at a more holistic college application process. About a thousand colleges and universities, including more than 125 featured in U.S. News and World Report rankings, no longer require SAT or ACT scores at all.<sup>36</sup>

Colleges have a vested interest in seeing that qualified students are admitted. In addition, there are millions of students in the nine states that are currently distancing themselves from the Common Core, not to mention in high-end private schools around the country, who will have had less or no exposure to the Common Core. No university or testing company can risk

freezing them out of college admissions. If the SAT were to swerve too deeply into the Common Core, hampering its perceived ability to evaluate all students across the nation, ACT will gain millions of more customers from non-Common Core schools. As the implications and effect of recent SAT changes are still not fully known, Catholic schools that have been significantly SAT-oriented in the past may want to expand their testing emphasis to include the ACT as well.

**2.4. Catholic schools need to adopt the Common Core standards because most teachers will be trained under the new standards, and most teacher in-services for ongoing development will occur in a Common Core world.**

Another prudential concern expressed by some Catholic-school leaders was that state teacher-preparation programs and teacher in-service materials and textbooks would all be Common Core-based.<sup>37</sup> While this argument seems plausible on the surface, it is also true that for years, when states had different standards, it was never thought that a teacher trained in Michigan under its specific curricular standards would therefore be unqualified to teach in Florida under its different particular curricular standards. A professional educator with strong core teaching skills can easily adapt to a set of curriculum standards. It simply was never an issue before.

Similarly, the notion that a non-Common Core-based teacher could not benefit from teacher in-services because the training might reference the Common Core is not convincing. Unless the in-service is on a particular standard itself, any in-service to fourth-grade teachers on how to teach poetry can be of value, regardless of the standards informing the fourth-grade curriculum. A comparison can be drawn to the pre-Common Core days when a teacher from Oklahoma and a teacher from Maine could both attend an in-service on teaching poetry in Oregon and richly benefit despite having different state standards. Competent educators can move skillfully through any set of standards. To a professional educator,

there is nothing sacrosanct, magical, or deeply mysterious about a particular set of standards.

### **2.5. Catholic schools need to adopt the Common Core standards because most textbooks and materials will reference them.**

Most textbooks have always covered a broad set of standards. Teachers in individual states would adapt the use of those texts to ensure that they meet their own state standards. In fact, even though there is a related effort to nationalize science standards, there technically are no Common Core science standards today. Each state has its own history standards, yet that does not prevent states from using the same textbooks to teach to their individual standards. This dynamic has not changed. Catholic educators can still follow their own standards and not be lost in interacting with any textbooks, Common Core-based or not.

It may be instructive, if not also distressing, to clarify at this point that much of the political, philosophical, historical, multi-cultural, relativistic, atheistic, and anti-American worldviews that saturate modern American education in all disciplines was well ensconced in textbooks and curricula before the Common Core and will likely remain so after the Common Core is a bad memory of yet another failed public-school experiment. The Common Core is not the source of the cultural and philosophical crisis in modern American public education; it is just part of its latest manifestation. It is therefore not safe to assume that in “Common Core-free” states, curricula or textbooks are safe from the worst elements of our fallen culture.

There are two distinct problems here: the dubious cultural baggage in our public-school textbooks, and the Common Core national standards. They are separate problems, but related. Not all parents can see this sad distinction. This is another reason that Catholic schools would do well to steer clear of the Common Core. In the eyes of some of their potential customers, the Common Core is the cause of the cultural dysfunction the parents wish to flee. By adopting the Common

Core, Catholic schools seem to deny them a safe haven or alternative to the cultural rot they seek to flee. Even if it were possible to maintain a solid classical focus in a school that has “adapted” the standards – and the ensuing discussion will demonstrate that it is not – a Catholic school seeking to do that runs the risk of getting tarred with the Common Core cultural brush by adapting to the standards.

### **2.6. Catholic schools can adopt the Common Core standards because criticism of them is just “political,” not educational.**

Some Catholic-school leaders who sought to defend the Common Core in their schools dismissed critics’ concerns as merely political. In their spring 2014 position paper on the Common Core, 45 superintendents, consultants, and publishers gathered by the NCEA stated,

Those who oppose the CCSS [Common Core State Standards] believe the standards remove local control of a school system and are ambiguous in their implementation. They also sense the CCSS will result in federal overreach into schools, loss of parental rights, a dumbing down of academic rigor, and a diminishment of a school’s Catholic identity. Not surprisingly, the CCSS have become a political issue as opposed to an educational matter.<sup>38</sup>

The sentiment reflected in this statement is a reason for the continued concern among Common Core critics. To say that their legitimate concerns about academic rigor and Catholic identity are “political as opposed to educational” is dismissive and ignores their legitimate educational concerns.

Even the many concerns of a political nature that plague the Common Core, specifically about the proper role of government in citizens’ lives, are legitimate and should not be simply dismissed. Catholics are citizens and have the responsibility to ensure the political order operates for the common good. In the American context, this involves ensuring that government respects religious freedom, enacts and enforces only laws that are constitutional,

and respects parents as the primary educators of their children. Catholics, like all citizens, are to ensure that the state properly exercises its role and responsibility in education. As Vatican II affirms:

All men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, their ability, their sex, and the culture and tradition of their country, and also in harmony with their fraternal association with other peoples in the fostering of true unity and peace on earth.<sup>39</sup>

This fraternal association often takes the form of political interactions and is central to the educational enterprise. Few activities are more “political” than forming other people’s children. It is the responsibility and duty of politics to inform this process. Political concerns, even though they are not the focus of this report, cannot simply be brushed away.

### 2.7. Catholic schools can adopt the Common Core standards since schools can simply “infuse” Catholicism into the existing standards.

Most Catholics would agree it is a good and important thing for Catholic schools to infuse their curriculum with Catholic subject matter as appropriate. Stories of saints, soul-shaping literature, discussion of virtues, discussion of Catholic contributions to art, literature, science, math, culture, and history, can all still happen both in and outside of the Common Core standards in a Catholic school. However, a fundamental concern remains: The Common Core standards are not enough to guide the complete intellectual formation in a Catholic school. The attempt to “work within” the Common Core by infusing Catholic content (or, as the superintendent of schools in one archdiocese said, to use the Common Core but “sprinkle Catholicism on top”<sup>40</sup>) is inadequate — ultimately much more is needed to retain a genuine Catholic education.

Two noteworthy attempts at “infusing” the Common Core standards with Catholic identity

merit attention and some praise, but each also may be found lacking. One is a set of standards produced by the diocese of Kansas City, Kansas; the other is the originally troubled, but now more helpful, “Catholic Identity Curriculum Integration” project sponsored by the NCEA.<sup>41</sup>

The archdiocese of Kansas City has created a standards document explicitly and significantly based on the Common Core in which each standard is augmented with examples of Catholic subject matter that might be used in teaching it. The archdiocese also combined standards related to informational texts and literary texts. For example, two second-grade Common Core standards read as follows:

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.7

Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.<sup>42</sup>

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.7

Explain how specific images (e.g., a diagram showing how a machine works) contribute to and clarify a text.<sup>43</sup>

The Kansas document combines these standards and adds this (bolded here for emphasis):

2.7 – Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text **including the stories of Christ’s love and forgiveness** to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot (REL 2.5). Explain how specific images (**EXAMPLES: illustrations, icons, statues, relics**, a diagram showing how a machine works) contribute to and clarify a text.<sup>44</sup>

This effort may be helpful to Catholic schools seeking to use the Common Core in their instruction. However, there is a degree of stiltedness in this approach. Specifically, this standard *requires* that at some point in second grade the English language arts (ELA) teacher will show the students a picture in a story that depicts Christ’s love and forgiveness and have

them explain how that particular picture reveals character, setting, or plot. That is rather specific and might be better done in theology, where more pictures are available. By combining fiction and non-fiction standards, the second-grade students must now also explain how a picture of an icon, statue, or relic contributes to and clarifies a text. The Common Core standard assumes that a student in a work of non-fiction will be able to look at a picture of a machine and explain how it clarifies and fits with the text. It is not clear how the same activity might be accomplished by looking an icon or relic. It is good to look at icons and relics, but not so clear how to accomplish this in an ELA text.

The Kansas City documents are helpful especially because they seek ways to take the Common Core standards beyond college- and career-readiness, which is of course the sole focus of the national standards. The opening of the Kansas City ELA standards states: “The purpose of reading literature and informational text in Catholic education is to find the truth, beauty and goodness in the world God created.” This is a critical first step, not to be underrated, but it is doubtful that this critical goal can be accomplished entirely *within* standards that are exclusively focused on a different goal. And it is also likely that the interpretive philosophies and practices underlying the Common Core itself can work against this goal. Therefore, this document may be the most helpful to teachers inside Catholic schools who have no choice about using the Common Core, but not as much to those who run Catholic schools, who should consider wholesale replacement of the Common Core with a truly excellent Catholic curriculum.

After some initial serious missteps, the NCEA has also made progress in providing some resources for integrating Catholic identity into the Common Core standards. This effort began in summer 2013 with a website project dubbed the “Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative (CCCII).” The first website, as in part evidenced by the title, aggressively supported the Common

Core and provided five initial exemplar units showing how a grade-level unit might use the Common Core standards and link them to Catholic material. Problematically, the original exemplar unit for first grade included morally questionable texts, further exacerbating the worst fears of Catholic Common Core critics.<sup>45</sup> After some complaints about these exemplar units, the site was soon taken off line for several months; it reappeared in late fall with the potentially offensive texts removed, but still with a decidedly pro-Common Core stance, including guidance on how to defend the Common Core.

In the summer of 2014 both the name and the mission of the site were changed to the “Catholic Identity Curriculum Integration (CICI).” The new site seeks to “develop and disseminate academic resources and professional development that supports the integration of Catholic identity into locally developed rigorous, standards-based curriculum.”<sup>46</sup> The new site takes a less pro-Common Core approach. Rather than going out of its way to argue the benefits of the Common Core, it simply focuses on how to put Catholic identity into any school’s curriculum. After several years the original group of five exemplar ELA units has not significantly changed or grown, but about 40 individual math assignments have recently been added. These assignments are based on the Common Core math standards, but use a Catholic subject as part of the problem to be solved. For instance, learning how to derive the standard form of the equation of an ellipse is explored by studying the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome<sup>47</sup> and using that as an opportunity to discuss the Vatican.

The materials provide some examples of how one might “sprinkle” Catholicism topics on top of the Common Core standards. However, they still fail to address the critical point that the Common Core is insufficient in and of itself to guide Catholic instruction. As explored later in this paper, the more expansive mission of Catholic education requires additional academic and affective standards, even in math.

## 2.8. Catholic schools can adopt the Common Core standards since standards are not a curriculum and therefore do not really affect what, when, and how Catholic schools teach.

Some Common Core supporters in Catholic schools seemed to seek refuge in the notion that standards and curriculum are different, which is true, but it is also true that standards are supposed to drive the curriculum. That is their very purpose. If new standards do not change the curriculum, then they are not being implemented.

In addition, standards, like everything in a school, must be driven by mission. But the NCEA's 2014 statement from 45 superintendents fails to recognize this alignment:

[A]s Executive Diocesan Catholic School leaders, we believe that Catholic communities should know that there is substantial distinction between standards and curriculum and that Catholic school curricula is [sic] built upon the mission of the church, diocese and school, and are informed by academic standards.<sup>48</sup>

It is proper to affirm that the Catholic curriculum will be informed by the Catholic mission, but these administrators do not clarify that standards should be informed by mission as well. They seem to carve out the standards as a separate force. This runs the risk of skewing the integrity of the educational process. Especially in Catholic education, mission should drive standards; standards should drive curriculum. Both standards and curriculum serve the mission.

If mission drives standards, then to the degree the Catholic schools' educational mission is similar to public schools' (e.g., in teaching basic math skills to second-graders), there can be some sharing of standards (if there is proof of their effectiveness). However, to the degree that elements of the Catholic mission are broader than the public schools', different or additional standards are required.

Catholic educators must also recognize that public-school standards may be influenced by philosophies or emphases that may run counter to

the Church's mission. As Pope Pius XII pointed out:

[A] formation which forgot or, worse still, deliberately neglected to direct the eyes and hearts of youth to the heavenly country would be an injustice to youth, an injustice against the inalienable duties and rights of the Christian family and an excess to which a check must be opposed, in the interests even of the people and of the State itself.<sup>49</sup>

The Common Core is clear that it seeks to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to prepare students for college and career.<sup>50</sup> If there is any other purpose to education, the Common Core does not recognize it. The mission of a Catholic school, though, is much broader. Vatican II states that through Catholic schools the Church seeks to provide students with "an education by which their whole life can be imbued with the spirit of Christ" and which can "promote for all peoples the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it is legitimate and in fact crucial for Catholic educators to investigate the Common Core standards in terms of their stated workforce-preparation end, versus the Catholic transcendent educational ends of personal growth in knowledge, holiness, sanctification, and service to the common good.

It is clear that a person might approach the study of literature, history, science, math, and art for the purposes of college/career readiness differently from the way he or she might approach it for the purposes of salvation and the Christian flourishing of individuals and society. The Church accomplishes its educational mission in the complex culture of a Catholic school. The academic standards used will affect that overall culture. The central question is how that will happen. The effect and influence of Catholic intellectuals and the Catholic intellectual tradition can be profound, for they have much that is unique and inspired to say about the nature and purpose of the study of science, history, literature, humanity, freedom, knowledge, truth, beauty, and goodness.

*Good habits formed at youth make all the difference.*

*-Aristotle*

*Students will appreciate that Literary and artistic works depict the struggles of societies, of families, and of individuals. They spring from the depths of the human heart, revealing its lights and its shadows, its hope and its despair. The Christian perspective goes beyond the merely human, and offers more penetrating criteria for understanding the human struggle and the mysteries of the human spirit.*

*-Congregation for Catholic Education*

*We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in every society, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks.*

*-Woodrow Wilson*

*We are the hollow men*

*We are the stuffed men*

*Leaning together*

*Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!*

*Our dried voices, when*

*We whisper together*

*Are quiet and meaningless*

*As wind in dry grass*

*Or rats feet over broken glass*

*In our dry cellar.*

*-T.S. Eliot: The Hollow Men*

### **PART 3. PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS ARTICULATED**

Having reviewed and explored how Catholic schools initially responded to the Common Core, and why Catholic schools need not follow it, it is now critical to explore in depth from an academic and formational perspective the specific insufficiencies of the Common Core.

These educational concerns are threefold:

1. The Common Core suffers from a misunderstanding of the nature of character formation due to a corrupting workforce-development view.
2. The Common Core suffers from a misunderstanding of the nature of literature due to a lack of understanding about man, creativity, and God.

3. The Common Core suffers from a misunderstanding of the liberal arts due to a lack of understanding about the relationship of man and God to each other and to everything else.

#### **3.1. The Common Core suffers from a misunderstanding of the nature of character formation due to a corrupting workforce-development view.**

##### **3.1.1 The school and character formation**

“Character” is an interesting word. It comes from the Greek work “charaktíras,” meaning to engrave or make marks on an individual’s soul or essence. The classical meaning of character comes directly from that ancient root. Our characters are the sum of the marks that have been engraved on us -- the marks left on us by the habitual ways we respond to life’s

situations. Character consists particularly of one's moral habits. One's good habits are his virtues, his habitual kindness, or his honesty or responsibility; the opposite is, of course, one's vice, one's habitual unkindness or dishonesty or irresponsibility. A well-ordered education of a young person, then, is focused on the formation of his or her character.

The word "character" has been somewhat blurred in modern usage. Modern psychologists have confused one's character with personal values and even eccentricities. On the other hand, classical thinkers, such as Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, had a clearer and more enduring understanding of character. When asked, "How can a man become virtuous?" Aristotle answered that a man becomes virtuous by doing virtuous acts. He becomes brave by doing brave acts, and kind by doing kind acts. Aristotle defined virtue as "doing the right thing, at the right time, and in the right amount." One's character, then, is made up of the habits and dispositions he or she has developed over a lifetime. For most Americans, at least 13 or 14 of their first 18 years of that lifetime are spent at school, under the tutelage of others, listening to and learning from others — and developing character.

By their very nature, schools have a huge effect on the characters and moral lives of students. From the time most young people enter school, until they leave in their late teens, school is the center of their universe. The academic demands of school absorb much of their time and intellectual energies. When they aren't at school, they complete assignments and prepare for tests.

Further, as the center of most students' social life, school teaches them how to get along in life. They learn how to deal with adults who are not their parents. More central to their lives, they learn how to make and keep friends. How they do their school work and how they learn to interact with others is a major source of their character formation and moral understandings.

Schools are, *de facto*, moral cauldrons, constantly calling on students to make or evaluate moral choices (*e.g.*, Will I watch television or do my homework? Will I do the minimum or complete the assignment as well as I can?). This is even truer for the many social elements of schooling (*e.g.*, Will I be respectful and honest with my teachers or be devious or uncooperative?).

The moral components are also at the heart of some of the most interesting topics in the various academic disciplines (Was Goldilocks a good girl? Was Andrew Jackson a good President? Should scientists mix human and animal genes? Etc.)

The activities and interactions between and among students, of course, are also sources of much character growth or stunting. Students are continually challenged by opportunities to be mean or cruel to other students, or to help and befriend others. (*e.g.*, Will they gossip about another? Will they accept into their group the other or exclude him?) All of these situations and events are moral battlefields both large and small where students develop virtues and vices, where the habits that constitute one's character are shaped. Teachers and administrators are often called on to weigh in and guide students onto a path of health, wholeness, responsibility, and kindness, often through encouragement and sometimes with punishment. The strong effect of the school on a student's character is unavoidable and inevitable.

While public schools today theoretically retain an intertwined mission to enlighten the mind and nurture character, the unified moral code and clear understanding of human virtue and human good which was the backbone of early American education is not as strong as it once was. At the founding of schools in America, their moral mission was clearly understood and primary. John Winthrop and his Puritan followers in the New World were greatly concerned that their noble experiment would fail without properly attending to the wellbeing and the character of their children. Cut off as they were from civilization, would their offspring be corrupted,

grow up wild like the “heathen” Indians, and, thus, become easy targets for the Devil? How would they deal with what Immanuel Kant called humanity’s “twisted timber”? Their answer was not simply through churches and homes, but also through schools.

As early as 1642, citizens of Massachusetts passed a law requiring parents to educate their children. That law was strengthened five years later in 1647 by the famous “Old Deluder Satan Act.”<sup>52</sup> Because Satan assuredly would try to keep people from understanding the Scriptures, it was deemed important that all children be taught how to read, and specifically, to read the Bible. Therefore, every town of 50 or more families was obligated to pay a man to teach reading and writing. Other knowledge was important, but biblical literacy was the road to the formation of good habits and moral conscience. This was the beginning of formal government involvement in the education and moral formation of students.

A somewhat more secular rationale for character education emerged with the birth of the United States. Classically educated founders, such as Jefferson, Adams, and Madison, were well aware of the built-in dangers of democratic government. One-man-one-vote was seen as vulnerable to demagogic populism, where the many end up oppressing the few. Jefferson and his wealthy and aristocratic rebels were more than a little wary of turning over their new nation to farmers and the street rabble in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Their common view was that for democracy to work, an educated populace was required. Jefferson believed that widespread education was needed to raise men up to the high moral responsibility of democracy.

One of the primary missions envisioned by many of the nation’s founders was to teach children the tenets of the Christian faith. While the degree of commitment to Christian dogma varied widely among the founders, there was a strong appreciation for the role of religion as a foundation of civic virtue. James Madison, one of the leading intellectuals of the period, wrote

that “the belief in a God All Powerful, wise, and good, is so essential to the moral order of the World and to the happiness of man, that arguments which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources.”<sup>53</sup> The philosopher Michael Novak, a student of the writings of our founders, encapsulated<sup>54</sup> their views in three lines:

Liberty is the object of the Republic.

Liberty needs virtue.

Virtue among the people is impossible without religion.

Throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, the public schools based their efforts at the character education of their students on religion. The early schools of our founding placed biblical Christianity at the center of the curriculum, using it to teach reading, ancient history, and the civility required of citizens. In fact, Catholic schools were first founded because *public* schools were teaching Protestant Christianity and Catholics had to defend their faith and their culture from those teachings.<sup>55</sup> However, gradually over the course of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, biblical Christianity began to recede in public schools. Rather than supporting a variety of schools where different ideas about religion grounded students’ moral formation and thus the republic, schools began to resort to the religious tenets of secularism, confusing these for neutrality. The causes for increasing secularization were many, from the popularity of new scientific theories, such as Darwinism, to concerns about proselytizing. By the 1950s, the pressures were great to strip all references to God and religion in public schools. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the job was complete. The merest mention of religion opened teachers to the charge of intolerance or insensitivity.

The result of the public schools’ becoming a “religion-free” zone has been that philosophical questions which are naturally at the heart of much of the educational enterprise at best are

improperly or insufficiently explored, taught implicitly through the lens of the religious claims of secular humanism, and at worst go unasked or ignored. The pursuit of good character unfettered from an anchoring understanding of what a human person is, is a sham. Stripped from the curriculum are fundamental ontological questions: “What is man?” “Does the human spirit exist or are we merely so much matter?” “Is man free or determined?” “What is worth living for and possibly dying for?”

Attempting to avoid these questions does not make them go away; perennial and persistent questions in the lives of the young have always been “Why be good?” and “Why put the desires of others ahead of yours?” Stripped of religion as a motivation for an individual to live a virtuous life and to develop his character, the answer our public, tax-supported schools offer is to become “a good citizen.” Students are taught and urged to be considerate of others, follow the rules, and live a worthy life. But what exactly constitutes a worthy life is narrowly, inadequately, or never defined. In the face of life’s temptations and demands, this approach has turned out to be thin gruel, indeed, often descending into thinly veiled political activism.

In place of a former robust presentation of man and the good from the Judeo-Christian worldview, there is an alternative reason imparted to students as a basis for action: enlightened self-interest. “Why be good? Why play by the rules? Why work hard?” The answer: to get ahead in the world. To get good grades and good recommendations. To get into the good college. To get that top job. Utilitarianism is the dominant, if not the only, philosophy of modern government education. The Common Core also focuses on the mere utilitarianism of college and career not only in the content of its academic instruction, but also in the pragmatic and secular humanist nature of the character formation that inevitably occurs in public schools. The secular public schools, as illustrated through the Common Core, have jettisoned a classical Western morality and worldview and replaced it

with a materialistic understanding of man, his good, and his purpose. The question is whether this worldview will result in greater human freedom and flourishing, or less.

C.S. Lewis once wrote an allegory that may help predict what might happen. His story is about a country that decided to drop mathematics from its schools. The decision was popular with everyone but math teachers. Students cheered, and parents with painful memories of quadratic equations happily supported the plan. For about a dozen math-free years, all was sweetness and light. Then, people noticed that trolley conductors couldn’t make proper change and shopkeepers were continually haggling with customers about bills. Finally, things were brought to a head when tax-collectors reported that citizens were making so many mistakes that the taxation system was grinding to a halt. Needless to say, mathematics was quickly and vigorously returned to the curriculum of the schools.

There is, of course, an analogy here between the schools’ removal of math and their removal of a proper focus on character formation and providing students with a moral “North Star.” Innumeracy created enormous practical problems, but moral vacuity has contributed to something worse: the stunning statistics about out-of-wedlock births, youth suicides, drug use, cheating, and general unhappiness among American students.<sup>56</sup> The school curriculum, including the Common Core curricular dicta, has increasingly become a utilitarian listing of the knowledge to which students should be exposed and the “skills” they should develop. Where issues of morality arise, they are left unexplored or left to individual unformed conscience (if there is such a thing) or to “popular consensus.”

By Lewis’s analogy, our businesses will suffer when humans are devoid of human excellence. Is it not also logical to assume that businesses will benefit from employing men and women of good character who bring more of fundamental value to the job than ability to read a spreadsheet?

This moral neutering of the curriculum is a profound distortion of what historically has been the purpose of a school's course of study. A curriculum should be what the adults in a school community think and believe are the knowledge and abilities students will need to live good lives, to participate well in society, and to appreciate the heart of our civilization. It is the formal statement or answer to the ultimate question of education: "What is most worth knowing?" How one answers this question will determine not only the course of individual lives, but the course of a nation. For the first time in the history of the United States an attempt has been made to answer this question on a national level, and the answer from government and industry is clear: What is worth knowing is that which will lead to success in college and career. What is worth knowing is what will prepare you for the workforce.

### 3.1.2. The workforce-development model: Effect on character education

The Common Core is the latest installment in an education model that has dominated K-12 public education in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: the workforce-development model. This concept can be traced back to the early twentieth-century Progressives, who believed the economy (and society) should be centrally managed and directed by experts. Education became an important strand in this theory. Expanding on – and perhaps warping – the belief of iconic Progressive educator John Dewey in "teaching through occupations,"<sup>57</sup> the heirs to Progressive thought decided that education should be reshaped to be utilitarian; designed to produce not more complete people, but more useful people.

This workforce development differs from traditional education in essentially two categories. The first is the diminishment of rigor (used in the traditional sense, not in the Progressive redefinition<sup>58</sup>) in academic subjects so that students receive only the education they "need" for jobs. Why spend time on *Paradise*

*Lost* if it won't be necessary for the student's future job? The second is the replacement of many aspects of those academic subjects with development of non-academic "skills," including government-endorsed personal attributes. As a workforce-development model, the Common Core presents a twofold problem of content and character.

### 3.1.3. Workforce development: The content problem

The first category, content, is deeply affected by the Common Core. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully critique these national standards, it is practically indisputable that they diminish the academic content of English and math. As admitted by the ELA standards authors David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, the standards require a "significant shift"<sup>59</sup> from creative and especially classic literature, poetry, and drama, which by their nature tend to be more complex and academically challenging,<sup>60</sup> to "informational text." An example of an informational text that supposedly would help young learners improve their literacy in on-the-job reading appears in the Common Core's Appendix B of suggested readings: the General Service Administration's "Strengthening Federal Environmental, Energy, and Transportation Management."<sup>61</sup> Whatever the literary merits of bureaucratic reports, almost no one would suggest they are as academically demanding as, for example, Chaucer.<sup>62</sup>

The same dilution of academic content can be seen in the Common Core mathematics standards. The math standards fall short of requiring even a complete Algebra II course, and their lead author admitted they were designed to prepare students only for nonselective community colleges.<sup>63</sup> A leading proponent of education-as-workforce-development, the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), showcased this philosophy in a May 2013 report<sup>64</sup> urging high schools to reduce the mathematics requirements needed for graduation to Algebra I and a little geometry. Even Algebra II should not

be required, according to NCEE, because most students will not need it in community college or on their jobs.<sup>65</sup>

This statement in the NCEE report provides a clear illustration of the “workforce model” view of education: “[requiring completion of Algebra II or beyond] is a requirement to learn material [students] will never need, either in college or later in their work, a bit like the requirement a century ago to learn Latin in high school.”<sup>66</sup> Workforce-development proponents thus dismiss any intrinsic value to learning Latin, the liberal arts, or any other deeper subject that requires thinking and serves as a foundation for further study.<sup>67</sup>

It is important to note at the outset that the support of education-as-workforce-preparation has been, and remains, bipartisan. As shown below, politicians and bureaucrats from both parties have embraced the concept that schools should produce workers for industry: Democrats, perhaps, because of their fondness for centralized control over systems and individuals for the benefit of a managed society, and Republicans because of their desire to give business what it wants – workers it need not train.

In 1990, the enactment of the Carl Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act,<sup>68</sup> ostensibly to integrate academic and vocational education for targeted, “at risk” secondary students, actually propelled a more comprehensive and radical transformation of the entire K-12 system. The envisioned new system — which was modeled to some degree after the European system of centralized control over education and the economy — was characterized generally as “school to work.”

At about the same time as the Perkins enactment, Secretary of Labor William Brock<sup>69</sup> chaired a commission to determine the skills young people need to succeed in the workplace.<sup>70</sup> The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, or “SCANS,” undertook a systematic analysis of various jobs in the U. S. — ranging

from farmer to front-desk clerk — and identified the skills needed for each aspect of each job.<sup>71</sup> It apparently did not occur to the bipartisan bureaucrats in charge of this project to wonder how the American economy had managed to achieve world domination without this comprehensive government catalogue.

In addition to determining what skills were needed for dozens of jobs, SCANS produced a report describing what K-12 schools should be doing to make sure students were trained for those jobs.<sup>72</sup> The SCANS report also foreshadowed the Common Core ELA standards in its utilitarian approach to all subjects. Consider this SCANS passage on instruction in reading:

Tomorrow’s career ladders require even the basic skills to take on new meaning. . . . [F]uture jobs will require employees who can read well enough to understand and interpret diagrams, directories, correspondence, manuals, records, charts, graphs, tables, and specifications. Without the ability to read a diverse set of materials, employees will not be able to locate the descriptive and quantitative information needed to make decisions or to recommend courses of action.<sup>73</sup>

This passage appears to be an early iteration of the Common Core’s emphasis on “informational text” in English class.

The SCANS report gave a brief nod to the importance of academic subjects (“A solid education is its own reward and has value beyond specific skills”<sup>74</sup>) but its heart was elsewhere. Hidden within was the notion that the character of students must be formed so as to serve the workforce with government-approved dispositions. Building on the “New American Schools” concept contained in legislation<sup>75</sup> proposed by President George H.W. Bush (but never enacted), the report advocated a “school of tomorrow [that] can be as different from today as overnight delivery is from the pony express.”<sup>76</sup>

The defining characteristic of the “school of tomorrow,” it seemed, was its replacement of most vestiges of classical education with skills-development. Schools would still teach

“basic skills” (defined as reading, writing, arithmetic/mathematics, listening, and speaking),<sup>77</sup> but much time would be spent on “thinking skills,” such as decision-making and problem-solving, and “personal qualities,” such as responsibility and sociability.<sup>78</sup> This lined up with the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) model of education (discussed further below), which diminished academic content knowledge in favor of developing “competencies” such as government-approved attributes and dispositions. Moreover, these competencies were to be developed not in individual work, but in collaboration with other students: “Personal characteristics such as self-esteem and responsibility . . . are best developed in teamwork efforts.”<sup>79</sup> [Like SCANS, the Common Core asserts the superiority of “collaborative learning” over individual study, as shown in this ELA standard: “CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.”]<sup>80</sup>

Significantly, these “SCANS competencies and skills” would not be limited to vocational-education tracks; rather, “[a]ll teachers, in all disciplines, [would be] expected to incorporate them into their classwork.”<sup>81</sup>

The SCANS report also claimed (without citing evidence) that “the most effective way of teaching skills is ‘in context.’”<sup>82</sup> “Reading and mathematics become less abstract and more concrete,” the report argued, “when they are embedded in one or more of the competencies; that is, when the learning is ‘situated’ in a systems or a technological problem.”<sup>83</sup> The idea that students will become more literate if addressing a “systems or technological problem” rather than immersing themselves in great stories is not only counterintuitive, but disproven by extensive evidence.<sup>84</sup>

But the conclusion is inevitable that the new school-to-work movement was and is not interested in developing good readers or

independent thinkers; rather, it is focused on producing compliant workers for politically connected corporations in a managed economy. And the SCANS authors were confident of the results of their educational transformation:

Students will find the content more relevant and challenging. Teachers will find their classes more attentive and interested. Employers and college officials will be delighted with the results because the curriculum will be tied to real things in the real world.<sup>85</sup>

In this SCANS Shangri-La, it is difficult to imagine Shakespeare and Chaucer being valued as “tied to real things in the real world.”

While the Department of Labor was cataloguing jobs and urging schools to train workers to fill them, influential private organizations were promoting the same philosophy. A major player in the world of workforce education (then and now) was the aforementioned National Center on Education and the Economy.<sup>86</sup> Founded in 1988 and led by Marc Tucker, NCEE has relentlessly advocated for the centralized workforce-development model of education. This model would be based on national standards and assessments, as promoted by NCEE’s “New Standards” project.<sup>87</sup> (Tucker played a role in developing the Common Core national standards, and NCEE boasts that “[m]any of the leaders in the New Standards work went on to play leading roles in the development of [Common Core], which built in part on the foundation laid by New Standards.”)<sup>88</sup>

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, Tucker and NCEE produced a series of reports outlining ambitious plans for restructuring American education according to the workforce-development model. Working with NCEE in various ways during this time were several people who either helped develop and market the Common Core (such as Michael Cohen, current president of Achieve, Inc.) or who are still on the national stage and advocating for this centralized “education” plan (such as Hillary Clinton, who served on NCEE’s board).<sup>89</sup>

Tucker laid out the workforce-development concept in a revealing letter<sup>90</sup> to Mrs. Clinton shortly after the 1992 presidential election. In this letter (read into the *Congressional Record* by then-Colorado Congressman Bob Schaffer), Tucker advocated going beyond the idea of separate vocational schools and instead “remold[ing] the entire American system” into “a seamless web that literally extends from cradle to grave.” This web would be coordinated by “a system of labor market boards at the local, state and federal levels” where counselors would engage in “job matching” by “accessing the integrated computer-based program.” And Tucker has reinforced elsewhere that this system must be centralized: “[T]he United States will have to largely abandon the beloved emblem of American education: local control.”<sup>91</sup>

Not surprisingly, given her long association with Tucker, Mrs. Clinton signed on to the agenda. In an essay co-authored with Ira Magaziner (currently working for the Clinton Foundation<sup>92</sup>), Mrs. Clinton repeated the “Dear Hillary” letter’s advocacy of replacing academic work and diplomas with skills-training and “certificates of mastery.”<sup>93</sup> This essay also parroted the Tucker argument that “[a] system of employment and training boards should be established by federal and state governments, together with local leadership, to organize and oversee the new school-to-work transition programs and training systems.” These boards would consist of government bureaucrats and “community leaders,” including executives of corporations in the region. Presumably, the young entrepreneur working on a new idea in his garage would not be given a seat at the table.

President Clinton and Congress enacted at least parts of Tucker’s agenda with the Goals 2000 Educate America Act,<sup>94</sup> signed into law in 1994. Noting that Goals 2000 was based on plans developed by the Clintons, Tucker, and Ira Magaziner, Rep. Henry Hyde warned that the statute “moves away from an academically intensive curriculum to one that is integrated with vocational training, producing skilled

manpower for the labor market.”<sup>95</sup> Rep. Hyde, at least, recognized the footprint of the “Dear Hillary” letter in the new statute.

With his ideological allies in the White House, Tucker was to have other victories during the 1990s. Congress built on Perkins and SCANS by enacting the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994.<sup>96</sup> This Act was designed to “make education relevant to students’ future careers . . . and ensure that students learn the habits and skills that employers value.” Again, the emphasis was on personal qualities, not academic knowledge.

School to Work was followed by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998.<sup>97</sup> This statute established a “public workforce system” under which the U.S. Department of Labor would divide the states into “workforce areas” to be facilitated by local “workforce investment boards.” Through this system, employers theoretically could get information about and access to the “workers” they needed. In 2014 WIA was superseded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA),<sup>98</sup> which doubled down on central planning, workforce boards, job-matching systems, and public-private partnerships for the benefit of established local employers. WIOA was designed for “supporting the alignment of workforce investment, education, and economic development systems in support of a comprehensive, accessible, and high-quality workforce development system . . . .”<sup>99</sup>

Though these two statutes technically didn’t address K-12 education, it is especially revealing to note how the WIOA defines “workforce preparation”:

basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in utilizing resources, using information, working with others, understanding systems, and obtaining skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of post-secondary education and training.<sup>100</sup>

Given that the Common Core and other federal initiatives supposedly are designed to guarantee “college- and career-readiness,”<sup>101</sup> and that states are being forced into that “readiness” mold no matter what standards they choose,<sup>102</sup> this new federal description of what makes a student ready for employment is troubling – less academic knowledge, more personal “skills” and “competencies.” And the recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (the rewrite of No Child Left Behind) further ties required state K-12 standards to this WOIA definition.<sup>103</sup>

This scheme – workforce-development “education” connected to government-established workforce-improvement systems – was in line with a U.S. Department of Education (USED)-financed report entitled *Polytechnic Education: A Step*, issued in September 1990,<sup>104</sup> which advocated embracing “polytechnical education . . . [as] useful in restructuring general education as we know it.” The departments of Labor and Education were fully on board with the workforce-development concept.

The NCEE/Clinton/school-to-work development model makes perfect sense if the goal is to have public schools train workers for the benefit of favored corporations or businesses. These corporations and their D.C. lobbyists can be relied on for full financial support,<sup>105</sup> and the government bureaucrats exert greater centralized control. It’s a win-win for them, but a loss for our nation and its greatest treasure — the creative and authentic freedom of its youngest citizens.

### 3.1.4. Workforce development:

#### The character problem

Some Common Core critics at this point might be tempted to ask, “Can’t they just leave all the character formation and affective dispositions out of it and just teach our students facts, without politics and values?” As has been argued, there is no human education without a human -- and humans are not disembodied intellects. They are integrated beings who learn in communities and are formed by communities of other humans: the community of the family, the community

of the school (Catholic or public), the civic and political community, and the community of both high culture and common culture that surrounds our students. There is no disembodied mind that can be cleanly educated without the influence of other humans. There is no way “not” to teach values and dispositions. It is simply a matter of which ones are taught and when.

Especially with the widespread adoption of the Common Core, public schools today privilege skills-based content designed to aid business and government; they also privilege social, moral, and affective dispositions to serve their determined ends. Under the workforce-development model, then, education is valuable primarily to the extent of its practical applicability and utilitarian ends to develop or change personal attributes for the practical benefit of (supposedly) making a student a more valuable worker. Government and industry have aligned in the Common Core to produce what they want: competent workers who they believe can make America globally competitive in a multicultural and pluralistic world. Really, this should come as no surprise. This is, after all, where their bureaucratic and financial interests reside.

Much of the problem that has led to the decline of American public education and the advent of the Common Core in particular is a confusion between “education” and “training.” We, Americans, are a practical and task-oriented people. We immediately understand and are drawn to the word “training,” because it refers to learning how to accomplish a task and “getting the job done.” And we need “trained” citizens, men and women skilled both in small and in complex tasks. The preparation of surgeons and aircraft pilots is largely dedicated to equipping them with the routinized ability to perform complex skills on demand. Training is a vital part of a person’s preparation to participate in modern life—but is hardly enough. Moreover, to reach the stage in life where they can participate in useful, career-oriented technical training, young Americans need a broader mental and personal formation.

“Education” is a larger and more inclusive concept, open to many more understandings and, sadly, misunderstandings. It has been said that to educate wisely we must first know what we educate our children to become. In order to know that, we must have some concept of life and its meaning. While current American civic life seems to be growing ever more diverse and hesitant in the possible answers to these critical questions, the meaning of life for Catholics has not changed. It is a critical function of Catholic education to promote this sense of meaning in a rapidly changing context. G.K. Chesterton described this larger concept of education:

[T]hat awful and ancestral responsibility to which our fathers committed us when they took the wild step of becoming men. I mean the responsibility of affirming the truth of our human tradition and handing it on with a voice of authority, an unshaken voice. That is the one eternal education; to be sure enough that something is true that you dare to tell it to a child.<sup>106</sup>

Catholics can claim such truths with confidence and authority. For public schools, a continued loss in confidence in affirming particular truths about humanity, or a growing hesitancy to instill truths about the human condition which might be considered biased or faith-based, has resulted in a shift from broad education into the seemingly less controversial role of job training. But tensions still remain. Pragmatic college- and career-training is now the focus of much that occurs in schools, but broader human formation – though less explicit and more controversial -- is still unavoidably present.

Understanding the Common Core’s pragmatic type of “education,” even of character education, requires familiarity with what was known in the 1990s as Outcome-Based Education (OBE), because the Common Core is at its essence OBE, round two. Although OBE meant different things to different people, the central idea was that the school system (*i.e.*, the government) should establish centrally defined “outcomes” that students should meet before progressing to the next level.<sup>107</sup> (The modern term for “outcomes” is

“competencies.”<sup>108</sup>) The OBE movement to some extent grew out of Benjamin Bloom’s “mastery learning” concept, which posited that “[g]iven sufficient time (and appropriate help), 95 percent of students can learn a subject up to high levels of mastery.”<sup>109</sup> OBE champion William Spady took this a step further: “*All* students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day and in the same way.”<sup>110</sup>

The reality-based reader will notice immediately that these claims are simply absurd. No teacher can get 95 percent (much less all) of his or her students to master any particular subject – *if*, of course, the “subject” consists of academic content, as is the case with traditional education. For the Bloom/Spady claims to be realistic, then, it is obvious that what is to be learned is something other than academic content. And in practice, OBE focused not on academic content, the mastery of which necessarily varies by individual ability, but rather on non-cognitive aspects of performance that most or all students could be trained to demonstrate. OBE morphed into “transformational OBE,” a method of progressive social engineering.

Bloom himself stated in 1981 that the purpose of education is to “change the thoughts, feelings and actions of students.”<sup>111</sup> In this he was substantially correct, but in the unraveling of the American common culture the nature of what thoughts, feelings, and actions a student should have has substantially deteriorated. The dominant common culture promotes relativism, multiculturalism, and materialism, and so do many public schools.

Some tradition-minded parents stuck in these disordered environments may prefer a school where no values, attitudes, or dispositions are privileged or taught, but the truth is that there is no values-free formation of the human person. Humans are value-seeking and value-based rational animals. It is not a question of whether students will learn and mirror values and dispositions in their educational communities. It is *which* values and dispositions. So it is not

just that the Common Core seeks to instill artificially limited college and career academic content. It also seeks to instill artificially limited and manipulated attitudes, dispositions, and sentiments based on making workers more productive.

The goal of the OBE proponents was to shape the student into the kind of person the “experts” believed had the attributes necessary to benefit the managed society. Examples of the preferred attributes can be found in the Common Core (OBE, round two).<sup>112</sup> The standards train students in “empty skill sets”<sup>113</sup> rather than academic content (see section 3.2.1 of this paper, *infra*) and are replete with emphasis on “twenty-first-century skills,” such as collaboration, perseverance, tenacity, and global awareness.<sup>114</sup>

Commenting on OBE, round one, in 1993, Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett summed up the problem: OBE “became a Trojan Horse for social engineering, an elementary and secondary school version of the kind of ‘politically correct’ thinking that has infected our colleges and universities.”<sup>115</sup> Bennett warned Catholic educators that “OBE can be used to undermine parental authority and traditional moral and religious beliefs.”<sup>116</sup>

This is why the Common Core and OBE are problematic for Catholic schools. Catholic schools are forthright about their transformational outcomes and ends. They seek to work from within a Catholic culture to transform the students into free, intelligent Christian disciples. OBE schools also seek to transform students and establish exit outcomes far beyond content knowledge. They believe these outcomes should include “orientations (affective and attitudinal dimensions of learning) [deemed] critical for assuring success.”<sup>117</sup> But again, according to what end, according to what definition of success, and according to what culture?

Different cultures and different communities offer various answers to what a good and

meaningful life entails. In Catholic schools, however, parents and the Church which sanctions its schools have a very specific answer. It is an answer that has been shared by faithful Catholics in various cultures and communities for thousands of years. Catholic schools work within a Catholic culture and intellectual tradition to form their students according to this vision. This complete integral formation then prepares students to work within the common culture and business community, not to blindly serve their needs, but to transform them and fit them for authentic human flourishing.

### **3.2. The Common Core suffers from a misunderstanding of the nature of literature due to a lack of understanding about man, creativity, and God.**

#### **3.2.1. The language arts as human arts**

The authors of the Common Core standards have a truncated view of human nature. They cannot allow themselves to conceive, even if they were to be tacit about it, that men and women are made in the image and likeness of God – that in their looks, as Milton would put it, “the glorious image of their Maker” shines. This is not merely to keep religion cordoned away. It is to sever mankind from any profound attention to, or attraction toward, the transcendentals – the true, the good, and the beautiful. As a necessary consequence, they must also truncate the human arts that are so oriented, and for our purposes here that means that they do not really understand what literature is, and why we read it. Lacking such insight, they must turn to some vision of mankind, a vision which is strictly utilitarian, man with the soul amputated, but then also wrenched away from the fully human questions and towards what supposedly will be of use in a workplace.

So man is not only reduced but bent; *and the same is true of the humanities*. Students are not encouraged to read literature to enter imaginatively into a moral universe, a world of wonders, but to hone “skills” as conceived by the authors of the curriculum. Hence the curriculum’s common use of excerpts, not full

works of fiction or poetry, as if one were to go to the Sistine Chapel to examine Michelangelo's figure of Isaiah and nothing else, or rather Isaiah's arm and not even the rest of Isaiah, so as then to discuss structures and compositional strategies and coloring. Yet one would not wonder at what the painting is, who the prophet is, what the prophet has to do with the rest of the ceiling, and what would move a human being to execute so staggeringly beautiful and mighty a work in the first place.

But the crowning irony of it all is that even if you were that amputee of an instructor and you cared only for "skills," let us say the skill of writing good English prose, the Common Core curriculum is not the way to go about it, as the wretched prose of the authors themselves unwittingly testifies. The Common Core, in effect, purports to deliver robots instead of human beings; *and the resulting robots function poorly.*

Let us consider the skills first. The architectonic feature of language is grammar. For over two thousand years that insight lay at the foundation of education in the west, both pagan and Christian. You do not study grammar in order to avoid a couple of common orthographic mistakes, such as writing "its" for "it's." You study it to learn what language is and what it does, and to master the peculiar characteristics of your own language. Grammar is the scaffolding upon which we hang our thoughts and what we say about them.

But the Common Core repeats and exacerbates the mistake we have made over the last sixty or seventy years as regards grammar. We have assumed that grammar is a sidelight to "language arts" (a vacuous phrase employed without embarrassment by the authors of the Common Core) and not its own coherent subject, to be learned as a whole, in a systematic way. So we have scattered a bit of grammar here and a bit there, haphazardly, over the course of many years; and much we have ignored altogether.

The Common Core dutifully includes a grammatical component, and people who do not teach English language and literature for a living might be impressed by the terms of grammar and style included in the curriculum and growing more sophisticated as the years go on. But it is empty. Do not be fooled. You cannot learn to ride a bicycle by focusing on pedaling one year and steering the next, moving on to hills in the third year and braking in the fourth. You cannot learn, let us say, the periodic table of the elements by focusing on one column per year. The table does not work that way: it is an ordered whole. You cannot study the human body by focusing on the nerves one year and on the blood vessels the next. The body is not a collection of features; it is an ordered whole, an organism. You study it as a whole, and after you know its fundamentals as a whole you can go on to specialize on a particular feature.

Even if you could justify learning about voice, active and passive, one year and learning about the subjunctive mood the next year, the human mind does not work that way. It is not a collection box. It yearns for order, for connections among things. If the connections are lacking, we lose the things to be connected. We forget. So by the time the Common Core gets around to mentioning that students should learn about subordinate clauses, they have forgotten what it means even to be a clause, to have a subject and a verb. A feint at grammar now and again will not do, and the result will be no different from what we see now among even the best of college freshmen. Grammar, for them, is a small collection of arbitrary directives, many of them incorrect even so.

It is strangely telling that when educational innovators look to disparage the curricula of the past, they turn straight to Latin (see p. 27, *supra*), as if the obvious absurdity of studying that classical language were sufficient to prove their point. They do not consider a fact that lies in broad daylight. If studying Latin (and Greek, for that matter) were so absurd, if it did produce generations of people who had no "skills" other

than anatomizing dead verbs, those incompetents seem to have gone forth, whatever else we may think of their deeds, to establish the British empire all over the globe. That supposedly useless classical education seems to have produced plenty of international and genuinely multicultural governors, administrators, merchants, diplomats, soldiers, and clergymen. An education that formed David Livingston, George Orwell, Cecil Rhodes, and T.E. Lawrence may hardly be called incompetent. If Americans are quick to dismiss the British, they might consider the libraries of the Founders of their own nation. The grammatical education that we have discarded produced men with names like Jefferson and Adams.

We will grant that students should learn how to write clearly and cogently. The authors of the Common Core write in the wretched patois of educational bureaucrats. Here, for example, is a “literacy” standard for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade: “By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 2-3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.”<sup>118</sup> Obviously having never attained the end of writing well, the authors are lost as to the means. For writing is an art, and the only way to learn an art is to be in the presence of masters, and to imitate what they do.

But the Common Core replaces literature, as much as it can, with writing that is not graced with art or even ordinary cleverness – with the happy turn of phrase, a memorable image, or a genuine thought expressed in a few plain words. When you are older you may learn how to compose a legal brief, and there may be some justification for the jargon of that profession, in certain circumstances. But to put that sort of writing in front of a student’s eyes is not only to risk making him hate to read and write. It is not only to risk failure. It is to risk success: to train young people up in perverse and mind-numbing habits. It is to produce in them a kind of studied and labored imbecility.

Therefore we should turn to the artists, and here again the Common Core fails, because its utilitarian prison has no windows out into the world of truth, goodness, and beauty. If you want to learn how to paint landscapes, you do not study Landscape Theory. You look at the paintings of Constable and Turner. More than that – you go outdoors and look at the hills and the plains and the sea. You will never paint well what in some way you have not learned to love. You will likewise never learn to write well unless there is something you love enough to want to write well about it. If the imagination is not in play, you might as well be painting by numbers. Such is the formula-writing that the Common Core encourages.

### 3.2.2. The language arts, beauty, and the moral imagination

And here is the great and unforgivable failure of Common Core. We study grammar to learn about the beauty, the coherence, and the immense capacity of human language. We place ourselves in the company of the masters of good writing to learn what our betters have done with words, to make known their thoughts, and to help us see what they see, admire what they admire, love what they love. We do so, though, not because writing is the end. The things themselves and the truth about them are the ends. We do not study literature so we may learn how to write good computer manuals. We read a good book so we may enter the imaginative world of the author, to learn about the world and man’s place in it. *Everything in a course in literature must be oriented towards the world of imagination*, which is ineluctably moral.

Some examples will illustrate the point. Suppose a young boy is reading Kipling’s *Captains Courageous*, and his class has arrived at the point early in the novel, when the boastful and spoiled Harvey, the son of a business magnate, has gone to the deck of the ocean liner and is leaning over the edge, seasick. The sea is rolling in a storm. Before he knows it, a wave like a great paw slaps him off the ship and into the water.

When he returns to consciousness, Harvey is in a small fishing boat, one of several belonging to a schooner nearby. The man who looks at him with a smile is not a captain of industry. He is a Portuguese fisherman named Manuel. Harvey has entered a world whose existence he had never suspected.

What are the things that a good teacher will ask young people at this moment? Should they consider Kipling’s “narrative strategy”? The formal structure of Kipling’s paragraph? If they are college students, perhaps; but even then such concerns must be subordinate to the main thing. What must it be like, to be safely in one world one moment, and the next to be in a completely different world, without the slightest possibility of return any time soon? How would it be to be that boy Harvey, with his sharp tongue and his soft hands, in a world of salt water, enormous sea creatures, dangerous waves, sixteen hours of work a day, salted pork and biscuit, ropes and sails precisely rigged, old sea dogs, another boy your age whose father is the captain – a world of sweat, song, strange tales, precise discipline, and masculine fellowship? What is good about what happened to Harvey?

Another example. Common Core allows very little place for poetry. That may be because poetry makes so immediate a claim upon the imagination and upon our aesthetic sense that we cannot really approach it with any utilitarian aim in mind. Suppose you are reading Gray’s famous *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*. The boys are playing in the schoolyard. The poet remarks upon their innocence, and wonders what life will have in store for them, with its inevitable disappointments and sorrows; and then comes the time when their limbs will be too old and frail to race; and we know what follows soon after old age. Why then tell the boys now? Gray ends the poem with these quiet and memorable lines:

*To each his sufferings: all are men,  
Condemned alike to groan,  
The tender for another’s pain,  
Th’ unfeeling for his own.  
Yet ah! why should they know their fate?*

*Since sorrow never comes too late,  
And happiness too swiftly flies.  
Thought would destroy their paradise.  
No more; where ignorance is bliss,  
’Tis folly to be wise.*

Louis Untermeyer, an accomplished poet and literary critic, in one of the last fine textbooks for teaching poetry to high schoolers, *Doorways to Poetry* (1938), recounts an incident that reveals what poetry is, and what a fully human response to it is like. The teacher had asked each student to commit one poem to memory and to recite it in front of the class. You cannot do that well unless you enter into the spirit of the poem – another thing that those who scorn memory work do not understand, though it seems actors could advise them on that score. In any case, one of the boys recited Gray’s ode. The teacher then called upon another young man to evaluate his classmate’s performance. This young man was a lineman on his football team. He replied simply, “I can’t. He was very fine. This is my favorite poem in the world, and there is nothing I can say about it.”

Untermeyer approved of that silence. How much less the poem must have meant to the football player, had he been able to be glib and voluble about its “argumentative strategy” or whether “sufficient evidence” had been presented to demonstrate the conclusion, and so forth. That is to stifle the imagination, and to dismember the poem. There is a place for acute linguistic analysis of a poem, but it is not the prime thing, it is not for inexperienced young people, and it is not even for the general student. It is for the literary professional – with strong reservations. Our first attention must be given to the imaginative work as a whole: what it is, and what truth it reveals, and how it pleases us as art.

Another example. In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the old counselor Gloucester has been betrayed by his illegitimate son Edmund and been blinded by the Duke of Cornwall, a son-in-law and enemy of the king. Gloucester had been fooled by the wicked Edmund and had turned against his loyal son Edgar. Now he wanders with bleeding sockets where eyes used to be, friendless and near

despair. When an old tenant farmer tries to help him along his way, Gloucester replies:

*I have no way and therefore want no eyes:  
I stumbled when I saw.*

Those lines are artful in a straightforward and most impressive way. In each line, one verb is balanced against another, and the second line is bitterly ironic. When he had eyes, says Gloucester, that was when he stumbled. Obviously he is thinking about having trusted the son who hates him and persecuted the son who loves him. What should a teacher discuss here, if not the *thing itself*, the dreadful blindness of man, especially when he believes he sees most clearly? Nothing in the Common Core encourages such immersion in the human situation. In how many ways can a person be blind? What is Shakespeare suggesting to us about the relationship between sin and blindness? Is it possible that Gloucester's suffering is necessary for his moral regeneration? Is he being purified here, even though he does not know it?

What does it mean that a poor tenant attempts to help him, when his own son and his supposed friends among the aristocrats have turned him out of doors, where, as the evil duchess Regan puts it, he can "smell his way to Dover"? Is that reversal of expectations like anything else in the play? Does it reflect any of the parables of Jesus, in the gospels? If it does, why does Shakespeare allow it, when the play is set in pagan Britain, before the time of Christ?

An apologist for the Common Core might say here that nothing in the curriculum prohibits a teacher from asking such questions as a matter of course. This is true in only a trivial and superficial way. The entire curriculum is aimed, like a rolling juggernaut, in the direction of producing the purported skills in logic and textual analysis that the writers of the curriculum favor, or believe they favor. The examinations, the required and strongly recommended readings, the programmatic progression from one form of drudgery to another, and, most dreadfully, the training and re-training of teachers away from

imaginative literature, will be the drivers of the movement. A hard-pressed teacher will fall back upon questions in the textbooks produced by companies well remunerated by cooperating with the curriculum; and of course the selections in the textbooks themselves will be included for their usefulness to the Core's stated objectives. It would be like trying to listen to the strains of Bach and Handel while you are seated in the middle of an eight-lane freeway. It is not going to happen; and if it does, it will be an accident.

If the apologist were then to say that the Core merely provides structure to what would otherwise float away into airy speculations, we must reply that there is nothing airy about the most important questions man asks and attempts to answer. Moreover, it is not actually true that the Core provides what it claims. The Common Core is with literature what it is with grammar. It is bureaucratically over-determined and programmatic where it ought to be free, and where it should have the genuine structure of a living organism, it is formless and incoherent. That is again because of its neglect of realities, in favor of skills; as if you could learn to paint without paying attention either to painters or to the *things* painted.

So then, just as the Common Core neglects the bones of language, which is grammar, so does it neglect the foundation of the study of literature, which is literary history. We all understand that readings must be tailored to the age and proficiency of the children who are to read them. But once we reach a certain age, the treasures of their literary heritage, as members of a western and Christian civilization, and as speakers of English, must be opened to them. Just as grammar is its own thing, a coherent object of study that children should master, so too our literary heritage. It too is its own thing; yet for it, the Common Core has no use at all.

### 3.2.3. The language arts and the transmission of human culture

In this regard too the Common Core confirms and exacerbates a long-standing failure. Here,

it is the failure to introduce young people to that heritage, in a systematic way, so that when they read one author, they know he has in turn read the authors that came before him, and thus they will be able to enter into his conversation with his predecessors. They can, as it were, *begin to speak the language*. They will be conversant in the perennial controversies of poets. They will wonder why Milton made his Satan sound like a hero of classical epic – because, in the first instance, they will see that he has done so. That in turn will make it possible for them to read, with understanding, the poetry of Byron, or Goethe’s *Faust*, to see how those artists understood or misunderstood Milton before them.

Our students nowadays can do none of these things. It is utterly insufficient to say that most college freshmen will never have studied Milton or Byron or Goethe. They will not even recognize their names. The Common Core canonizes the discarding of any canon of literary study. What happens then to the little literature students do study in school? The result is rather like what has happened to grammar, or what must happen to any subject that is no longer taught as the thing it is, but is dismembered, a finger here and a toe there, with the emphasis on anything but the organism to which those members rightly belong. The result is confusion in the mind and boredom in the soul.

We might turn again to Shakespeare to illustrate the trouble. Many states require that students in high school read at least one play by Shakespeare every year. That is because legislators recognize Shakespeare is the literary genius *par excellence*. You cannot speak English and claim to be educated if you are ignorant of Shakespeare.

But what good does that actually do? Suppose you say that students in high school must listen to at least one Bach chorale or oratorio every year, because Bach is the musical genius *par excellence*. What would be the point of it? The requirement is well intended but incoherent. If you are going to study Bach, you have to study

Bach, and not just listen to one piece each year. That means that you have to place him in a context. You have to learn what an oratorio is, and a chorale, and what purpose they served, and what Bach inherited from his predecessors, and what he did that was new. The same thing goes for Shakespeare. Unless you intend to inoculate students against ever catching a love for the Bard, you must prepare them to read Shakespeare by giving them experience of Renaissance English, and by placing his work in the context of the literature of his time.

Absent a coherent structure – a grammar of literary works, if you will – Shakespeare merely frustrates. Its language will strike the students as foreign, because they will have had no experience of the early translations of Scripture, or of other Renaissance poetry and prose. Its historical and literary illusions will sail overhead unsuspected. What high-school students now read is, basically, a scattering of political novels of the twentieth century (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Catch-22*, *Animal Farm*, *Brave New World*), young adult fiction that is often pretty dreadful, and a few plays by Shakespeare tossed in, as anomalies, out of place, out of time, and halfway out of the only English language they know, which is modern and colloquial.<sup>119</sup> The Common Core gives all of that its imprimatur, with the caveat that even less of literature will be taught, and so there will be even fewer opportunities to address what Russell Kirk called “the permanent things.”

Perhaps that is finally the aim of the Common Core, to forestall those opportunities. Shakespeare is sometimes called a *thaumaturge*, a worker of theatrical wonders, and wonder itself, that engagement of the whole person, body and mind and soul, in the surpassing goodness or beauty of something beyond the workaday world, is central to understanding his plays, especially the ones with which he bade farewell to the stage, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. Wonder is not a mere flurry of the emotions. It is not reason, in a fainting spell. It is, as Aristotle says, the beginning of philosophy, the love of wisdom. A creature incapable of wonder is less than

human. A human being incapable of wonder is worse than such a creature: a cynic, a drudge, a functionary, a calculator of advantages to himself. That's at the best. Let Shakespeare describe him thus:

*The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, strategems, and spoils.  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as Erebus.  
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.*

And the worst? The spiritual organ of religious sensibility is precisely the capacity for wonder. A parent who depends upon religious instruction for his or her child's spiritual development and who ignores the humanities and the arts is like someone who would prepare a soldier to go forth to war by giving him a military handbook, and nothing more. He will know, in a notional sense, *what* he is supposed to do, but it will be an abstract and bloodless thing. He will not have the knowledge in his muscles and bones.

The same is true of what Catholics believe about God and man. A child's imagination is going to be formed one way or another. It will either be formed by the great art and literature of our heritage, or it will be formed by the open sewer of mass entertainment, and the general garbage, foolish and vicious at once, peddled to him by the authors of books for the young. One hour in a brothel is sufficient to corrupt the best; and the brothel in question is open all day and all night, and advertises its wares everywhere the young person looks; and his cousins and teammates and even some of his teachers haunt its back rooms and basements. What then in ordinary times is a great delight is in these bad times an urgent necessity.

### **3.3. The Common Core suffers from a misunderstanding of the liberal arts due to a lack of understanding about the relationship of man and God to each other and to everything else.**

Even though the Common Core is sometimes marketed as being limited to ELA and math, the standards actually extend their tentacles into

other disciplines as well. This is apparent from the full title of the ELA standards – “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects”<sup>120</sup>– and curriculum vendors are hawking troubling lessons from these disciplines for “English” classes (more on this below).

But a deeper problem is that the shallow and pragmatic workforce focus of the ELA and math disciplines runs the risk of bleeding over to the entire academic enterprise. Since the Common Core is so pervasive in our educational landscape, Catholic schools must be well armed to defend other disciplines, not just English and math, from a distorted approach insufficient to human dignity and falling short of the goals of an authentic Catholic education.

#### **3.3.1. History**

As mentioned, the “literacy” standards of the Common Core allow schools to import content from other disciplines into Common Core English classes. Curriculum developers have embraced this idea especially with respect to history/social studies, resulting in many schools' implementation of “English” lessons that go far beyond grammar and literary study.

Presumably, these types of lessons would also make their way into Catholic schools that adopt the Common Core. Indeed, the ability to share lesson plans across state lines and types of schools has been a sales pitch for Common Core. It is thus necessary to reflect briefly on what unique elements a Catholic social-studies program or history program might have.

The efforts of Catholic education in the area of history will somewhat mirror the experience in literature, *i.e.*, while Catholic schools cover many of the same basic skills and content areas that their secular counterparts do, they provide both their own areas of emphasis and add areas of inquiry. A Catholic history program will likewise cover many of those elements and skills relevant to the discipline of history that secular programs

will cover — exposure to critical dates, persons, and events (with a Catholic emphasis) -- but it will also open up new levels and types of inquiry that public schools may miss. Among them, the Church teaches:

Teachers should guide the students' work in such a way that they will be able to discover a religious dimension in the world of human history. As a preliminary, they should be encouraged to develop a taste for historical truth, and therefore to realize the need to look critically at texts and curricula which, at times, are imposed by a government or distorted by the ideology of the author. . . . they will see the development of civilizations, and learn about progress. . . . When they are ready to appreciate it, students can be invited to reflect on the fact that this human struggle takes place within the divine history [of] universal salvation. At this moment, the religious dimension of history begins to shine forth in all its luminous grandeur.<sup>121</sup>

In specific distinction from the Common Core, Catholic efforts at teaching history will reject the exclusive use of “close reading,” which seeks to analyze a text primarily in terms of the text itself. The Catholic method will focus rather on encountering historical texts, artifacts, materials, events, and experiences on their own terms and within as complete and comprehensive a context as possible. The standards employed must assure that work is accomplished according to the best practices of historical inquiry, and that students at the appropriate stages use critical historical lenses such as evidence and causation, and skills such as contextualization, periodization, inferencing, sourcing, and corroboration (based on the character and reliability of sources).<sup>122</sup>

Catholic-school students are also expected to understand the relationship between God and history. They should be able to relate how history begins in God and ends in God and how history has and serves a divine purpose.<sup>123</sup> They should be able to demonstrate a general understanding of the “story” of humanity from creation to present day through a Catholic concept of the world, and man from a Catholic perspective.<sup>124</sup> They should be aware not just of secular dates, events, and

people, but also of critical Catholic events and people and how they influenced history. They should encounter and discuss the thoughts and deeds of the great men and women of the past so as to develop their perspective, reasoning, and understanding of the complexity of the human condition. They should be able to identify the motivating values that have informed particular societies, how they correlate with Catholic teaching, and to what effect.<sup>125</sup> They should be able to evaluate individuals throughout history in terms of how they measure up to Catholic ideals and norms. They should also ponder events and people in history in order to become more reflective on their own values and behaviors so as to enlarge their understanding of themselves and others.<sup>126</sup> They should explore what is true, good, and beautiful in other cultures and in other times so as to increase their understanding of themselves and others and join in the larger human conversation about what it means to be human and how ought they best to live with others according to God's plan and the longings of their hearts. In pursuit of the common good, historical inquiry can help students discriminate between what is positive in the world, what needs to be transformed, and what injustices must be overcome.<sup>127</sup>

As a result of this holistic approach, Catholic-school students will come to view history not as a mere chronicle of detached human events or isolated texts, but rather a moral and metaphysical drama having supreme worth in the eyes of God so as to help the student appreciate the eternal consequences of his or her individual life and personal history.<sup>128</sup> A study of history will assist the student to recognize and reject cultural counter-values that threaten human dignity and are therefore contrary to the Gospel.<sup>129</sup>

### 3.3.2. Mathematics

If there were any area in the curriculum that would seem to be safe with purely secular standards, it would be math. There is, however, reason for concern on both a practical front and a student-formation front. On the practical

front, Catholic schools need to ensure academic excellence in order to justify their high tuition. Recent test scores on the NAEP math tests, for both public and private schools, are lower than expected.<sup>130</sup> While there is no clear causal relationship with the Common Core yet, there are also no indications that the Common Core has provided a clear path to mathematical mastery. Catholic schools must be seen to offer the best math education, not the most common.

There are also concerns that some of the Common Core math standards are in some cases misplaced and in other cases completely missing.<sup>131</sup> Also, although the Common Core does allow a path permitting students to study Algebra I in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, this is not the norm for the Common Core (nor is it reasonable to expect many students to take this path unless their families can afford tutoring, because the Common Core K-7 standards do not prepare students for Algebra I in 8<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>132</sup>). For many Catholic schools, requiring a more advanced math curriculum, in which Algebra I is the norm for most 8<sup>th</sup>-graders, has proven effective for both high-school preparation and for marketing. More importantly, it further develops a student's soul to know and love what is true and beautiful, as advanced math is often where these concepts come most alive.

Algebra I in 8<sup>th</sup> grade allows a student to take more advanced math classes in high school, which in turn opens up more post-high-school opportunities, especially for students who might want to pursue science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) studies. World-renowned mathematician and Stanford Professor *Emeritus* James Milgram, who as a member of the Common Core Validation Committee refused to sign off on the standards, has issued numerous warnings that the entire Common Core math schema is flawed, that it will restrict STEM access for many students, and that the math standards are not aligned with expectations at the college level.<sup>133</sup> A set of standards that stops with an incomplete Algebra II course, as does the Common Core, can prepare students only

for nonselective community colleges – and as Dr. Milgram points out, the math standards' chief drafter admits that is exactly what is intended. To the degree that Catholic schools are seen by potential customers to simply offer the same mediocre math program that could be had for free at a public school — and in fact a program not geared toward high-end performance assisting in admission to elite high schools or colleges — their competitive advantage may be thwarted.

The Common Core math standards do offer an account of the goals of mathematics. Most Catholic educators will find themselves in significant agreement with these goals. The Common Core standards want students to be able to make sense of problems and persevere in solving them; reason abstractly and quantitatively; construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others; model with mathematics; use appropriate tools strategically; attend to precision; look for and make use of structure; and look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning.<sup>134</sup>

Thoughtful people formerly could disagree (before the Common Core stifled debate) about exactly where and how the complex processes would be initiated to achieve these lofty ends. The Common Core claims that these principles describe varieties of expertise that mathematics educators at all levels should seek to develop in their students. However, many educators might disagree that “Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others” belongs in a kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup>-grade math class.

Alarmed educators and groups have voiced their concern that many elements in the Common Core are not developmentally appropriate, especially for young children.<sup>135</sup> The too-early introduction of abstract reasoning comes at the expense of teaching young children the standard algorithm – the logical way of solving a problem that works every time – in favor of teaching them multiple exploratory approaches to math and only later arriving at the standard algorithm.

This sequence gets it exactly backward: Expecting children to understand more abstract concepts before mastering the foundational building block of the standard algorithm may be sowing lasting confusion, and generating early experiences of failure and despair, among our younger math students.<sup>136</sup> It also explains the need to push Algebra I to high school – so much time is required to sort out the confusion that most students are not ready for Algebra I in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>137</sup> So while there is some agreement in ultimate goals of a life-long math program, the devil is in the details. Unfortunately, with the Common Core, authority over the timing, content, and placement of “the details” has been removed from public debate and local control.

Finally, regarding the math standards, although some of the more abstract benefits of math are listed, they are insufficient. Math programs in Catholic schools do more than this. Part of the hope is that in encountering math, students will be able to better understand both man and God. Students should glory in the wonder of the human intellect, made by and reflecting the divine intellect.<sup>138</sup> They should contemplate the transcendental and eternal. They should be able to move from concrete to abstract thinking: from the notion of “if you take one of my three cookies, I am angry because I have fewer to eat,” to the notion of number operations and to the quite difficult notion of the number 3.<sup>139</sup> They should come to appreciate that there are abstract transcendent truths, which the mind does not make up, but which it discovers. They should gain experience in discovering that there are truths that transcend time and culture, and that apply equally to various elements of reality. At the same time, they should understand that there are questions of values, common sense, and religious and human truths and experiences that are beyond the scope of math.<sup>140</sup> They should be able to extrapolate as applicable those elements of mathematical reasoning that are helpful to other disciplines as appropriate, including science and philosophy.

Older students should be inspired by math to begin to explore the discipline of philosophy and some of the great minds that have informed the Western tradition. They should both appreciate the unique power of deductive certainty which the study of math allows, but also appreciate that this type of certainty is not imposed on other areas of inquiry.<sup>141</sup> They should appreciate that there are truths and experiences that transcend math and science and are beyond its methods of inquiry. They should grow comfortable in finding and acknowledging that there is an objective truth in math, and indeed in many other disciplines that exists outside of the human will.<sup>142</sup> They should gain experience in humility by subjecting their inquiries to categories of fairness and proof. They should become aware that the hunger for truth is never satisfied, that each definitive answer leads to a yearning for more knowledge. They should explore in ever-deepening ways the notion of limitlessness and infinity.<sup>143</sup> They should value inquiry for its own sake, inquiry that is delightfully evident when theoretical mathematics — math for math’s sake — poses and explores problems with equal vigor whether or not there is an immediate “real world” application. They should engage the world, including the world of math, as integrated and complete human beings who in their experiences of math come to value beauty, harmony, proportion, radiance, and wholeness.

Catholic-school students are not expected to reach these goals and aspirations at a young age, and many may never fully reach them. But Catholic schools do expect their math program to be guided by these highest truths and for their math teachers, to the degree they are able, to model and experience them in their own intellectual journey. This is part of what Catholic educators believe themselves called to do differently in the study of math and according to the high ideals of Catholic intellectual inquiry.

### 3.3.3. Science

As with the other disciplines, when Catholic schools approach science, it is with the notion that their science standards will largely mirror

the standards in use in secular schools, but also have some critical differences in emphasis as well as some critical additions. Catholic educators approach science with confidence and wonder, secure in the belief that there exists no contradiction between the God of nature and the God of the faith, for there is only one Father and God who is the author and end of both faith and science.<sup>144</sup> In seeking and discovering scientific truths, they are seeking and discovering truths about God and His plan. The Church emphasizes:

By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. These man must respect as he recognizes the methods proper to every science and technique. . . . Whoever labors to penetrate the secrets of reality with a humble and steady mind, even though he is unaware of the fact, is nevertheless being led by the hand of God, who holds all things in existence, and gives them their identity.<sup>145</sup>

Additional standards and elements included in a Catholic school involve the attempt to understand how God created the world, how it manifests His wisdom, glory, and purpose, and how He holds it all in existence according to His plan. The Catholic school seeks to explore the relationships and underlying order and meaning in God's creation. It is particularly interested in the relationship among God, man, and nature. What is discovered in matters of science and technology is always placed at the service of men and women, and ultimately, of God.<sup>146</sup>

A Catholic study of science is inspired by a sense of wonder and delight about the natural universe and its beauty:

Engagement in knowledge and research cannot be separated from a sense of ethics and transcendence: no real science can disregard ethical consequences and no real science drives us away from transcendence. Science and ethics, science and transcendence are not mutually exclusive, but come together for a greater and better understanding of man and the world.<sup>147</sup>

Catholic schools teach students to value and care for the world and all its men, animals, and environments. All are understood as part of God's creation, which cannot be manipulated simply at man's will or viewed as a thing to be used, but that man must cooperate with God's plan. Catholic education encourages bold exploration with confidence in human reason and in man's ability to know the truth about God's creation and the fundamental intelligibility of the world.<sup>148</sup> It values the simultaneous complexity and simplicity of physical reality.

More mature students are instructed in the various views regarding the creation of the cosmos and human evolution and the Church's perennial teaching regarding micro- and macro-evolution. Older students also learn the differences between methodological naturalism, that is, a reasonable scientific technique which holds that only physical evidence is considered in any scientific investigation; and philosophical naturalism, that is, an errant, materialistic, and atheistic metaphysical claim that physical science is the only way of genuinely knowing all elements of reality. This is part of a larger effort to help students articulate how science properly situates itself within other academic disciplines for correction and completion (*e.g.*, with history and theology) in order to recognize the limited material explanation of reality to which science is properly attuned.<sup>149</sup>

Finally, Catholic-school students are to be exposed to the great contribution of generations of Catholic scientists, many of whom were priests, who have made significant discoveries in all areas of science — from Mendel in genetics and Pasteur in biology to Copernicus in astronomy. Catholic-school standards should ensure that students graduate with a firm understanding that the Church is a proponent of science and human flourishing.

*Teaching has an extraordinary moral depth and is one of man's most excellent and creative activities, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings.*

*-Congregation for Catholic Education*

*The darkest places in Hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.*

*-Dante Alighieri*

*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.*

*-Matthew 22:21*

## **PART 4. MOVING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS FORWARD IN A POST-COMMON CORE WORLD**

### **4.1. True to mission**

Many Catholic educators have seen the particular insufficiency of workforce development, such as that embodied in the Common Core, to guide the work of Catholic schools. They understand how specific disciplines in the Catholic intellectual tradition seek to explore much more in every subject. They sense that the degree to which Catholic schools allow Common Core textbooks, test-based assignments, and the tests themselves to limit their instruction and academic exploration, is the degree to which they fail in their mission. As Pope Pius XI observed:

Any form of education that ignores or marginalizes the moral and religious dimension of the person is a hindrance to full education, because children and young people have a right to be motivated to appraise moral values with a right conscience, to embrace them with a personal adherence, together with a deeper knowledge and love of God.<sup>150</sup>

It is important to broaden the scope even more to examine the Catholic schools' particular calling to teach to the transcendent and the Catholic insight that all knowledge is ultimately united and human-friendly, and finds both its source and end in God. As the Church declares:

The world, in all its diversity, is eager to be guided towards the great values of mankind, truth, good and beauty; now more than ever.

... Teaching means to accompany young people in their search for truth and beauty, for what is right and good.<sup>151</sup>

Catholic-school students must fulfill their human potential and both be good and do the good in authentic freedom. To do this, they must be able to know how to wisely and fully apprehend and investigate all aspects of reality from a solid Christian intellectual tradition. This intellectual tradition not only involves teaching facts and skills but is also essentially focused on seeking to understand the value and nature of things, and appreciating knowledge for its own sake. As Pope Benedict XVI stated, "The role of education cannot, in fact, be reduced to the mere transmission of knowledge and skills that aim to form a professional but must include all the aspects of the person, from his social side to his yearning for the transcendent."<sup>152</sup>

### **4.2. The transcendentals**

One method of assisting students to keep focus on these aspects of Catholic intellectual inquiry is to use the lenses of truth, goodness, or beauty to evaluate a subject under consideration. These three realities are often understood as being among the transcendentals, commonly defined as the timeless and universal attributes of being.<sup>153</sup> From the Catholic perspective, they are among the essential properties of all beings, reflecting the divine origin of all things and the unity of all truth and reality in God. Since these are among the most profound attributes of things, and are substantive to man's very nature, they help to unite men across time and culture and are often a delight to explore.

The transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness are closely intertwined. It has been noted:

Truth, beauty, and goodness have their being together. By truth we are put in touch with reality, which we find is good for us and beautiful to behold. In our knowing, loving, and delighting the gift of reality appears to us as “something infinitely and inexhaustively valuable and fascinating.”<sup>154</sup>

In seeking to discuss one, the others are naturally brought into the conversation.

The conversations that should be occurring with students in Catholic schools may require extensive use of many of the pragmatic and disjointed skills the Common Core attempts to develop in public schools in the attempt to make students college- and career-ready. However, Catholic conversations will have the guidance and the freedom to go much deeper into the meaning of the materials under study, whatever the subject or topic. The goal is that students will achieve this level of engagement and joyful confidence in a life of the mind that can seek and ultimately discover, but never exhaust, various elements of reality, a reality that is friendly to humans and ordered to their ultimate delight by a God who created it, and placed them in it for their own growth, freedom, and flourishing.

A natural exploration of the material at hand, under a knowledgeable and engaged teacher, is the first step. A teacher who is enamored of the subject under consideration and who wants to share that joy and knowledge with students he or she truly cares for is at the heart of the enterprise. Pope Pius XI noted that “[p]erfect schools are the result not so much of good methods as of good teachers, teachers who are thoroughly prepared and well-grounded in the matter they have to teach; who possess the intellectual and moral qualifications required by their important office; who cherish a pure and holy love for the youths confided to them, because they love Jesus Christ and His Church, of which these are the children of predilection; and who have therefore sincerely at heart the true good of family and country.”<sup>155</sup>

This is why teachers need to approach with caution, or better yet avoid, teaching to the test or teaching with canned “one size fits all” teaching materials or computer-delivered curricula produced by textbook and testing giants such as Pearson. Catholic goals are not their goals. The goal is not just to generate easy questions for easy answers, but to generate foundational questions for deep inquiry into the nature of things, to instill a sense of the intrinsic value of knowledge, and to elicit a sense of wonder. To aid in this more profound attempt to engage with the subject matter at hand, the educator can assist in keeping the eyes on the prize and on keeping instruction engaging and properly oriented by bringing into the conversation analysis of any subject’s transcendentals of beauty, goodness, and truth. Catholic colleges and universities offering teacher-preparation programs have a particular responsibility and opportunity to advance these realities.

### 4.3. Beauty

Beauty can help evoke wonder and delight, which are foundations of a life of wisdom and inquiry.<sup>156</sup> Beauty involves apprehending unity, harmony, proportion, wholeness, and radiance.<sup>157</sup> It often manifests itself in simplicity and purity, especially in math and science.<sup>158</sup> Often beauty has a type of pre-rational striking force upon the soul, for instance when one witnesses a spectacular sunset or the face of one’s beloved. Beauty can be understood as a type of inner radiance or shine coming from a thing that is well ordered to its state of being or is true to its nature or form.<sup>159</sup> Beauty pleases not only the eye or ear, but also the intellect, in a celebration of the integrity of body and soul. It can be seen as a sign of God’s goodness, benevolence, and graciousness, of both His presence and His transcendence in the world.<sup>160</sup> It can serve as re-enchantment with the cosmos and all reality<sup>161</sup> and assist in moving students to a rich and deep contemplative beholding of the real.<sup>162</sup>

A Catholic educator might accomplish this by looking at something with the students

and asking: “Is this beautiful? How so or why not?” and then drawing on some of the critical elements typically related to beauty such as proportion, harmony, unity, and wholeness to consider what they are seeing. Questions related to its ability to attract and delight (and what this attraction and delight reveals about the thing and about the individual) may also prove effective. Finally, thinking about how faithfulness to form shines through it can also prove a gateway to deeper levels of contemplation and meaning.

#### 4.4. Goodness

When exploring issues of goodness with his or her students, a Catholic educator is fundamentally asking them to consider questions of how well someone or something fulfills its purpose. Goodness is understood as the perfection of being. A thing is good to the degree that it enacts and perfects those powers, activities, and capacities appropriate to its nature and purpose. A good pair of scissors cuts, a good eye has 20/20 vision, and so forth. We have to know a thing’s purpose, nature, or form to engage in an authentic discussion of “the good.” When addressing questions of what is a good law, a good government, a good father, or a good man, the discussion quickly grows richer, deeper, and more complex.

Catholic educators pursue the goal of helping students to become good persons. Among those qualities deemed good are wisdom, faithfulness, and virtue. Virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good.<sup>163</sup> People are free to the extent that with the help of others, they have maximized these goods, these proper powers and perfections as man.<sup>164</sup> Such efforts raise fundamental questions of what it means to be human, and of individuals’ relationships with each other, the created world, and God.

The Church teaches that God, through reason and revelation, has not left humanity blind on these issues, nor has He left man to his own subjective devices. It is a fundamental responsibility of the Catholic school to teach and pass on Catholic culture, a Catholic worldview,

a cultural patrimony, and truths about the good and what constitutes the good life.<sup>165</sup> Particularly, in this and all their efforts, Catholic educators build the foundation of the good on Jesus Christ, who as the incarnate Word is the perfect man, who fully reveals man to himself.<sup>166</sup>

A Catholic educator might accomplish this by asking, “What is this thing’s nature or purpose?” or “What perfections are proper to this thing in light of its purpose and how well does the example fulfill its proper potentialities?” If the issues under consideration touch directly on the human person’s relationship with self, others, or God, a question might be, “How does this measure up in terms of a Catholic worldview and values?” The Catholic educator poses such questions with confidence that reason, the natural law, and divine revelation can all assist in reaching conclusions as to the nature of the good.

#### 4.5. Truth

A simple definition for truth is the correspondence of mind to reality.<sup>167</sup> Catholic educators seek always to place their students and themselves in proper relationship with the truth. Nothing they do can ever be opposed to the truth, that is, opposed to reality, which has its being in God. Catholics hold that when their senses are in good condition and functioning properly under normal circumstances, and when their reason is functioning honestly and clearly, they can come to know reality and have the ability to make true judgments about reality. Through study, reflection, experimentation, argument, and discussion, they believe that an object under discussion may manifest itself in its various relations, either directly or indirectly, to the mind.<sup>168</sup>

Building on Jesus’ words that “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,”<sup>169</sup> Catholic schools also understand that truth is a Person: Christ. One’s relationship with the truth, and with all that is real, is also intimately tied to one’s relationship with Christ. There is a divine aspect to reality tied to love, tied to one’s very being, and tied to one’s relationship with God. Truth and reality are intimate and insistent.

The Church teaches that man tends by nature toward the truth. Even though due to man's fallen nature he may sometimes seek to ignore or obfuscate the truth, he is nonetheless obliged to honor and bear witness to it in its fullness. Humans are bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with its demands.<sup>170</sup> Catholics believe that reason, revelation, and science will never be in ultimate conflict, as the same God created them all.<sup>171</sup> They oppose scientism, which without evidence makes the metaphysical claim that only what can be measured and subject to physical science can be true. They oppose relativism, not only because its central dictum "there is no truth" is self-contradicting, but also for a deeper reason: because removing objective truths from any analysis also removes the possibility of gauging human progress, destroys the basis for human dignity, and disables the ability to make important moral distinctions such as the desirability of tolerance<sup>172</sup> and the wisdom of pursuing truth, beauty, and goodness as opposed to their opposites of ignorance, ugliness, and privation.

A Catholic educator might accomplish this by simply asking of anything: "Is it true? Is our thinking on this matter in accord with reality?" This can be expanded by asking, "Are we looking at this clearly, logically and fairly and with our senses and reason properly attuned?" These "starter questions" are just to get the conversation rolling. Catholic schools' confidence in reason, in the intelligible nature of reality, and in the goodness of the Creator or reality gives them an incredible competitive reality. They are speaking the language of being and transcendence. It is a language their hearts and minds were made for.

#### 4.6. Seeking the unity of truth

Catholic education authentically transpires only in the context of humility to the truth and to reality. Knowledge and reality must be approached with respect and wonder. Knowledge is sought, not for its own sake and not for power, but for wisdom and understanding. In seeking to

explain a Catholic approach to learning, Cardinal Newman compared the universal value of general intellectual health to the universal value of general bodily health.<sup>173</sup> Like human health, which is good for its own sake and not just because it allows a person to do all sorts of things such as engage in manual labor to make a living, intellectual or academic health is sought for its own sake and for the freedom it affords man to reach his potential in all areas. Everything is to be respected in its totality and in light of its final end: its God-given purpose.

God's effect on knowledge does not involve just how humans interact with it, but also its very nature. Cardinal Newman observed:

All branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator. Hence it is that the Sciences, into which our knowledge may be said to be cast, have multiplied bearings one on another, and an internal sympathy, and admit, or rather demand, comparison and adjustment. They complete, correct, and balance each other.<sup>174</sup>

This unified, transcendent, and receptive approach to knowledge cannot be adequately explored in a cramped Common Core environment. That environment is focused on college and career; that environment is obsessed with testing and measurement; the God of that environment is the high-stakes test. Academic salvation or damnation not only for the student, but also increasingly for the teacher, rests on the omnipotence of those tests. All knowledge must bow to the test. Any knowledge that cannot be tested quite likely will not be taught. A critical point of the Common Core's agenda is to isolate meaning within a text or problem, wherein the perception is that it can be objectified, known, controlled, and tested.

In contrast, the Catholic intellectual tradition seeks to uncover transcendent truths that cross cultures, times, and disciplines: truths that unite humanity, unite academics to the glory of God, the Creator. The Church teaches:

Catholic schools are encouraged to promote a wisdom-based society, to go beyond knowledge and educate people to think, evaluating facts in the light of values. In teaching the various academic disciplines, teachers share and promote a methodological viewpoint in which the various branches of knowledge are dynamically correlated, in a wisdom perspective.<sup>175</sup>

#### **4.7. Moving forward: Celebrating the unique mission and competitive advantage of Catholic schools**

Intellectual development in Catholic education is aimed at a student's autonomy and freedom as a fully functioning human, not at training him so he can make a living or be useful. Catholic schools teach much more than can be tested. They form the complete human being for complete human flourishing.

Perhaps here is a gift the Common Core provides Catholic educators: It has revealed a subtle but profoundly important point about the intellectual development in Catholic schools. Catholic education is not just better at instilling secular intellectual skill sets into students. It is called to a much more holistic and lofty end. Guided by reason and revelation and confident in the goodness of God and the intelligibility of His creation, Catholic schools are free and at home in the natural world and in the world of the mind as they seek to educate the whole person, mind, body, and soul.

While completely at home in the physical universe and in the transcendent life of the mind, the Church and its schools must also proclaim and witness to their confidence in Christ and the power of the Gospel. The Church expects its schools to play a critical role in this public proclamation of the faith. The lay Catholics now teaching and running most Catholic schools must at this critical time orient or re-orient themselves to their mission as schools. Their mission is twofold, it is clear, and it requires and ultimately secures authentic human freedom. Both Pope Pius XI<sup>176</sup> and Vatican II<sup>177</sup> emphasize that Catholic schools exist to ensure:

1. The final good of their students and
2. The common good of society.

The final good of the students is eternal life in heaven with God, which they will attain by knowing, loving, and serving Him in this life. Schools and their students serve the common good when they develop and use their talents in loving service to others, including evangelizing.

Because the Catholic mission is more comprehensive than that of public schools, and since its methodologies are more comprehensive, involving the formation of the moral, physical, spiritual, and intellectual realms, and since its area of concern includes the transcendent, Catholic schools need their own additional standards, including standards related to specific academic disciplines. These additional Catholic standards must address elements of intellectual development and moral reasoning and dispositions that are a critical part of a Catholic school's unique mission in every academic field. Catholic schools cannot simply appropriate the Common Core standards or simply apply their empty skill sets to Catholic materials in the hope that they can provide complete human formation.

A benefit of the Common Core to Catholic schools is that it has drawn attention to the need for Catholic educators to better articulate exactly what the unique standards and elements of Catholic education might be. Groups such as the Cardinal Newman Society have worked with Catholic intellectuals and school leaders to prepare standards that attempt to implant the unique insights of the Catholic intellectual tradition into the various academic disciplines. Some dioceses have also attempted to articulate some unique standards for Catholic schools, and many dioceses are focusing on their unique Catholic character with renewed focus in face of the leveling factor of the Common Core.

To the degree that Catholic schools learn to articulate and embrace the Catholic intellectual tradition and their unique salvific mission, they have a pearl of great price. They have the Way,



## About the Authors

**Anthony Esolen** is a professor of English literature at Providence College. He is the editor and translator of three epic poems: Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*; Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*; and, in three volumes, Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He has published a volume of his own poetry, *Peppers*, and seven other books, including two which bear upon the matter at hand: *Ironies of Faith: The Laughter at the Heart of Christian Literature* and *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child*.

**Dan Guernsey** is an associate professor of education at Ave Maria University. He also serves as the Director of K-12 Programs at the Cardinal Newman Society. His work includes Catholic educational policy and a focus on Catholic school identity. He has worked for over 25 years in Catholic education both nationally and internationally at the K-12 level as a teacher, principal, and consultant and in higher education in both instruction and administration.

**Jane Robbins** is an attorney and Senior Fellow at the American Principles Project. She has written extensively about the deficiencies of progressive education and the Common Core, and about threats to student and family privacy posed by government policies such as training students with technology rather than educating them with teachers. She has testified about these issues before the legislatures of 11 states.

**Kevin Ryan** is an *emeritus* professor of education at Boston University. He is the founder and director *emeritus* of the Center for Character and Social Responsibility. He is a former high-school English teacher and taught on the faculties of Stanford University, the University of Chicago, Harvard University, Ohio State University, and the University of Lisbon. He was appointed to the Pontifical Academy for the Social Sciences by Pope John Paul II in 2003. He has authored and edited 22 books, primarily on moral education and the education of teachers, and written over 100 articles.

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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to change the intellectual climate in the Commonwealth by supporting scholarship that challenges the “conventional wisdom” on Massachusetts public policy issues.

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185 Devonshire Street, Suite 1101 | Boston, MA 02110 | 617.723.2277  
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