Iowa Core 2

In the last installment of these notes, I shared some basic information about the Iowa Core. The information in this article will once again not be focused on the politics of the core, but on the actual curricular and academic aspects of the Iowa Core. It is important to remember that as accredited non-publics in the state of Iowa, we have always followed what the state has required us to do, but look at what is offered and use our faith and common sense to make educational and curricular decisions that align with our mission. We would not follow something that is not in the best interest of our students for their faith and academic development.

In this edition of the Notes we are going to look at a couple of questions that have come up, which may be the same questions you have.

Why are we moving to a “standards-based” curriculum?

There has been some concern about moving to a “standards-based” curriculum. For the past twelve years our diocesan schools have had a standards-based curriculum that was developed by the professional educators in this diocese. This means that our curriculum gives benchmarks at each grade level on important skills and knowledge sets that we believe our students need to know and be able to do for success in their educational and post-educational lives. This kind of curriculum is not new to our teachers.

We also note that the standards we have been using, as well as those in the Iowa Core are minimum requirements. Our teachers are constantly challenging students not only to meet the standards we have but to move beyond them. In all areas of the curriculum our teachers seek ways to involve students in the learning, ask questions that require students to explain their thinking, and help students to reflect on their learning.

If all schools are using this same curriculum, what sets Catholic schools apart from the public schools?

When you look at textbooks and curriculum guidelines, those are nearly all the same no matter what school (public or Catholic) you are in. What makes us different in our Catholic schools is how we use those materials. Let’s consider students who are reading A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. The teacher might use any of these activities to help them understand what Marley meant when he said, “Mankind was my business.”

- Students may learn about and be challenged to practice the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, finding out firsthand how these actions help us to place others first.
- They can consider the story of Jesus feeding the multitude or eating with Zacchaeus; as well as the parables of healing the paralytic and the prodigal son.
- We can learn about people like Pope Francis, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa), St. Vincent de Paul, or St. Francis of Assisi, and find out how their actions showed they knew each person was made in the image and likeness of God.
- They might learn about Catholic Charities or other organizations that help others with food, clothing, shelter, job training, and health care in our own communities and be challenged to volunteer.

Teachers in our Catholic schools know that their first and most important role is to pass on the faith to their students. Catholic school teachers enhance the curriculum and materials they have so that students experience their Catholic identity in all subjects so students experience their faith 24/7, not just in Religion class or at Mass. By doing this our students learn to make decisions that are guided by their faith and knowledge.

This is what sets us apart and none of that will change with the Iowa Core. In the Diocese of Des Moines we have put special attention on this topic and have made time at professional development events for teachers to share ideas and brainstorm ways to embed the Catholic identity into their teaching. As our teachers take part in the School of Faith program during the upcoming year, they will continue to not only strengthen their own Catholic identity and knowledge, but find new ways to share that with students.

We will continue to look at the Iowa Core in upcoming editions of this newsletter. We hope that by sharing our study, educational insights, and work you will come to have an understanding of how our teachers use the curriculum, materials, and resources to provide your students with an education that will help them become life-long disciples of Christ who will use what they have learned in our schools and in your homes to make the world a better place for everyone.