

Common Core not the “Horror” you keep hearing about! **–By Justin Raber, West Virginia PTA President**

Anyone that has a Facebook page has seen the various “Common Core Math” horror stories that try to make us believe that parents with highly technical degrees cannot do this “new math” that is being taught to our students. We turn on the television and hear some outrageous claim that “Common Core” is forcing kids to do too much. We see stories that state how this “new fuzzy math” should be abandoned and that we should just get back to the basics; how the math we were taught twenty or thirty years ago worked.. The reality is Common Core is getting us “back to the basics” by laying out high expectations for students in order for them to have a solid, deep understanding of the skills needed for math and English language arts. Common Core expects that students actually know how and why math works instead of just memorizing facts.

As the new standards in West Virginia are taking hold and our students are being tested using the new standards this year, we have to understand the difference between the standards and the curriculum. First, let’s just get it out of the way: there is no such thing as “Common Core Math” or “old” and “new” math. The Common Core State Standards are just that, standards. They set the overall goals to ensure that our students are learning the skills needed for the careers of today and tomorrow. Beginning in Kindergarten each grade level builds upon the next so our kids will have a strong foundation in math and English language arts. The goal is to ensure that all kids finish high school truly prepared for the next step in their life whether that is college, technical school, military service or any other career choice. The standards set the foundation. The curriculum is how teachers choose to teach in his or her classroom.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of myths and misleading information about the Common Core State Standards (Next Generation Standards in West Virginia). This initiative has been led by states, with coordination from the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Teachers were involved in the process of developing the standards. The federal government has not been involved in initiating or developing the standards. Additionally, states are not required by the federal government to adopt these standards. In order to receive grant funding or waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act’s failed goals, states were required to adopt college and career-ready standards, of which the Common Core State Standards were only one possibility.

As parents, if you do not understand how your child is being taught, do not rush to social media, but instead, pick up the phone, send an email, or go visit your child’s teacher and classroom. The only way that we can become informed is having meaningful partnerships between the home and the school. I have met hundreds of teachers and administrators throughout West Virginia and I have never met one that does not want to share their techniques and goals with parents. Simply, when there are meaningful partnerships between the home and school, our students and schools do better!

It is important to stress that the curriculum decisions are decided at the local level; decisions about what textbooks to use, which classroom lessons are appropriate and what teaching techniques work best are decided by our teachers, principals and school administrators, and ideally parents. The Common Core standards set the goals that we need to meet. But more

importantly, the curriculum is how the goals will be met. . These two terms, standards and curriculum, are very different and are not interchangeable. Our teachers and local school boards are deciding how to teach our children fractions, what textbooks to use, and how to meet the needs of our children. In math, Teachers are presenting various strategies to students on how to solve problems and they are letting students discover there is not just one way to get to the correct answer and that is acceptable. Our teachers are using various strategies so that the student can choose the way they best understand, which is personalized for them. We do not want our students to just memorize math facts. We do want them to understand how and why math works so they are able to transfer those skills to real world situations like giving change without the aid of a cash register or how to decide which algorithm works best for a technical situation at work.

The West Virginia Department of Education and West Virginia PTA provide great resources to educate parents on the new standards that are now implemented. It is up to you as a parent to take a few moments to research what the goals of the standards are and to see how they are being implemented in your child's classroom. Visit our websites and ensure that you are receiving the most up-to-date and correct information.

The bottom line is that parents and families are the best advocates for their children. Opening the dialogue between parents and the school is vital to ensure that our children are learning and that their needs are being met. We cannot believe everything that is posted and shared on the Internet, but we can be confident that our children are being taught by individuals who have dedicated their lives to our children. At the end of the day, the power is in our hands.