



DIOCESE OF TRENTON

Department of Catholic Schools

March 6, 2015

Dear Parents,

Each year students in grades 2-8 take assessment tests to determine continuous growth and learning. In the Diocese of Trenton, the Terra Nova Assessment is administered in March for this purpose and testing will be administered the week of March 9th.

The focus on the Common Core throughout our nation has resulted in test companies including specific questions which focus on higher-order thinking skills, multi-step problems and logical thinking. The Terra Nova Assessments, like those of other assessment companies, provide some of these questions that go beyond a basic answer and incorporate common core concepts.

There is much controversy relating to the Common Core with a major concern in the public sector directed at the inordinate time spent preparing students for testing which may impact the time for quality teaching.

In Catholic schools in the Diocese of Trenton, the focus on instruction is to engage students in rigorous studies which challenge them to think, to be creative and to problem-solve. Through instructional strategies, teachers promote student understanding which leads to deep learning. A greater emphasis is focused on non-fiction reading and writing, the use of informational text and on deep, narrowed topics rather than broad exposure. Critical thinking is an essential component. These strategies are based on research and best practices. Many of the strategies utilized are also components of the Common Core State Standards. Our students are exposed to these skills on a regular basis and, therefore, teachers do not spend an extended time "teaching to the test." The teaching is part of the normal instructional delivery.

In the Diocese of Trenton, elements of the common core are *adapted*, not adopted, to improve student learning. Catholic schools use discretion in educational practices to ensure that our mission of educating students in the faith is never compromised. We are first and foremost Catholic schools that transmit the teachings of Jesus. The mission



of our schools and the philosophy of teaching the whole child encompassing the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental capacities are non-negotiable.

Catholic schools continue to be discerning in identifying materials and resources that will form students in accordance with our faith-based mission. At the same time, students will be prepared for an ever-evolving future by learning needed skills – the application of technology, communication skills, self-expression, problem-solving and creative thinking.

Realizing that three-fourths of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma, our schools incorporate guidelines, standards, active-learning and best practices in daily lessons. Through the commitment of administrators and teachers, students are being prepared for 21st century global education.

As your child's primary educator, please join our administrators and faculty in encouraging your child to get a comfortable night's sleep, come to school well-nourished and relaxed. Testing is but another opportunity to guide instruction as it provides an indicator of areas of growth or needed improvement.

If you have any questions regarding the Terra Nova testing, please speak with your child's teacher or principal so that any concerns are addressed. Thank you for choosing to educate your child in a Catholic school and for your continued trust and commitment.

Sincerely,

JoAnn Tier

Superintendent of Catholic Schools

INFORMATION REGARDING THE COMMON CORE

- The Common Core, also known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or the Common Core Education Standards (CCES) seeks to normalize or equalize what is taught and what is expected of students in each state.
- The CCSS are nothing more than a set of skills that has benchmarks (observable, provable indicators) which show that the standards have been met.
- While the CCSS are a set of skills to be met and demonstrated by means of benchmarks, Catholic schools have consistently and traditionally exceeded what has been expected from state standards in the past.
- The approach of Catholic schools has never been and will never be to teach to any test. We give our students the tools necessary to thrive in an academic environment and to be ready for college and/or career in the 21st Century.
- Catholic schools adapt the CCSS to their needs; we do not adopt the CCSS. By means of the most current research and best practices, we take what is offered in the CCSS that will enhance our educational programs and leave behind what does not complement the mission of our Catholic schools.
- Since CCSS have been adopted by public schools across the country, many standardized tests have been prepared and constructed with that in mind. Students in Catholic schools must be prepared to compete academically with students from the public school system.
- There is a concern that with the CCSS, the federal government is over-reaching its authority and telling schools what they have permission to teach and how they must teach it. This simply is not the case in any Catholic school.

- Catholic school teachers focus on the ability of our students to think critically.
- The need for CCSS came from our state governors of both parties.
- CCSS have bipartisan support from organizations such as:
 - Walton Family Foundation
 - Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
 - Foundation for Excellence in Education
 - Broad Foundation
- Everything that is taught in Catholic schools is based solidly on Catholic doctrine and Catholic teaching. Nothing that is or will be taught will contradict the teachings of the Roman Catholic Faith.
- Diocesan curricula have as their foundation the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, the CCSS, the *New Jersey State Standards* and *diocesan curriculum guidelines*.
- Catholic schools have educated millions of young people over the years, providing them with a superior academic background. This mission and commitment continues. Catholic schools have always held themselves to high standards.

Please take a few moments to watch this short video explanation of what Common Core State Standards are all about. The video can be found at the following web address.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s0rRk9sER0>

Frequently Asked Questions about the Common Core and the PARCC Test

The following FAQ relates to the Diocese of Trenton's approach to the Common Core Education Standards and the PARCC test.

1. What is the Department of Catholic Schools' approach to the Common Core Education Standards? After an in-depth review of the CCES we have adapted concepts and skills of the CCES and included them in curriculum development. Additionally, first and foremost, every curriculum developed in the diocese is always based in the concepts and doctrines of the Catholic faith.
2. What standardized test is given to the students in the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Trenton? The schools will administer the Third Edition of the Terra Nova Test that includes open –ended questions aligned with the CCES in Math, Language and Reading.
3. Is the PARCC test administered to the students in the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Trenton? The students will not participate in the PARCC testing protocol. The PARCC test is only administered to the public school students.
4. What research forms the basis of curriculum development for the Catholic schools? The development of curriculum is based on a multitude of documents and research such as *The National Standards and Benchmarks for Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, National Standards in curriculum such as Math, Language Arts, *New Jersey State Standards*, current educational research about student learning and achievement, and the expertise of classroom educators.
5. In the Catholic schools do we teach to the test on a regular basis? No, Catholic schools do not teach to the test. The students are prepared for the Terra Nova Standardized test throughout classroom instruction during the school year. The philosophy of Catholic schools is to provide instruction that includes formative assessment and that does not necessitate time set aside for in-depth test prep.
6. What concepts connected to the CCES are adapted in the Catholic schools? The concepts that are adapted include more in-depth learning , metacognition or the process to understand how to think through a problem, inquiry learning, analysis and evaluation.

7. What skills, imbedded in the CCES, are adapted in the Catholic schools?
The skills that are adapted are critical thinking and analysis, in-depth approach to problem solving and inquiry based learning.
8. Are the CCES and the test results tied to teacher evaluation as they are in the public sector? Teachers in the Catholic schools are individually evaluated by the administrators throughout the school year.
9. Does the diocesan curriculum only include CCES?
The diocesan curriculums include many more topics than found in the CCES such as financial literacy that begins in kindergarten through the eighth grade and a balance between fiction and non-fiction texts. Literature has not been removed from diocesan curriculum. The writing process in CCES has been a hallmark of Catholic education for over twenty years.
10. How many times during the school year are the students tested with the Terra Nova tests? The students are only tested once a year during specific days in the month of March. The PARCC assessment tests the students twice during the school year.
11. Does the Federal Government mandate academic requirements for our students?
No the Federal Government does not mandate what is to be taught in the Catholic schools and never will have that right to do so. Diocesan curriculum is not tied into government funding.