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Measuring Christian Education Against National and State Standards: A Review of the Literature

Beth Gordy Waddell

Almost all states within the United States have adopted state education standards as a tool to measure the knowledge and skills needed and the expected outcomes students should be achieving within a given school year (Juarez, 1999). There are two kinds of standards, content standards and performance standards. Content standards indicate what a student should know and be able to do. Performance standards incorporate content standards, but are expanded to include suggested tasks, sample student work, and teacher commentary on that work (Georgia Department of Education, 2004). According to Robert J. Marzano, a Senior Fellow at the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning Institute in Aurora, Colorado, "Standards hold the greatest hope for significantly improving student achievement" (Scherer, 2001, p.1). A recent RAND report and a study conducted by the University of Texas concluded that significant increases in student achievement have been linked to standards-based efforts (Biemesderfer, 2004).

The Georgia Department of Education requires that Georgia public school systems deal with, at a minimum, the material in the state curriculum. The state curriculum gives a guideline for instruction that helps teachers, students, and parents know what topics must be studied and mastered for a particular course. A recent audit concluded that the Quality Core Curriculum previously used by Georgia schools lacked depth and could not be taught in a reasonable amount of time; furthermore, it did not even meet national standards. This drove the state of Georgia to adopt a curriculum aligned to Georgia Performance Standards. Performance standards go into greater depth than the original content standards of the Quality Core Curriculum. New state wide assessments will also be aligned to the Georgia Performance Standards. According to the Georgia Department of Education, these standards are based on best practices that have been proven to be effective in high-performing states and nations (Georgia Department of Education, 2004). In the state of Georgia private schools are not required to follow state mandated curriculum. Even with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 driving public education into an age of accountability, private schools are still not required to meet Quality Core Curriculum objectives or Georgia Performance Standards. The

curriculum regulations for Georgia private schools are very general. The code simply states "Private schools by definition must provide a basic academic educational program that includes reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science Ga. Code Ann. § 20-2-690(b)(4), (d)" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Does this mean that private Christian schools should not follow state or national standards? On the contrary, Christian schools should set the trend for using curriculum that not only meets but exceeds the state and federal standards when these standards have been soundly researched and do not compromise the Biblical teachings and values on which Christian schools base their educational foundation. Private Christian schools may not be accountable to the state of Georgia when it comes to academic standards, but they are accountable to a much higher authority than that of state or federal governments (Stephenson, 2004).

Perhaps Christian education should be viewed as sacrifices and offerings, such as those given to God, as recorded in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 17:1 commanded the people to bring the very best offerings to God. Only those without defect or flaw were accepted. All others were detestable to God (Smitherman, 2004). Other scriptures also provide direction for the educational programs in Christian schools. In Proverbs 22:6 we are commanded to train up children in the way they should go, while Thessalonians 5:21 teaches us to examine everything carefully and hold on to those things which are good. In light of presenting the best offering possible to God, Christian educators must investigate and utilize solid, research based best practices in the field of education when training a child (Stephenson, 2004). Since public educators have adopted state and national standards that are based on best practices to improve student achievement and to produce high-performing schools, Christian educators owe it to God and to their students to at least use these same standards as a minimum requirement of their academic programs.

As the administrator of a new Christian school, Trinity Christian Academy, it is difficult to develop a school improvement plan based on the use of test data to improve student achievement, since we are yet to

administer any standardized tests. I began to look instead at other improvement models, some of which were continuous improvement models based on aligning the curriculum, instruction and assessment with state and national standards. The curriculum used by Trinity Christian Academy is guided by standards that are developed by Christian publishing companies. These companies, however, do not claim that the standards that guide their curriculum are aligned with any state or national standards. This caused me to question whether or not Trinity Christian Academy was meeting the state and national standards.

As I began to do research on the topic, I found only one source that linked best practices and performance standards to excellence in Christian education. The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) had several publications supporting this paradigm. ACSI encourages Christian schools to look in depth at books, articles, position statements and national standards written by professional education organizations as valuable resources when developing a school improvement plan. Scripture defines why improvement is needed, while professional litera-

ture uncovers the best practices in education that will bring about this improvement (Leak, 2004).

The solution for ensuring the improvement of student achievement at Trinity Christian Academy would be through the alignment of their curriculum, published by well-known Christian curriculum and textbook publishing companies, to that of Georgia Performance Standards. I started by taking the third grade Georgia Performance Standards in math and comparing them to the ABEKA curriculum standards taught at Trinity Christian Academy. Due to high test performances of Christian schools nation wide who use the same curriculum that Trinity Christian Academy uses, I hypothesized that our standards exceed the standards adopted by the state of Georgia.

Below is an explanation of how the third grade ABEKA math curriculum (Howe, 2000) either does not meet or exceeds the Georgia math performance standards for third grade (Georgia Department of Education, 2004). The third grade ABEKA math curriculum met all other Georgia standards for third grade math (not listed):

Georgia Performance Standards: M3N. Number Operations

M3N1. a. Identify place values from tenths through ten thousands.	ABEKA: Place value ones through one thousands.	Does not meet
M3N3. b. Know the multiplication facts with understanding and fluency to 10X10.	ABEKA: Know the multiplication facts with understanding and fluency to 12X12.	Exceeds
M3N3. f. Use mental math and estimation strategies to multiply.	ABEKA: Does not teach estimation in third grade.	Does not meet
M3N4. e. Divide a 2 and 3-digit number by a 1-digit divisor.	ABEKA: Divide a 2 and 3-digit number by a 2-digit divisor.	Exceeds
M3N5. a. Understand a decimal fraction and a common fraction represent parts of a whole. c. Understand a one place decimal fraction represents tenths. d. Know and use decimal fractions and common fractions to represent the size of parts created by equal divisions of a whole. e. Understand the concept of addition and subtraction of decimal fractions and common fractions with like denominators. f. Model addition and subtraction of decimal fractions and common fractions.	ABEKA: Does not teach decimal fractions, teaches common fractions and mixed number concepts listed in Georgia performance standards.	Does not meet decimal fraction, but exceeds common fraction

Georgia Performance Standards: M3M. Measurement

M3M1. Students will further develop their understanding of concept of time by determining elapsed time of a full, half, and quarter-hour.	ABEKA: The concept of time is taught to the minute prior to third grade and is reviewed in third grade.	Exceeds
M3M2. b. Measure to the nearest 1/4 inch, 1/2 inch, and millimeter in addition to the previously learned inch, foot, yard, centimeter and meter.	ABEKA: Teaches all of the above except measures to the nearest 1/4 inch or millimeter.	Does not meet
M3M2. d. Compare one unit to another within a single system of measurement.	ABEKA: Converts measures of time, length, and units liquid or dry measures from smaller to larger, and larger to smaller units.	Exceeds
M3M3 & M3M4 Students will understand and measure the perimeter and area of simple geometric figures (squares and rectangles)	ABEKA: Does not teach area or perimeter.	Does not meet

Georgia Performance Standards: M3G. Geometry

M3G1. a. Draw and classify previously learned fundamental geometric figures and scalene, isosceles and equilateral triangles.	ABEKA: Does revisit previously learned fundamental geometric figures, but does not introduce the different classifications of triangles.	Does not meet
M3G1. c. Examine and compare angles of fundamental geometric figures.	ABEKA: Teaches the concept of the right angle only.	Does not meet
M3G1. d. Identify the center, diameter, and radius of a circle.	ABEKA: Does not teach this in third grade, but does teach concept of parallel lines.	Does not meet

Georgia Performance Standards: M3D. Data Analysis

M3D1. Students will gather, organize, and display data and interpret graphs	ABEKA: Does not teach graphs or tables in third grade.	Does not meet
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The findings concluded that the ABEKA curriculum is weak primarily in the areas of place value, decimal fractions, geometry and data analysis, in comparison to the Georgia Performance Standards. The ABEKA curriculum met most of the Georgia standards while exceeding them in some areas by going deeper into some concepts. One thing that this study

did not reflect was that there are many concepts taught in the ABEKA third grade math curriculum that are not covered by the Georgia Performance Standards. No real conclusion can be drawn from this study as it was only a small sample of the Georgia Performance standards and the ABEKA curriculum standards. One can not draw a conclusion from the data collected

from the comparison of one subject in one grade. This has prompted a much more in-depth study across the curriculum and across the grades to determine how well the standards of the curriculum used at Trinity Christian Academy and many other Christian schools are aligned with Georgia Performance Standards.

Until these studies can be completed many Christian schools must rely on the yearly assessment used, the Stanford Achievement Test, 10th Edition (SAT 10), which is aligned to a wide range of national standards, including: the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Association of Educational Progress, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Council for the Social Studies. It is also aligned to the National Science Education Standards and the Benchmarks for Science Literacy (Harcourt). Because the Georgia Performance Standards and the SAT 10 are derived from national standards, the SAT 10 provides a somewhat valid and reliable assessment of the mastery of the Georgia Performance Standards by students at Trinity Christian Academy. Since there is no criterion-reference test written to assess mastery of the standards guiding current Christian curriculum and textbook publishing companies, Trinity Christian Academy will also use the SAT 10 to assess student achievement.

As more professional educators enter the field of K-12 Christian education and Christian education organizations such as ACSI continue to educate Christian educational leaders on the importance of relying on standards and research to improve student achievement, the field of Christian publishers will begin to pay closer attention to the standards-based reform that is moving into Christian education. Christian publishers will realize that Christian educators want the curriculum and assessment to be aligned and not only meet, but exceed the state and national standards. Criterion-reference tests that will give a more accurate assessment of how well individual students master the standards will be developed by Christian publishing companies to go along with their curriculum. Standardized tests will then be relied on to compare student performance within a school to that of student performance in other schools in the nation. Perhaps this type of transformation in Christian education will produce Christian schools of academic excellence, an offering truly worthy of God and man.

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