

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN U.S AND THE NEEDS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract: This study identifies the challenges that the K-12 system of public education faces in Macedonia and explore several successful models that are active in US. These challenges are of different natures starting from the infrastructural issues, curriculum development and standards and unfortunately the strong political involvement of un-professional political elites in all stages of education. The study aims to focus on curriculum development by providing to Macedonia successful models that will create clear standards in teaching and assessment in the K-12 system in Macedonia. It is also expected that this set of criteria will indirectly minimize the political influence in the decision making since the standards are purely academic and performance-based. Common Core State Standards are a model that is considered successful in the US. It aims to unify the learning outcome in the whole country by setting clear educational objectives and mainly focuses in language arts and math. According to CCSS official website, this is a state-led effort launched in 2009 by state leaders, including governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia, through their membership in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). On the other hand the K-12 curriculum in Macedonia is organized in yearly programs. Each of these programs seems quite impressive on paper since three levels of plans are included: the yearly/global plan, the thematic plan and thematic-procedural plan. For each academic year the program states the specific skills and vocabulary/mathematical element that should be conveyed in a particular year. However there are issues such: the Majority of the academic standards in Macedonia have not been revised nor updated in the last 12 years. Also, the content is often not relevant and it does not serve its educational purpose. Unfortunately the English language classes have no cohesion between the curriculum and the teaching materials. In regards to organization the curriculum/program does not have a consistent assessment plan and there is a lack of mentorship support. It is clear that Common Core State Standards are more complex to be fully replicated locally particularly when we consider the cultural context and the legal and infrastructural challenges but the aim for a progressive objectives. This paper aims to compare and contrast these US standards with the current K-12 educational system in Macedonia with the goal of recommending new norms and principles.

Keywords: Common Core State Standards, Macedonia, Virginia SOL standards, K-12 education.

WHAT ARE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS (CCSS)?

A model that is considered successful in the US in this regard is Common Core State Standards which mainly focuses in language arts and math. According to their official website, this is a state-led effort launched in 2009 by state leaders, including governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia, through their membership in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)... and the State governors recognized the value of consistent, real-world learning goals and launched this effort to ensure all students, regardless of where they live, are graduating high school prepared for college, career, and life. These new standards were based on three main pillars:

- standards that already existed,
- the experience of teachers, content experts, states, and leading thinkers
- feedback from the public.

At this stage I should also clarify that not all educators in US were excited about these reforms and some of the arguments state that in certain stages the CCSS are not in line with Piaget's monumental research work on Cognitive Development that were used as a basic model in shaping education around the world. A supportive argument is the fact that some portions of the CCSS (particularly in Math) are too difficult to understand at particular target age. However the general opinion is that CCSS is helping America move forward in ranking regarding the performance in Language skills and math. One of the supporters of the CCSS is Bill Gates who at a talk in American Enterprise Institute stated that Common Core standards are a written explanation on what knowledge kids should achieve at various milestones in their educational career.

Before explaining how portions of these standards can help the education process in Macedonia I will need to clarify the following:

- Common Core State Standards are not curriculum; they are guidelines to follow in order to achieve academic benchmarks.

- Common Core State Standards help in raising the bar of education achievement and the focus is for these standards to be fewer but deeper in knowledge, so quality vs. quantity
- Critical thinking is strongly encouraged which helps student to achieve their potential.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF THE PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MACEDONIA?

The K-12 curriculum in Macedonia is organized in yearly programs. Each of these programs seems quite impressive on paper since three levels of plans are included: the yearly/global plan, the thematic plan and thematic-procedural plan. For each academic year the program states the specific skills and vocabulary/mathematical element that should be conveyed in a particular year.

In order to get more insightful information about the process I have conducted six interviews with different stakeholders. Two of the interviews were with officials from the Ministry of Education (one Albanian and one Macedonian representative) and four teachers with different ethnic background from the courses of Math, English Language (EFL), Macedonian language and Albanian language.

Although it seems that there are common points between CCSS and the organization of the academic programs in the system of Education in Macedonia, below is a list of challenges that need to be addressed:

1. The Majority of these academic standards in Macedonia have not been revised nor updated in the last 12 years. This is quite discouraging when you think of all technological development that has been introduced in the life of the millennial student. Examples to illustrate this is that current programs suggest that young learners are expected to learn the numbers at an English class in grade three, although in reality the majority of these kids are already moderately fluent speakers of English language since they are a generation of digital natives and vast time of their childhood is spent watching English videos and using different applications in their smart phones. A personal example that I can bring is my four years old daughter who feels more comfortable to speak to me in English than Albanian language.
2. The content is also not relevant and it does not serve its educational purpose. An example from the interviews with the teachers illustrates this: one of the skills taught in one of the courses is “how to write your friends name on a (paper)phonebook”. For a generation that has the presence of electronic amenities around 24/7 this is useless and even absurd.
3. In English language classes there is no cohesion between the curriculum and the teaching materials. Most of the English as a foreign language classes use books from well-known publishers such Oxford University Press or Longman but the topics covered in these books do not coincide with the program. It is expected from the English teachers to bridge this gap but not much training nor is professional development offered.
4. The curriculum/program does not have a clear assessment plan, so it is not clear which are the modes in which these goals will be evaluated. Also there is no clear benchmark such as grade 6, 9 and 12 like in CCS Standards.
5. There is no concrete mentorship program for the newly hired teachers. Although the English teachers expect more updates in the curriculum, this is not the case with the math-teachers. One teacher stated that they do not have problems with the content but more with the teaching methodology that needs to be updated and become more inductive then deductive in the process.
6. The process of designing these academic programs has not consulted different stakeholders such as external field experts, content specialist or general public.
7. There is no record or any feedback system on how each of these programs are implemented and what are the possible gaps that might need to be modified or amended.

In regards to human resource management in the school, the interviewed teachers stated that although there are clear regulations regarding the hiring policies based on experience, GPA and university ranking level in reality most of the teaching engagements are often mediated by the Mayors of the towns who are representatives of the political parties. This type of approach creates a series of serious challenges in the process since no matter how updated the standards might be if the teacher is not appropriately trained it will not the serve the core purpose of the process.

What are the steps to follow in order to replicate these US standards in Macedonia?

The general intention should be to understand the CCSS process insightfully in order to pick and choose which aspect can be beneficial to Macedonia. The process requires the need to address the following issues:

1. Can we apply similar standardized assessment in Macedonia?
2. What are the challenges in setting up this new reality?
3. Foresee possible challenges in regards to teachers, administration, infrastructure and networking.
4. Identify how certain benchmarks are culturally appropriate for the current academic practices in Macedonia and if not, design an academic “adjustment tool” for academic purposes.
5. Identify possible partners in the process besides the Ministry of Education, such as professional associations of teacher, experts and external consultants.

In this regards, this plan would be realistic and doable if the following activities and concerns are addressed:

1. Use all available e-journals and library resources to understand profoundly the facts but also myths behind the CCSS.
2. Organize interviews with the officials in the U.S. Department of Education. Also the online platforms allow us to get an insight from the interviews of comity chairs in the New York, New Jersey or Virginia Department of Education but also members of the assessment comity in regards to Common Core Standards. It is important at this stage to clarify that the state of Virginia does not recognize CCSS. According to educators in the state of Virginia the Common Core State Standards are lower than the Standards of Learning (SOL) in Virginia and as such SOL standards according to them are superior to Common Core standards. This dispute is raised in many studies, and often report that the standards are not very different from one another/ However, it must be our aim to analyze both models in this regard.
3. Besides the interviews, it is important to observe firsthand the process of implementation of SSCC in the educational system in US and any type of on-site observation would have helped to gain detailed insight regarding the implementation of the standards.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STANDARDS

It is important at this stage to be aware of the different cultural and economic settings that both countries are facing. The objective is to design a preliminary program with particular standards that might be beneficial to Macedonia with specific cultural characteristics that the region has. The process would have the following dynamics:

- Implementation must be divided in stages and see if partial replication of the US model is possible.
- Set up guidelines for administrative implementation through various administrative approvals in the Ministry of Education.
- Set up culturally responsive guidelines by taking in consideration different ethnic groups specifics (Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Roma, Serbian, Bosnian, etc.).
- Create a team of educators and field experts that share the same enthusiasm in contributing positively in the educational process in Macedonia.

At the last stage it is important to set up a system for feedback and evaluation of the programs that reflect constant advancement. Very often initiatives of this proportion require continuous feedback in order to identify needs analyses and deal with implementation challenges.

CONCLUSION

These types of standards should deliver modes in which we can assess student progress on yearly bases in order to ensure possible academic progress continually and develop an extensive data who would serve as a great record for future research.

An important element in this process will also be the teacher training departments in different universities in Macedonia. These departments currently produce teachers of Language Arts and Math and if these new standards are approved, it is important that these standards are included as a separate course or as part of particular quality assurance course in the last semester of their studies before graduating at university. Also a possible partnership among public schools and a teacher training faculty can help in providing training and professional development with clear focus toward the expected new academic standards.

The process would have an extended effect if the expected results and the dissemination of this study is later followed by a quality assurance team assigned by the Ministry of Education that would monitor how this standards are implemented in the teaching process and evaluated in different stages of the k-12 education in Macedonia.

I believe that this plan can create an intellectually stimulating environment and will keep the gates of academia safe with clear standards that coincide with the reality of our millennial students and the digital natives.

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