

Fresno private schools grapple with changing academic landscape

By Rory
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- Three Fresno private schools take different approaches to adopting Common Core standards.
- Carden School of Fresno, a private K-8 school without religious ties, has rejected the standards.
- Fresno Christian Schools and San Joaquin Memorial are adapting some standards to help their students prepare for the SAT and ACT.

Several Fresno private schools are attempting to forge a new academic identity in the wake of the California public school system's switch to controversial academic standards for English language and math, the [Common Core Standards Initiative](#). Administrators from three of Fresno's largest private schools — [Carden School of Fresno](#), [Fresno Christian Schools](#) and [San Joaquin Memorial High School](#) — have taken drastically different approaches.

California private schools have immense freedom to govern themselves, said Giorgos Kazanis, spokesman for the California Department of Education.

"We basically treat them like a private business," Kazanis said. "They file a petition to be recognized as a private school, but we don't regulate them in any way."

For Carden Principal Carol Joyner, this freedom means following the [Carden Method](#). This curriculum and teaching style was created by Mae Carden in 1934, and Joyner said it has not changed since then. Each of the 50 or so Carden schools in the country operate autonomously, but each receives educational materials from the Carden Educational Foundation. Carden School of Fresno was founded in 1963 and was privately owned until 1992, when it became a nonprofit operating solely on tuition.

The result of Carden's commitment to an 81-year-old tradition is a school straight out of a 1950s TV show. Every student stands up to greet visitors and must wait for permission to sit back down. Math problems are dictated to students; there are no worksheets. Every child — from preschool up to eighth grade — receives art, music and French instruction at least once a week.

Joyner said the curriculum is designed to teach children how to think critically, not just retain information.

An example of this occurred on a recent sunny morning in northeast Fresno, when around 15 elementary school students used "Winnie-the-Pooh" characters to learn about ancient Chinese religions.

"Pooh is the consummate Taoist," said Rick Mancebo, sixth-grade history teacher at Carden School of Fresno. "Pooh says that Rabbit is clever and intelligent, but that doesn't mean Rabbit understands things."

A group of students discussed this, then one girl raised her hand and said, "I think Piglet is a Confucianist because he is always afraid of new things."

Toni Lerandean, who coordinates visits for the parents of prospective students, said these educational values are what attract them primarily. But some are choosing Carden to avoid the new Common Core standards in public schools.

“A lot of parents are concerned about the Common Core,” Lerandeau said. “They don’t want their kids to be the guinea pigs for it. We do not follow the Common Core. Our standards are higher.”

Because Carden only goes up to the eighth grade, students will be exposed to Common Core when they move on to high school. Joyner said that most have no problem adjusting to high school, and most Carden students test two full grade levels above their own grade for their entire academic career.

Superintendent Jeremy Brown, who oversees nearly 500 K-12 students at Fresno Christian Schools, is taking a much more open-minded approach to California’s changing educational landscape.

“We are going to react to it,” Brown said. “It’s about educating our parents first.”

Brown said that Fresno Christian already has adapted some of the Common Core math standards. Brown has planned an open forum in May for faculty and parents to discuss further implementation.

“We want to know more about it before making any judgments,” he said. “Our standards are the most important thing, and a curriculum is simply a vehicle that you drive toward the standards.”

The discussion is particularly important for Fresno Christian’s college-bound high school students who take the ACT and SAT tests, which include some questions that relate to Common Core standards. Fresno Christian’s average score for the 2014 ACT tests was above the state average in all categories, and the school only finished below the state average in math for the 2013 SAT tests.

For parents, the looming curriculum talks don’t appear to be a big deal. Three moms said they focus more on the Christian values the school instills in children.

“First of all, Christ is front-and-center for our family,” said Marylou Savage, who has had four children progress through Fresno Christian’s ranks. “My eldest son was in a Clovis school and trying to help a new student. He — a third-grader — was chastised in the principal’s office for ‘God talk.’ That’s when we moved him here.”

San Joaquin Memorial High School, Fresno’s Catholic high school, also is adapting to the Common Core — in exactly the opposite way. Whereas Fresno Christian has adopted only Common Core math standards so far, Memorial has adopted everything except integrated math.

“We don’t feel integrated math is best for our students,” said Principal Stephanie Nitchals. “The other pieces have been going just fine.”

The Common Core’s integrated math program requires students to learn a little bit of algebra, geometry, algebra II and statistics each year rather than taking them as separate courses in succession.

Nitchals said that there has not been significant resistance from parents to these adaptations and that the school’s curriculum could continue to change in the future.

College advancement is a primary goal at Memorial; the school’s website [notes](#) that 99% of graduates will enroll in college. The median GPA for the class of 2015 is 3.5. The test scores were comparable to Fresno Christian’s — above-average in all categories except for SAT math.

The cost for these differing approaches to education can add up. Carden’s yearly tuition is \$7,150 for preschool through eighth grade. Fresno Christian’s annual tuition is \$5,595 for children K-6, \$7,115 for seventh- and eighth-graders and \$8,275 for high school students. San Joaquin Memorial charges \$8,650 plus fees for freshmen and sophomore students and \$8,900 plus fees for juniors and seniors.

“It [the tuition cost] is tough on our family sometimes,” said Amy Brown, whose 10-year-old son attends Fresno Christian. “But it’s worth it.”

“We are getting such a return.”

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