

State Opposition Jeopardizes Common-Core Future

By: Andrew Ujifusa- June 12, 2013

Activity in states reconsidering their adoption of the Common Core State Standards continues to simmer, as some conservative supporters of the initiative increasingly worry that the federal government has become the standards' worst possible friend.

Michigan is set to join Indiana as the second state this year to institute a so-called halt to common-core implementation, but other efforts in statehouses have run out of steam or are still in the early stages.

Last week, the Michigan legislature approved a budget that prohibits the state department of education from spending any money to implement the common core and the assessments tied to the new standards.

Gov. Rick Snyder, a Republican who last month reiterated his support for the common core in an appearance with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, does not have the line-item-veto power to scrap that provision of the bill. As of late last week, the budget was still awaiting Gov. Snyder's signature.

Massive Uncertainty

The state common-core spending freeze in Michigan would officially begin Oct. 1. But the provision is set to create massive uncertainty at the local level about what district leaders should do next, officials say.

A spokesman for the state education department, Martin Ackley, wrote in an email: "This provision in the bill will leave school boards, administrators, teachers, and parents with no clear direction on how they continue planning their locally developed curricula to meet the state standards."

There would be other major consequences of the legislation, he added, from jeopardizing the state's federal waiver under the No Child Left Behind Act to reverting to prior tests and content standards. Mr. Ackley said Michigan has not spent "much" on the common core so far, and there is no specific line item for it in the state budget.

Activists against the common core in Michigan have said the plan is really to "pause" common-core implementation and review the standards more carefully. But there is no restart date, so lawmakers would have to pass another bill at some point to revive state spending on the

standards, said Amber Arellano, the executive director of the Education Trust-Midwest, a research and advocacy group in Royal Oak, Mich., that supports the standards.

In her view, it will take Republicans, who are divided over the standards but control the legislature, to revive the common-core push.

"We haven't been as a state as proactive as we need to be," Ms. Arellano said, referring to Michigan's supporters of common core.

Efforts to snuff out or hobble common-core implementation in other states have continued, with varied degrees of success.

Kansas lawmakers opposed to the standards first supported legislation requiring the state to drop them. But that bill failed. They then duplicated the Michigan blueprint by attempting to block the use of state funds to implement the Common Core State Standards, as well as the Next Generation Science Standards. That measure passed the state Senate but failed in the House of Representatives.

In Wisconsin, the joint committee on finance approved budget language late last month that would require new hearings and a policy review of the standards before implementation could proceed.

And in North Carolina, Lt. Gov. Dan Forest, a Republican, criticized the common core in remarks he posted last week on YouTube.

The method of blocking or delaying the common core through state budgets, instead of complicated stand-alone bills, could be attractive for legislators opposed to the standards "when that 11th-hour horse-trading goes on," said Michael McShane, a research fellow in education policy studies at the free-market-oriented American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

Mr. McShane also pointed to a rising sentiment among some conservative common-core supporters that the Obama administration's vocal support for the initiative is "actually unbelievably harmful to the common-core effort moving forward." The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers led the drive to craft the standards, which cover English/language arts and math.

Even though anti-common-core efforts at the state level remain relatively small in number, the anxiety over the federal role in promoting them has been years in the making, Mr. McShane said. That sentiment has grown as the standards became a part of Race to the Top applications and NCLB waivers, he said, and then were touted in President Barack Obama's re-election bid. The rhetoric and policy moves have combined to create political problems in states, particularly for Republican governors who support the common core, because many people fail to see how the federal government could actively support yet not be in charge of the initiative, Mr. McShane said.

"At a certain point, the Obama administration and Department of Education sort of saw what was happening, and liked it, and jumped on the bandwagon far too forcefully for many on the right to be able to stomach," said Mr. McShane. He described himself as a supporter of what he

deems the standards' benefits, yet someone who is concerned about how well they will be implemented.

An April proposal from U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, to prevent the federal government from using money to develop common-core assessments or encourage states to use the standards, should actually have the support of many common-core advocates, Michael J. Petrilli, a senior vice president at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Washington, argued in a blog post last month.

Who Holds the Reins?

But there's no reason common-core supporters should want the federal government to depart from its current mode of actively supporting the standards, given the long-term benefits they will provide for the country, said Lucille Davy, a senior adviser at the James B. Hunt Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy in Durham, N.C., who supports the standards. She also said that despite recent headlines, common-core support remains solid across state legislatures.

"I see no evidence of the feds taking it over. I was in the room when we talked about this in 2005 and 2006 and 2007," said Ms. Davy, a former education commissioner in New Jersey, referring to states' work on standards.

But some common-core champions must still confront the uncomfortable truth about who really holds the reins, said Neal McCluskey, the associate director for the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington and an opponent of the standards.

If states begin to consider breaking from the principles binding the standards together, such as if they use different assessments or cutoff scores, only the federal government has the power to stop such a breakaway, he said--by threatening to withhold K-12 aid, for example.

"If you don't have all those parts together, all this national comparability falls apart," he said.