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State on board with Common Core standards

By: RICK WILLS – December 30th, 2012

Starting next school year, public schools in Pennsylvania and in much of the country will use a more rigorous curriculum aimed at unifying educational standards.

The Common Core Standards seek to make U.S. students more competitive with increasingly proficient students from other countries. These standards emphasize teaching math more in-depth, and teaching English and language arts through not just classic books but also historical documents and technical manuals. States and school districts can decide specifics.

Critics lashed back in some states that adopted the standards, but in Pennsylvania limited resistance resulted when the Pennsylvania State Board of Education, a 21-member panel with 17 members appointed by the governor, approved their adoption in 2010.

That's because the standards are not really in any conflict with standards that Pennsylvania already has," said Ron Cowell, president of the nonprofit Education Policy and Leadership Center in Harrisburg.

Some educators say the United States is fast losing ground to other countries. The graduation rate for U.S. high school students in 2010 was 77 percent, well below the average of 84 percent for the 34 member countries of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.

All states except Alaska, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia have adopted the Common Core standards.

But South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley said she supports legislative efforts to block their implementation, and Texas Gov. Rick Perry called them a federal intrusion into the classroom. In Michigan, three Republican state lawmakers last month introduced legislation to stop their use.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, said the standards amount to a national curriculum.

also not a good idea. Different educational systems create competition," he said.

But different systems can create a learning gap, argues Kathy Christie, vice president of the Denver-based Education Commission of the States.

Curriculum and assessment vary incredibly, not just from state to state but within states. Kids who move from Iowa to Minnesota should not be repeating the classwork they had two years ago, or whatever the case may be,"Christie said.

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers led the effort to develop common standards.

Common Core is not a federal law. It is a recognition that standards need to be of a similar level throughout the country," said Ryan Reyna, education program director for the governors' group.

One reason for pushback is that only a few state legislatures voted on the standards, said Christie.

Typically, it has been state education boards in collaboration with the governors that have approved the standards," she said.

Adapting curriculum to the standards is time consuming, educators say.

These standards require teachers to teach at a deeper level. They are not used to teaching that way. They are much more rigorous standards. Most teachers are fine with it, but some are concerned that their students will not be up to it," said Jeff Taylor, an assistant superintendent for curriculum and assessment at North Hills School District, which put in place unified standards for elementary-level math.

The Obama administration made adopting Common Core a requirement for No Child Left Behind waivers, which exempt states from 100 percent proficiency by next year.

Jim Burkheit, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, said most members of his group support the standards.

You do have to wonder whether these standards are harmful for struggling kids," he said. And there are tremendous gaps in what various states spend on education."

Disparity in spending could make it difficult to implement common standards, Burkheit said.

Pennsylvania spends an average of \$12,906 per student, according the 2012 Kids Count Data Book, a report released annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. At \$17,847, Vermont spends more than any other state.