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COUNCIL FOR A BETTER LOUISIANA

Louisiana Must Not Backtrack on Common Core Education Standards

CABL Commentary
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Last week the state Senate did something the Senate Education committee couldn't bring itself to do, and killed a resolution asking education officials to cease any further implementation of the Common Core State Standards Initiative in public education. That was the right thing to do.

While at first blush it might sound like a pretty boring topic, it elicited more than two hours of testimony in committee that sometimes bordered on the surreal. That's unfortunate considering it's an issue that's extremely important to the public school students in our state.

So what is the Common Core initiative that some are trying their best to undermine?

In a nutshell, the Common Core effort was initiated by the National Governors Association in 2009. It is a voluntary program which states can choose to participate in. To date, 45 states have already signed on, including Louisiana. The goal is to align standards across the country to provide a clear understanding of what students should know and be able to do at various stages of their educational development.

It's not a curriculum and it doesn't tell teachers how to teach or how to run their classrooms. It's simply a set of standards that suggest, for example, what types of math equations a student in fifth grade should be able to perform or at what level a sixth grader should be able to read and comprehend. The standards have a level of rigor for students that has been lacking in Louisiana and they're designed to prepare students for the real world in a way that's relevant and reflects the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in college and careers.

But listening to some of the testimony in the committee, you might have thought it was part of a plot to undermine the youth of Louisiana. The words communism and socialism came up from time to time, as well as the implication of a web of conspiracy that suggested a plot to turn over control of school curricula to the federal government.

But there was also testimony from public school teachers and other educators who are working the Common Core standards into their classrooms right now. They praised it

for its rigor saying it will help raise student achievement in Louisiana and give us a better indication of how our students perform compared to those in other states.

To be clear, CABL supports Louisiana's ongoing implementation of the Common Core. We do so for a variety of reasons that just make common sense:

- Louisiana's previous standards and LEAP tests were developed 16 years ago and were right for the time. Our achievement levels were so abysmally low that we needed to establish minimum benchmarks and make sure everyone met those. Even though we have upgraded our standards since then, they are still considered lower than national standards for students to be skilled and knowledgeable in the world today. This is evident when you look at the performance of Louisiana students on the state LEAP tests compared to the national NAEP assessment. Louisiana's minimum is not enough.
- The world's economy has vastly changed. Our kids need to know more to succeed – not just nationally, but to compete for the high-skilled jobs right here in Louisiana. It is critical to identify and teach what all young people need to know and do in academics, creativity, critical reasoning, communications and more, which is the aim of Common Core. Filling jobs of the future and fixing Louisiana's social problems will be done by people who have a strong, competitive academic foundation and are adaptable.
- States, districts or schools are not restricted in any way from adopting additional learning standards outside the Common Core – which is designed to be a set of core goals for knowledge and skills based on higher expectations. Common Core also encompasses professional development, better use of technology, and feedback for teachers, students and parents.
- The legitimate concerns that have arisen in a few states seem to center on the speed or quality of implementation – not the standards themselves. If there is a lesson to be learned from that experience, it would be that Common Core is most successful when proper time and support are given to train teachers and prepare students prior to testing.

The bottom line is fairly simple. The Common Core will not "eat your baby," as one national literacy expert advised in a column poking holes in some of the myths surrounding the standards. It's not being forced on Louisiana by the federal government, it's not a national takeover of public education and it doesn't threaten Louisiana's sovereignty.

Safeguards do need to be in place to ensure that it is implemented appropriately and student privacy rights are protected. But Louisiana does need to move forward. This is the next phase in the evolution of our school accountability model, it builds on our successful efforts of the past and we should embrace it without delay.

The last thing our young people deserve and our technology-driven businesses and industries need is to be outmoded in the classroom or trailing the rest of the country in the knowledge and skills our schools are providing.