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**Kentucky education bill might surprise you**

by Allison Ross

Much ado is being made over a sweeping education bill filed in the Kentucky Senate this session, with some saying the wide-ranging bill contains "fundamental changes" to education assessment and accountability in the Bluegrass State.

Talk outside of education circles has focused mainly around the idea that the education bill, or Senate Bill 1, would "repeal" Common Core, but a read through the 88-page legislation shows a number of other major proposed changes.

"That piece of legislation is a big one," Tracy Herman, legislative liaison for the Kentucky Department of Education, told the state board of education this week. "It's kind of a sea change from where we've been. ... We're all anxious to see where folks land on that as we move through the process."

Bill sponsor Mike Wilson, R-Bowling Green, has said there already are committee substitutes pending on the original legislation.

But here's a basic breakdown of some of the things that are – and aren't – in this wide-ranging bill.

**It doesn't "repeal Common Core."**

In fact, the term "Common Core" is not mentioned even once in the original bill. However, the bill does propose a new way of reviewing Kentucky's education standards, suggesting, among other things, that the Kentucky Board of Education review standards every six years using the help of a number of review committees and advisory panels.

One of those newly created committees would be a "standards and assessment recommendation committee" that would include three people appointed by the governor, three members of the Senate and three members of the House.

Wilson said the idea of repealing Common Core comes from this review process. He said that changes to the standards will effectively mean they are no longer Common Core standards.

"There will probably be some standards that will still be the same," Wilson said. "A standard is just a standard. It doesn't matter who comes up with it if it's a good standard."

But Kentucky has previously done reviews and changes to its standards and is currently going through another review process right now.

Education Commissioner Stephen Pruitt recently told the Courier-Journal that he's not sure the current standards Kentucky has can even be called Common Core, saying that is why the state dubs them "Kentucky Core Academic Standards."

Kentucky Board of Education member Mary Gwen Wheeler said during the recent board meeting that she was concerned that "obviously there are pieces in SB1 that I think make a lot of decisions about education more political."

She later told the Courier-Journal that she read the bill as being that the final recommendation would come from a group of people that include legislators.

"My request to the legislature is for them to be thoughtful," Wheeler said, "and not expose what should be good professional, sound education decisions to partisan politics."

**It deletes requirements to have social studies tests.**

Wilson said he doesn't think there is any good standardized social studies test in the education marketplace, and he'd rather see social studies just be tested at the local level by teachers.

"You have vendors hawking their wares and saying they line up with the standards and they don’t," Wilson said.

The Kentucky Department of Education is reviewing its social studies standards. Pruitt recently said that new social studies standards would not be rolled out this year, with the current standards still being used as the state continues its work.

**Program reviews would be done away with under this bill.**

Remember program reviews? For the last couple years, they have made up 23 percent of a school's accountability score. They are a school's self-evaluation of the quality of some of its programs, such as its arts and humanities and practical living programs.

The idea was to have some way to measure the quality of instruction in areas that aren't easily measured by standardized tests, but some schools officials have said the paperwork behind them is onerous, and a Kentucky Department of Education review this past summer said that schools were sometimes over-scoring themselves on these program reviews.

**Certain special needs students would no longer be included in a school's accountability.**

The current version of the bill says that certain students with disabilities who take longer than four years to graduate high school would no longer have their test scores counted in schools' scores after their fourth year of high school.

**It would hand teacher evaluations back to local school districts to oversee.**

The bill proposes that each school district develops its own teacher evaluation model that is based on a framework established by the Kentucky Department of Education.

Right now, school districts use an evaluation model from the state, called the Professional Growth and Effectiveness System. This bill would revert greater control and maintenance of teacher and staff evaluations back to local school districts, with school districts not required to report data to the state.

The bill stipulates that the evaluation systems couldn't use student growth to measure teacher effectiveness and said the evaluations can't be part of the state's school accountability system.

**References to the ACT are erased.**

The bill deletes references to the college-readiness exam the ACT, stipulating instead that a college admission and placement test of English, math, science and reading be given in the fall of ninth grade and the spring of 11th grade.

**The bill creates "bands of schools" to measure how different schools are doing.**

The bill proposes that the heaviest weight in the accountability model be based on how well schools are doing over three years compared to the average growth of its "band of schools." The "band" would be a group of schools that are similar in demographics, including the numbers of students with disabilities or with limited English proficiency.

The bill also stipulates that student growth scores would not be used in the accountability model, but it says the accountability model would include things like graduation rates, elementary and middle schools' climate and safety, industry certifications, high school students' results on college admission and placement tests, and more.

**It alters some of the definitions and requirements for dealing with struggling schools.**

The bill lays out definitions for three types of struggling schools and also lays out responses for when schools fall into those categories. Some say the bill would take away some of the authority from the state in helping to turn around struggling schools.

"Initial intervention schools" would be schools in the lowest 25 percent in the state that had also failed to meet state accountability targets for three consecutive years. If a school under this label have a principal opening, the district superintendent – using a narrowed field of candidates from the school's site-based decision-making committee – would get to choose the new principal.

"Focus schools" would be so named if they either have had a graduation rate below 68 percent for three consecutive years or have had three consecutive years of low performance by a certain student group (such as English language learners, minority students, students on free or reduced price lunch or students with disabilities). Schools named to the focus category would get district help in revising their school improvement plans.

"Priority schools" would be those in the bottom 5 percent in the state that fail to meet state accountability targets for three years, or schools that were previously labeled as persistently low-achieving and have not exited that status. When a school is labeled as a priority school, the bill would have the school undergo an external audit done by a team that does not include any of the school's district employees.

After the audit, the local school board would solicit requests for proposals from external management organizations to provide a turnaround training and support team to the school. The superintendent would be able to choose to keep or move the school's principal and other certified staff to comparable positions in the district and would have the power to select a new principal, in consultation with a number of stakeholders.

Turnaround plans – both short-term and five-year plans – for any priority school would get input from the Kentucky Department of Education but would get ultimate approval from the local school board. The bill stipulates that turnaround plans should request exemptions from the state from certain reporting requirements.

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