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Joint Committee on Finance

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Educational Standards (DPI -- District Operations and Standards)

[LFB 2015-17 Budget Summary: Page 362, #1]

CURRENT LAW

State law provides that each school board, operator of an independent "2r" charter school, and private choice school must adopt pupil academic standards in mathematics, science, reading and writing, geography, and history.

GOVERNOR

Prohibit the State Superintendent from giving any effect, or requiring a school board to give any effect, to any academic standard developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative and adopted and implemented prior to the effective date of the bill. Prohibit the State Superintendent from taking any action to adopt or implement any academic standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative or directing any school board to adopt or implement any academic standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative after the effective date of the bill.

Require that school districts annually, prior to the start of the school term, notify the parents and guardians of pupils enrolled in the district of the academic standards adopted by the school board for that school year. Require that a notice identifying the academic standards adopted by the school board be included as an item on the agenda for the first school board meeting of the school year.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Academic standards are benchmark measures that define what all students should know and be able to do in given academic subjects at each grade level. Standards are intended to ensure educational quality, as well as fairness, in that all students are expected to achieve certain minimum levels of knowledge, competence, and skill. Standards do not dictate curriculum or instruction, which are a prescribed learning plan including instructional content, resources, and materials and how teachers teach that content, but do inform the development of curriculum and instructional practices.

2. States were initially required to create or adopt academic standards under the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In 1998, Wisconsin adopted model academic standards that provided guidelines for what pupils should know by grades four, eight, and 12 in English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and other subjects.

3. In June, 2010, the State Superintendent issued a proclamation replacing the state's prior mathematics and English language arts model standards with the Common Core State Standards, which describe what students should know at each grade level from kindergarten through 12th grade, and are designed to prepare students to succeed in college and the workforce by high school graduation. The common core standards were developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative, an effort coordinated by governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states through the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, with the help of the educational policy organization Achieve. Forty-five states, including Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia initially adopted the common core standards, although six states have since voted to replace or formally review the standards.

4. Wisconsin has historically emphasized local control over the content and curriculum taught in public schools. Consequently, although state law requires each school district to adopt pupil academic standards, local districts can adopt the model standards selected by the State Superintendent, including the common core, or other academic standards of their choosing. DPI staff indicates that only one district in the state, Germantown, is known to have adopted standards other than the common core for English language arts or mathematics. Additionally, while the common core or other academic standards provide guidelines for what students should know in each grade, it is left to local school boards and teachers in Wisconsin to determine the specific curriculum, texts, and materials to be used in classrooms, dependent on community input and parent interest.

5. Some have criticized the common core, citing challenging content in the early grades that might be developmentally inappropriate, as well as overly prescriptive curriculum and instruction guidelines. Additionally, some believe that the standards represent inappropriate federal involvement in state-level education decisions, suggesting that the common core was rapidly adopted due to the assumption that states that did not adopt the new standards would not be eligible for federal Race to the Top grants under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act or ESEA flexibility waivers offered by the U.S. Education Department. These programs required states to adopt "college and career ready" standards, such as the common core, for English language arts/reading and mathematics in kindergarten through 12th grade.

6. On the other hand, education experts have long advocated for voluntary national standards in the U.S., in order to help states and school districts have general guidelines about what students should know and be able to do at each level of elementary and secondary school. A uniform set of expectations allows pupils to easily transition from a school in one state to a school in another and facilitates the sharing of lesson plans, activities, and other teaching resources between educators in different states. Additionally, Wisconsin's previous academic standards were frequently criticized as too vague and not rigorous enough, particularly because they did not provide specific standards for each grade. The common core standards are widely regarded as much more challenging.

7. The bill would prohibit the State Superintendent from giving any effect to the common core standards, but does not define specific policies or actions that would be prohibited under this provision. DPI staff anticipates that the provision would require the Department to cease advocating for or promoting the standards to school districts. DPI would also no longer require that the statewide assessment be directly aligned with the common core standards, but given that many assessments align with multiple sets of standards, would not be prohibited from using an assessment aligned with the common core. Under another provision of the bill, the State Superintendent would be required to select a new statewide assessment for pupils in grades three through eight beginning in 2015-16.

8. The bill would also prohibit the State Superintendent from adopting any additional standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The common core standards for mathematics and English language arts were finalized and published in 2010, and no other standards are being developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative at this time. The Initiative's website indicates that no revisions of the standards are planned, but that the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers would make decisions about future revisions to the standards, if they became necessary, in consultation with states.

9. In 2013, another multistate consortium published national science education standards, known as the Next Generation Science Standards. The standards were developed by the National Research Council (the staff arm of the National Academy of Sciences), the National Science Teacher Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Achieve, and were written by a team consisting of educators from 26 states, including Wisconsin. The standards describe what students should know or be able to do at each grade level related to physical sciences, life sciences, earth and space sciences, and engineering, technology, and other science applications. The State Superintendent has not adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, but would not be prohibited from doing so under the bill.

10. The administration indicates that the proposal is intended to support Wisconsin's tradition of local control by ensuring that school boards are aware of their authority to choose academic standards for their districts and that each school board selects the academic standards it will use each year. Additionally, it could be argued that the proposal supports the goal of providing parents with information that can be used to make educational choices for their children by requiring information about the academic standards used by each public school district to be made readily available.

11. On the other hand, it could be argued that the bill would create an additional administrative requirement for local school boards. Although school districts generally review and update their curriculums every five to seven years, the bill would require each school board to include a notice regarding academic standards as an agenda item in every school year. School boards would also be required to notify pupils' parents or guardians of the district's chosen academic standards annually. Although the method of notification is not defined, the notification would require staff time, and could incur a cost depending on the method of notification selected by the school board. Because districts already have the authority to select their own standards under current law, the bill would not grant new authority to school boards.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Approve the Governor's recommendations to: (a) prohibit the State Superintendent from giving effect to the common core standards or adopting new standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative; and (b) to require that school boards include academic standards on the first school board agenda of each year and annually notify parents of the selected standards.

2. Modify the Governor's recommendation with one of the following changes:

a. Delete provision prohibiting the State Superintendent from giving effect to the common core standards or adopting new standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

b. Delete provision requiring school boards to include academic standards on the first school board agenda of each year and annually notify parents of the selected standards.

3. Delete provisions.

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