

Why SBOE authority matters

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History has a way of repeating itself. And sometimes it seems the GOP never learns from its mistakes.

Both of those adages are on display right now in Senate Bill 6. The elected State Board of Education exists for a good reason, and every time Republicans take authority away from it, bad things happen.

As recently as the 2006 school finance revision, lawmakers messed with the State Board of Education's authority. And when all was said and done many wished they hadn't.

Left to its own devices, the education system is liberal for two key reasons. First, federal granting agencies often provide lots of money for trendy, liberal approaches to education such as fuzzy math. Second, colleges of education -- like most of academia -- are controlled by the far left.

The elected State Board of Education is the counterbalance to this path of least resistance, saying no to the left-wing trend du jour in education.

About six years ago, the taxpayer-funded school lobby used college readiness as the excuse to take a swipe at the elected SBOE. Various education groups encouraged legislators to create "vertical teams" of college faculty and high school teachers who were to draft college readiness standards for inclusion in the state curriculum.

The Vertical Teams statute has been an unmitigated disaster. Texas public school children are no more prepared for college than they were six years ago. But the state did waste a bunch of money on "college readiness" standards that really haven't accomplished a whole lot.

The social studies vertical team came out with its first draft in Oct. 2007, and the GOP legislators who wrote the Vertical Teams statute quickly started distancing themselves from it.

The social studies standards focused more on teaching students multiculturalism than the core values that made America great. The Declaration of Independence was mentioned only once in the draft standards. Students were directed to "Analyze the Declaration of Independence from the perspective of men and women, and people of Native American, European, and African descent";

Ronald Reagan was never even mentioned, but students are expected to summarize the five main points of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech and "Assess how concepts of ethnicity have been used to allow one group to dominate another." And don't go looking for Adam Smith in the economics section, but there is an expectation that students learn the effect of global warming on the economy.

Fortunately, Sen. Jane Nelson (R-Lewisville) got a statement of legislative intent when the vertical teams were first created that the elected board retained final authority over the curriculum. As a result, the SBOE stopped these so-called "standards" described above from ever being implemented.

The social studies standards the board did adopt emphasize the Founding Fathers and American values. (For more information about one of the SBOE's greatest success stories, visit www.juststatethefacts.org).

The board has adopted a traditional social studies curriculum, but thanks to SB 6, it may not matter.

One of the ways the State Board of Education ensures the curriculum is taught is through its approval of school textbooks. But lobbyists for computer companies don't like the thorough and public review process the board uses to pass textbooks, and they want school districts buying computerized equipment, not traditional books. So they have prevailed on the Legislature to pass SB 6.

SB 6 was amended on the House floor to give veto power to the board over computerized content, provided that said veto is exercised in 90 days.

But the legislature left one giant loophole intact. The board can review and comment, but may not reject, "open source" materials submitted by college faculty.

Here we go again, the Vertical Teams, Round II. Universities will get grants to do fuzzy math, whole language reading, and social studies materials that talk more about institutional racism than George Washington and James Madison. And they -- with the help of participating school superintendents -- will use those grants to get those materials in the hands of our kids. And if the conference report on SB 6 passes, there will be nothing the elected State Board of Education can do about it.

The State Board of Education is one of the few places where average citizens who pay the taxes that fund public education get to influence what is taught. And a lot of the Republican legislators behind SB 6 give a lot of lip-service when campaigning to social conservative causes and issues. But then when the Legislature comes in, a lot of them scoff at social conservatives and take potshots at socially conservative institutions like the SBOE.

Granted, the lobby played a role in SB 6 (more on that in a future post), but for now, let's just say that the conferees on SB 6 have done Texas schoolchildren a great disservice. And many of them should know better.

