

Risk of returning to No Child Left Behind too high

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times As the Kansas House of Representatives neared the end of the 2013 legislative session, Rep. Reid Petty found himself facing “one of the toughest votes I have ever had to cast as an elected official,” he said. “That vote was a ‘no’ to the bill that would have put a freeze on continued implementation of the Common Core Standards in Kansas.”



The bill was not going to defund Common Core and would still allow the math and reading standards to continue. However, the bill aimed to suspend future standards for a year and allow for a legislative oversight committee to be appointed to review Common Core. When the final votes were tallied, the bill failed, 55-58. Petty, though saddened to see the failure of a measure many of his friends in the Legislature supported, was relieved.

“Don’t get the wrong idea — I’m not some big fan of the Common Core,” he said. “But I just don’t want our public schools to have to go back to the requirements of the No Child Left Behind act, and no one could even tell us how this (rejection of the Common Core) would affect that. It wasn’t worth the risk.”

Petty took heat for his choice. The morning after the vote, visitors to his Facebook page debated the merits and dangers of Common Core, and several expressed disappointment that Petty had “abandoned true conservative values.”

Petty sees it differently.

“I only heard from one constituent from my district who said they wanted to see Common Core go away,” he said. Further, “the school districts in my area are fully on board with Common Core and like it. A large majority of the teachers I have talked to like Common Core for the most part and most of them are very conservative.”

Finally, Petty’s research on the issue included personal experience as a student teacher.

“Last semester, I student-taught at Kismet using a Common Core-aligned textbook,” he said. “What a lot of people don’t understand is that the Common Core is not a curriculum or a script. It is a set of standards used to measure what students have learned. States and local school districts are still in charge of their own curriculum.”

That’s a good thing, Petty said, particularly in contrast to the rigid measurements used by NCLB

to evaluate schools and students.

“No Child Left Behind is the worst thing to happen in education, ever,” he said. “That is something that both Republicans and Democrats can both agree on.”

Not only is it difficult to meet benchmarks set up by NCLB, if schools fall short, “the federal government goes in and takes over,” said Petty. “As I said on the floor of the House, my school district, literally, had a celebration at the back-to-school breakfast for teachers and staff this past fall for getting the NCLB waiver.”

The waiver Petty mentioned was granted, in part, because Kansas adopted the Common Core Standards in 2010, thus demonstrating a statewide commitment to rigor and accountability in education. It helped that Kansas opted for Common Core long before anyone even knew the federal government might begin granting waivers.

When Common Core first surfaced, Petty was serving as a member of USD 480 school board. The standards, which had been assembled by the National Governor’s Association long before President Obama’s election, seemed like a sensible solution to several problems.

“Standards simply identify where a student should be academically at one point in time,” Petty said. Using this kind of a system means students who move from one district to another, or cross state lines, will not find themselves repeating material or scrambling to catch up. One example would be the standard that students should know how to do simple multiplication by the end of the second grade.

When Common Core first emerged, Petty said, “no one at the national or state level questioned the standards. They were put together by the governors, and there are more Republican governors than there are Democrat governors. The military supports the Common Core Standards, along with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which is very conservative.”

As the years passed and more detail was added to the implementation of the Common Core Standards, many conservatives began to worry about what they viewed as a sinister agenda. Political pundits and think tank members began to warn about “data mining,” in which the Common Core Standards testing process would enable government entities to pry into the lives of public school students. Famous commentators like Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin warned that the Common Core is a “Trojan Horse,” that will be used by federal agencies to invade the lives of private citizens and control what their children think.

Petty has not ignored the hype, but he is more interested in working with what he knows than what might happen.

“There is a lot of misinformation out there about this topic,” Petty said. “If Common Core did what a lot of people are saying it does, I would be very strongly against it. But it doesn’t. If it were to ever start doing what people are saying it is doing, I will come out against it.”

For now, he said, much of what worries people “already happens in some school districts, long

before the Common Core. Textbook companies print books with inaccurate information in them. School districts teach inaccurate or questionable things. That isn't a Common Core problem. That is a problem that should be dealt with at the local level with the local school boards."

For now, Petty said, he is willing to work with legislators who want to set up an oversight committee to further study the effects of Common Core Standards on Kansas students.

"You don't need a bill to have such a committee, so I think the Education Committee can still do that, even with the failure of the bill," he said.

What does the state know about students?

The Statewide Longitudinal Data System allows Kansas to provide schools and districts with necessary data that "helps sharpen instruction and ensure every student receives the most appropriate education possible," according to the Kansas State Department of Education. n The Common Core Standards do not contain requirements related to data collection.

n Kansas has had a student level data system since 2005 and there are a number of data points the state is required to collect.

n The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) collects a variety of information on Kansas students, including such things as date of birth, race/ethnicity, gender, program participation including status related to English language proficiency or special education, performance on state assessments, as well as students who qualify for free/reduced priced meals.

n Required reports of this data are only provided in the aggregate, meaning only statewide, district and building data is provided, not student level data.

n The adoption of the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards has no impact on the state's data collection requirements.

n The KSDE DOES NOT collect information on political affiliations or beliefs; sex behavior or attitudes; religious practices, affiliations or beliefs or income of the student or family.