

Huebert, Kansas education board try to lower temperature on turf war over civics test bill (Excerpts)

Rafael Garcia and Andrew Bahl, Topeka Capital-Journal, February 10, 2021

Claiming to want to be a peacemaker but also acknowledging he was “no Ronald Reagan,” Rep. Steve Huebert went before the Kansas State Board of Education on Wednesday morning to tear down walls in his quest to require that all Kansas high school students pass a civics test before graduating.

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The bill has been met with criticism

The bill, while backed by some Republicans including Attorney General Derek Schmidt, has been sharply criticized by public education advocates as an overstep by the Legislature into the role played by the Kansas State Board of Education, which claims a sole responsibility under the Kansas Constitution to determine graduation requirements over accredited schools.

Board legislative liaisons Deena Horst, R-Salina, and Ben Jones, R-Sterling, had previously submitted written testimony to the House committee advocating against the bill. They argued the board is much better positioned to address any desire to boost civic knowledge among students, even if it didn’t implement a test as a requirement.

“We consider this bill to be encroaching into the Constitutional responsibilities of the State Board. We have no issue with such suggestions being made, but the appropriateness of implementing the contents of a test should be made by educators,” they wrote in their testimony.

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Content already taught in schools

Critics have also argued that Huebert's bill is unnecessary, as much of the substance of any civics test to come out of the bill is already covered by existing high school history, government and general social studies classes.

"We wonder why we are now singling out young people with the assumption that they know nothing about civics, history, and government," Mark Desetti, director of legislative and political advocacy for the Kansas National Education Association, said in submitted written testimony. "With the number of elected officials across the nation finding themselves in hot water for ethical violations, misrepresentations of American history, racist comments, and even violations of law, perhaps we should require every candidate for elected office to pass such a test."

Ahead of Wednesday morning's discussion with Huebert, the board and Huebert heard a presentation from Kansas State Department of Education staff on state schools' existing curriculum on civic knowledge and engagement.

Civic engagement curricula starts as young as kindergarten, with educators teaching students about their role as members of a group. That education gets progressively deeper into what being an excellent citizen is, culminating with in-depth studies on U.S. and Kansas history and government functions in middle and high school.

While a U.S. citizenship-style exam isn't required by the state, it is one of several civic engagement criteria for schools to reach School of Excellence status as recognized by KSDE's Civic Advocacy Network.

Thomas Fulbright, Kansas Council for the Social Studies president and teacher at Hope Street Academy in Topeka, spoke briefly with the board Wednesday morning about civic engagement in his classes.

Speaking to The Capital-Journal after the meeting, Fulbright said Huebert's bill would be "a terrible mistake" for the Legislature to pass. He said a bill like Huebert's would force teachers to focus on rote learning, rather than the critical-thinking skills educators try to develop in having students analyze U.S. history and government.

Furthermore, Fulbright argued that an exam wouldn't actually add anything to students' experiences. He said it was presumptuous for any social studies teacher to believe students would remember specific dates and facts and figures past their time in high school.

"The idea is that the historical thinking skills which can and should be taught by social studies teachers is of far greater importance than focusing on having students memorize names, dates, etc.," he said. "To elaborate on a specific example, in the news today you would find a number of people voicing opinions that show a misunderstanding of what the First Amendment actually does.

"If all their teacher did was tell them what the amendments did in an attempt to get them to memorize them for the assessment — in this case, say something like 'it protects your freedom of speech' — students would not have as full of an understanding of the amendment as if they had actually analyzed the text of the amendment."

Fulbright compared the situation to the driver's licensing process, where students take both a written and practical test to earn their license. While both might have some value, the practical portion is much more important to a student's ability to drive, or think about civic engagement, in the future.

And especially in a year when teachers have had to make hard decisions on what to teach with bigger constraints from COVID-19, a civics test requirement could force teachers to cut back on valuable critical-thinking lessons in favor of having students memorize facts to get them through the civics test.

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