

Senate Bill 3 Curriculum Transparency in K-12 Schools

ARTICLE 1

We Need ‘Curriculum Transparency,’ But Not The Kind Some State Bills Would Require
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliewexler/2022/03/17/we-need-curriculum-transparency-but-not-the-kind-some-state-bills-would-require/?sh=7222865847aa>

By: Natalie Wexler May 17, 2022

A recent wave of Republican-sponsored state bills would require schools to post instructional materials online, in the name of “curriculum transparency.” We do need to know more about what schools are teaching—but not for the reasons behind these bills.

According to NBC News, lawmakers in at least 12 states have introduced legislation that would require schools to post lists of all their teaching materials online. So far, Republican-controlled legislatures in only two states—Pennsylvania and Wisconsin—have managed to pass such bills, and in both cases Democratic governors vetoed them. Still, an activist pushing for these laws predicts “a lot of momentum” in the coming year.

Educators and organizations on the left, including the ACLU, have denounced the bills as another salvo from the same conservative political movement that has challenged books and instruction touching on issues of race or sex. And the architect of the push against “critical race theory” in schools, Christopher Rufo, has cheerfully admitted as much.

“The strategy here is to use a non-threatening, liberal value—‘transparency’—to force ideological actors to undergo public scrutiny,” Rufo has tweeted. “By moving to curriculum transparency, we will ... bait the Left into opposing ‘transparency,’ which will raise the question: what are they trying to hide?”

The head of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, has pushed back. “Good schools and good school districts have always had curriculum transparency,” she told NBC. “Pretending otherwise is just the latest attempt by Chris Rufo and others to exploit the frustration of Covid to create a toxic environment where the biggest losers are children and their recovery.”

But in fact, most schools and districts—good or otherwise—have not been particularly transparent about curriculum, especially at the elementary level. That’s not because they’ve been trying to hide anything. The reasons are more complex.

As researcher Morgan Polikoff has found, most state education officials are clueless about what materials are actually being used in school districts. Local district officials often don’t know what materials are being used in school buildings. Even principals may be unclear about what teachers are using in the classroom down the hall. And teachers themselves may not know what materials they’ll be using in class until the night before. Clearly that would make it difficult, if not impossible, to post “curriculum” online.

How could this be? There's a longstanding assumption on the part of American educators that curriculum just isn't that important. In many schools, teachers have traditionally created the curriculum themselves, using state academic standards as a guide. Even when there is an officially adopted curriculum, many teachers have learned during their training that a "good" teacher doesn't follow it closely.

Partly that's because educators often see prescribed curriculum as an administrator's attempt to make instruction "teacher-proof"—to protect students from teachers who aren't effective. Predictably, that perception has made teachers and those who train them wary. They argue, correctly, that a lot of curriculum materials are low-quality. They also maintain, with less justification, that no curriculum can anticipate the varying needs of individual students. Only teachers, they say, can do that. (Students' needs do vary, but that doesn't mean teachers need to start from scratch.)

The result is that teachers spend huge amounts of time either creating classroom materials or searching for them online—an average of about 12 hours a week, according to one study. Virtually all teachers report using Google to plan their lessons, and many use websites like Pinterest or Teachers Pay Teachers. Unfortunately, another study has found that most of the materials available online are "mediocre" or "probably not worth using."

In the area of reading or English language arts (ELA), the curriculum situation has been particularly dire. Whether or not there's an official curriculum in place, instruction in both aspects of reading—sounding out words and comprehending written text—hasn't worked for most children. The reasons are complex, but suffice it to say that neither the training teachers receive nor the materials they're given—or that they find online—correspond to what scientists have discovered about how children actually learn to read.

This situation is beginning to change, especially when it comes to instruction in sounding out words. More schools are teaching phonics systematically. An increasing number of schools and districts are also moving away from the standard approach to teaching comprehension, which focuses on having kids practice largely illusory "skills" like "finding the main idea." Instead, they're adopting one of several recently developed content-rich literacy curricula that build the academic knowledge and vocabulary that enables reading comprehension, beginning in kindergarten.

Here's where some degree of curriculum transparency could be enormously helpful. Suppose you're a parent who wants to make sure the school your child attends is teaching reading in a way that's likely to work—or is trying to find a school or district that does (and judging by anecdotal evidence, there are more and more such parents). School websites and district listings provide all kinds of information—about demographics, test scores, extracurricular activities. But it's rare to find anything specific about a school's curriculum.

Another valid reason to provide information about the curriculum is to enable parents to reinforce or extend classroom learning. If you know what topics your child is learning about, it's

easier to initiate conversations or read aloud books that build on them. For those very reasons, some of the recently developed content-rich curricula include information to be sent home.

It's clear, however, that advocates of curriculum transparency bills don't have these objectives in mind. Model legislation drafted by Rufo and his colleagues at the conservative Manhattan Institute not only requires that curriculum for students be "displayed on the school website," it applies the same requirement to materials for "staff and faculty training." And in both cases, optional additional language specifies that this mandate applies to materials "on all matters of nondiscrimination, diversity, equity, inclusion, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, or bias."

Politicizing the issue of curriculum transparency in this way is both cynical and dangerous. Research has shown that high-quality curriculum can provide a powerful boost to students' learning. One study found that "the average cost-effectiveness ratio of switching curriculum was almost 40 times that of class-size reduction." That study was done in the context of math—which has been easier to study for a number of reasons—but promising research is now emerging about the effects of content-rich curriculum on reading comprehension.

If curriculum transparency is reduced to a vehicle for challenges to supposedly offensive or divisive texts, schools may shy away from including any content in their curricula. They'll stick with or return to an ELA curriculum that consists of the usual round of "comprehension skills" and doesn't specify any content whatsoever. As has been standard practice for decades, students will spend the bulk of their time reading (or pretending to read) texts on random topics, supposedly honing their ability to "find the main idea," and learning very little of value.

If that happens, Randi Weingarten will be right about one thing. The "biggest losers" will be children—especially the ones who, through no fault of their own, have less access outside of school to the academic knowledge that could enable them to succeed in school and in life.

If Chris Rufo and his fellow activists are truly concerned about the future of the country, they ought to spend some time thinking about that rather than trying to magnify the voices of a vocal minority of parents at the expense of the many others who just want their kids to get a good education.

ARTICLE 2

Sen. Mastriano announces new legislation on 'curriculum transparency'

<https://www.abc27.com/pennsylvania-politics/sen-mastriano-announces-new-legislation-on-curriculum-transparency/>

By: Madison Montag and Sarah Wilson March 22, 2023

HARRISBURG, Pa. (WHTM) — On Wednesday, Senator Doug Mastriano announced a new bill that would allow parents to play a role in what their children are taught in schools.

Senate Bill 340 would require schools to post every textbook, course syllabus, and state academic standards for every course offered on a publicly accessible website. Schools would also be required to update the website no more than 30 days after any changes are made.

“Transparency is key to ensuring that all parents have a seat at the table and can make their voice heard on issues that impact their children,” Mastriano said. “Schools should be focused on teaching our children how to think, not what to think. I’ve heard from many parents who have no idea what is being taught until they see their children’s homework. This legislation ensures parents have the tools they need to be informed.”

The bill is now being considered by the Senate Education Committee.