

Schools lament growing loss of local control

Editor's note: This is the first article in a three-part series on loss of local control in school districts, city and county government.

by News-Register staff

Once upon a time, school boards and administrators had the authority to determine when student absenteeism reached an unacceptable level.

Once upon a time, school boards and administrators could set their budget and property tax levy at a level that would cover their needs. If the public didn't approve, they could vote in new board members.

Once upon a time, teachers could teach and not administer standardized test after test after test to make sure 'No Child is Left Behind.'

That kind of local control seems more and more like a fairy tale these days as schools, city and county governments live under state and federal mandates that govern many of their policy decisions.

The more money you take from the state and federal government, the more schools are under their control.

"We have to follow these mandates to the point where the only thing the board can decide is the color of the gym walls," said Aurora superintendent Larry Ramaekers -- tongue in cheek.

It's puzzling to administrators that individuals who are not involved in education on a daily basis think they know what's better for students than those who make education their career.

And the way some mandates evolve is even more puzzling.

Ramaekers said the latest two policy mandates evolved out of situations in Omaha and Chicago, a far cry -- in both distance and circumstance -- from Aurora.

Ramaekers said the absenteeism policy schools are being "asked" to adopt is the result of action by one senator who was upset with the way Omaha schools were handling their absenteeism, so he introduced legislation that would make a universal absenteeism policy for all schools in the state.

"We have our own policy that says when a student misses eight days of school a semester, it's excessive," he explained. "Now you have a senator who thinks he knows better than we do so it's five days a quarter and when absenteeism reaches 20 days you have to get in touch with the county attorney."

Beyond that, the Nebraska Department of Education now requires a monthly report on every student who misses more than two days of school per month.

"To me, that is totally losing local control. What do they know of the situation here in Aurora, Nebraska?" he asked.

The other policy that was read during the September school board meeting deals with restraint and seclusion of students.

Ramaekers said that policy had its birth on the federal level and came from the Chicago schools. The policy requires kids be restrained or secluded in a certain way for the welfare and safety of both students and adults involved.

Aurora schools already have a policy on restraining children, seclusion of children and in-house suspensions, so federal intervention seems unneeded, he said.

"I equate these kinds of policies to fire marshal regulations -- something may have happened to one school district in the city of New York and, because it happened there, they're going to blanket everybody with the same regulation and we lose local control," Ramaekers said.

The same can be said for levy lids and required testing to see if students are meeting standards.

"All these things lead to loss of local control," he said. "I can understand uniform graduation requirements, but I do have a problem with continual testing for standards."

A veteran administrator of 34 years, Ramaekers said he's of the old school thinking where you elect board members to do their job and if they don't do their job you have the power of the vote -- don't re-elect them.

"Where did it start and can you kill a monster such as this? My opinion is you can't put the toothpaste back in the tube -- once it starts, you can't go back," he said.

Not that Ramaekers hasn't tried.

In conversations with Gov. Dave Heineman, the Aurora superintendent made his feelings known about all the state mandates and the governor told him that's the price schools pay for accepting state aid -- the more money the state gives a school, the more regulations come with it.

"My response was this: Governor, we maybe get 20-25 percent of our funding for the operation of our school district from state aid but you're controlling, in a sense, 100 percent of what we're doing," Ramaekers said. "He didn't have a response for that."

And while the constitution says the education of children shall be decided by the states, not the federal government, schools also face mandates from the federal level, like No Child Left Behind, that come with stipulations.

Granted, he added, there are some mandates that have come down that have been good: They got rid of asbestos in schools, brought special education students back into the classroom and schools are now handicap-accessible.

But there are so many other things today that you never had to do before that don't make sense and it all means loss of local control.

"You're under the whim of the mandates they give you," the Aurora superintendent said. "It comes down to this -- if you want the money, you have to play by the rules."

Different school, same story

Giltner superintendent John Poppert said he's seeing the same trends in his district.

"We're seeing the same thing as everyone else," he said. "We have state control over us, but the state is controlled by the federal government since they hold the purse strings with the money."

That trend has been evident throughout the school, as ESU-standard assessments have been replaced by the NeSA assessments and meeting state accountability for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has become a necessity.

"Definitely the state testing, NeSA and all that, the AYP and all the new regulations that come across in the last year," Poppert said. "Also 'Race to the Top,' the state wants that money even though we haven't qualified yet, and the ARRA (federal stimulus) money we've received, there are a lot of stipulations, a lot of paperwork tied to it."

All of that, Poppert says, results in less classroom time for him, more required student testing, and teachers' instruction based more on tests than curriculum.

That loss of local control has already been felt by students.

"Definitely, the state tests affect the kids. Basically, the months of February and March, we do a lot more testing," Poppert said, noting the various NeSA assessments, science standards, writing tests, and national tests such as the Terra Novas. "That's taking away a little from your teaching time, but educators in Nebraska have always been taking care of it, and as usual, they'll take care of it again."

He elaborated on how the teachers' jobs have changed.

"The teachers get a little upset because basically we're teaching to the tests. People are looking at the tests and hitting those points a little more," Poppert stated. "Those teachers are working more on teaching to the test than the curriculum, which is sad. They don't like it, we don't like it, but it's what we have to do."

In just the last year alone, he said he's seen his own job evolve.

"I'm definitely not as much in the classroom as I'd like," he added. "There's more paper work, more of a paper trail, and the coding is different than what it used to be for bills and expenditures. It's more of a business side than educational side."