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OKLAHOMA'S INNOVATIVE EDUCATION LAWS

Oklahoma has become a pace-setter for innovative legislative ideas in the field of education and parental rights. Since the spring of 1981, the Legislature has passed three separate acts aimed at solving current problems in education.

The Parents' Consent Law, enacted June 1, 1981, requires that all instructional material used in connection with a "program designed to explore or develop new or unproven teaching methods or techniques" be made available for inspection by parents or guardians of students in that program. It was modeled after Section 1282h of the U.S. Code.

The Oklahoma statute further requires parental consent for psychological or psychiatric testing, and for examination or treatment of any minor student. In the absence of parental consent, it prohibits any school staff member from eliciting by written survey or examination personal or private information concerning religious beliefs, sexual behavior and attitudes, critical appraisals of family members, or legally privileged communication

Although this law has been in existence only one full school year, its advocates are enthusiastic about its operation. It has become an effective tool for stopping "values clarification": a process widely used in schools to force pupils to choose new values independent from those of their parents; the tools of the process are usually self-disclosure, role-playing, peer pressure, and situation ethics.

Success of the law is credited to the cooperation of the State Department of Education. At the beginning of both the 1981 and 1982 school years, the State Curriculum Director sent all schools a strong letter spelling out the provisions of the Parents' Consent Law and urging schools to avoid the use of values clarification techniques.

As a result, almost all obvious forms of psychological instruction were discontinued by the schools. In some cases, values clarification moved "underground" into courses in which it is harder to isolate and detect. In most instances, however, when parents became aware of a violation of the law and brought it to the attention of the teacher or principal, the courses were modified to exclude the unlawful elements.

In March 1982, Oklahoma passed a Textbook Guidelines Resolution setting standards and guidelines for the selection of textbooks used in Oklahoma public schools. This resolution issues a strong directive to the State Textbook Committee to approve textbooks and teaching materials which (1) are objective in content, (2) do not encourage civil disorder or disrespect for the law, (3) teach high moral standards, including honesty, respect for those in authority, the value of work, and the existence of absolute right and wrong, (4) emphasize the importance of the family and do not degrade traditional roles, and (5) teach principles of free enterprise.

Since this resolution does not have the force of law, few expect that it will cause a significant change in textbook standards. The resolution is valuable because its proponents can return to the Legislature next year and show whether the guidelines have been followed or not. If the resolution is widely ignored, it should become easy to pass an enforceable textbook standards law.

Finally, on June 1, 1982, Oklahoma's Back to Basics Law went into effect. It mandates basic subjects, including reading, writing, the use of numbers, citizenship, history, and government. It returns to the discretion of local school boards the continuance and management of all previously mandated "non-basic" programs.

Non-basics include health, safety, conservation of natural resources, physical education, vocational education, economic education, drug abuse education, and the history of minority races. The Back to Basics Law also encourages local school boards to involve parents in the curriculum evaluation process.

The Back to Basics law untied the hands of local school districts so that they are no longer required to mandate certain non-essential courses. Some districts have used this new discretion to strengthen their academic standards; others have changed nothing.

The results of the law vary from district to district, but an overall improvement is expected because the competitive edge of students in districts with higher academic standards will provide an incentive for other districts to follow suit.

Ultimately, school education depends on the quality and the dedication of the teachers. But intelligent and reasonable legislation such as Oklahoma's can point the way to constructive parental involvement and improved teaching materials.