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PARCC Showdown in Arkansas as Governor Tries to Kill Test

By Andrew Ujifusa | June 23, 2015

Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson isn't done trying to nix his state's common-core assessment—even if his state board just voted to keep it.

The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reported June 22 that Hutchinson, a Republican, directed state Commissioner of Education Johnny Key to end the state's contract with the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and seek a new state test for the 2015-16 school year. What's the problem? Earlier this month, the state board of education decided against doing exactly that, voting 7-1 to continue using the PARCC exam.

There's a June 30 deadline for the state to extend its contract to use PARCC. But Hutchinson and Key are pointing to a PARCC memorandum of understanding that states the following:

"States in this Partnership recognize that they might experience changes in political leadership over the four-year project period. Therefore, in the event that the governor or chief state school officer is replaced in a Partnership state, his or her successor must affirm in writing to the Governing Board Chair within five months of taking office the state's continued commitment to participate in the Partnership and to the binding commitments made by that official's predecessor."

The governor and state chief, who are both new to their positions this year, say that unless they agree to keep PARCC, something they don't want to do, then the state can't recommit to PARCC.

Politico raised the issue of this MOU a few months ago when discussing possible defections from PARCC. But it doesn't appear that provision has been seriously put to the test, so to speak, until now.

The same MOU states that in order to leave PARCC, the state board chairman, governor, and state chief must all agree to do so. It's not clear whether that provision will matter after June 30. Still, here's an interesting detail—although the board voted 7-1 to reject the proposal to ditch PARCC, state board Chairman Samuel Ledbetter abstained from the vote, the Arkansas Times reported.

Remember, earlier this month, Hutchinson and Key didn't act as though the state board's vote was unnecessary for ditching the test. But they did treat the board's decision to drop PARCC as a foregone conclusion. As I wrote previously, Key's department put out a statement a few days before the board's June 11 vote that the state "will not renew its contract" with PARCC, and would switch to an ACT test instead.

However, the state board rejected the push from the governor and state chief, saying that the move away from PARCC came too hurriedly. At their June 11 meeting, in addition to rejecting the switch to the ACT, they directed Key to re-up the state's deal with PARCC.

The original recommendation to leave PARCC came from Lt. Gov. Tim Griffin, a Republican who is overseeing a review of the Common Core State Standards and aligned tests in Arkansas. Hutchinson quickly agreed with Griffin's proposal, and Key in turn agreed. (Although technically appointed by the state board, Key was Hutchinson's hand-picked man for the commissioner's post.)

So will the state board prevail in its attempts to keep PARCC, or will Hutchinson and Key get their way? In about a week, we might know the answer.

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