

Feb. 13, 2008

Conservatives will revive rejected curriculum plan

Critics say the late language arts move would harm public education

By GARY SCHARRER and JENNIFER RADCLIFFE

Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

AUSTIN — A group of conservatives on the State Board of Education is expected to make an 11th-hour move today to scrap two years of work on a language arts curriculum revision in favor of a plan that was rejected more than a decade ago.

Some on the divided, 15-member board contend that the proposed curriculum backed by the Texas Education Agency is too vague and not worth the \$85,000 the state paid the nonprofit group that developed it.

"It's unreadable. It's mangled. It's confusing," said board member David Bradley, who represents the Beaumont area.

Others contend that introducing the alternative curriculum at this late date is an attempt to push a "right-wing agenda" that will harm public education.

They say that, in addition to disregarding years of work by a board-appointed committee of Texas educators, introducing an alternative document gives teachers very little time to weigh in.

"What I'm upset about is, how could we involve teachers and then leave them out of the loop? This is absurd," said board member Mary Helen Berlanga, of Corpus Christi. "I want teachers to be outraged that they are not being heard."

Judy Wallis, the language arts director in the Spring Branch district, said she is stunned that this alternative curriculum has resurfaced.

"I don't know what to say. We're all troubled, a little mystified and surprised," said Wallis, who plans to testify at the meeting in Austin today.

The alternative curriculum puts more emphasis on handwriting, grammar, spelling and punctuation. It also includes a suggested reading list, a contentious point among many educators, Bradley said. Texas is revising all of its curricula, the documents that spell out what children are taught.

Up against a tight April deadline for approving the new language arts curriculum, the state asked for help last fall from StandardsWork, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group.

Some board members were dissatisfied with a draft that the group submitted in January.

"I think everybody just groaned," Bradley said.

He added that this alternative curriculum was nearly adopted in 1997, when conservatives were unhappy with the TEA's version. There was little they could do then, Bradley said, because then-Gov. George W. Bush and his political director, Karl Rove, "pushed it through because we had to reform education in Texas."

The principal author of the 1997 document is retired English teacher Donna Garner.

"We don't need input from a person who retired many years ago and thinks this document that she submitted 10 years ago is still good enough today," Berlanga said. "They are dictating what to read. They are not even saying, 'These are some examples.' They are saying, 'This is what you are going to read to them.'"

In an e-mail message to supporters last week, Garner complained that students no longer read traditional classics.

"They cannot write nor speak using correct grammar," she wrote. "Students' spelling and vocabulary skills have disintegrated. Multicultural authors have taken the place of time-honored classics in students' textbooks. Students spend class time reading teen genre which is replete with violence, sexual content and abusive language.

"Diversity now includes homosexuals. The gay lifestyle is being heavily promoted in our public schools," Garner wrote. "Schools cannot afford to hire enough policemen to control student violence."

Kathy Miller, president of the Texas Freedom Network, criticized McLeroy for trying to cast aside two years of work.

Her organization, which offers itself as a counterbalance to religious conservatives, is a frequent critic of the state board.

Miller said McLeroy "is trying to do this with a last-minute bait-and-switch, offering a curriculum document that the board, parents and teachers haven't even discussed. The arrogance is breathtaking."

jennifer.radcliffe@chron.com
gscharrer@express-news.net

Curriculum pitch sparks controversy

02/13/2008

Gary Scharrer
Austin Bureau

AUSTIN — Conservatives on the State Board of Education are expected to make an 11th-hour move today to scrap two years of work on a language arts curriculum revision in favor of adopting an alternative curriculum rejected more than a decade ago.

Some on the divided, 15-member board contend the proposed curriculum backed by the Texas Education Agency is too vague and not worth the \$85,000 that the state paid the nonprofit group that developed it.

"It's unreadable. It's mangled. It's confusing," said David Bradley, the State Board of Education member who represents the Beaumont area.

Others contend that introducing the alternative curriculum at this late date is an attempt to push a "right-wing agenda" that will harm public education.

In addition to disregarding years of work by a board-appointed committee of Texas educators, introducing an alternative document gives teachers across the state very little time to weigh in.

"What I'm upset about is how could we involve teachers and then leave them out of the loop? This is absurd," said Mary Helen Berlanga, a Democratic member from Corpus Christi. The alternative curriculum puts more of an emphasis on handwriting, grammar, spelling and punctuation. It also includes a suggested reading list, a contentious point among many educators, Bradley said.

Texas is in the process of revising all of its curricula, the documents that spell out what children across the state are taught. They also spur the development of billions of dollars of textbooks and standardized tests.

Up against a tight April deadline for approving the new language arts curriculum, the state asked for help last fall from StandardsWork, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit.

Some board members were unhappy when they saw a draft that the group submitted in January.

Bradley said this alternative curriculum was nearly adopted in 1997, when conservatives also were unhappy with the TEA's version. There was little they could do at that time, Bradley said, because then-Gov. George W. Bush and his political director, Karl Rove, "pushed it through because we had to reform education in Texas."

The principal author of the 1997 document is retired English teacher Donna Garner.

"We don't need input from a person who retired many years ago and thinks that this document that she submitted 10 years ago is still good enough today," Berlanga said.

In an e-mail to supporters last week, Garner complained that students no longer are reading traditional classics and developing abilities to read complex text.

"They cannot write nor speak using correct grammar," she said. "Students' spelling and vocabulary skills have disintegrated. ... Multicultural authors have taken the place of time-honored classics in students' textbooks. Students spend class time reading teen genre which is replete with violence, sexual content and abusive language.

"Diversity now includes homosexuals. The gay lifestyle is being heavily promoted in our public schools," she wrote. Texas Freedom Network President Kathy Miller criticized Chairman Don McLeroy of Bryan for trying to cast aside two years of work.

"And he is trying to do this with a last-minute bait-and-switch, offering a curriculum document that the board, parents and teachers haven't even discussed. The arrogance is breath-taking," Miller said.

gscharrer@express-news.net

Houston Chronicle Staff Writer Jennifer Radcliffe contributed to this report from Houston.

