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Critics lambaste education board on English curriculum

Leaders defend program, set for vote today, despite calls for revisions

By GARY SCHARRER

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AUSTIN — A preliminary vote on a new English and reading curriculum is expected today after scores of teachers, language experts and civil rights leaders blasted it Wednesday at a public hearing before the State Board of Education.

Board leaders contend they are under strict deadlines to approve a new English language arts and reading curriculum for the state's 4.7 million public schoolchildren and say the critics are misguided.

English teachers complained their expertise went ignored and told the 15-member board the proposal falls far short on reading comprehension and grammar. It also fails, they said, to provide a transition from grade to grade and ties teachers' hands by recommending what books students should read.

They begged for more time to perfect the plan. Others complained bitterly of the lack of Hispanic experts involved in the three-year process of writing the new curriculum.

None of the 65 people who signed up to speak during the hearing defended the plan.

Hispanic input

Board Chairman Don McLeroy of Bryan, who supports the plan, could not speculate on how the board will act.

"I want to clarify some of the mischaracterization," McLeroy, a Republican, said. "They are just inaccurate to say that we haven't had any Hispanic input."

Part of the disagreement revolves around "teacher-centered versus students-centered approaches," McLeroy said.

Some of the critics suggested that board members would trigger a firestorm if they adopt the curriculum.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, opened the hearing by warning the exclusion of Hispanic experts in developing the new curriculum will short-change Texas.

Nearly half of the state's 4.7 million public schoolchildren are Hispanic, and the percentage of Hispanic first-graders in cities such as Austin, Dallas and Houston top 60 percent, Shapleigh said.

The most important priority is developing the academic vocabulary of students, Shapleigh said, "and to not gather input (from Hispanic experts) at this very important junction puts at risk public education in the state of Texas."

State education officials face deadline pressures to adopt an English curriculum by this summer. Textbook publishers need time to develop textbooks for the 2009-10 school year. The curriculum will last 10 years.

Shapleigh urged the board to take more time.

"Somehow, I think the publishers will accommodate you. Do it over if you are not going to do it right," Shapleigh said.

The standing-room-only crowd applauded, which drew a rebuke from McLeroy, who told the audience: "If everyone continues to applaud, I will have the room emptied out. We're here to conduct business. We're not here for a pep rally."

Later, board member Terri Leo of Spring said, "I want to get it right, but I'm not so sure that the answer is more time to get it right."

'Very dissatisfied'

Two former national presidents of the League of United Latin American Citizens scolded the board for excluding Hispanic experts in the rewriting of the English and reading standards and urged revisions.

"We are very dissatisfied," Hector Flores of Dallas said.

Tony Bonilla of Corpus Christi warned the board that its action would make state education officials look "ignorant or indifferent to a constituency that needs more help than ever before because of the high (number of) dropouts."

"What you end up with is creating a perception that this board is controlled by the right-wing element in politics in the state of Texas, and what we need from this board is some balance where you become inclusive rather than exclusive," Bonilla said.

"That's so ridiculous," Leo, a Republican, said during a break. "What is Democrat, Republican, conservative or liberal about English ... about math?"

The critics should bring specific complaints instead of saying, "I want the document changed," Leo said.

Cindy Tyroff, a secondary language arts instructional specialist in San Antonio's Northside Independent School District, is considered an expert.

"We want to be able to teach children to read," Tyroff said. "We want to be able to teach grammar within the writing because that's where it matters. We want to make certain that when you go from one grade to the next it makes sense. We want to be able to make the decision about what literature, what non-fiction our students should read because we best know our students."

Alana Morris of Houston, president of the Coalition of Reading and English Supervisors of Texas, also served on a working group that the board appointed to help craft the new curriculum. But that effort has been wasted, she said.

"Those of us on the work group have been discounted, disregarded and disrespected by those who should be the most supportive," she said. "Please do not tie our hands any longer."

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