

English plan slammed ahead of vote

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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 the new English language arts and reading curriculum for the state's 4.7 million public school children 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 smooth 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 public hearing defended the proposal.

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 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 that the exclusion of Hispanic experts in developing the new curriculum will shortchange Texas.

Nearly half the state's public school children are Hispanic, and the percentage of Hispanic first-graders in cities such as Austin, Dallas and Houston tops 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 a new English curriculum by this summer. Textbook publishers need time to develop textbooks for the 2009-10 school year. The new 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.

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."

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 more revision.

"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. McLeroy is a Republican.

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

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

"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 nonfiction our students should read because we best know our students."

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