

Mar. 28, 2008

State board tentatively approves English curriculum plan

By APRIL CASTRO

Associated Press Writer

The State Board of Education tentatively approved a new English and reading curriculum for public schools on Thursday, but made one sought-after change and left the door open for further improvements after the document came under fire from teachers, education experts and Hispanic leaders.

Before the 15-member board unanimously approved the document, they agreed to remove book titles and names of authors that were inserted as examples of works students should read.

The curriculum, which still faces several hurdles, would remain in place for the next decade and would set standards for state tests and textbooks, as well as classroom teaching.

Earlier this week, teachers urged the board to reject the curriculum, and lambasted the books in the list as limiting their flexibility in the classroom.

"Let's let the teachers use their abilities, what they've learned, and I'm willing to bet that they will do a good job," said board member Bob Craig, of Lubbock. "We don't need examples. We don't need lists. Let's let the teachers teach and do a good job."

The measure approved Thursday also directed a panel of experts charged with drafting the curriculum to continue to tweak the plan to address other concerns of teachers before the board's next meeting in May.

The board also yielded to the emotional pleas of member Mary Helen Berlanga, who wanted bilingual education experts added to the panel of experts that has been charged with drafting the curriculum.

She argued that thousands of non-English-speaking students are being taught in classrooms that the curriculum affects, rather than specialized bilingual classrooms, and should be taken into consideration in the draft.

She noted the high dropout and retention rates among Hispanic students.

"They say that retention is due to not having a good reading program," Berlanga said. "And if they don't do good at reading, then they're not going to be successful."

State education officials are under pressure to adopt an English curriculum by this summer to comply with the state budget and publishers need time to develop textbooks for the 2009-10 school year.

The board, which sets school curricula, selects textbooks and manages the \$25 billion Permanent School Fund, is split almost evenly between social conservative Republicans and moderate Republicans and Democrats.