

State finds compromise on teaching English

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AUSTIN — The State Board of Education avoided a firestorm from Texas English teachers Thursday by voting unanimously for a tentative new English and reading curriculum.

The vote came only after a compromise allowing teachers and Hispanic experts to improve the plan before the board takes a final vote in late May.

"Maybe now we can really get a good document that will reach out to all children," said board member Mary Helen Berlanga of Corpus Christi.

She has been urging the board to include experts who understand the culture and learning habits of Hispanic children, who now make up 47 percent of the state's 4.7 million public school students.

She tearfully implored her colleagues to help teachers with growing numbers of Hispanic students filling classrooms, many of whom are struggling.

More than 13,000 Hispanic children had to repeat first grade after the 2005-06 school year, according to the most current statistics kept by the Texas Education Agency. Berlanga complained that her pleas for the inclusion of Hispanic experts have been ignored.

School board member Geraldine Miller of Dallas agreed to invite two Hispanic experts in the writing of the final draft and said suggestions that she did not care for Hispanic children "hurt me deeply."

"I can cry, too. I feel just as emotional," she said.

The board must adopt a new English language arts and reading curriculum before summer so publishers can produce new textbooks for the 2009-10 school year.

The board risked alienating thousands of English language arts teachers had it adopted a document supported by seven social conservative members, which included a recommended reading list for students.

Though the compromise briefly united the fractious board, English teacher leaders emphasized they remain wary about the work in progress because their previous recommendations have been ignored.

"We're wary, without a doubt," said Cindy Tyroff, a secondary language arts instructional specialist in San Antonio's Northside Independent School District. "This is the third time that we have provided the board with specific recommendations. I just don't know how the outcome will be."

The plan proposed by teachers incorporates the current research on the teaching of English, including reading comprehension and teaching grammar in the context of writing.

The board rejected the new curriculum prepared largely by teachers on an 8-7 vote before shifting to Miller's compromise.

Teachers complained that a document coordinated by a Washington, D.C.-based company did not include a focus on comprehension and taught grammar in isolation instead of in the practice of writing.

"This is the process," San Antonio board member Ken Mercer said. "This is the way it's supposed to be. We speak with passion. This is what it's all about — coming to a compromise solution."

But the contentious debate is "not very admirable in the eyes of the population, especially in the district I represent," said board member Rick Agosto, also of San Antonio. "We didn't need to get to that point where we're begging for representation. It's really unfortunate. I hope that we can all come together. We need to."

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