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English curriculum, minus reading list, gets Texas education board's initial OK

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AUSTIN -- The State Board of Education gave unanimous approval Thursday to a new English and reading curriculum for Texas' 4.6 million public school students, although the contentious battle over what gets included in language arts textbooks and what gets taught in classrooms is far from finished.

The product of nearly three years of work, the new curriculum will affect the teaching of reading, writing and grammar in kindergarten through 12th grade, as well as the content of the state's high-stakes standardized tests. The 15-member board will take another vote on the plan today and then a final vote in May.

Besides giving the initial green light to the curriculum plan, the board on Thursday also voted not to include a suggested reading list in the new curriculum.

The state board has been deeply split over the issues, with the panel's bloc of seven social conservatives largely divided from eight more moderate Republicans and Democrats. Those factions have been bickering for weeks, with the social conservatives favoring a more rigid curriculum that includes a separate section for teaching grammar, and other members saying schools should maintain more local control over instruction.

The conservatives initially pushed for the reading list, while the moderates said the reading list would tie educators' hands.

Member David Bradley, one of the conservatives, said that despite the 15-0 vote, the panel still remains divided. He predicted more fights ahead.

"All we have done is postponed a decision until May -- we'll have the same debate and the same concerns, we'll receive the same documents back again," said Bradley, R-Beaumont.

But board member Pat Hardy, a Weatherford Republican, said Thursday's vote marked a step forward.

"We wanted to honor the teachers and their work and expertise and I think ... it'll work -- I feel pretty good about it," said Hardy, whose district includes much of Fort Worth.

In response to a tearful plea from member Mary Helen Berlanga, the state board agreed to add two education experts with knowledge of Hispanic culture to the panel that will continue working on the curriculum.

Berlanga, D-Corpus Christi, argued that about 2 million public school students are Hispanic -- the most of any demographic group in Texas schools -- and yet the expert panel has not included anyone with expertise in their specific education needs. "I had asked [earlier] for an expert and y'all had deaf ears to my request," an emotional Berlanga said.

The vote Thursday marks another milestone on a politically treacherous road taken by the education board as it attempts its first revision since 1997 of the state's English and language arts curriculum. A Washington, D.C.-based company, StandardWorks, has acted as a facilitator since November, and after working with experts presented a curriculum plan to the board in February.

It was a variation of that plan that received the initial OK. However, the state board also voted Thursday to keep the door open to a competing plan that was unveiled this week by a coalition of education groups.

The competing plan has more emphasis on reading comprehension. The original plan appeared to stress the use of phonics, in which kids learn to read by sounding out words.

The education groups had complained about being shut out of the state board's curriculum-development process. In response to those complaints, the State Board directed its panel of experts to review the competing plan and to merge any useful elements into the final document that comes up for a vote in May.

The rancor over the English and reading curriculum likely foreshadows even more friction at the end of the year, when the State Board of Education overhauls the state's science curriculum.

Staff writer Katherine Cromer-Brock contributed to this report.

Why is it important?

The state's curriculum determines the content of textbooks and what is taught in the classroom.

It also determines what is tested on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and, beginning in 2011, what will be included on high school end-of-course examinations.

In their own words

"My hope is that the State Board of Education will keep in mind that we need to build teachers up and strengthen teachers, not strengthen rules. Allow teachers to practice their craft. That will allow teachers to strengthen students. That's what we're about every day."

-- Twyla Tasker, middle school literacy coach in the Grapevine-Colleyville school district and mother of three

"We're really pleased that the State Board of Education listened to the teachers from across the state and took their recommendations into consideration. That's the democratic process at work. Folks will be watching very closely."

-- Michael Sorum, Fort Worth chief academics officer

"It has been a very sobering process to watch over the last three years as the school board has discounted the work and opinions of teachers and instead followed their own agenda. There is still time to have a good document that teachers can live with that will be good for kids."

-- Lisa Rowlette, secondary language arts coordinator, Hurst-Euless-Bedford school district

What's next

April 18-May 18: The public can submit comments on the English language arts and reading curriculum.

May 23: The state board takes a final vote.