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Board tentatively OKs state English, reading curriculum

But panel agrees to allow experts to work on plan before final vote

By GARY SCHARRER

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AUSTIN — The State Board of Education avoided a fire-storm from English teachers Thursday by voting unanimously on a tentative new English and reading curriculum.

The unanimous 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," board member Mary Helen Berlanga, of Corpus Christi, said.

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 enrollment.

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 that 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.

While 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."

"It's still a substandard document moving forward," said Alana Morris of Houston, president of the Coalition of Reading and English Supervisors of Texas. "What the English language arts teachers of Texas wanted is for the clearest, most accurate document to move forward to the next step of a wobbly process."

Texas educators have not been heard in the nearly three-year process of developing a new English language arts curriculum, Morris said. Teachers hope that Miller's substitute proposal will result in improvements, Morris said.

"Our hope fizzles each time an additional substandard draft comes forward," she said.

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