



Texas education board passes new standard with 'no opportunity to review it'

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AUSTIN – The State Board of Education's debate on new English and reading standards took another rowdy turn Friday as members approved a never-before-seen version of the lengthy document which materialized less than an hour before the board was to take a final vote.

After a wacky and terse debate on the new curriculum, the board voted 9-6 in favor of the new version, which will remain in place for the next decade and sets standards for state tests and textbooks, as well as classroom teaching.

Experts and teachers have been working on the new curriculum standards for two and a half years.

"I find it's really wild that we can work for three years on a project and then the board is so qualified they can pull it out of their hat overnight," said board member Pat Hardy, a Fort Worth Republican who, like other board members, received the substituted document when it was slipped under her hotel door less than an hour before their meeting was set to convene Friday morning.

Some social conservatives on the board prepared the latest version overnight.

"I'm appalled by the process that we've taken part in," said board member Bob Craig, a Republican from Lubbock. There's been "no opportunity to review it, no teacher group is involved, not even the (Texas Education Agency) staff was involved or had seen it."

A day earlier, the board gave tentative approval to a version of the curriculum created largely by StandardsWork, a company hired to facilitate the revision process. The move angered teachers and more moderate board members who preferred a version crafted by a working group of teachers appointed by the board.

The primary disagreements between the two factions were on how grammar and reading comprehension should be taught in schools.

The new version was presented to board members as a compromise, which addressed some of the teacher's concerns. Still, critics on the board were reticent to accept the explanation.

"How am I supposed to vote on a document when I've had it in my hands for slightly over an hour?" asked angered board member Mary Helen Berlanga, a Democrat from Corpus Christi. "How are we supposed to reply to our constituents? I don't understand that. I can't support a document that I haven't had a chance to read."

Teacher groups complained that the curriculum was a patchwork and poorly written, but largely withheld judgment.

"It's really hard to say since nobody has seen it," said Jennifer Canaday, a lobbyist for the Association of Texas Professional Educators. "They were rushed by the chairman through a review of the changes. We were told by the authors of the document that it is supposed to contain sections from the teachers work group version and others from the Standardswork version ... but again nobody's seen it, so it's hard to say for sure what's in there."

After first saying he would not give board members time to go over the new document during the meeting, Chairman Don McLeroy, a Republican from College Station, eventually relented, allowing a quick run through of the new document with an explanation of the changes.

But the squabbling did not end there.

"Mr. Chair you're going so fast ... you're moving so fast we can't find it in the other document," Berlanga said, shortly after the page-by-page explanation began.

After more complaints, McLeroy declared that he would continue at the fast pace.

"The ruling is you're being dilatory in dragging this out," McLeroy said.

"I'm voting against it. I'm sick of this," replied board member Mavis Knight, a Democrat from Dallas, moments after the discussion started.

Critics said Friday's display illustrated long-simmering dysfunction on the board.

"The state board is split between members who respect the opinions of teachers and education experts and ... other members who clearly don't," said Kathy Miller, president of the education watchdog group Texas Freedom Network. "So this board is increasingly unable to complete tasks with efficiency and a respect for informed debate and expert opinion.

"This is not how you develop smart education policies."

Conservatives lauded the new curriculum.

"It is obvious that too many Texas public school students aren't learning the basics with our current curriculum," said Brooke Terry, education policy analyst for the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation. "We are glad the new curriculum will emphasize grammar and writing skills."

Science curriculum, which includes the divisive teaching of evolution, is next up for review by the board.

"It does not bode well for any of us with the science (curriculum) review coming up," Canaday said. "Everyone I spoke to about this week's meetings asked me why on earth would English be considered a controversial subject. If it's this difficult to change the English curriculum, it's just going to be a war when it comes time for them to try to agree on science standards."