

Board approves altered textbooks

Conservative groups' complaints led to harmful changes in books, critics contend

By Gary Susswein

AMERICAN STATESMAN STAFF

Texas schoolchildren will learn more about Mexicans who helped defend the Alamo but less about when exactly the Earth was formed when they read the textbooks approved Thursday by the State Board of Education.

By a vote of 12-1, the board approved hundreds of changes made by publishers to the social studies books that will be used in public school classrooms for the next six years. Many of the changes had been prompted by socially conservative groups that complained the textbooks were sometimes anti-capitalist, anti-Christian or just plain wrong.

On statesman.com: For examples of textbook changes, go to statesman.com.

Other critics blasted the changes, saying the publishers were kowtowing to special interests.

But board member Mary Helen Berlanga, D-Corpus Christi, said her vote in favor of the changes was a trade-off. She said she was willing to say geological events that happened millions of years ago occurred in the more Biblically correct "distant past" in order to get other changes that put greater emphasis on Hispanics' contributions to American history.

"If it means accepting that in order to accept the people who were left out that fought for this country and died for this country, I'm willing to accept that," she said.

The board will vote one final time on the policy today and is

expected to approve it.

The only board member who voted against the changes, Dan Montgomery, R-Fredericksburg, said accepting the changes weren't fair to publishers who had met a June deadline to submit their final texts.

Members of the Texas Freedom Network, which seeks to keep religion out of public policy, said the changes were unfair to schoolchildren.

"We certainly wish the publishers had rethought the changes they made on behalf of the religious right," spokeswoman Ashley McIlvain said.

The group had criticized changes that eliminated the suggestion that global warming is a proven scientific phenomena, that Christians accepted slavery and that Islam teaches love and tolerance.

The Board of Education reviewed and accepted public testimony earlier this fall on the social studies textbooks for

public schools. Before the final board vote, publishers are supposed to change factual errors that have been spotted — a process that leads to a yearly battle over what is a factual error and what is ideological spin.

Members of the groups that lobbied for some of the changes said it was all about getting the facts right.

"The publishers' main interest has obviously been to improve the quality of textbooks," said Chris Patterson, director of education research for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which supports such issues as school choice and limited government. "The open, public review process has ensured that not only do Texas schoolchildren receive better books, but so do children around the nation. The books Texas adopts are the books that the rest of the nation will use."

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