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State education board mulls controversial English curriculum plan

The Associated Press

The State Board of Education is considering a new English and reading curriculum that has come under sharp fire from teachers, education experts and Latino leaders, who say it would hurt minority students.

At a public hearing on Wednesday, dozens of English teachers urged the board to reject the proposed curriculum, which would establish statewide reading lists for English and reading classes, newspapers reported.

The 15-member board is expected to vote Thursday on the proposed curriculum, which would remain in place for the next decade and would set standards for state tests and text books, as well as classroom teaching.

State education officials are under pressure to adopt an English curriculum by this summer, because publishers need time to develop textbooks for the 2009-10 school year.

However, teachers testifying at the hearing urged the board to take more time to correct the plan, saying the current proposal would limit their ability to decide which books to assign students.

"We want to be able to teach children to read," said Cindy Tyroff, of San Antonio's Northside Independent School District, who represented the Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts. "We want to be able to teach grammar within the writing because that's where it matters. We want to make certain that when you go from one grade to the next it makes sense. We want to be able to make the decision about what literature, what nonfiction our students should read because we best know our students."

Opponents also charged that book titles included in the proposal lack diversity, which could harm minority students.

Many of those speaking at Wednesday's hearing complained that needs of Hispanic students and other minorities were overlooked when the proposal was drafted.

About half of the state's 4.7 million public schoolchildren are Hispanic, and more than 60 percent of first-graders in cities such as Austin, Dallas and Houston are Hispanic, said State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso.

"To not gather input (from Hispanic experts) at this very important junction puts at risk public education in the state of Texas," Shapleigh said.

Brooke Terry of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, was one of the few to testify in favor of the plan.

"Our public schools need to focus on teaching the basics of reading and writing," she said. "We believe the proposed English-language arts standards will help schools improve."