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Curriculum is in the books after 2 years of fits and starts

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After more than two years of behind-the-scenes cajoling, public bickering, charges and countercharges, the bitterly divided State Board of Education settled Friday on new English and reading curriculum standards for the state's 4.6 million schoolchildren.

The result is a patchwork document, with pieces pulled from a plan adopted by the board Thursday, plus segments submitted by teacher work groups.

Many board members complained that even after the drawn-out process, the latest document was sprung on them Friday with almost no notice.

The final vote was 9-6, with Democrats and some moderate Republicans joining in opposition. Social conservatives backed the plan, along with Democrat Rick Agosto of San Antonio and swing-vote Republican Geraldine Miller of Dallas.

"I'm very disappointed. What it boils down to is the teachers were not respected enough to have their opinions count," said board member Pat Hardy, a Republican from Weatherford who voted against the new standards.

The background

The new standards roughly track those that won initial board approval Thursday. However, the board incorporated some changes recommended by teams of educators that also had support from some of the board's moderate Republicans and Democrats.

Changes included adding a section in the appendix on reading comprehension. The board also voted to align grammar instruction more closely with writing instruction.

The board rejected an attempt by social conservatives to add a recommended reading list.

Instead, the board agreed to create a reading-resource Web site.

Board member Barbara Cargill, a social conservative who helped craft the plan adopted Friday, said she took the best elements from previous proposals.

"We tried to come up with something that might work and would make both sides happy," said Cargill, R-The Woodlands.

But Hardy said that while the plan represents an improvement over a version adopted Thursday, it is flawed nonetheless.

She noted that the guidelines lack sufficient integration between grade levels, meaning that children could end up with gaps in their education.

Plan supporters "did attempt to put in some [improvements], but that was more of a political move than anything else," Hardy said.

The Texas Education Agency must begin putting the new standards in place for the 2009-10 school year. The new curriculum, which also affects textbooks, is the first language-arts overhaul since 1997.

A divided board

The curriculum decision is important because it 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.

But the process has been anything but smooth, with board factions complaining that they had little time to review the technical proposals or that they were being railroaded by their opponents.

On Friday, for instance, many members complained that the nearly 100-page document had been distributed to them just before the meeting.

What they're saying

"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."

-- **Kathy Miller**, director of the Texas Freedom Network, which opposes social conservatives on the board

"It is obvious that too many Texas public school students aren't learning the basics with our current curriculum. We are glad the new curriculum will emphasize grammar and writing skills."

-- **Brooke Terry**, education analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a free-market think tank

Looking ahead

The board will oversee an effort to create parallel standards for Spanish speakers and vote on them in July. The board will consider science curriculum standards next year.