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Divided board passes English curriculum plan

Teachers reject plan and criticize the panel's process

By GARY SCHARRER

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AUSTIN — A three-year effort to rewrite English language arts and reading standards for the state's public schools came down to a last minute cut-and-paste job Friday.

But the final document didn't change any minds as the State Board of Education voted, 9-6, to approve a plan that teacher groups again rejected. And educators who criticized the curriculum found fresh ammunition in the last-minute process the board employed.

Socially conservative board members produced a new document Friday that they said included some of the best elements of a separate plan advocated by English language arts and reading teachers.

"We wanted, in good faith, to pull out what was best from what the teacher work group had done," said Barbara Cargill, R-The Woodlands.

The new standards are understandable and measurable, she said. This, she said, is in contrast to part of the current curriculum that says, "Students will understand the effect of media on their own perception of reality."

Plucking it apart

Although teachers' representatives dismissed the final curriculum as illogical, Cargill said rank-and-file teachers whom she heard from favor it.

But Houston's Alana Morris, past president of the Coalition of Reading and English Supervisors of Texas, accused Cargill of patronizing teachers "by pretending that their plucking our document apart is the same as including our input and validating our experience."

She noted that educators will not get another opportunity to create an English language arts and reading standards document for at least a decade.

"Our one hope is that some of these arrogant board members, who align with special interest groups, who have no interest in the success of public education, will have been unseated by that time," Morris said.

Authors list

The board narrowly rejected, 8-7, an 11th-hour bid to create a suggested "authors list" for teachers to use in assigning reading books.

Rick Agosto, D-San Antonio, was the only Democrat voting with the board's social conservatives for the final document.

"This is a better and improved document based on our board's initiative," Agosto said.

But some members were offended that they didn't see the final version until Friday's meeting.

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"I don't trust the people who have worked behind the scenes in secret," said Mary Helen Berlanga, D-Corpus Christi.

Patricia Hardy, R-Fort Worth, wondered what made some board members so qualified "to pull something out of the hat at the last minute. It's amazing."

"The process stinks. ... No leadership from anywhere," Hardy said later. "The sane six have spoken. We stand by what the teachers developed, and we wanted the teachers to be heard."

The new curriculum standards that will show up in textbooks in the 2009-10 school year were marked by the same disagreements over grammar instruction and reading comprehension that have divided the board for months.

Bob Craig, R-Lubbock, failed to get board members to move the reading comprehension standards from the appendix to inside the document where they would get more attention.

The new curriculum standards also will keep grammar as a separate teaching strand instead of teaching grammar to students while they develop writing skills.

Emphasis on basics

Two different outside groups offered opposite reactions. The Texas Public Policy Foundation, a free-market think tank, favored the board's action.

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

Texas public schools fail to adequately prepare many students for college or the workplace, she said, citing a 2006 survey by the Conference Board found that 81 percent of employers viewed recent high school graduates as "deficient in written communications" needed for letters, memos, formal reports and technical reports.

But the Texas Freedom Network, which promotes public education, religious freedom and individual liberties, called the board divisive and dysfunctional.

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