

Bilingual Moment Of Truth

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The state Board of Education is scheduled to act today on one of its most controversial and vexing issues — bilingual education.

The term alone stirs controversy. The Reagan administration recently scrapped proposed federal bilingual regulations that Education Secretary Terrel Bell called "harsh, inflexible, burdensome, unworkable and incredibly costly."

Similar words were used Wednesday to describe complex state regulations that the state board was to have acted upon by April 1. In the final public hearing on the proposed regulations, school district officials from throughout the state decried the rules as unclear, unnecessary and enormously expensive.

"The cost would be prohibitive," said Riverside Unified School District administrator Starrett Dalton.

Representing some of the largest districts in the state — and those with large populations of Spanish-speaking students — Dalton said the regulations will hinder the transition of bilingual students from Spanish to English in the classroom.

The proposed rules were prompted by 1980 legislation that makes the learning of English the goal of bilingual education. The law increased the number of bilingual classes that can be offered and set more stringent requirements for local school districts, which must provide adequate schooling for students who are not proficient in English.

The law charged the Department of Education with responsibility for drafting the regulations now before the board.

"The criteria would nearly double the number of students needing bilingual education in our district," Dalton said, echoing complaints of other district administrators who criticized the regulations' "arbitrary" testing standards.

Regulations set the 34th percentile as the cut-off point in tests for bilingual students to be "reclassified" into English-speaking classes. Many districts use a much lower cut-off point, and insist students benefit by quicker transition into English-speaking classes.

Supporters of the regulations counter that many students are not ready for reclassification under lower standards, and flounder as a result.

William A. Bibbiani, senior research analyst for the Pasadena Unified School District, said the regulations would add at least 900 students to the

2,700 in limited-English classes in the district, at a cost of \$400,000 annually.

Henry Boas of the massive Los Angeles Unified School District — which uses the 16th percentile as a cutoff point — said the district serves 100,000 students in limited or non-English speaking classes. In 2½ years, he said, 20,000 students were reclassified into English-speaking classes — barely enough to match the numbers coming in who cannot speak English.

"Los Angeles is a port of entry," Boas said. "We get more youngsters coming in than going out." In addition to a percentile cutoff which is much lower than the proposed standard, Boas said the district does not require the writing sample proposed in the regulation for "reclassifying" students into English-speaking classes.

Rebecca Baumann, a lobbyist for the California School Boards Association, which supported the bilingual legislation, said the Education Department rules go far beyond legislative intent.

Under the new regulations, Baumann said, "Well over 50 percent of the children would never leave the program. This is an injustice to bilingual children and to the schools."

Linda Guest Garcia, representing Los Angeles County Bilingual Directors, said the 34th percentile test cutoff "is not unreasonable, if we indeed want to prepare these children to compete."

Aurora Martinez Quevedo, director of the San Jose Area Bilingual Consortium, said districts in the consortium have been using the proposed standards for two years and have found them workable. "The process is by no means perfect," she said, but pointed to a 20 percent "reclassification" rate whereby students were graduated into English-speaking classes.

For the first time since 1975, the state board is not meeting in separate committees. Instead, it is meeting as a full board throughout its two-day monthly Sacramento session. Sources close to the board say bitter disputes among board members have created deep divisions and distrust on the board. Such divisions may have prompted the decision to meet as a full board on the controversial bilingual issue.

"They don't trust each other enough to meet separately in committee," one source said. "They want it all out at the full board."