

Education Board Faces Bias Issue

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

State Board of Education members Tuesday again confronted proposed regulations prohibiting a wide range of discrimination in public schools and initially disagreed over whether discrimination complaints should be directed to state or local school officials.

The proposed regulations are required by legislation passed four years ago. They have been in the works at the department for months and before the board on several occasions. The board is expected to take final action on them next month.

A motion by board member Lorenza Calvillo Schmidt to give people with discrimination complaints the option of going to local or state authorities failed by a 5-4 vote.

Although board discussions in recent months have increasingly split along similar lines — with Schmidt, Robert Arroyo, Uvaldo Palomares and Allan Seid in the minority — Tuesday's meeting saw little of the acrimony and philosophical divisiveness of previous sessions.

The proposed non-discrimination regulations would prohibit discriminatory conduct against minorities, women or the handicapped by school officials or private vendors that supply school materials or services.

Department officials have recommended that people with discrimination complaints against the schools — or against private concerns doing business with the schools — first file their complaints with local districts. They then could appeal to the state decisions they found unsatisfactory.

Board President Ann Leavenworth urged local resolution of complaints whenever possible. "I think we have to remember that we (the state board) are not the only

ones with the answers."

A subsequent motion by Arroyo — to set a 15-day limit on the time period in which a local district must prepare "a plan for addressing the complaint" — was defeated.

Although originally supporting Schmidt's motion, Palomares changed his position and moved to support the department recommendation, which would establish a 30-day complaint period at the local level before the matter could be appealed to the state. Palomares' motion passed unanimously.

State schools superintendent Wilson Riles cautioned board members against assumptions that citizens will understand and abide by the board's regulations on complaints.

"Let me tell you what reality is," Riles said. "People are going to complain. They're going to pick up the phone and call the state Department of Education. I remember when I was at my office one Sunday morning, and I picked up the phone," Riles said. "Someone said he had just passed El Camino High School and the lights were on and what was I going to do about it?"

Riles said that when complaints involve local districts, he directs his staff to bring the matter to the attention of local superintendents, "who usually know nothing about it." He said such problems "are usually resolved at the local level."

"This board knows that the board and the department have 132 suits against them," Riles added. "People sue the state. No matter what you do, the citizen is going to do what he wants. I would hope all problems would be handled at the local level. I have enough problems."

And, he told board members mired in huge volumes of proposed regulations governing all variety of school conduct and administration: "Just because you have a regulation, doesn't mean people are going to know about it."

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