

Educators Junk Key Bilingual Placement Rules

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In a long session plagued by bitter political rivalries, the state Board of Education scrapped key provisions of controversial rules on bilingual education Thursday.

The proposed regulations, in the works for months and the subject of statewide controversy, were to have been acted on by the board no later than April 1. Required by 1980 state legislation that came out of arduous months of compromise, the proposed state Department of Education rules set specific standards for the transition of bilingual students into English-speaking classes.

After several hours of frequently acrimonious debate, the board voted to eliminate a key provision of the proposed regulations that specified the test scores required of bilingual students before they could be "reclassified" into English-speaking classes.

Some of California's largest school districts — and those with large enrollments of Spanish-speaking students — had harshly criticized the "reclassification" regulations as arbitrary and too expensive.

Apparently responding to those complaints, the board scrapped the requirement that students score at the 34th percentile on achievement tests designed to measure their readiness for English-speaking classes. Most districts use a considerably lower test score to move bilingual students into regular classes, and critics of the districts say they move students out of bilingual programs before they are ready.

The board voted 6-3 to leave the range of acceptable test scores up to local districts — a move which enraged the board's only Chicana member, Lorenza Schmidt. She voted against the motion by board member Bill Honig, as did members Allan Seid and Mary McLuhan. The three also voted against adoption of the total package, which was passed — with certain key amendments — by the same 6-3 margin.

Honig's amendments also eliminated a requirement that students produce an acceptable writing sample before they are reclassified, but retained a disputed math requirement. Both proposed requirements were criticized by local districts, which were most critical of the test score requirement scrapped by the board.

District officials and some board members speculated that bilingual students would be "trapped" in bilingual classes under the proposed regulations, thus hampering their adjustment to English-language courses. And district officials said the number of such students kept in bilingual

classes under the more stringent proposed guidelines would mean enormous financial cost to the local districts at a time when they can ill afford it.

"If there was a trap, it was in 100 years of being trapped in English-language classes and having a 60 to 80 percent dropout rate," Schmidt responded angrily. "It is as if all you can expect from these kids is a low level of performance, and I find that offensive."

Schmidt also decried the "negative way this board is articulating this issue for the public. It continues a history of placing these children in a bad light."

She also called the board's action "very poor treatment" of children, "an abusive act" and "an embarrassment."

Her strong statements prompted board member Lewis Bohler Jr., the board's only black member, to accuse Schmidt of "name-calling" and making "a very dangerous charge which is almost completely without factual foundation."

To which Schmidt quietly retorted: "I stand by my statements."

Board President Ann Leavenworth, to whom some of Schmidt's caustic remarks were directed, said fiscal limitations and educational indifference have contributed to the intense national controversy over bilingual education.

"If we were a rational society and really cared about children and funded education adequately," the former college government professor said, "all children would start with two languages in the first grade."

Member William Gilbert cautioned the board against "opening Pandora's box" by exceeding the legal requirements of bilingual education. "Given the national climate, bilingual education might be tossed out altogether," he said.

Schmidt repeatedly objected to what she perceived as efforts by other members to "make this an English-language program." In the compromise legislation which prompted the proposed regulations, the goal of bilingual education is the learning of English.

More than 200,000 students are in bilingual classes, according to state figures.