

State Board To Consider Fate Of School Activity Fees

By Sigrid Bathen
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The state Board of Education today will consider the controversial issue of whether districts can charge public school students "participation fees" for activities — primarily athletics — which traditionally have been offered without charge.

Some districts that already charge fees — usually \$25 for activities ranging from drama to football — gave impassioned testimony before a board committee Wednesday, urging board members to end the state prohibition against such fees or risk losing many school activities altogether.

Most of the school officials testifying before the board's Policies and Programs Committee represented middle or high-income districts. Seven school officials, all white, said no low-income student would be denied the right to participate in an after-school activity because he or she lacked the money for the fee.

But representatives of low-income and minority parents expressed the fear that their children would bear the real brunt of the move for activity fees.

"What you're saying is that you're going to put more kids out on the streets to be shot or to shoot others," Miguel Angel Perez, a parent of children in the Los Angeles Unified School District, told school officials who favored fees. "In the barrios and the streets where I come from, you'll be creating more problems, more deaths."

After hearing testimony from both sides, the three-member board committee voted for continuation of the current state

policy, which means no fees for activities. The matter will be considered by the full board in its regular meeting today. The state Department of Education opposes any change in the policy, despite apparent widespread violations of the policy in districts decimated by a statewide budget squeeze.

"We have no reserves," testified Ann Hinchcliffe, board president of the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District, which is in a wealthy section of Los Angeles where achievement scores are high and 90 per cent of the students go on to college. "Our decision-making powers are being eroded by the state. It seems to me that (the board) ought to be strengthening test scores and educational standards, rather than deciding extracurricular activities that should be decided at the local level."

Noting that "our community is high-income, not our school district," Hinchcliffe said fees for extracurricular activities are necessary in order to preserve those activities, and to avoid further cutbacks in academic programs. If she didn't support such fees for athletics, she said, "I think I'd be run out of town."

A similarly dismal picture of school district finances was presented by other district representatives. They told of cutbacks upon cutbacks in school programs, and insisted funds would be made available — at least in part through "booster" clubs and community fund-raising — for scholarships to students who cannot afford fees for after-school activities.

"Nobody likes charging fees, least of all board members," said Margaret Connell, president of the Santa Barbara High

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School District board. "We not only feel the heat. We have our feet in the fire. We have to make difficult decisions with our friends and neighbors looking on. This is as it should be, but we would like to have clear and unambiguous authority.

"I do not believe that charging fees for extracurricular activities is letting the nose of the camel into the tent. Unless the regulation (against fees) is changed, activities for children will have to be severely curtailed across the state."

Hamilton Smyth, superintendent of the William S. Hart Union High School District in Los Angeles County, noted that "fees" of one sort or another always have been charged in school athletics — for such items as clothing and equipment — although such expenses have not officially been labeled as such and much of the cost is borne by sports booster clubs.

There was little organized community or school district testimony opposing the imposition of fees for after-school activities — which can range from drama and band to all variety of school sports. Dorothy Carr, from Sacramento's San Juan Unified School District, said "more people in the community should be aware" that the board is even considering revising its no-fees regulation.

Even with scholarships, "working it off" on school grounds, or community fund-raising — all suggestions of fee proponents — Carr said many parents would be loathe to ask for help.

"Some people are very proud about applying for a hand-out," she said. "I hear from a lot of middle-income families with more than one child, and they say they can't afford to

send but one (to a particular activity), so they don't send any."

The imposition of fees is also opposed by the California Teachers Association. "The legal questions are staggering," said Jerry Bollinger, the association's liaison with the state board. "We certainly do not argue the value of extracurricular activities, but fees encourage a have/have-not philosophy. We would be encouraging our affluent districts whose students can afford fees to turn their backs on districts which are less-affluent."

An informal state board survey found that about one-third of districts surveyed were charging fees for school athletics, with a slightly lesser number charging for participation in after-school clubs. Some charge fees for summer school, if they have summer school at all.

Noting that many school districts have eliminated after-school activities, a board staff report indicated that the costs of such activities often have been picked up by private resources in wealthier school districts.

"Thus," the report concluded, "more affluent pupils continue to receive the service through these other sources while poor pupils do without."

The matter is also before the courts, with a major lawsuit pending against the Santa Barbara High School District over its \$25-per-student fee for participation in extracurricular activities. No ruling has been made, but the case will have widespread ramifications for local districts searching for alternative financing of traditional school activities.