

Texas board approves curriculum standards with nationwide impact

May 21, 2010

AUSTIN—In spite of protests, the Texas State Board of Education voted May 21 to approve social studies curriculum standards that urge high school students to examine church-state separation critically—a move likely to affect textbooks nationwide.

A motion to postpone until July a vote on the social studies standards failed 6-8. The high school social studies standards passed along party lines, with 9 Republicans favoring and 5 Democrats opposing them.

In the days leading to the vote, more than 200 people registered to testify before the board, voicing their opinions about language of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, a state-mandated set of learning objectives for public-school students.

Those standards not only influence textbooks in Texas, but also have an impact nationally because Texas is one of the top two buyers of textbooks in the United States, and many publishers craft their books with the Texas market in mind.

Over the objection of some members—including Mary Helen Berlanga of Corpus Christi, who raised concern about last minute “cut-and-paste” additions to standards—the board approved a lengthy list of amendments on the day of the final vote.

Bob Craig of Lubbock offered an amendment rewriting the contentious church-state amendment, offering what some observers characterized as

compromise language.

The amendment, calling on high school students to compare and contrast separation of church and state with the Founders' original intent, passed 11-3.

As amended, the standard states, "Examine the reasons the Founding Fathers protected religious freedom in America and guaranteed it free exercise by saying that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, and compare and contrast this to the phrase 'separation of church and state.'"

Thomas Jefferson, who famously used the phrase "wall of separation between church and state" in a letter to Danbury Baptist Association, had been dropped by the board from an early draft of the high school standards in a list of influential political thinkers, although he appeared in standards at other grade levels.

In response to a firestorm over the omission, the board reinstated Thomas Jefferson to the high school standards. But the board rejected a move to add John Madison—primary author of the Bill of Rights—and drop theologian John Calvin's name.

At the opening of the May 21 meeting, board member Cynthia Dunbar of Richmond offered an invocation articulating the position of a vocal segment of the state board—a desire to teach public school students the United State is "a Christian land governed by Christian principles."

"I believe no one can read the history of our country without realizing that the Good Book and the spirit of the Savior have from the beginning been our guiding geniuses. ... I like to believe we are living today in the spirit of the Christian religion. I like also to believe that as long as we do so, no great harm can come to our country," she said.

Prior to final public hearings and the board's vote on curriculum standards, some religious leaders had voiced concern about proposed language that would downplay constitutional protections for religious freedom.

"Our Founding Fathers understood that the best way to protect religious liberty in America is to keep government out of matters of faith," said Roger Paynter, pastor of First Baptist Church in Austin.

"But this state board appears hostile to teaching students about the importance of keeping religion and state separate, a principle long supported in my own Baptist tradition and in other faiths."