

Oakland schools may get some control back

Local authority over Oakland district now rests in Senate hands

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SACRAMENTO — The state Assembly approved a controversial bill Tuesday that would force the state to return some local control of schools back to Oakland Unified School District.

The lower house approved AB45 by Assemblyman Sandre Swanson, D-Oakland, on a 47-32 vote, with six votes to spare to clear the majority margin required in the 80-member house.

The Assembly's approval sent the bill to the state Senate, where Swanson said upper house leader Don Perata, also an Oakland Democrat, is prepared to push it through to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Notably, Perata authored the bill that led to the Oakland school district takeover in 2003.

The Republican governor, however, has not taken a position on the measure.

Swanson's bill would gradually restore the Oakland school board's ability to exercise control over personnel and facilities management, community relations and student achievement.

For the past four years, the school board has been strictly advisory to the state-appointed administrator — currently, Kimberly Statham.

"In AB45, we've tried to put together a thoughtful, transparent process, based on measures of confidence, so that this transfer can take place," Swanson said. The pace of the transition would be tied to progress reports by independent state auditors. The transfer of powers in certain areas — those authorized by the auditors — would begin in July 2008.

Chris Dobbins, the district's newest school board member and a former government teacher, said he was excited to hear the news. He said he believes the community should have more of a say in educational policy, such as whether to close schools. He also said voters would have elected officials to hold accountable for the shortcomings of the school system.

"I'm still really upset about the East Oakland Community High School," Dobbins said, speaking of a new high school the central office administrators shut down because of a host of problems.

The state took over the Oakland school district in 2003 after it overspent its budget and the cash-strapped state loaned the school district \$100 million. The state Education Department assumed management and decision-making power until the department decides the district is fiscally stable.

Bill supporters say the district is meeting state and county fiscal recovery plans.

But Assemblyman Todd Spitzer, an Orange County Republican, argued it was too early to restore even non-fiscal governance to Oakland schools, given the district's history and concerns of state overseers.

Supporters also say the district has made academic improvements over the past few years, while foes say the district's students still score poorly on standardized tests when compared to other California students.

Jack O'Connell, state superintendent of public instruction, has publicly opposed the bill. But Statham — O'Connell's appointee — has not taken a stance, said district spokesman Alex Katz.

"I know her position is that while she's here, for as long as she's here, she wants to make schools better," Katz said.

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