

School board prepares to retake control

Legislation that would restore some local authority to be considered Wednesday

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OAKLAND — At a meeting earlier this year, Oakland school board members watched with concern as hundreds of people marched to the central office, pleading — in vain — for the administration to keep their schools open.

The next month, they witnessed an uproar over the School Options Program, a school assignment process that has drawn criticism for its lack of transparency.

They also caught the aftermath of the principal selection process at Skyline High School. To the dismay of parents and teachers, the central office staff announced they had chosen the new leader for the high school — despite promises to gather community input through a series of interview panels.

But the seven people elected to oversee the city's education system saw those controversies unfold from the sideline. Their role in district affairs has been strictly advisory since summer 2003, when the state issued an emergency loan and assumed control of the city's schools.

This week, however, Oakland's public school system could come one step closer to regaining some form of democracy. On Wednesday afternoon, the state Assembly Committee on Education hears testimony on a bill that would return all but fiscal control to the local school board by Jan 1.

School board directors, teachers, parents and other community members are expected to attend the

1:30 p.m. hearing in support of Assembly Bill 45, authored by Assemblyman Sandre Swanson, D-Oakland. If it passes muster with the committee on Wednesday, the bill still needs to pass through the Assembly's Committee on Appropriations before it is heard on the floor.

If the legislation dies, Jack O'Connell, state superintendent of public instruction, will have the final say in the matter.

Hilary McLean, a spokeswoman for O'Connell, said last week the state superintendent had not taken a formal position on the legislation or set a time-

line for local governance.

School board member Gary Yee said a timeline is necessary for the district's morale, as well as for long-term planning. He also argues the state — under O'Connell and Oakland's two state-appointed administrators — has not been able to resolve the district's greatest challenges.

"He hasn't stopped the declining enrollment. He hasn't stopped school closures. He hasn't stopped the conflict over school choice. The fundamental issues are still hanging out there, I think," Yee said.

Betty Olson-Jones, president of the Oakland teacher's union, said she feels Swanson's legislation — which she supports — also should include a timeline for the return of financial control. As the bill is written, the school board would once again oversee facilities, administration, instruction, personnel and community relations, but not its budget.

"Whatever you plan to do academically, it has to have a budget attached to it," Olson-Jones said.

Another challenge the board will face is timing. One of its key duties is choosing a superintendent, a process that can take months.

David Kakishiba, school board president, said the board was already preparing for that moment. In the next few months, through a leadership development consulting firm, Aspen Group International, Inc., the board will begin to outline its priorities — including what to look for in a leader.

District spokesman Alex Katz said the training budget was about \$60,000 and the district was paying slightly more than half of the cost. Foundations have contributed the rest, Kakishiba said.

"The real test is whether or not we can act in a disciplined fashion, speaking in one voice and getting accountability and results from the superintendent," Kakishiba said. "Because boards in Oakland haven't functioned that way."

Michele LeProhn, a parent at Skyline High School, said many families feel disenfranchised from the educational system, especially after the way they were cut out of the principal selection process at Skyline.

LeProhn said she is ready for the state takeover to end. But, she said, the culture of the Oakland school district has never been particularly open or accessible to families.

"The Oakland school district has always made it hard," she said. "The overall feeling on Second (Avenue) has been, 'We're us, and you're them.'"

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