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Oakland School Board Members Back Local Control Bill

By J. Douglas Allen-Taylor

CALIFORNIA Assemblymember San-dré Swanson (D-Oakland) brought his Oakland Unified School District restoration of local control bill to the OUSD Board of Trustees Wednesday night, and, not surprisingly, trustees voted unanimously for a resolution in support.

The vote was not a rubber stamp, however, and statements by both board members and Swanson showed how seriously both are taking an eventual return of power to the board four years after it was stripped away by the State of California.

Swanson's AB45, which he introduced on the first day he took office at the end of last year and calls his "top legislative priority," would immediately restore full power to the School Board over the areas of community relations and government, facilities and personnel management and pupil achievement while retaining state control over financial management. The bill would also provide for a restoration of compensation to the elected School Board, which has been serving in an advisory capacity without pay since the state takeover.

Swanson has already secured several assemblymember co-authors for his local control bill, including Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley), Assistant Speaker Pro Tempore Laura Richardson



(D-Long Beach), Majority Leader Karen Bass (D-Los Angeles) and Assistant Majority Whip Mary Hayashi (D-San Leandro). Other elected official supporters include Congressmember Barbara Lee (D-Oakland), Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums, and several members of the Oakland City Council and the Alameda County Board of Supervisors.

Since 2003, the Oakland Unified School District has been run by a state administrator—first Randolph Ward and now Kimberly Stathan—hired by the state superintendent of education and answerable only to the superintendent.

The first hearing on Swanson's local control bill will be held at the state capitol in Sacramento on April 25 in the Assembly Education Committee. Lobbying for the bill has already begun, with a delegation of parents from Maxwell Park Elementary meeting in Sacramento on Wednesday with Assembly Education Committee members and representatives of the State Superintendent to secure their support.

Swanson said on Wednesday that he has met with the governor's office, State Superintendent of Education Jack O'Connell, OUSD State Administrator Kim Stathan, State Senator Don Perata (D-Oakland)—who authored the original OUSD state takeover legislation—and Assembly Education Committee Chair Gene Mullin (D-San Mateo) "telling them that it's imperative that we pass this legislation. We're going to great lengths to find out every objection and to encourage constructive changes. I don't this to be just an exercise. I want a bill that's passed and signed into law."

Swanson told board members that many legislators "are wondering whether you are ready to govern," and has cited the fact that board members have voluntarily taken management training, "even though no one has required you to do so. Some of them have said that this board is probably more qualified

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than most boards to run a school district, since most School Board members around the state merely take office and start making decisions once they are elected, without any training at all.” Swanson also said that legislators were surprised to learn that with four of its seven members elected following the discovery of the budget shortfall that led to the state takeover, “it’s not the same board” that approved the policies and actions that led to that shortfall.

And while OUSD board members unanimously supporting Swanson’s local control bill, with only board member Noel Gallo being absent, they gave differing reasons why.

Board member Greg Hodge, who was board president during the takeover, said that in Oakland and other districts where the state has taken over local schools, “there is no evidence that academics have improved.” He said that he had pulled district reports going back to before the takeover, “and we are on the same academic trajectory now that we were before 2003.”

Hodge defended the previous board’s actions in approving a teacher pay raise that inadvertently led to the budget shortfall, where an antiquated district computer system did not catch the problem until it was too late. “We overspent our checkbook without understanding what was in our register,” Hodge said. “But the money was well spent.”

And Hodge said that in order to prevent such problems from happening in the future, he would like to see a restoration of the position of independent auditor “answerable to the board only, and independent of staff. That position was done away with by a previous board.”

But Boardmember Gary Yee, who was elected in the tumultuous period shortly after the budget shortfall was discovered but before the state took over, said that it was declining enrollment rather than the teacher pay raise which caused OUSD’s budget crisis.

“The enrollment decline was unforeseen,” Yee said. “I’ve told a lot of my colleagues in the California School Boards Association that they need to be mindful when they approve pay hikes and health packages. Their turn may come, too. Many of these problems cannot be predicted.”

And Boardmember Kerry Hamill, who was serving on the board in 2003 when the state took over, said that while “obviously I support this legislation,” she did not view the board’s actions prior to 2003 in as favorable a light as Hodge. “I was one of the persons who thought we needed help,” Hamill said. “We almost defaulted on our payroll more than once prior to the budget shortfall. I don’t have a problem asking for help.”

But Hamill was also sharply critical of the state administration of the Oakland schools since the takeover, saying that “every school takeover should have one focused year of real help, where resources are concentrated on the district, not just substituting one overworked administration for another.”

Hamill said that with the district down 14,000 in student enrollment in recent years and with a projection of a loss of another 1800 students in the next five years, the district needed to hold onto as many students as possible in order to balance its finances. “We are fighting for our financial lives,” she noted. But instead of following that policy,

Hamill said that the office of the OUSD state administrator “is exacerbating the problem with regard to the approval of charter schools. We have approved dozens and dozens of new charter schools in recent years, three in the last three months.” She said that the administrator was approving the charters “to take the pressure off and keep parents from questioning what is going on inside the district,” but that the policy will leave OUSD as “a shadow of itself. We’re in an emergency. I’d like power back so we can do the right things to correct this and get a grip on it.”

Board member Alice Spearman, elected following the takeover, agreed with Hamill, saying that “Oakland has become a panacea for charter schools. They are coming here from hundreds of miles away to open them, many without regard for the needs of our children. There needs to be a moratorium on charter schools in Oakland.”

Swanson also announced on Wednesday night that he has been selected by Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez to chair a select committee on state school takeovers to investigate the effect such takeovers have had on local school districts throughout California. The ultimate result, Swanson said, would be recommendations on changes to the overall state legislation that governs school takeovers. Swanson said he plans to hold hearings in districts around the state where such school takeovers have taken place, including Oakland, Fresno, Compton, and Richmond, and is currently in the process of choosing committee members. He said that the OUSD local control bill is his priority, however. “I want to get this done first,” he said.