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Oakland schools in governor's hands

Local control bill passes through Assembly

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OAKLAND — An Assembly bill that could speed the return of governing authority to the state-run Oakland Unified School District met strong opposition Monday from Republicans in the state Assembly, but it passed with a 45-28 vote.

The legislation now heads to the governor, who has until mid-October to sign or veto it. A spokeswoman at Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's press office said Monday that the governor had yet to take a position.

Oakland Democrat Sandre Swanson, who introduced the bill last December, said he planned to meet with Schwarzenegger's staff again this morning.

"I'm optimistic and hopeful the governor will sign the bill into law," Swanson said.

More than four years have passed since the state took over management of Oakland public schools. The School District went into state receivership in mid-2003 after a huge deficit came to light and the state issued a multimillion-dollar emergency loan.

Under the current law, the state superintendent decides when the Oakland

School District is ready to oversee certain areas, such as facilities, academic achievement and staffing.

Swanson's bill would instead link the assessment of Oakland's readiness to annual progress reports by the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, a team of auditors charged with measuring the district's improvement. For example, if the district scores highly enough on the staffing section of the report, the state superintendent would have to restore boardoversight of its personnel department within months.

In July, state Superintendent Jack O'Connell returned a small piece of oversight — over an area named "community relations and governance" — to the Oaklandschool board. O'Connell, who opposes Swanson's bill, said his decision had nothing to do with the pending legislation.

Some proponents of the bill argue that Oakland citizens have the right to hold their elected school board accountable for the success or failure of the city's public schools, and that the state administration has dragged on for too long. Others say the process of restoring local power would be more transparent under the proposed legislation.

But opponents have countered that the bill is premature and that it was engineered mostly to appease angry constituents of Swanson's predominantly Oakland district.



As the Assembly considered Senate amendments Monday, Republican Sam Blakeslee of San Luis Obispo said the bill sets a worrisome precedent for the entire state — that legislation will intervene before a school district achieves full fiscal recovery.

Some Oaklanders, including school board President David Kakishiba, aren't as confident in the state's ability to bring about fiscal stability. Late last month, the school district's interim chief financial officer estimated the deficit for 2007-08 was \$4.7 million — more than three times what the outgoing CFO had estimated in June.

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