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City leaps first hurdle to regain control of schools

■ Amended Assembly bill ties Oakland district's transition to progress reports

By Katy Murphy

STAFF WRITER

SACRAMENTO — A bill that would establish a plan for the return of local governance to the Oakland school board sailed through the Assembly's Committee on Education on Wednesday afternoon.

A group of Oakland residents, who wore buttons signaling their support, hailed the passage as an important step in restoring democracy to the school district, which has been under state control since a fiscal crisis in mid-2003.

"I feel so strongly that AB45 is necessary to restore the community's connection with their own schools," said Joel Freid, the children's advocacy chairman of the Crocker Highlands Elementary School PTA, which recently voted to endorse the bill.

But Assembly Bill 45 would not automatically restore the board's powers by Jan. 1, as originally written. Rather, amendments made by Assemblyman Sandre Swanson (D-Oakland) tie the transition to annual progress reports by independent state auditors in the Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team. The next such review, under the bill, would be made in March. The transfer of powers in certain areas — those authorized by the auditors — would begin in July 2008.

In a news conference following the hearing, Swanson explained the amendments would address a question that would almost certainly arise during the legislative process: "How do you know they are ready?"

"It's a much stronger bill," he said.

Although the revised legislation no longer includes a "date certain," several school board members said they were confident it would be

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more likely to pass in its current form.

"I think whatever Swanson needed to do to move the bill forward was the critical thing," said school board member Gary Yee.

In fact, a spokeswoman from the office of state Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata confirmed Wednesday the senator had decided to back the bill, as amended.

But another key player broke his neutrality Wednesday. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell — who oversees the Oakland district — took a stance against the bill.

Andrea Ball, O'Connell's deputy superintendent for governmental affairs, urged the committee to vote "no."

Although the Oakland USD has made progress in fiscal responsibility and academic achievement, more work needs to be done," she testified. "The state superintendent will not return authority to the board until the district is on sound footing to recovery . . ."

Ball's statements prompted hisses from the large crowd and criticism from school board members. Nevertheless, O'Connell's position didn't seem to come as a surprise.

As of now, the state superintendent has the last word on the



DIANA DIROY — Staff

ASSEMBLY MEMBER LONI HANCOCK (right) explains how the approval of AB45 is only the first step in a long process toward Oakland reclaiming control of its school district. Assembly Member Sandre Swanson stands with Hancock Wednesday at the Capitol in Sacramento.

transfer of power to those districts under his authority.

At the Wednesday press conference, Swanson and other public officials — including Assemblywomen Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, and Mary Hayashi, D-Hayward — urged supporters to lobby legislators to support the bill. It must first clear the Committee on Appropriations before it goes to the full Assembly.

They didn't have to ask twice. As soon as the press conference ended, a large group descended on Perata's office and were already discussing plans to visit with O'Connell.

Noel Rabinowitz, a Maxwell Park resident whose son is about four years shy of kindergarten, said he views the restoration of board authority as critical to his efforts to foster community support for the Oakland schools.

The board, Rabinowitz said, "is going to make good decisions, and they're going to make bad decisions. But they have the legitimacy of being elected."

He added, "At least now, here's a light at the end of the tunnel. We're not exactly sure where the light is, but we see it now."