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Education board clears room after outbursts over transgender policy proposal

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About 100 people attend a meeting Tuesday evening of the Kern County Board of Education at which there was contentious discussion of a policy proposal to require local schools to notify parents if students declare they identify as transgender.

John Cox / The Californian

The Kern County Board of Education retired early to private session Tuesday evening after a series of outbursts following a failed effort to force a discussion about whether local schools should be required to notify parents if their children declare themselves transgender.

President Ron Froehlich called a closed session meeting less than 20 minutes into the meeting's opening session, even before audience members had an opportunity to address the contentious proposal.

About 100 people on both sides of the issue had gathered at the meeting, many planning to weigh in on whether the board should follow in the steps of the Chino Valley Unified School District, which last month adopted a policy requiring staff to notify parents of students' identification as transgender. That policy mirrored a bill that this year failed in the state Legislature.

Shortly after the start of Tuesday's meeting, board member Lori Cisneros asked that the policy be brought up for discussion, saying Froehlich had offered to place the proposal on the agenda but that he later withdrew it. Froehlich said he declined to put it on the agenda because discussion on the matter had already taken place during the three previous board meetings.

When the board rejected Cisneros' motion by a vote of 5-2, audience members clapped, booed or shouted from their seats. Froehlich threatened to clear the room, then after being unable to proceed with the meeting, declared the board was moving to closed session. He said public comments would be heard later, when the rest of the meeting resumed.

Audience members filed out of the room into a lobby and side room, where they waited for the meeting to resume. The board returned from private session shortly before 8 p.m. The meeting was still going after 9 p.m.

Assembly Bill 1314, introduced in the spring by Assemblyman Bill Essayli, R-Riverside, would have required schools to notify parents within three days after learning a student identifies as a gender that is not in alignment with their official records.

LGBTQ groups successfully opposed the bill, saying students have a right to keep such information private, and that disclosing sensitive gender identification information to parents could lead to abuse and even suicide.

According to the Kern County Superintendent of Schools, state law forbids notification of parents by school personnel.

"Everyone has a right to consent," said Adrianna Ocegüera, who showed up at Tuesday's board meeting to oppose any policy that would require parental notification of transgender identification. She said she supported Froehlich's move to clear the room, adding that people on the other side of the issue were behaving rudely during the meeting.

But parental rights advocates say schools have no right to keep such information from them and that, in some cases, teachers and school staff are encouraging students to switch genders.

"They're opening a Pandora's box," said parental rights advocate Tara Carter, who had campaigned for Froehlich's seat and lost. She said the meeting's events prior to closed session amounted to "tyranny."

Upon Tuesday's return to open session, Brad Dacus, president of the Southern California office of the Pacific Justice Institute, said parents have a fundamental right over their children's welfare, adding, "it's not something that can just be ignored and put off."

Former North High student Lance Mack, who identifies as transgender, spoke against the proposed notification policy, saying not all parents are protective of their children. Mack recalled being homeless for a time after coming out as transgender, adding that parental consent remains required before minors may undergo surgery or hormone treatment.

Brandon Holthaus, senior pastor of Rock Harbor Church, warned the board that church-going parents will pull their children out of public school if they are denied information about their children's choices.

"You're going to lose your state funding because you're going to lose your students," Holthaus said.

Bakersfield resident Michael Pollack called the notification policy Cisneros proposed morally wrong and anti-American. He said moving forward with such a decision would also expose school districts to lawsuits.