

State

Bills in favor of bilingual education in committee

AUSTIN — Despite a federal court order requiring sweeping expansion of Texas' bilingual education program, bills to bring the state in compliance with that order still are lodged in House and Senate committees with less than four weeks remaining in the session.

Sen. Carlos Truan, D-Corpus Christi, who expects his bill to come before the Senate Education Committee today says he has the votes to favorably send his measure out of committee and on to the Senate floor for approval.

"I would be concerned if we don't get the bill out of the education committee this week and then out of the Senate early next week," Truan said.

"By next week we'll have three weeks, so anything that is left over for the last week — anything can happen. I'm trying to avoid that. We've been trying to get the bill drafted in such a way that we all can agree on it."

Bilingual education programs in Texas currently are provided only in kindergarten through third grade and Truan's measure would extend them through elementary school. It would require bilingual education in any district where 20 or more students in any grade speak the same language other than English. The state would spend about \$150 for each student in the bilingual education program. If his bill passes, it would cost taxpayers \$40 million in the next two years.

Rep. Matt Garcia, D-San Antonio, sponsor of a bill identical to the senator's, feels much the same way about the chance of his bill's approval — concerned but optimistic.

"I would have liked the matter to have been through sooner," Garcia said. "I think the longer it takes the more pressure it will be for them to vote out a bilingual education package. But I feel it will be voted out of committee favorably and voted favorably out of the full membership of the House."

"Ordinarily, I would get nervous about the status of the bill, but there is a federal judgment mandating bilingual education and a task force appointed that has already spoken to it."

A Governor's Task Force on Bilingual Education recommended in April the state establish and provide increased funding for bilingual education from kindergarten through elementary grades.

The task force also recommended optional language programs be provided through eighth grade for students identified as having limited English speaking ability. The programs could include instruction in English as a second language, bilingual education or other methods, the report said.

Both bills by Truan and Garcia comply with the task force report, but address more explicitly such matters as entry and exit criteria and monitoring.

Truan thinks the work of the task force slowed down action on his Senate version.

"The governor's task force delayed us," he said. "We (the task force) ended our work on April 15 and have been having drafts of legislation that we've looked at to implement the recommendations. There has been a lot of activity behind the scenes, but not necessarily out in the open."

Garcia said many Texans do not understand what bilingual education is.

"They think it's going to be a horrendous expense and it's not going to do anything. But it's not going to be horrendous and it is going to do something," he said.

Garcia said his measure should be reported out of committee next week.

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Flood risk receding with water

HOUSTON — Homeowners along the San Jacinto River kept their fingers crossed Tuesday watching water levels along the already swollen river banks, hoping the forecast scattered showers would not cause flooding.

Officials of the San Jacinto River Authority at Lake Houston said Tuesday there were no flooding problems near Conroe at the dam. "We're doing fine," said H.E. Barrett, the authority spokesman. "There isn't any flooding along the river (near the lake)."

John Caswell, with the Harris County Civil Defense, said he had several calls from homeowners along the river south of the dam, "but it hasn't been too bad. Barring any more rain, we may be able to put this behind us," Caswell said.

National Weather Service meteorologists said Tuesday scattered showers during the afternoon would probably cause some street flooding, but the majority of the thunderstorm activity had moved east towards Louisiana.

The persistent weekend rains caused at least one death and forced several families to evacuate their homes late Sunday as water levels in homes rose. By Monday, water in streets, homes and highways began receding, but the runoff caused threatening conditions in the river, creeks and bays surrounding Houston.

"We've still got some crews out, but everything has been dropping today," said Bill Edwards of the Harris County Flood control office. "I just hope it stays that way."

Although the river was not at flood stage, which is 19 feet, the usually 3-foot-deep water was measured to be 13.8-feet deep at Interstate 45 near Conroe.

Judge OK's using dogs to find drugs

HOUSTON — A federal judge has dismissed a civil rights lawsuit challenging a suburban school district's use of dogs to sniff out drugs and alcohol in the classroom and in students' lockers and cars.

U.S. District Judge Robert O'Connor ruled Monday Goose Creek Independent School District officials were within their rights and dismissed the lawsuit filed for three Sterling High School students by the American Civil Liberties Union.

"When school officials have reasonable cause to believe that activity is occurring on a school campus which jeopardizes the health and safety of students, warrantless searches are justified in proper circumstances," O'Connor said.

In a similar case involving the Latexo school district in Houston County, U.S. District Judge William Wayne Justice in September ruled drug-sniffing dogs could not be used "without reasonable suspicion" that students sniffed have illicit substances.

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