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Eighth-Graders In State Must Take Algebra

Education Chief Says Not All Students Prepared

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- California's Board of Education voted Wednesday to require all eighth-graders to be tested in algebra, acting upon a forceful, last-minute recommendation by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The governor immediately applauded the board's action to make California the first state in the nation to require algebra at such an early level. He called algebra "the key that unlocks the world of science, innovation, engineering and technology."

Schwarzenegger fueled a political firestorm by issuing a letter asking for the mandate the night before Wednesday's state Board of Education meeting.

The Schwarzenegger-appointed board had been scheduled to consider adopting a new eighth-grade math test proposed by Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell. Instead, it voted 8-1 to adopt Schwarzenegger's recommendation.

O'Connell, a Democrat, blasted Schwarzenegger during the nearly four-hour hearing, saying he had never seen such meddling by a governor at the last minute on a policy change that deserved rigorous public debate.

"The governor never took the time - or perhaps wasn't aware of it - the governor never took the time to weigh in until last night," on a policy that "will have significant impact on literally tens of thousands of students in our state," O'Connell said.

Just half of California's eighth-graders currently take full algebra, up from about 34 percent four years ago. But O'Connell said only about 23 percent of those score as proficient or above on standardized tests, and the rate is even lower for black, Hispanic and poor students.

About half of California's 6.1 million students are considered poor, and a quarter are still learning English.

Critics say pushing students into higher-level math too early could increase the dropout rate.

Algebra I is a requirement to graduate from high school, but many students need remedial classes or a pre-algebra course first. The eighth-grade test O'Connell proposed would have measured some algebra standards, but not all.

Board members agreed with Schwarzenegger's contention that the superintendent's proposed exam could set up a two-tiered system that fast-tracked some students into regular algebra while allowing others to take a less rigorous general math test.

The governor and his supporters argued all students should be held to the same high standard.

"I think this is a bold, innovative way of setting that high expectation and then finding the resources to get there. Otherwise we're going to be sitting here in 10 years saying the same thing," board member David Lopez said.

The state will phase in the algebra requirement over the next three years.

Several of the more than 30 speakers who raised concerns about the test noted that California already has a shortage of qualified math and science teachers. Board members worried how the state could teach algebra to nearly 500,000 eighth-graders in such a short time without dramatically boosting education funding.

California already is facing a \$15.2 billion budget deficit for the fiscal year that started July 1. Democrats and Republicans in the state Legislature remain far apart on negotiations about how to close it.

Still, Schwarzenegger's education secretary, Dave Long, said the governor would help find the billions of dollars it would cost to boost what he referred to as California's education "infrastructure." He did not say where the money would come from.

After the meeting, Long said Schwarzenegger has pledged to make the funding a priority.

"It will be done. The governor feels he wants this gold standard," he said.

During a conference call with reporters after the state board's vote, O'Connell said "a promise (on education funding) was made that he can't keep."

Jim Aschwanden was the lone board member to vote against the mandatory algebra test, which he said was an ill-thought out plan "hatched over the past 48 hours."

"We have research that tells us it's a fantasy. Not all children are developmentally ready to take algebra in the eighth grade," said Aschwanden, the executive director of the California Agricultural Teachers' Association.

The state was under pressure from the U.S. Department of Education to change its current eighth-grade math test by Aug. 1 or face losing up to \$4.1 million in funding.

Federal officials found that California's existing math test for students not enrolled in Algebra I did not follow the rules under the No Child Left Behind Act because it tested sixth- and seventh-grade math but was administered in eighth grade.

Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Kerri Briggs praised the board's action. She said California was setting a bold goal that would not be easy to achieve but was critically important.

"Kids are dropping out because they're bored and they don't feel like there's enough challenge and expectations for them," she said. "This may be exactly what they need to help spur achievement."

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