

News//Chip Johnson

# Bill would return school operations to Oakland

Chip Johnson

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The day new state legislators take office, they are invited to introduce a bill for consideration in the coming year. Assemblymember Sandré Swanson introduced Assembly Bill AB 45.

For first-term East Bay Democratic Assemblyman Sandré Swanson, who was sworn in last week after his election last month to represent the 16th Assembly District, it was an opportunity to resurrect the debate over one of Oakland's thorniest issues -- who should control public schools in the city.

Swanson's first legislative undertaking would shift control of the Oakland Unified School District's day-to-day operations from a state administrator back to local officials. The district has been under state control since a \$100 million financial bailout in 2003, when all aspects of school management, from student achievement to finance, were placed in the state's hands.

"This is a very serious issue," Swanson told me in an interview, "because for 3 1/2 years the state has controlled the district -- and heard from more than 1,000 parents who've asked to play some role in the educational decisions that affect their children."

If Swanson's bill were to make it through the Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger were to sign it into law, the state Department of Education would be required to hand control of the district's day-to-day operations to Oakland officials by early 2008, while continuing to provide oversight of district finances.

Swanson's bill is the first legislative approach to the problem, but it's certainly not the first time an Oakland politician has taken up the cause. Since Oakland's schools became the sole domain of State Superintendent Jack O'Connell's office, the issue of local control has almost resembled a religious crusade at times.

There have been sit-ins and shout-downs at school board meetings. Political hopeful Aimee Allison, a Green Party candidate for City Council, made the issue a key part of her campaign strategy. And when Dan Siegel presided over the school board, he filed a lawsuit intended to give the school board power over classroom curriculum policies.

So far, none of it has worked.

Perhaps Swanson's approach will generate some attention. And maybe the backing of Mayor-elect Ron Dellums, an enthusiastic advocate for children, would generate the political momentum to challenge the state bureaucracy.

Dellums certainly seems to be planning to make youth issues a priority of his administration. Last month, a national task force he created -- the Dellums Commission -- issued a report on youth violence, education and other issues. These problems will be central to his work as Oakland's mayor.

Swanson's bill also challenges the progress the state has made in reaching the goals it set for its administrator. The state's latest audit report criticized the district for constant - and costly -- changes in leadership, policy and direction. But the report acknowledged gains made in many areas, including student

achievement. The report recommended returning operational control to local officials while maintaining fiscal oversight of the district.

Swanson's bill points out that the district's state overseers have not met their own goals to come up with a recovery and implementation plan to chart a path back to local control. In other words, Swanson says, the state and its hand-picked administrator, Randy Ward, who left in July to take over the San Diego County Office of Education, made mistakes as well.

The jumble of department heads and constant shifts in policy is the result of the state's direction, not the failure of the Oakland school board, which has been reduced to advisory status under the current structure.

School board member Kerry Hamill backs Swanson's bill and says state control has come with more baggage than anyone expected. The district is regularly scrutinized by the state's Fiscal Crisis Management Team, the state Department of Education, the state administrator and the Alameda County Office of Education, Hamill said.

In each of the last three years, the state controller has audited the district's books, she added.

"That's just too many cooks in the kitchen," she said. "Above all, you need leadership, and this was sold to us as one person in charge, but it's not," Hamill said. "Three and a half years is ample time for the state to have corrected those deficiencies."

For school board members Hamill and Siegel and others, enduring more than three years of state receivership has been an ordeal. They are like employees who've been fired from their jobs, receive no stipends -- but are required to show up for work.

Perhaps one of the strangest functions of the state recovery plan is the practice of penalizing district programs that fail to meet expectations. If a literacy program falls short of goals set by the state, the program is punished by withholding state monies it uses to operate.

Short-changing a program that has failed to toe the line, even while under the leadership and direction of a state administrator, seems to be at cross purposes with educating the state's children, which is the agency's primary mission.

"This bill is way overdue and represents an attempt to shift the debate from control to education," Swanson said.

The school district has made measurable improvements in student achievement and management practices since the state took over three years ago. It seems to me it's time that the state begins giving the locals some of the control they seek, or at least setting a date for when daily operations will shift back to home rule.



Written By

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Reach Chip on

Since 1997, Chip Johnson has written a twice-weekly column for the San Francisco Chronicle.

A graduate of San Francisco State University, Chip has worked as a staff writer for the Albuquerque Tribune, the Oakland Tribune, the Los Angeles Times and the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

With family and friends spread across the city, he is a proud Oakland resident.