

April 16, 2008 - 9:51PM

Measure backs 'American values' in state schools

[Comments 7](#) | [Recommend 2](#)

Howard Fischer, Capitol Media Services

Arizona schools whose courses "denigrate American values and the teachings of Western civilization" could lose state funding under the terms of legislation approved Wednesday by a House panel.

SB1108 also would bar teaching practices that "overtly encourage dissent" from those values, including democracy, capitalism, pluralism and religious tolerance. Schools would have to surrender teaching materials to the state superintendent of public instruction, who could withhold state aid from districts that broke the law.

Another section of the bill would bar public schools, community colleges and universities from allowing organizations to operate on campus if it is "based in whole or in part on race-based criteria," a provision Rep. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, said is aimed at MEChA, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan, a student group.

The 9-6 vote by the Appropriations Committee sends the measure to the full House.

The legislation appears aimed largely at the Tucson Unified School District, whose "Raza Studies" program has annoyed some people. Tucson resident Laura Leighton read lawmakers sections of some books used in classrooms which she said promote hatred.

If the proposal becomes law, however, it would have a statewide reach. And that concerned even some lawmakers who voted for it, saying the language of what would and would not be prohibited is "vague."

Tucson school officials have said the program under fire has helped Hispanic students improve their academic achievement by building pride and focusing on their cultural heritage.

But Pearce, who crafted the measure, said the program doesn't stop there. He said taxpayers are funding "hate speech paid for by tax dollars."

And Pearce said some of the teachings amount to "sedition" by suggesting that the current border between the United States and Mexico disappear, with Mexico - and Hispanics - taking over the American Southwest.

Leighton had specific problems with a text called "Occupied America," a book touted by its publisher as examining Chicano history from the coming of the Spanish in 1519.

She read one line which said "kill the gringos." Another talked about a plan to take back the U.S. Southwest and deport all the Europeans.

A closer look, at the book, though, showed the line about the gringos was a quote from someone referenced. And that the plan to take back the area was not urging current action but instead detailing one pushed by Mexico in 1915.

Leighton, however, said she and others who reviewed the course work believe it is unacceptable.

"We find hate and revolution is being taught in their books," she testified. "We found a denigration and disparagement of American values and a subversion of our history."

Anna Graves said she believes schools are promoting a double standard with such programs.

"If we were to have a group of white citizens teaching white culture only for the white children, it would be totally and absolutely inappropriate in a country that is a country of diversity," said Graves, a Mexican immigrant now a U.S. citizen.

"I absolute deplore people who come from another country and do not want anything to do with the culture, the language or anything that has to do with the government," Graves said. She said they are in this country to send back money to relatives elsewhere and "are not here to provide loyalty."

Rep. Peter Rios, D-Dudleyville, said that kind of attitude ignores the United States as a "culture of diversity."

"What is the downside of students learning about their culture along with the American culture, value and mores?" he asked. Graves said nothing - as long as it's not just Hispanic culture being taught.

More to the point, Graves said it's the job of parents to teach children about their own ethnic background and culture.

"Not everybody had what you had," Rios responded. "So some of these children have to pick up some of this positive self-image building at the school because they're not getting it at home, they're not getting it in the barrios of the neighborhood."

And Rios suggested there was a reason to have programs aimed at teaching Hispanic youngsters about their heritage.

"At the end of the day, we all know the history books are written by the victors," he said. "And we didn't win too many of our battles coming from a Hispanic culture."

Pearce said nothing in the Legislature precludes teaching about various cultures. What he opposes, he said, are the "hateful, despicable comments" becoming part of public education. What would be illegal, Pearce said, are "race-based" classes.

"Nobody would stand here, I suspect, and try to defend the KKK teachings at a Tucson school or anywhere else," he said.

House Minority Leader Phil Lopes, D-Tucson, said lawmakers should butt out of the controversy. He said decisions of curriculum should be left to local school boards.

But Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Gilbert, said lawmakers are entitled to regulate the use of tax dollars taken from Arizonans and "demand that our publicly funded education teach and inculcate our youth, our children with the values that make America what it is, the greatest and most free nation in the world."

Biggs, however, conceded the language of what would be prohibited is "somewhat vague" and probably needs work.

Rep. David Schapira, D-Tempe, said it is more than vague. He questioned what it means to "overtly encourage dissent" from the values of American democracy and Western civilization.

School board and superintendents' lobbyists signed in as opposed to the measure but did not speak. Nor did Sam Polito, Tempe schools lobbyist, saying it made no sense to try to derail Pearce's bill in a committee he chairs.