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Posted on Tue, Aug. 04, 2009

Modesto City Schools medical change faltering

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last updated: August 04, 2009 10:46:36 AM

A controversial proposal allowing junior high and high school students in Modesto to leave school to seek confidential medical services without their parents' knowledge appears headed to defeat.

Modesto City Schools board President Steve Grenbeaux signaled Monday night that he has changed his mind. He was one of four board members to vote in favor of a less restrictive policy in June.

"I'm a firm believer that if it ain't broken, don't fix it," Grenbeaux said during the meeting, which included 90 minutes of comments from 33 parents, health care professionals, educators and church pastors.

Without the change, city schools would follow current policy, which requires that parents submit written consent for their children to obtain the confidential medical services. The opt-out form is found in the district's 74-page handbook sent home at the beginning of each school year.

About 20 to 25 forms are submitted annually in a district with about 18,000 junior high and high school students, according to an informal survey of two Modesto high schools, said Marlin Sumpter, district director of child welfare and attendance.

Two months ago, trustees voted 4-3 to approve the first reading of the less restrictive policy. Unless other trustees switch sides, Grenbeaux's apparent change of heart would mean students could not leave campus for medical appointments without their parents' permission.

Most of the opposition to the policy centers on the idea that a teenage girl could get an abortion without parental knowledge. Medical services for boys and girls can include pregnancy testing, contraception, abortions, sexually transmitted disease testing and treatment, and counseling and treatment for rape, drug abuse and mental health.

About 215 people made Monday's meeting a standing-room-only event with overflow outside. Judging by applause, the crowd overwhelmingly opposed any policy that would let students obtain medical services without their parents' consent. Many wore yellow tags that said they support parental rights.

Of the 33 speakers, 21 spoke against the policy. Throughout the evening, audience members remained respectful. Some speakers shared their experiences with teen pregnancy, abortions and physical abuse, and some cried when they referenced the abuse some children suffer.

But opponents urged trustees not to adopt a policy based on the exceptions. They noted that Child Protective Services is called when children are being abused or need help. Some said schools should focus on educating students, not helping them get abortions.

One mother asked if trustees and school staff were going to be there 10 or 20 years later when the student is dealing with the emotional distress from making a decision without the guidance of their parents.

A father pointed out that a district policy states that parental rights include the "assurance that school personnel will at no time pre-empt parental prerogative." He said the confidential medical services policy would pre-empt parent rights.

Big Valley Grace Community Church Pastor Rick Countryman said about 2,000 parishioners signed a petition stating their opposition to the proposed policy.

"It's important for the board to send the message that they want more parent involvement," said Pamela LaChapell when arguing that the policy takes away from parents who are involved.

Those who support allowing students to leave school for the medical services without parental consent said the policy is meant to protect the students who are the exception and don't have loving and caring families. They said CPS is a broken system and that students cannot focus on earning an education if they are not getting mental, emotional or physical

help.

By not adopting the policy, trustees "are slamming another door in the faces of our most vulnerable children," said Kathy O'Brien, a retired special education teacher.

Eugene Conrotto said opponents are misdirecting their anger at trustees, and that they should be mad at the parents who don't have a strong bond or trust with their children.

Grenbeaux and Trustee Steve Collins were the only board members to speak. Collins said he would likely still support the policy, but could be persuaded otherwise if someone could show him there were negative impacts on communities where school districts don't require parent consent for confidential medical services. About half of the districts in the state have the policy. Several Stanislaus County districts do have the policy.

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