Forced Kindergarten Bill Dies In House

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — A bill to force parents to send their children to kindergarten has been killed by the House of Representatives for at least this session.

Earlier in the session, the House refused to pass a Senate bill that would have done the same thing and on Thursday, refused Senate amendments to a House bill that would have required mandatory kindergarten.

The House voted 49-37 to table the bill, a move that effectively killed it.

As it left the House, the bill would have forced all school systems to offer kindergarten to all children but parents would not have been required to send their offspring to class.

The Senate amended the bill to require attendance.

The measure was part of Gov. Edwin Edwards' 22-bill education package which has had rough going this session.

The governor earlier predicted the bill would fail because the Legislature wasn't ready to face the issue of mandatory kindergarten.

"We didn't feel when this bill left the House that we could mandate to parents that they had to send their children," said Rep. Jesse Deen of Benton.

"School boards can request help from the state Department of Education now if they want to offer kindergarten and get reimbursed," he said. "...so I ask you to put this to rest and maybe we can get together next year."

Rep. Jimmy D. Long, chairman of the House Education Committee and author of the governor's package, said he could see arguments on both sides.

"There is a strong belief in some education circles that if they get into an organized, professional program at an early age, they will be more mature and ready for the first grade," Long said.

Long acknowledged that 80 percent of the school systems now offer kindergarten in all schools.

Long had wanted the House to concur in the amendments to give the bill final passage "because I've already got five (Edwards) bills in conference committee."

He had better luck in getting the House to go along with Senate amendments to two other measures, thus giving them final legislative passage.

One would establish standards for any new teacher aides hired by local systems. They would have to have high school diplomas and test out at a 10th grade level on a national achievement test. They also would have to be at least 20 years old. The only requirement now is that an aide be at least 18.

The House had gone on record earlier in the session that the aides should test out at a 12th grade level and that all existing teacher aides should be given a one-year period to upgrade themselves.

Long said that was unrealistic and that few students are graduating who can test out at a 12th grade level.

"Frankly, I doubt few of us could," he added. "It's unrealistic to expect this of people who make $400 to $500 a month.

"For the first time in history we are establishing specific guidelines for aides.... We are trying to give you a reasonable approach that can get through this Legislature. It's nice to say we will require a 12th grade level but we know that is not going to happen. Most now are working for $400 to $500 a month and don't have that ability."

Rep. Ed Scogin of Slidell said it was not too much to expect because teacher aides frequently teach class when the regular teacher is gone for a few hours.

The House voted 56-31 to approve the Senate amendments and give the measure final passage.

The other bill, accepted unanimously, will require students entering colleges of education to take aptitude tests. If they don't make good grades they can still continue in the college.

However, the deans of the various colleges would counsel with the students and apparently tell them whether they should pursue the field of education.