Study recommends abolition of education program

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

An out-of-state expert and a state review panel have recommended abolishing a program to promote involvement of “poor” parents that has spent $665,000 and employed several people with links to Education Superintendent Tom Claussen.

An official study of the program uncovered inaccurate records and exaggerated claims of success.

The pilot project, sponsored by Claussen’s Department of Education and run by officials of Southern University, was supposed to improve education by showing parents how to become active partners in their children’s schooling.

Only one-fourth of the schools reportedly served by the program had “actual parental involvement activities,” University of Southern Mississippi professor Harold Knight said in an evaluation report.

In fact, the program’s officials claimed they worked in some schools “that actually did not exist,” said Knight, a specialist in education research.

Two-thirds of the school superintendents who responded to a survey “felt that this project did not increase the effectiveness of their parental involvement program,” and three-fourths recommended it not be continued, the professor said.

And despite “top-heavy” administration, the program was poorly planned, poorly administered and poorly documented, he said. Many records were unreadable, he said.

“The cost-effectiveness of the project as measured by any objective standard must be considered poor,” his evaluation concluded.

Last week, after receiving Knight’s report, the Chapter 2 Advisory Council, which reviews requests for federal funds used in the program, unanimously recommended to Claussen that the program not be funded for the coming school year.

Claussen must now decide whether to present the project to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which has final say over the spending of the federal money. The board meets May 22.

Claussen, whose administration pushed the program as one of the few most effective ways to improve public schools, could not be reached for comment.

The director of the program, Southern University professor Van Ray Fields, suggested that some of Knight’s conclusions may be based on an overly quick review of the program’s records.

“We have a lot of evidence showing our involvement in a lot of schools,” Fields said.

Parents

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Education.

The program coordinator, Earl Tolbert, is Betty Bryant’s uncle. According to Charles Bryant, Tolbert moved to Louisiana from New Jersey, where he was a minister and a school board member, to take the job.

The evaluation report recommended that the program, if continued, employ as coordinator “a qualified individual with actual experience in parental involvement.”

Fields’ proposed budget for next year, although generally stripped down, includes a $4,660 raise for Tolbert.

Tolbert was active in the East Baton Rouge Parish parental involvement program, according to Donald Hoover, assistant superintendent for academics for the school district.

“The biggest help to us was in planning” conferences and similar activities, Hoover said. The pilot project did not have sufficient staff to actually conduct extensive parental involvement activities, he said.

The project is a major plan in Claussen’s school improvement program. He has often said that increasing parents’ interest and responsibility in their children’s schooling is one of the keys to improving public education.

Officials of the Claussen administration lobbied the program through BESS and the advisory council in 1984.

Members of BESS and the advisory council often complained privately about the program, particularly after Fields spent a one-year budget in eight months by hiring more people than his original budget included.

But the board, over the advisory council’s objections, reapproved the program last summer after the staff arrangement was changed to reduce administrative costs.

Knight still found the program high in administrative costs, which he said is especially unjustified because the program was poorly organized and supervised and suffered from sloppy record keeping.

He praised one field worker, Sylvester Williams, who did “outstanding work” in attempting to increase the involvement of parents in pilot schools in the south central part of the state.

But Knight stressed that the successes did not offset the failures in the program. He said there are better ways to increase parental involvement.

“The Southern University Project, as currently structured, cannot be recommended for future funding,” Knight concluded.

“It is recommended that alternative methods of delivering these services be explored,” he said.