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Sarah St. John

Mar. 16--The parents of 15 students in the Olathe school district last year requested that their children not take sex education courses.

That equates to 0.0006 percent of the 2004-05 student population whose parents chose to opt out of the curriculum.

"When I look at that, it demonstrates that the Olathe school district is doing a great job of keeping parents informed," said Alison Banikowski, associate superintendent of teaching and learning.

But a majority of **state board** of education members said Wednesday that parents weren't informed enough about what their children are learning about sex in school. So in a 6-4 vote, they approved a policy proposed by Olathe representative John Bacon last fall to make sex education an opt-in course. Instead of the current method in which parents must sign a permission slip to get their children out of the class, they must now sign a permission slip to get them in.

"What I'm trying to do is make sure parents are plugged in and given the opportunity to be well informed about what is taught," Bacon said during Wednesday's **state board** meeting. "This will give schools the opportunity to practice good parent-teacher communication like we've heard so much about. It's also possible that if a school wants to push the envelope a little bit and teach something controversial, this could give them a level of protection from liability."

Banikowski said Olathe parents are amply informed of the district's sex curriculum, which is delivered in different pieces in fourth through seventh grades and then as a comprehensive health class unit in the sophomore year of high school. Olathe is part of the one-fourth of Kansas school districts that

use an abstinence-only curriculum.

At the elementary level, a letter is sent home to parents, and they are invited to an information night to learn what will be taught. At the secondary levels, parents are informed of upcoming lessons through a letter. And all parents are invited to review the district's sex curriculum at the Instructional Resource Center. Banikowski said about 85 parents did so last year.

The **state board** vote split along conservative-moderate lines, with the six conservative members voting for the opt-in policy. The question arose last September, but the **board** got stuck in a 5-5 vote. Those who voted against it pointed out that, as in Olathe, few parents chose to opt their children out of sex education.

"So the necessity to mandate an opt-in method seemed to be addressing a problem that did not exist," the minutes of the September **board** meeting **states**.

But the one **board** member who switched sides last autumn, Kathy Martin of Clay Center, came back to vote with her five conservative colleagues Wednesday, citing input from her constituents.

Sue Gamble, a **board** member from Shawnee who voted against the measure, said she fears what repercussions the opt-in policy could have.

"Students need to have education about their bodies and how they work, frankly for their own protection," Gamble said. "Parents were always able to opt out. The potential here if districts will follow the letter of the law ... is they would potentially deny education to students."

Janet Waugh, another **board** member of Kansas City, Kan., who voted against the policy said the **board** was overstepping its bounds.

"We cannot mandate parenting," she said. "That's what we're doing."

She also fears students who need the education most -- like those with unengaged parents -- will miss out.

"If they don't opt in, we're saying they don't want their children to take it," Waugh said. "That's not always true."

Banikowski said requiring a permission slip from the parent of every student who takes a sexual education course would be "cumbersome" for a district of Olathe's size.

"Sometimes getting permission slips back for field trips can be challenging," she said.

Until now, local **boards** of education decided how sexual education was administered, and some of the opponents on the **board** said the policy threatens local control.

A few districts in Kansas already offer opt-in sex education, said David Awbrey, the **state board's** spokesman. At the **state** level, Awbrey said, three others have opt-in policies similar to what Kansas just passed: Utah, Arizona and Nevada.

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