

Facility interests suggest moving OPSC away from DGS

By Allen Young

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A group of school facility interests assembled by Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson suggested last week severing the Office of Public School Construction from its government parent agency, the Department of General Services.

Legislators have attempted to make the transfer in past years only to watch their bills die. But as the final dollars leave the state's new school construction account, momentum has grown around a major system overhaul to the state's school construction funding and approval process – and some are discussing a new home for the OPSC.

"I think it would be a significant improvement," said Gary Eberhart, president of the Mt. Diablo Unified school board.

Eberhart, who discussed the idea at Torlakson's 'Schools of the Future' event last week, said that the California Department of Education would seem like a natural fit for the OPSC.

"You have to have a classroom that promotes learning," he said. "And there are a lot of things that make up that environment – day lighting and proper ventilation and low noise and all those things that are specific to the education of students...The (California Department of Education's) mission is the education of students."

A spokesman for schools chief Torlakson said the superintendent plans to wait until his 'Schools of the Future' work group creates specific proposals before commenting on them, said a CDE spokesman.

The Department of General Services, which operates the OPSC, has long been criticized for failing to adequately meet the needs of school facility operators, who have complained of poor customer service and unnecessary scrutiny of construction projects in an attempt to conserve bond funds.

The agency responded to those complaints last June by announcing a comprehensive OPSC overhaul project that officials say is still active.

Meanwhile, the DGS is also starting a series of quarterly stakeholder meetings beginning March 24 to brief educators on streamlining efforts underway and also to hear about other problems experienced with the OPSC.

"I know we'd certainly be open to hearing what (educator) concerns are and why they believe (OPSC) needs to be moved," said Eric Lamoureux, a spokesman for the DGS.

"At the end of the day, this is going to be a discussion for the Legislature and the governor to have, because this is something that would require statutory change," he said.

On a state policy level, one outstanding issue with the OPSC's governance structure is the blurred lines of authority between the two entities that oversee the agency – the governor and legislative leaders.

The DGS is run by gubernatorial-elected leadership, but OPSC personnel also staff the State Allocation Board, a legislative panel that sets policy and approves school construction project funding.

Last year, allocation board members disagreed with DGS officials over whether the board had the authority to relieve the OPSC of its responsibility for auditing construction projects. The issue is still unresolved.

There have been multiple legislative attempts in recent years to move OPSC oversight away from the DGS and under jurisdiction of the State Allocation Board.

The first bill came in 2005 by former Sen. Bob Margett, R-Glendora. But SB 1552 was pulled after former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger indicated he would not sign it.

Instead, allocation board members asked the Little Hoover Commission to review the OPSC governance structure and make recommendations.

In 2007, the commission recommended moving the OPSC from the DGS to the allocation board.

The second legislative attempt came in 2009 by former Senator Denise Ducheny, D-San Diego. But SB 365 was marked as a fiscal bill and sidelined in the appropriations committee suspense file, where most cost-producing bills go to die.