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Despite protests, delegates OK education mandates

By MEGAN POINSKI

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ST. THOMAS - A spirited and sometimes confusing debate on public education by Constitutional Convention delegates on Tuesday ended with delegates approving the draft article without making any changes.

After spending hours debating the draft, delegates at Tuesday's convention session made no changes and approved the education article with an 18-6 vote.

The article on education had been agreed on in principle at a September convention session, but there was not a quorum present to vote on that section of the document. Delegates took advantage of Tuesday's quorum to approve a first draft of the section.

From the moment that Education, Youth and Culture Committee Chairwoman Mary Moorhead began reading the draft to delegates, several hands were raised in protest.

The draft begins with the territorial educational philosophy, which says that the territory's goal is to provide citizens with a free, high-quality, public education system that "preserves the African history, culture and traditions of the people of the Virgin Islands." Delegate Douglas Brady spoke up and reiterated the same objection he had to the language in September - he wanted to remove the word "African."

Moorhead failed to recognize Brady's objection, saying that the same thing had been discussed in September. Back then, Moorhead said, a majority of delegates wanted to keep the wording.

A shouting match ensued between several delegates about how the convention was going to proceed. Moorhead said that all of the concerns already had been discussed, and delegates should accept the first draft of the section. This draft, she said, would go to the public. After they have seen it, changes would be made.

Convention Vice President Lawrence Sewer, who acted as the president for the morning portion of the session, said that Moorhead would read the draft, and delegates should write down their concerns. After the full reading was finished delegates would go back

and make changes, Sewer said.

Brady was upset about the cutting off of discussion, saying that it seemed the language had already been approved and it could not be discussed any further.

"All we're doing today is what?" Brady asked. "Here it is, and this is what we're going to do? We've got 30 people here ready to do some work, and you're saying we can't do some work on it."

Delegates then passed a motion to waive Moorhead's reading of the rest of the document. After that vote, delegate Adelbert Bryan immediately made a motion to accept the education article with no changes.

Several delegates stood up to object. They had issues that they wanted to discuss, but would not get the chance if the document just went up for a vote.

Delegate Michael Thurland said the objections were ridiculous. All delegates had access to the draft for about a week, so they should not be questioning it at the last second.

"I have to agree with the motion. We accept this," Thurland said. "We take it to the full body, vote it up or down."

Delegates who objected to the motion were allowed to briefly share their concerns with the language on the record.

Delegate Robert Schuster was concerned that the draft mandates that 30 percent of the territory's budget go toward public education. Delegate Charles Turnbull did not want the constitution to mandate maximum class sizes of 15 for grades kindergarten through 7, and 20 for grades 8 through 12.

Delegate Arnold Golden found the whole draft to be too much. At the appropriate time, he said, he would make a motion to replace the entire draft with the much simpler education draft approved by the 1980 Constitutional Convention.

"I find so much in here that seems to be legislative in nature and not in the form of a constitution that it will be confusing," Golden said. "The Legislature has a function. They need to be able to use it here."

Brady agreed, saying that delegates were "micromanaging even what the Legislature should do."

Committee members were visibly angry that such suggestions were made. Lois Hassell-Habtes stood up and yelled in anger, saying committee members worked very hard to perfect their draft.

"As a 34-year educator today, I take offense that we're going over and over and over it,"

Hassel-Habtes said.

The draft passed, with all delegates present except Brady, Golden, Turnbull, Clement Magras, Thomas Moore and Lisa Williams voting for it.

- Contact reporter Megan Poiniski at 774-8772 ext. 304 or e-mail mpoiniski@dailynews.vi.