

Alternate HS exam may be flunked out

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TRENTON - Within a couple months, the death knell may sound for an alternative high-school graduation exam that state Education Commissioner William Librera argues "erodes the integrity of the high school diploma."

Librera yesterday asked the state Board of Education to move quickly to approve phasing out the Special Review Assessment this fall - and to offer an additional opportunity to pass the standardized exam.

The board seemed willing to move ahead as long as concerns about preventing large numbers of students from falling through the cracks were addressed.

The Trenton school district has been among the most vocal proponents of the exam, designed in the 1980s to help students considered "test-phobic" but expanded to all students who fail the standardized High School Proficiency Assessment.

Last year, three out of four students at the district's Daylight-Twilight high school, serving adult dropouts and troubled teens, graduated through the SRA. At Trenton Central High School, 37 percent used the SRA, a sharp increase from the prior year.

But even in suburbs such as Hamilton, East Windsor and Lawrence, SRA use has risen substantially.

Statewide, the number of SRA graduates skyrocketed by 75 percent from 2002 to 2004, with 15,000 taking the exam last year.

"Bluntly speaking, we think the SRA hurts the very kids it's designed to help," Librera said after the meeting.

He said the board would have to act by early August if the phase-out were to begin this fall.

He called for making 2008 the final year for giving the SRA in literacy, affecting this fall's incoming freshmen. The math exam would end two years later.

Several changes would be made to try to increase students' chances of passing the HSPA:

-- The HSPA would be administered at the beginning of 11th grade, beginning in October 2007, meaning there would be a maximum of four tries to pass, instead of three. The test is now given toward the end of 11th grade.

-- An appeals process would be available for students with at least 90 percent attendance, a good grade-point average and adequate course work.

-- Using the eighth-grade exam, the department would develop a system to notify students at risk of failing the HSPA and supplying the information to districts.

Librera had sought to move the HSPA to the end of 10th grade, saying students lose considerable knowledge over the summer. But, he said yesterday, logistical problems blocked the idea.

Board members expressed concern about the appeals process, but Librera indicated there was room for flexibility.

He also said he wants to ensure that the state doesn't become inundated with appeals - or with more students dropping out earlier.

Trenton school board President Bernard McMullan expressed disappointment with the commissioner's initiative. Daylight-Twilight has become an award-winning program, he said, yet the state wants to undermine it because some districts are allegedly taking advantage of the SRA.

State Board of Education member Thelma Napoleon-Smith, a former Trenton principal, said she would prefer to fix the SRA. "I can't believe the HSPA is the one size that fits all," she said.

Librera responded that the system cannot be repaired. Though the state prepares the test, each district administers and scores it, creating "400 interpretations of what represents an answer."

Hamilton Assistant Superintendent James Federici was glad to see some leeway with the appeals process but opposed the SRA's demise.

"Why don't they just deal with districts that had concerns they were abusing the SRA process?" he asked.

Hamilton's Nottingham High had 22 percent of graduates use the SRA.

Librera said a longer time is necessary to eliminate the math SRA because work needs to be done to improve New Jersey's math instruction.

Half of all students in the state's special-needs districts graduated through the SRA last year.

Dana Egreczky, a top New Jersey Chamber of Commerce official, said the SRA is used to graduate too many students who are unemployable.

"The SRA absolutely has to go away," she said. "It's a back door we have to close and lock."