

Corzine wants to strengthen high school requirements

BY JOHN MOONEY
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Future New Jersey high school students could be required to take — and be tested on — specific courses of study such as geometry, American literature and biology under a plan Gov. Jon Corzine presented yesterday.

Saying too many of today's graduates are unprepared for college or the modern workplace, Corzine led a group of education and business leaders to present the plan for strengthening the state's high school requirements in its main subject areas.

Such demands in all of the state's 300-plus high schools are likely years away, but the plan could include specific mandated courses and

new state testing with each class to ensure the material is learned, they said.

Currently, students are only required to take a set number of years in English, math, science and other courses.

"It is absolutely essential to make sure our high school standards and efforts are aligned with the real world that we live in today and the challenges of the 21st century," Corzine said in the Statehouse presentation.

The proposal is modeled after a national program known as the American Diploma Project that has been signed in principle by more than 20 states.

Laying out a core of specific skills and

knowledge every student should have, the project was the brainchild of a group of governors and business groups worried about United States students' mediocre standing internationally and the potential impact on the nation's economy.

Locally, the president of Cumberland County College said yesterday that 80 percent of his full-time students require remedial classes before they can start earning credits. Business leaders said even low-level jobs are requiring higher-level math or communication skills.

"We are not experts in education, but we know what is required to be successful in business," said Arthur Ryan, chairman and chief executive of Prudential Financial. "This is what it will take to not simply get a job, but to be successful in it."

Yet with any such plans come short-term worries that raising the rigor of course work and testing in the high schools will drive more students to drop out, especially in urban districts where as many as a third or more of students already don't graduate.

A national report released this week by the Center on Education Policy in Washington, D.C., said states are slowing down — and in some cases moving away — from requiring students to take an exit exam to graduate, out of fear it could heighten dropout problems.

"That is another one of our challenges," said acting Education Commissioner Lucille Davy yesterday. "And that is why it would be incremental change and not requiring immediate adherence to these benchmarks."

"But it is our belief that all children can achieve this way as long as we, as adults, do our jobs," she said.

Others also stressed that many of New Jersey's students already reach these levels, especially with colleges demanding the course work.

"For districts that are now operating at a high level, this will not be an issue," said Edwina Lee, executive director of the New Jersey School Boards Association. "But districts still struggling to address

not only their dropouts but those who are not engaged in what they have now ... this begins that discussion."

Officials said the first step is in reviewing and revising the state's core-curriculum standards, a process that is likely to take at least a year. Needed changes to middle and elementary schools, as well the state's elaborate testing system, would take longer than that.

A steering committee chaired by Corzine and Ryan plans a series of public meetings in the next several months to further discuss the proposal, starting with teachers and other educators in early October.

The state board of education also will be a key forum, as it will have to approve any changes to the state's standards and testing system.

The board already agreed to phase out the state's alternative high school exam that each year provides a fifth of the state's graduates a back door around the state's harder standard test. But even that smaller move has prompted worries in districts that students completing all other high school requirements would no longer have a safety net.

"This work is a jigsaw puzzle, and we need to look at a number of issues," said state board President Arnold Hyndman. "But I don't think the answer is to push back on this. The rest of the world isn't pushing back."

John Mooney covers education. He may be reached at jmooney@starledger.com, or (973) 392-1548.