

Standardized test will assess high school biology students

By KATHLEEN CARROLL

High-school biology students, get ready: Starting next year, you'll face a new, statewide, end-of-the-year test.

The test is the first in an anticipated battery of subject-specific exams, which would be phased in over several years and eventually include language arts, math, chemistry and physics, said Jay Doolan, acting assistant commissioner in the state Education Department's division of educational programs and assessment.

"We want to ensure we enhance the rigor of each of the disciplines, that students learn more in-depth understanding of the content while covering a wide range of topics in a specific discipline," Doolan said.

The new biology test will join another new statewide science exam, debuting this March -- the science section of the High School Proficiency Assessment, or HSPA, which is given to 11th-grade students. Passing the reading and math sections of the HSPA is one of the state's graduation requirements. But students won't have to pass the science test to graduate.

The biology test will debut in May 2008 and will be given only to students who take biology. It will not be a graduation requirement.

Doolan said educators have mostly welcomed the new direction, because it allows students to be tested on a specific course of knowledge as they are studying it.

"We're delighted," said Patricia Lord, supervisor of science in Teaneck. "We look forward to receiving the specifications."

Educators have worried that the cumulative nature of the science section of the HSPA -- which includes questions about biology, chemistry and earth science -- force students to spend too much time reviewing old lessons, rather than delving deep into their current class.

"If a student took biology in their freshman year, and chemistry sophomore year, and then physics or an elective in their junior year, the HSPA science test means that student has to brush up on course content he or she might have taken three years ago," said Doolan. "How do we prepare students to do well on that?"

The subject-specific exams under discussion are part of a push to make high school more rigorous, to better prepare students for college or a job. The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee has discussed requiring every student to pass biology, chemistry and physics to earn a high school diploma -- while also taking four years of English classes, two years of algebra and a geometry course. The group will present its recommendations to the state Board of Education next year. Currently, just 70 percent of New Jersey school districts require biology; officials are urging all districts to include the class as a requirement, Doolan said.

"[The test] will help us ensure that the content is rigorous, that it's consistent with what we believe students should know about biology," he said. "And that will help us in the long run to provide consistency across the state."