

## Work to close gap in education a start

New Jersey may have the highest graduation rate in the country, but that does not mean our schools, or our students, are outperforming everyone else. Although 88 percent of the state's students graduate, according to the findings of a recent study, the state reckons 80 percent of those who go on to community colleges require remedial classes in math or English, and nearly half of those who go to the state's four-year schools need the same.

In those cases, at least, our diplomas hardly seem to be worth the paper on which they're printed.

So there is plenty of reason to cheer Gov. Jon S. Corzine's decision to strengthen the state's high school curriculum. The details are still sketchy, although they are likely to become clearer after a series of hearings beginning this fall, but the governor has announced his intention of joining an alliance of more than 20 states committed to school improvement. The coalition's goal is to make American students more competitive by increasing the number of required academic courses, particularly in math and science, and by strengthening and more closely vetting the content of those academic courses. For example, the governor and his staff say they will push to demand four years, rather than the current three, of math and science for graduating students.

The governor's committee, which includes businessmen as well as educators, says the toughened requirements will apply to students bound both for college and for work; there simply is no room in the modern-day economy for students who can not do math, or who are not versed in technology. That is especially true for an economy like ours, which relies less and less on manufacturing jobs and more and more on higher-wage, higher-skill professions.

For years, businessmen and educators have predicted doom for the country, based on our service economy and our perennially dismal performance in international education rankings. Corzine's plan is a necessary first step in trying to reverse our lagging educational standards. But even he says the process will be slow and the rewards long in coming. Of course, the state must constantly balance higher standards with the threat of higher drop-out rates; it also must make sure the standards really mean something — that they lead to better curriculum content and better teaching, rather than simply more testing. These changes will take time to do right, and the state deserves to be given the space and time to find the right solutions.

On the other hand, the governor already seems to have discounted the possibility of significantly changing the school calendar; he appears loathe, for example, to embrace a longer school year, a strategy used by other countries that consistently outperform us. Corzine's reluctance is economic: he apparently fears the cost of such a measure. There may be other solutions. The state might shorten the summer break, for example, but lengthen other vacations throughout the school, which would give students the same number of days in class but protect against a long break that interrupts the learning process.

Still, it seems almost inevitable that the state, if not the nation, will one day have to pledge more days and/or longer hours in school for its students; at any rate the governor ought to remain open to such a possibility. It is abundantly clear we must do a better job of educating all our children. As the governor prepares to embrace change and tougher standards, he has got to leave himself open to any kind of change that will bring the most success to the most students.