

The Star-Ledger

Raising the bar in schools

Too many kids graduate from New Jersey high schools ill-equipped for the workplace or higher education. That's what New Jersey colleges and employers have been telling Gov. Jon Corzine, and he is right to see it as a message the state dare not ignore.

When large numbers of citizens are hampered by the inadequacies of their education, it threatens the state's future as well as the individual's.

Corzine says one solution is to enrich the high school curriculum by adding geometry, American literature, biology and other subjects the state does not require for all students.

Unfortunately, a harder curriculum might be counterproductive. The state already has too many kids who are not learning the curriculum now available.

About 20 percent of high school seniors never pass the official high school exit exam, even after multiple tries. They get their diplomas through an alternative, easier exam. Urban schools are overrepresented in that group, but almost every school district has some alternative route candidates. In addition, 10 percent of high school freshmen drop out before graduation.

Corzine is pushing a counterargument backed by a national program called the American Diploma Project: Low expectations and a dull, undemanding curriculum stifle education. Rigorous courses turn kids on to learning and raise achievement. Perhaps.

If the state decided to adopt the more rigorous program, it would have to evaluate its ability to implement it.

Do all schools -- some of which struggle with the current requirements -- have teachers qualified to deliver the more rigorous, exciting curriculum the governor imagines? How will the state produce such teachers? Are the elementary and middle schools ready to provide the educational foundation for a more challenging high school experience? Merely adding to the high school task list will not be enough.

Corzine says his call for a more rigorous curriculum is just the first step in a long process of review, analysis and planning. Moving cautiously is warranted, both for the schools and those who will make the rules and judge the schools' performance.

Other than testing to measure failures, the state has yet to demonstrate that it understands or knows how to fix what is wrong in those schools where students consistently fail to meet the current curriculum standards -- the standards that were supposed to raise the academic bar. The Education Department will need to better educate itself if it expects to demand more of others.