

## **Algebra II test designed to make studies tougher**

By **KATHLEEN CARROLL**

Some New Jersey high school students will face an experimental end-of-the-year Algebra II test next spring, part of the state's push to encourage high-level math and science study.

The test is the second in an expected battery of new, subject-specific exams as New Jersey moves to make high school more rigorous.

Next spring, as a pilot group of 5,000 students in volunteer districts take the Algebra II test, every student in New Jersey enrolled in biology will face that end-of-the-year exam. Neither test will serve as a graduation requirement.

"We're moving through this carefully," said Jay Doolan, an assistant commissioner at the state Department of Education. "We will study the impact [of the tests] on students and schools."

New Jersey is one of nine states that will give the new Algebra II test next year. The effort was coordinated by Achieve, a non-profit agency that oversees a national high-school reform effort called the American Diploma Project Network.

Locally, a committee led by Governor Corzine and business and university leaders is developing a plan to make high school more demanding. Many graduates may be ill-prepared for life after graduation: A state Chamber of Commerce poll found 99 percent of businesses reported graduates weren't prepared for company jobs, and 40 percent of students at the state's four-year colleges end up in remedial classes.

While many students enroll in advanced courses throughout high school, they are not obligated to do so. Statewide graduation requirements only specify a minimum number of credits in math, science and language arts, and a passing score on a cumulative exam given in 11th grade. Many school districts impose more rigorous graduation requirements than the state minimums, but fewer than half require students to pass Algebra II, Doolan said.

The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee has emphasized more specific, sophisticated coursework and requirements. Changes under discussion would have students pass two years of algebra as well as one year of geometry, biology, chemistry and physics and four years of English classes before they can earn a diploma. The committee is still developing its formal recommendations and will present them to the state Board of Education later this year, Doolan said.

"We know a lot of students take general science and general math classes, but that may not be giving them higher-level content," he said. "We want to raise the rigor of high school, and end-of-course assessments are a good way to do that."

## **By the numbers**

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New Jersey high-school students must take 12 credits of math to earn a diploma. But the state doesn't specify particular courses, so some graduate without ever taking advanced classes.

Some school districts require students to pass specific classes to earn a diploma. The classes students must pass and the percentage of districts are:

Algebra I - 66 percent

Geometry - 59 percent

Algebra II - 43 percent