

Gov aims to raise bar for students

More requirements desired

By **MICHAEL RISPOLI**
GANNETT STATE BUREAU
mrispol@gannett.com

WAYNE — — New Jersey's high school curriculum should be overhauled and testing of students revised, in an effort to better prepare students for a seamless transition into college or the work place, a task force appointed by Gov. Jon S. Corzine said Friday.

Math, science, and language arts requirements for graduation would become more specific — including a new requirement in economics — and content would be more rigorous in these areas to match knowledge needed for academia or a job.

The goal, said Education Commissioner Lucille Davy, is to update an outdated curriculum to better meet the demands of today's higher education and economy.

"The need for these skills goes far beyond just participating in the global economy," Davy said, as the report was unveiled at a meeting at William Paterson University. "It's also important for students to have these skills in order to be informed citizens and consumers."

State regulations currently require a certain amount of years to be taught for a general subject area. The new requirements would specify what classes would be needed for those subjects — such as algebra II for math and chemistry for science. Students then would be tested on these specific classes, replacing the general High School Proficiency Assessment.

Central Jersey school superintendents had some mixed reactions to the proposed changes.

Some said curriculum changes should be handled locally. Others said their districts are already doing many of the things suggested by the state report.

Franklin Township's superintendent endorsed the proposals.

"We support all initiatives to raise the bar to help our students become better prepared for college and ultimately more competitive in the world after high school," said Edward Seto.

Middlesex Borough Superintendent James C. Baker said he supports rigorous curricula but believes those decisions should be made locally.

"I think that one of the problems that we have is that the state keeps on presenting more of a requirement for the schools without the necessary funding," he said. "There are things we're being mandated to do which are not consistent with the realities of our students and not consistent with the realities of our community."

Perth Amboy Superintendent of Schools John M. Rodecker said his district already offers Algebra to freshmen as opposed to a general math.

"I'm not opposed to raising the bar for higher achievement as long as it's understood children learn differently," he said, adding it does not mean the success rate will equal what is required.

He said the high school requirements will actually impact the whole kindergarten to 12th grade continuum by accelerating the pace for learning. By the time a child gets to high school, they have to be prepared for the rigorous requirements.

"You have to prepare students for that rigor," Rodecker said.

Linden Assistant Superintendent Rocco G. Tomazic said more rigorous requirements didn't come as a surprise to him, especially since the state Department of Education has been advocating the America Diploma Project, which requires more math and science and requires Algebra II for everyone even if they are not college bound.

Tomazic added it's valuable to have input from the business community, like the state Chamber of Commerce, on the skills they look for in the work force compared to what is taught in the schools. "Even if you're not going to Harvard, what does a worker need to know?" he said.

Dr. Simon Bosco, superintendent of the Old Bridge public schools, said "We've already made adjustments in our math curriculum because the state HESPA test has questions on Algebra II." HESPA is given to all high school juniors. "What the report doesn't talk about is how to get the additional teachers, and the additional lab space to satisfy these additional requirements."

Bosco added that it may be impossible to find the number of teachers required for the type of curriculum that's mandated. "They talk about 'reallocation,' but you can't reallocate something that isn't there."

Davy said she did not expect costs to rise for schools with the new changes because many of the required classes are already being taught at high schools without being required.

"I think all districts are offering these classes. The question is: Are all students getting access to the courses?" said Davy.

The recommendations come from a group called the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee, which Friday released the results of its 20-month study. The report says New Jersey's current high school graduation requirements do not reflect the skills students need to be successful once they leave high school.

The report, citing Commission on Higher Education data, says 40 percent of the students entering four-year colleges in New Jersey and 78 percent of those entering community colleges need remedial courses.

There is a direct link between those needs and graduation rates. Seventy-six percent of college students nationally who take remedial reading do not earn their degrees, along with 63 percent taking remedial math failing to get degrees, the report says.

Gov. Jon S. Corzine said as more jobs require some higher education, students should not have to delay their course work to take remedial courses on subjects they should have been taught in high school.

"We have work to do. We can't accept that as we go forward, particularly when the demands are as high as they are," said Corzine.

The new requirements would be phased in starting with ninth graders in the 2008-09 school year. Additional requirements would be phased in for the 2010-11 and 2012-13 school years.

Frank Belluscio, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said local boards "wrestled with the concept of course requirements" because each school is tailored to meet the students' needs.

"We just don't want the communities to be overburdened with these new requirements," said Belluscio, who added that, despite the concerns, the group was happy overall with the planned changes.

Other recommendations in the report include strengthening teacher recruitment, emphasizing personalized learning approaches and creating a council to align the education system from preschool through four-year colleges.

The different recommendations would require approvals from various agencies to be enacted, including the Department of Education, the state Board of Education, local school boards and the state Legislature.

On the Web: www.njhighschoolsummit.org