

Stricter graduation requirements proposed in N.J.

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High school in New Jersey might get harder under a new set of recommendations released by the state yesterday.

The proposals are the work of the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee, a joint effort between business and education convened two years ago by Gov. Corzine.

The panel, cochaired by Corzine, calls for phasing in over the next eight years more rigorous graduation requirements, including biology and chemistry, economics, geometry, and Algebra I and II. The panel also recommends local boards of education require a second year of foreign language and a fourth year of "rigorous" math and science.

In their report, the panel noted the Algebra II requirement may be their most controversial recommendation. Some say the subject would be too difficult for many students, they acknowledged. However, they continued, the objections "are not as compelling as the data that indicates how important Algebra II is for lifelong learning." And, the panel added, many colleges require Algebra II for admission.

Overall, the panel calls for aligning high-school graduation requirements with what is needed to get into college or enter the work force. This varies from district to district, according to the report.

The recommendations also include enhanced teacher recruitment and professional development, redesigning high schools as "learning communities" with personalized learning approaches. The panel proposes that each student have a six-year education plan, encompassing high school and two additional years of higher education, job training, skilled employment or military service.

In addition, the report released yesterday calls for replacing the state High School Proficiency Assessment with a new language-arts assessment test and end-of-course exams for the individual math and science classes as requirements for graduation.

The committee recommendations were presented yesterday at a joint board meeting of the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education and the state Board of Education at William Patterson University in Wayne. Corzine and Lucille Davy, state education commissioner, both present, praised the work of the panel.

Two of the panel's recommendations are already on the way to being implemented, according to state education spokeswoman Kathryn Forsyth. All students starting high school in September will have to take algebra and biology before they graduate. In addition, this spring, students will take an end-of-course exam in biology. Students will not be required to pass this test to graduate this year.

However, for the vast majority of the panel's other recommendations, a public-private sector council will soon be called together to figure what action is needed for implementation, said Forsyth. Some will require legislation or new state education regulations.

The panel's report notes that New Jersey public schools overall already have a good academic record, including placing first in the nation for the number of high schools offering advanced placement courses. Its eighth graders recently placed first nationally in writing.

Marie S. Bilik, president of the New Jersey School Boards Association, in a written statement, said the proposals merited "immediate attention," but she also noted that implementation would require money.

"We have to make sure that the high-school redesign initiatives do not place an undue financial burden on New Jersey's communities," Bilik said.