

NJ panel wants tougher standards for high school graduation

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New Jersey is trying to make high school tougher.

A panel led by Gov. Jon S. Corzine proposes phasing in more specific — and rigorous — graduation requirements over the next eight years.

The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee's report was presented Friday at a special meeting of the state Board of Education.

The recommendations add New Jersey to a growing list of states trying to beef up high school requirements.

New Jersey's high schools are considered strong now. The state consistently has one of the nation's highest graduation rates. And its students are usually among the top performers on standardized tests given nationwide.

The proposed requirements — which need approval of the state Board of Education — aim to have almost all students close to meeting requirements for college entrance.

“We have an obligation and a vested economic interest to equip our high school students with the tools they need to build successful lives,” Corzine said. “These recommendations are a blueprint for this process.”

Instead of taking three years of science, for instance, all students would have to take lab biology, lab chemistry and a third “rigorous” course. The committee is also recommending that local school boards require a fourth year of science for graduation.

One difficulty in putting the new requirements into place is providing enough lab space for all those science classes. The recommendations do not address how to pay for the additional room that would be needed in many schools.

There have been early signals that funding could become a contentious issue.

“We have to make sure that the high school redesign initiatives do not place an undue financial burden on New Jersey's communities,” said Marie S. Bilik, executive director of the New Jersey School Boards Association.

As with science, the requirement to take three years of math would be boosted. Students would have to pass Algebra I, geometry and Algebra II to graduate. The report calls the Algebra II requirement “controversial” and says that some experts believe it would be too difficult for some students. But, the report says, those arguments “are not as compelling as the data that indicate how important Algebra II is for lifelong learning.”

Under the new standards, students would also have to take a half year of economics.

Many classes would eventually come with end-of-course standardized tests.

The course schedules for most college-bound students would not look much different if all the changes are adopted.

But for other students, there could be big changes, with Algebra II replacing consumer math or accounting classes in some cases. Some exceptions to the tougher standards would be allowed for special education students.

Some school districts are already putting into place curricula that meets what the state is looking to require.

Jersey City, for instance, will have more challenging academic requirements starting this fall as it turns its four big high schools into specialized “academies.”

And East Brunswick, a diverse middle-class Middlesex County community, implemented a course of study in 1989 that looks a lot like the proposed statewide requirements.

“We don’t have nonacademic courses,” said Evelyn Ogden, deputy schools superintendent there.

To graduate, all the students there take three years of lab science; most take physics along with biology and chemistry. And Algebra II is a standard course there.

Ogden, who helped design the program, says it has worked. In 1988, she said, about three-fourths of East Brunswick High students went to college immediately. Now, 98 percent do — the majority of them to four-year colleges.

And, she says, many enter college with some college credits they earned in high school.

Preparing all students as if they’re heading to college is fairer.

Otherwise, she said, students must decide early on whether they want to pursue college.

And that, Ogden said, can “limit what they can do because they didn’t take the basic courses that they really need.”

THE PROPOSAL: A committee headed by Gov. Jon S. Corzine wants to make high school standards more rigorous and more specific. Instead of merely requiring three years of math, for instance, the state would call for a year of algebra and two years of geometry.

THE REASON: The new standards would bring most New Jersey graduates close to meeting college entrance requirements.

THE IMPACT: For top students and school districts, the changes might be barely perceptible. But they could mean bigger challenges for other students.

THE PROCESS: The requirements would be phased in over several years but first need the approval of the state Board of Education.