

Students face tougher road to graduation

High School students statewide will face a tougher, more academically rigorous road to graduation if recommendations by a state task force are adopted.

The task force, entitled the High School Redesign Steering Committee, includes members from state education associations, higher education institutions and statewide business stakeholders. The goal over its past two years of research, hearings and public input was to recommend a new framework of high school education that would help students better transition to college or the workforce. If implemented in whole or part, it could mean an entirely different way of approaching high school education statewide. The plan, which would first need approval by the state's board of education, would fully effect the high school Class of 2016, as it would be phased in over the course of an eight-year period.

"We have an obligation and a vested economic interest to equip our high school students with the tools they need to build successful lives," said Gov. Jon Corzine at William Paterson University last week upon the report's release. "These recommendations are a blueprint for this process."

Economics, biology and chemistry

Among the most prevalent changes, high school students would be required to take specific core classes before they would be eligible for a state-issued diploma. Currently, state mandates require that just accumulated mandatory credits each school year in differing subjects move a high school student up the ladder toward graduating. If adopted, the recommendations would make it mandatory that every high school student have at least geometry, Algebra I, Algebra II, a half year of economics, biology and chemistry.

"I'm pretty shocked people aren't doing these things already," said Lyndhurst's Assistant Superintendent Tracey Stellato. "We'd be ready if these [recommendations] were implemented."

HSPA replaced

Another current graduation requirement that would be eliminated and replaced with a new system is the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA); a state-issued standardized test administered in the 11th grade. Instead, students would take end of course exams to assess what they learned on that particular coursework. The HSPA would be replaced by end of course testing in Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, biology and chemistry. In addition, a new language arts proficiency assessment would be formulated and administered as well. It's something most school administrators have eagerly been anticipating.

"Standardized tests only take a snapshot in time of where a student is in relation to skills they have acquired," said Jencarelli. "The exit, or end of course exams, will determine if a student has met the requirements of a particular course. It allows us to assist students who may be struggling in a subject prior to their junior year."

Still, questions remain with the end of course recommendation. Rutherford Superintendent Leslie O'Keefe wonders if a student is tested in June at the end of the course, will they be able to move on? If a senior is tested in June, how soon will they know if they can move onto college, a college

they may have already been accepted to? She recommends the state move to something similar to New York State's Regents exams. Those are course-oriented standardized tests that allow students to graduate with a rated diploma depending on how well they tested on specific curriculum mandatory as part of graduation. Stringham likes the idea of end or course testing, but said it shouldn't apply to every single high school student.

"End of course exams make sense for most, however for certain special needs students and ESL students, the state should move toward a growth model form of assessment which is a much fairer and meaningful form of assessment," said Stringham.

Not ready for college

The state says the revamp is desperately needed based on recent studies in both the business community and through higher learning institutions. According to a 2005 survey of college instructors by consulting firm Achieve, Inc., which the report relied on for statistical data, 42 percent of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level classes. Although New Jersey does have a relatively high graduation rate compared to many other states, on average, 40 percent of four-year New Jersey college students and 78 percent of community college students are required to take remedial classes. Only one in four actually move on to receive a college diploma.

Not prepared for jobs

A recent study by the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce of 100 eclectic businesses found that 99 of those surveyed said high school graduates immediately entering the workforce were not prepared for entry-level jobs.

The change wouldn't only effect students however, it would open more doors for educating teachers as well on how best to successfully transition students to college or entry level jobs. Specific recommendations include providing increased technical assistance to local education leaders and implementing data-based decision making programs.

"There are many mandates for educators that I truly believe in and support," said Jencarelli. "We need to do a better job of providing professional development opportunities for our teachers so they can assist our students to achieve at higher levels. I look forward to more professional development opportunities for all educators. We're telling our students to be life-long learners. We should set the example."

As most administrators say they are prepared for the revamp and welcome it, there are still questions that remain. O'Keefe said she has been in the education sector too long to know that once plans are announced by the state or even initiated, a new governor or education commissioner can quickly come in and change them again in a heartbeat.

"It would be nice if there was some continuity," she said. "You plan, jumpstart the plan, then they change their mind because of a power structure. I've been in this too long to not anticipate too much. Let the chips fall where they may. We'll be prepared either way it goes."