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Albany Legislators Seek to Dilute New, Tougher Graduation Exams

By RAYMOND HERNANDEZ

An unusual bipartisan coalition of state lawmakers, whose constituents range from inner-city residents to affluent suburbanites, is pushing to scale back new, more stringent graduation requirements for nearly all public high school students.

The lawmakers contend that the new graduation standards are being phased in too quickly, do not accurately measure the overall academic performance of students and could result in increased failure and dropout rates in school districts across the state.

The rising concern in the State Legislature comes as the Board of Regents, the body charged with setting educational policy for the state, and the State Education Commissioner press ahead with new standardized tests that all high school students will eventually have to pass to graduate. Some lawmakers fear that as many as 20 percent of seniors may be unable to pass the tests.

Beginning next year, students will have to pass a more rigorous English Regents exam to earn a high school diploma. In later years, students will have to pass similar standardized tests in four other subjects: math; American history and government; global studies, and science.

It is not clear what action the Legislature might take to scale back the new standards, or whether such a move would have the support of Gov. George E. Pataki, whose aides declined to comment today. But one measure has already been proposed in the Assembly to allow school districts to use alternative standards to the Regents exam for graduation. The Democratic-controlled Assembly and the Republican-led Senate are holding joint hearings on the issue around the state.

Aides to the leaders of both chambers say they have heard widespread concerns that the new graduation requirements may deny diplomas to thousands of students.

That the Senate and the Assembly have found common ground on this issue is remarkable, given that their leaders agree on almost nothing else. To date, both houses have jointly passed only about two dozen pieces of legislation this session, none of them major, and budget talks are still deadlocked almost six weeks past the deadline.

"There's growing concern that relying on one set of standardized, time-pressured tests will leave hundreds of thousands of students behind," said Assemblyman Richard L. Brodsky, a Democrat from Westchester County who proposed legislation to allow alternative standards.

"This issue has resonance that goes well beyond the traditional fault lines that have polarized education debates in the past," Mr. Brodsky added. "It affects every community in the state, whether they are in the inner cities or in the suburbs."

Dean G. Skelos, a Republican from Nassau County who is a deputy majority leader in the State Senate, agreed. "There is really universal and bipartisan concern with what they are doing," he said of the new Regents standards. "We are hopeful that the Board of Regents will get the message that the Legislature is not happy with what they have done."

But in an interview late this afternoon, Richard P. Mills, the State Education Commissioner and one of the architects of the new graduation standards, said any move to relax the standards would rob students of the education they need to compete in the workplace. "The reason we raised the standards was in response to a public outcry that the old standards were too low," he said, adding, "We just have to stay the course and insist that children get the education that they need."

Mr. Mills said the new standards had already raised academic performance. He said 78 percent of high school seniors passed the Regents English exam last year, even though it was not required for graduation. "The standards are working," he said.

The Commissioner is chosen by the Regents, who in turn are appointed by the Legislature.

An aide to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani said the Mayor favored the tougher standards. The Regents' plan "restores the value of a high school diploma," said the spokeswoman, Sunny Mindel. "To reverse this would be a terrible step backward in time."

The state first offered the Regents exam in 1879 as a standard for colleges to use in evaluating high school graduates. But until now, students only needed to pass a competency test to graduate, and only a minority -- fewer than 25 percent of graduates in New York City -- have taken diplomas showing they passed the more difficult Regents exams.

Mr. Mills and the Board of Regents have contended that the old two-tiered testing system had created two classes of students: high

achievers, who often go on to college, and low achievers, who lack the skills to function well in the workplace.

But Mr. Mills and the Regents are not just requiring students to pass the Regents exams to graduate. They also say that they are making the exams considerably harder. The new exams are being phased in gradually, beginning this June, when 11th graders will be required to take the two-day, six-hour reading, writing and listening test in English. The class of 2003 will be required to take five subject exams: in math, science, global studies, American history and government, and English.

That has led to widespread concern, if not panic, among parents, teachers and administrators over the prospect of widespread failures.

Lawmakers here are careful to point out that they heartily applaud the Regents' effort to raise the academic performance of students. But they also argue that the tests are just one measure of academic ability, and that many school districts, particularly poor ones, lack the resources to prepare low-achieving students to take the new tests.

Jeffrion L. Aubrey, a Democratic Assemblyman from Queens, said he was particularly troubled that teachers did not have enough time to review the tests. "How can teachers construct a curriculum or conduct classes around a test they haven't really had a chance to see?" Mr. Aubrey asked. "That's not fair. I would raise the curriculum standard first, without tying it to a test that means as much as this one does."

Steven Sanders, a Democrat from Manhattan who is the chairman of the Assembly's Education Committee, expressed similar concerns. "Are we really prepared in this state to witness perhaps as many as 15 or 20 percent of our high school seniors not to graduate, and then to suffer the very real consequences of what that will mean?" he asked.

Senator Michael A. L. Balboni, a Republican from Nassau County, said he supported the effort to enact higher standards, but questioned the reliance on a single series of tests to determine the academic fate of a high school student.

"This is an example of rushing perhaps in the right direction, but not having all the details worked out ahead of time," he said.