

Alaska high school exit exam faces legislative test as repeal chorus grows

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Alaska's high school exit exam may be ready for its final exit. The three-part test, which has been a required for a public high school diploma in Alaska for a decade, has lost support among many legislators and public school officials who say that the test no longer measures up, if it ever did.

The Association of Alaska School Boards voted in November to ask that the Legislature end the test requirement, arguing that the exam won't meet the new state assessments for grades three to 11 set to begin in 2015.

The exam, which originated with a state law enacted before the federal No Child Left Behind Law prompted a series of other tests, is given twice a year in high schools over a period of three days.

"It is one of a number of assessments at the high school level that can be ended, realizing a cost savings that can be put towards the new assessment system," the Association of Alaska School Boards said in a resolution approved last month.

"Importantly, this gains six additional school days in the high school year that can focus on instruction. It frees up personnel time in administering another assessment."

School board members from across the state have come to believe the idea of giving an "exit exam" to sophomores gives them the wrong idea about high school.

"Many students have been misled, believing they have accomplished all high school has to offer once they pass at the tenth grade, which causes them to lose interest in the remaining coursework," the board members said.

'If it's not doing its job, then let's get rid of it'

It appears the school boards will find ready allies for that point of view in the Legislature.

At a meeting Monday of a Senate subcommittee in Fairbanks, four senators said they favored getting rid of the test, while a fifth said that the question of its survival should be debated during the 2014 session.

"I guess I agree with the districts that have come before us. If it's not doing its job, then let's get rid of it," said Eagle River Sen. Anna Fairclough. "We're testing all over the place."

She said the Legislature should direct the state education department to “choose one assessment tool and have the districts align under it.”

“I just was told that WorkKeys is so outdated that it shouldn’t be used for any kind of performance,” she said, referring to another test used by the state.

Test of 'minimum skills'

The Legislature approved the law requiring an exit exam in 1997, but later delayed implementation of the rule linking it to diplomas until 2004. Legislators said there were too many high school graduates without basic skills and that the exam would show whether students were prepared for college or the workforce.

“There is a fundamental problem with education in Alaska when our students are able to graduate from high school and receive a diploma without learning the skills necessary to compete in a university setting or in the job market,” former legislator Con Bunde, who led the pro-test crowd in the Legislature, put it in 2000.

But despite pronouncements that the test would prove the value of an Alaska diploma, the Alaska test never became a means of determining readiness for college, the military or anything else. It has been described as a test of “minimum skills,” a term that remains deliberately vague.

While some school officials have said over the years that the test reflects skills that students should master by the eighth grade, others say the Alaska test is designed to include content taught through the end of 10th grade. No one argues that the test contains material taught through the 12th grade.

Adding to the confusion is that the 10th grade exam is actually two tests in one. Federal school standards require a different test, which is incorporated into the high school exam but graded separately. It is possible to fail one test but not the other. The federal part of the test is not required for graduation.

A 2012 report by the Center on Education Policy said the overall success of exit exams in the more than two dozen states that require them remains questionable and that the goals and standards vary widely from state to state.

Dumbed down?

Alaska requires students to take its test as sophomores. If they don’t pass all three parts, students have to retake the parts they fail at least once a year as juniors and seniors.

About three-quarters of sophomores pass the reading, writing and math portions on the first go-around, while those who don’t try again as juniors or seniors. Students who don’t pass the three parts by the end of 12th grade, but complete all other requirements for graduation, receive a Certificate of Achievement. They are able to go back in later years and take the test again if they wish.

In 2012, 7,989 graduates earned diplomas in Alaska, while 366 students collected Certificates of Achievement.

Sen. Berta Gardner said the original idea of the Alaska exam was to have students demonstrate that they had reached a basic level, “but then it was dumbed down.”

The state made the math test easier in 2002 after only about one-third of tenth-graders passed an early version. In 2007, the state made the writing test more difficult and the reading test easier.

Wasilla Sen. Mike Dunleavy said there is “very little correlation” between the standards measured on the test and the introductory math class at the University of Alaska. He said the assessment doesn’t match new standards about what high school students have to learn.

“You’re probably going to see the Department of Education require that the high school qualifying exam go” because it doesn’t match new standards, he said. “Right now the high school qualifying exam is going extinct one way or another.”

Final test coming for exit exam?

A spokesman for Education Commissioner Mike Hanley said the state board has taken a position on ending the test but expects it will be reviewed in 2014.

Fairbanks Sen. Pete Kelly, who was in the state House at the time the test requirement was enacted, said he decided shortly after voting for it that the whole thing was a mistake.

“The test is a bit of piling on because a diploma used to mean you hit all those things that you were trying to measure in an exit exam. That’s what it meant,” he said.

He said a student in Alaska who completes all other graduation requirements, but fails the exit exam, is at a disadvantage competing for a job against a student with the same talents who happens to graduate in a state with no exit exam. The student from Outside would have a diploma, while the student from Alaska who failed the exam would have a certificate.

Kodiak Sen. Gary Stevens said that while legislators have heard from some students that they “give up” once they pass the test and coast through the final two years of high school, he’d like to see legislative hearings on whether the state should abandon the requirement. That may be the final test for the exit exam.

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