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Bill would create standardized final exams for core subjects

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More standardized tests may be headed for Arizona schools.

State officials want the Arizona Department of Education to write final exams for core high school courses, even art and music, a job that has always been left to teachers or districts.

Schools could use the required tests to replace their own final exams or offer both tests.

The "end-of-course" test scores would help determine the rating for a school's performance, in addition to AIMS scores and other factors, such as graduation and attendance rates.

The state finals are being proposed in a bill sponsored by the Senate's education committee chair and are supported by state schools chief Tom Horne.

The tests, which also are proposed for social studies courses in Grades 3, 6 and 7 would not determine who gets promoted or earns a diploma.

Parents have long complained that too many schools overload their children with reading, writing and math courses to raise their AIMS scores and help federal and state performance labels. Time devoted to art and music, history and the sciences is shrinking.

Horne said he does not want that to be his legacy.

"It is unthinkable that students should enter middle school with no knowledge at all of science, history and art," Horne told lawmakers Wednesday.

Some researchers say the end-of-course tests are a good solution. The tests would give the state a broader and more logical profile of student performance at a school than the more general AIMS tests, said Paul Koehler, policy director for WestEd, a non-profit research agency.

The finals also would help ensure a high school chemistry course in Yuma teaches the same concepts as one in Paradise Valley or Chinle.

The idea is similar to Advanced Placement courses, which use national standardized end-of-course tests that allow students to earn college credits.

"It's a step toward systematic teaching and less haphazard teaching," said Arizona State University Professor Thomas Haladyna.

But school districts may balk at giving the state more time and control over testing.

Mesa, the state's largest district, already requires districtwide final exams for the same reason the state wants them: to ensure consistency and quality of teaching and learning in every classroom.

By writing its own tests, Mesa can return them graded to teachers the day after they are given.

"If we go to a state-secured test, we may lose the immediacy of that feedback," Mesa testing director Joe O'Reilly said.

Statewide final exams

Senate Bill 1177 proposes that schools would be required to administer a series of state-created, end-of-course tests.

- By December 2009, students in Grades 3, 6 and 7 would take statewide social studies exam.
- By December 2009, high school students would take state finals in earth science, world history and geography.
- By December 2010, high school student would take state finals in chemistry, physics, American history, economics, government/civics, music and visual arts.
- State would use test results to help determine the performance label of a school. It would not require students to pass the tests to be promoted or graduate.
- The tests would be an addition to existing and more general AIMS tests. High school students must pass AIMS reading, writing and math tests to get a diploma.
- The bill would request \$7.5 million to begin developing tests.

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