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District considers 2 tiers of diplomas

Scottsdale would join others to halt dropouts

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Scottsdale Unified may soon join other Valley school districts that offer different types of graduation diplomas: one that honors students for scholarship and one that requires fewer credits.

The Scottsdale Unified district governing board will consider a proposal for the multitier diploma system next month. The district's high school planning guide group came up with the idea.

The concept isn't new, as more school districts struggle to retain students who now often drop out or jump to charter schools offering fewer graduation requirements, said Scottsdale school board President Karen Beckvar.

Glendale Union High School District has had success with a similar multitiered model for almost 25 years, said Jennifer Johnson, that district's associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

"The basic diploma provides students with a solid foundation of basic skills and an awareness of other skills and opportunities," Johnson said. It requires 20 credits.

The endorsed diploma requires a minimum of 23 credits and an overall 3.0 grade-point average or ranking in the top quarter of a student's graduating class.

There's also a seal of excellence available by taking advanced-placement classes.

About 27 percent of the district's 2006 graduates earned the advanced diploma, with an additional 35 percent earning the seal, Johnson said.

Mesa Public Schools, the state's largest school district, with 74,000 students, has offered a standard diploma and a scholastic diploma since the mid-1980s, said spokeswoman Kathy Bareiss.

Both require 21 credit hours, but the scholastic diploma requirements include four years of math, three years of science, two years of the same foreign language and a minimum of a 3.0 grade-point average.

Scottsdale's six high schools still would require 22 credits for students to graduate.

A second honors diploma would recognize students who complete 24 or more credit

hours.

But it would allow students at its Sierra Vista Academy alternative high school to graduate with 20 credits, the minimum number required by the state.

The students would complete the same amount of content classes, but take six elective credits instead of the usual eight.

"We did not want to reduce the requirement of rigor," said Idiko Laczko-Kerr, the district's director of student information management.

Keeping the core requirements and helping students stay in school was critical to the high school planning committee.

"We weren't trying to water down their academic program, just (have them) take two fewer electives," said parent and committee member Suanne Rudley.

But Cassie Weinman, a senior at Scottsdale's Chaparral High School, said she has mixed feelings about the tiered diploma because it honors students already touted for their academic achievements.

"I think it's great that (some) kids do well in school, but it shouldn't matter that you barely squeak by," Weinman said.

"Graduation is a big day for everyone."

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