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State moves to increase graduation requirements

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX — State education officials took the first steps Friday toward requiring more of students to get a high school diploma.

In an informal vote, members of the state Board of Education agreed to mandate that students entering ninth grade next fall have three math courses, one more than is now necessary. They also would need three credits of social studies, up from the current two.

And ninth-graders in 2010 would need a fourth math course to graduate, as well as a third year of science.

The added requirements are being pushed by business interests as well as Gov. Janet Napolitano. In an unusual appearance before the board, the governor said the state will be unable to attract new businesses if it does not prepare more students for higher education and technical careers.

In fact, Jason Bagley, a lobbyist for Intel Corp., told board members that his company already is looking outside Arizona — and the United States — for new engineers because not enough high schoolers here are ready for technical college degrees.

The proposed change came despite protests from several people, including state Rep. Mark Anderson. The Mesa Republican, who chairs the House K-12 Education Committee, said that while students should be encouraged to take more math, it shouldn't bar them from graduating.

"In the quest to achieve national priorities, let's not leave behind many of our students who really have no desire to be involved in these particular fields," he said. "Many young people can find exciting, meaningful, practical and rewarding careers without four years of math."

Even state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne wants an "opt out" provision.

"There are some kids who are literary or have other talents," he said. "And if they take two years of math and if that's enough for them to pass the AIMS test, and they're going into a nontechnical literary field, that should be their choice."

Napolitano, however, said even students who don't intend to go into technical fields need more math, calling it "mental push-ups."

Requirements aside, Horne isn't convinced the four-year math requirement can be met for 2010's incoming freshmen.

Local angle

The possible changes to math and science requirements would have a big impact locally.

None of the nine major districts in the metro area now requires four math credits to graduate. Five require three credits and four require two, although one of those already plans to increase it to three credits beginning with the class of 2010.

Seven districts require two credits of science to graduate, while two require three credits.

The proposed change to social-studies requirements wouldn't change much here. All nine districts already require at least three credits.

These school districts' graduation requirements for math, science and social studies:

Amphi

Math: 2*

Science: 2

Social studies: 3

*Beginning with the class of 2010, 3 credits will be required

Catalina Foothills

Math: 3

He said the state already needs 70 new math teachers each year just to stay even with the number of teachers retiring.

He said a third year of math won't be a big change because about two-thirds of districts already require it. But he said it would take an immediate influx of 600 teachers to add a fourth year at all schools — which he doesn't believe can happen as fast as the board's schedule.

While refusing to approve an opt-out provision, board members agreed to a bit of flexibility. Rather than specifically requiring algebra II of all students, they said students could meet that fourth-year requirement with some other course approved by the Board of Education.

Horne said he remains worried about the new requirements increasing the number of students who don't graduate.

This year, 525 seniors did not get diplomas because they did not pass the AIMS test. But Horne said another 3,400 — about 5 percent of the graduating class — also would have been held back if they hadn't been able to supplement their scores on the test, known formally as Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, with a C or better class grade.

Those bonus points won't be available to this year's seniors.

Aside from the need for more teachers, there may be another financial barrier: State law prohibits the board from making any changes in course requirements that affect the cost of schools. New science requirements could create the need for more laboratories.

Some details of the tentative plan still have to be worked out.

The effect of the new plan, if it is finally adopted, will vary around the state.

No Tucson-area district requires four years of math to graduate, though the majority requires three, or soon will.

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Amphi

Math: 2*

Science: 3

Social studies: 3.5

Flowing Wells

Math: 3, 4*

Science: 2, 3*

Social studies: 3.5, 3.5*

*The district has two sets of requirements depending on if a student wants a "blue" or "gold" diploma. The first earns a blue; the second means gold.

Marana

Math: 3

Science: 2

Social studies: 3.5

Sahuarita

Math: 2

Science: 2

Social studies: 3

Sunnyside

Math: 2

Science: 2

Social studies: 3

Tanque Verde

Math: 2

Science: 2

Social studies: 3

TUSD

Math: 3

Science: 2

Social studies: 3

Vail

Math: 3

Science: 2

Social studies: 3

*Beginning with the class of 2010, 3 credits will be required

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