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Horne asks to expand AIMS to higher math, science, social studies

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State schools chief Tom Horne wants to expand the AIMS test to include subjects such as American history, chemistry and trigonometry.

The tests would be end-of-course exams intended to address a growing problem in which some teachers ignore social studies and science in favor of teaching only subjects that appear on high-stakes tests, Superintendent of Public Instruction Horne said.

Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards tests reading and math, and will add a biology component in 2008.

"There are a number of elementary schools where they've stopped teaching science and history. That's a catastrophe," Horne said. "This is the only solution. We've been trying to urge (teachers) to teach science and history and the arts, but if we don't test it ... they don't do it."

He doesn't plan to stop there, either, and wants to eventually roll out a fine-arts portion to the AIMS test.

But first, the state Department of Education wants to start giving social-studies tests to sixth- and seventh-grade students. Specific subjects would include American history, world history, government and economics.

Meanwhile, fourth- and eighth-graders, as well as high school students, would take science tests that would include physics and chemistry.

Horne will ask lawmakers to provide \$7.5 million to his department to create the exams, which he says will ensure uniform standards of quality in classrooms statewide.

But some educators think Horne's plan goes too far.

Anita Mendoza, a charter-school administrator who sits on the state Board of Education, said the tests could lead to the state's micromanaging teachers' lesson plans and requiring them all to teach exactly the same thing.

"By designing a state test, you are then defining a curriculum — which is different than having the state standards," she said.

The new tests would not be required for high school graduation, but they would be used to assess students' progress, as well as to help determine a school's academic label.

Horne said that eventually he would also like to test higher-level math such as intermediate and advanced algebra and trigonometry, which would be above what AIMS currently requires.

But first, he will have to convince the Legislature to hand over the money in what lawmakers are saying will be a tight budget year.

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Rep. Mark Anderson, R-Mesa, said he's not sure students need standardized tests for every subject area, even though he favors testing and accountability.

"AIMS provides motivation and an accountability factor," he said. "I'm not so sure that we really need to go with the science and other subject areas. ... To me, it's already accomplishing its purpose the way it is right now."

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