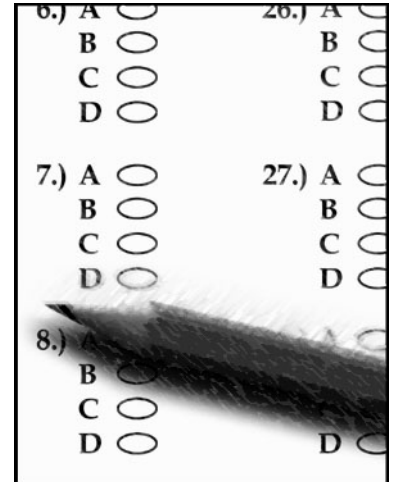


Improving High School Competency Testing

The Alaska Legislature passed a law in 1997 which enacted competency testing, or the "high school exit exam," in response to concerns that Alaska's graduates were not adequately prepared for life after high school. Business leaders told stories of graduates who couldn't fill out job applications or perform basic calculations. The University of Alaska explained how much time they had to spend teaching students remedial math and writing before they were prepared for college level courses.

The competency-testing bill required that students graduating from high school in the year 2002 be able to pass a three-part exam covering reading, writing and math skills. Students would take the tests once in their sophomore year, and then have the opportunity twice a year for the next five years to retake portions of the exam they didn't pass. Those unable to complete all three tests within three years after graduation would receive a certificate of attendance in lieu of a diploma.



Last year the class of 2002 took the exam for the first time as sophomores. The results were disheartening. Two-thirds of the students were unable to pass the math and writing portion, and parents, teachers and administrators were unsure if they would be able to pass the exams in time to receive diplomas. At the same time, concerns were raised that the test might discriminate against children with disabilities and students transferring in from out-of-state schools.

Over the course of the session, the Legislature heard from students, parents, teachers and administrators on the positive and negative aspects of the competency test. Many of those who testified expressed concern over the deadline for passing the exam and the level of difficulty of portions of the exam. At the same time, others described how the exam had driven their schools to improve teaching methods and curricula, and increased the performance of students as they worked toward the goal of passing the tests.

The Legislature considered all of the information it received and used it to craft legislation that fine-tuned the high school competency exam process. Legislators stressed that accommodations for those who need them must be provided while maintaining the objective that high school graduates have the skills necessary to succeed in the real world.

SB 133, sponsored by the Senate Health, Education and Social Services Committee, makes the following changes to the current law:

- While continuing to give the exam as is currently being done, delay tying exam passage to receiving a diploma until 2004;
- Focus the exam on knowledge of essential skills;
- Provide a waiver process for cases of extraordinary circumstances; and
- Provide for appropriate testing of students who experience learning or developmental disabilities.

The bill also requires annual reports from school districts to help monitor academic standards and identify trouble spots. Districts will be required to report:

- Number and percentage of students who pass the exam at each school;
- Progress in aligning schools' curricula with state standards;
- Qualifications of teachers instructing subjects covered by the exam; and
- Turnover in teaching staff, administrators and superintendents in each district.

The reporting requirements in this bill help the Department of Education and Early Development identify trouble spots in schools, districts and in the exam process. By showing where modifications can be made in the future, the department will continue creating an exam that is fair to the students tested while holding students and their schools to reasonable standards.