

Pupil Competency Test

By Representative Con Bunde

The Legislature passed legislation creating the Pupil Competency Test in 1997, which high school seniors must pass in order to earn a diploma. This test has also been called the "High School Graduation Qualifying Exam" and measures students' competency in three basic areas -- reading, writing and math. The Competency Test was developed because of concerns voiced by the business and university communities, who felt that Alaska's high schools were graduating students who were not capable of doing high school level work. One of the goals of the Competency Test was to address this concern. Other important goals were to gain the public's confidence in our schools, give meaning to high school diplomas, and to gain a measure of accountability from the schools our students attend.

After the Governor signed the Competency Test into law, Alaskan teachers worked together to design the test. Standards that had been voluntary for school districts were evaluated, honed, and used to create tests for reading, writing and math. Questions were developed to measure students' knowledge of each standard. The tests were then field-tested by actual high school students. Finally, educators came back to the table, and based on the field tests, decided what scores would represent a reasonable mastery of basic literacy.

Students begin taking the three-part Competency Test in their sophomore year last Spring. Once a student completes any part of the test, they do not have to re-take that part. They do have the opportunity to re-take any part they do not complete four more times before graduation. Students cannot "fail" the Competency Test until they take it the second time in the Spring of their senior year. Until then, it is a diagnostic test. There are a further six opportunities to re-take portions after graduation -- for a total of eleven chances to demonstrate basic literacy!

The results of exams taken in the Spring and Fall of last year are in. Some have called for a delay before requiring evidence of mastery of these skills to earn a diploma. We have to ask ourselves, however, what would a delay accomplish? If we do delay the test, what guarantee is there that anything will change?

Some have expressed concern for those students who have not passed the reading and writing portions of the test. However, I have heard from the parents of those who did pass who believe they are too easy. I have to remind them that this is a test of basic skills, and hope that students will follow the model of lifelong learning. Many parents also believe that there is a welcome consequence to the Competency Test -- schools, seeing the results, are providing necessary remedial help for their children. Those parents are asking us to "stay the course".

Before this test, there were no mandatory standards, and many feel that the current high school diploma is little more than a certificate of attendance. So, for the students who do pass (and I believe that the majority will) the value of their diploma would be diminished by any delay. I fear that that some in our educational system, by asking for a delay, are acknowledging that they haven't done their jobs to lead, motivate, teach, and remediate where necessary. While the Competency Test is not the only tool to improve our schools, it certainly should be one of the tools.

Ultimately, I would like to invest more in our children's education. However, we can not blindly do this. With state funds, there must be accountability. Asking for a delay is choosing not to be accountable, to refuse to change what clearly isn't working. Unless and until our schools are accountable for our investment, it is unlikely that there will be additional funds for our public schools.