

Sponsor Statement for CS Senate Bill 133 (HES)

Public School Exit Exam

An Act relating to a two-year transition for implementation of the public high school competency examination and to establishing an essential skills examination as a high school graduation requirement; and providing for an effective date.

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CSSB 133 (HES) focuses on three main goals:

1. Continue giving the exam, thus requiring responsibility and accountability;
2. Ensure the exams test knowledge of essential skills and that students taking the exam as seniors have been taught the appropriate material; and
3. Address provisions for special education/disabled students and extraordinary situations.

Although the existing exit exam law has effected positive change to Alaska's education efforts, several problems with the exam have been identified over the last several years. CSSB 133(HES) addresses these problems by delaying the implementation of denying diplomas for failing the exam until 2004, by creating a carefully administered waiver program for extraordinary situations and by adding language that would allow students participating in an "individual education plan" the ability to earn a diploma.

Currently, some students are being tested on skill sets they are not required to know by state statute and/or by local school districts, on information they have never been taught, and they will be denied a diploma if they fail the exam. Additionally, content review committees, especially in mathematics, did not develop tests for those essential skills we expect students to have when they graduate. CSSB 133 (HES) provides the department with two additional years to resolve this serious matter. During this two year period, CSSB 133(HES) requires that students take the exam and that areas of the exam they successfully pass be shown on their diplomas and transcripts.

Also, current law makes no provision for students with an IEP. Consequently, students with an IEP would be denied the opportunity to earn a diploma. CSSB 133(HES) addresses this inequity by ensuring students with an IEP have the same opportunities as students without special education needs.

Additionally, the current law provides no flexibility for the department to consider extraordinary situations such as illness or military transfer students. CSSB 133(HES) addresses this issue by creating a waiver system. The legislation requires the department and the board of education to develop the criteria and procedures for such a waiver and then return to the legislature to report on their proposed regulations by January 31, 2003.

In short, though CS for Senate Bill 133 (HES) is relatively short and simple, it is also the only legislation introduced this year that comprehensively addresses the problems expressed to the Senate HESS Committee. CSSB 133(HES) is reasonable legislation designed to enhance current competency exam laws so that Alaska's children can fully benefit from their educational efforts.