

Legislature Improves Competency Exam

By Representative Con Bunde

One of the most important and far-reaching issues before the Alaska State Legislature this year is the high school competency exam.

It is appropriate that this issue should be the focus of so much public attention and legislative work, as it raises an important question about how well the state is fulfilling one of its basic responsibilities: Are Alaska's schools doing their job of preparing our young people for the challenges and rewards of adult life?

A brief review on the exam's history will help put the current discussion in context:

The Legislature for years had been hearing from the business and university communities that graduates of Alaska high schools were not up to the challenge of productive work or advanced study. Many entry-level workers needed basic tutoring before they could be useful employees, and about half of freshmen entering the University of Alaska -- even those among the top 10 percent, attending on Alaska Scholars scholarships -- needed remedial classes.

In 1997, the Legislature addressed these concerns by passing a law requiring high school students seeking to graduate with a diploma to take a three-part competency test to show they could read at about a seventh grade level, write at a ninth grade level, and (following a revision of the math portion), perform math at the junior high level.

Results from preliminary tests, however, indicated about 30 percent of students statewide could not meet even these standards. Obviously, the educational status quo is not working, and we need to move beyond it.

The Legislature took up the challenge of addressing these concerns this session. While the House considered its House Bill 94, introduced at the governor's request, the Senate worked on Senate Bill 133, sponsored by Sen. Lyda Green (R-Matanuska-Susitna). Legislators in both houses spent weeks and months in research, work sessions and committee meetings. They heard hours of testimony from concerned parents, teachers, school district officials, and Department of Education officials. They spend days on public hearings, revisions and rehearings.

The Senate's version, SB 133, passed the Senate on March 28 and moved to the House for consideration. At a joint meeting of the House Special Committee on Education and the House Health, Education and Social Services Committee on April 2, SB133 became the vehicle for legislative work on the competency test issue.

Though both House and Senate committees had already discussed them at length, the joint committee carefully revisited several critical issues, including whether students had the "opportunity to learn", whether the tests were legally valid and could be defended in court; whether they tested the curriculum taught by Alaska schools; whether schools should waive the test for certain students, and whether they properly addressed the needs of special education students.

The legislation that resulted from this process merges the best thinking and work that went into the House and Senate versions, creating a bill that goes far in addressing not only the original goal of the

competency test, but the demonstrated need to fine-tune it as the time for its full implementation approaches.

(MORE)

Bunde - Competency Test

April 11, 2001

Page 2

In its current form, SB 133 would improve our ability to measure Alaska students' performance, to hold them and their schools accountable, and ultimately, to maximize students' opportunity to achieve academic and vocational success. It would allow the Department of Education to continue developing ways to measure accountability. It would employ standards-based assessment of student learning to make sure school districts and families receive performance data on how well students are learning. It would provide the maximum opportunity for all pupils to learn and for districts to improve.

SB 133 also addresses other important elements of the competency test issue. It would

- Award diplomas to students who transferred into high school in Alaska from another state, so long as they passed any competency test required in their old state, and fulfilled the graduation requirements of their new district
- Allow students to appeal denial of a diploma, under a process to be designed by the Department of Education
- Allow students with disabilities to receive diplomas either by passing all three tests with or without accommodation for their disabilities, or by producing a portfolio of work demonstrating achievement of state education standards
- Award those who do not qualify for a diploma a Certificate of Achievement, noting information on the portions of the test the student passed, attendance and other information the district thinks would indicate student qualifications
- Require districts to make extensive reports to the state on test results, and their efforts to help students succeed, to keep districts accountable to students, parents and the Legislature
- Delay implementation of the tests until February 2004
- Require all students to take the tests, and
- Between 2002 and 2004, students' transcripts and diplomas will reflect which sections of the test they passed in order to reward the achievements of students during the interim period.

SB 133 will be referred to the House Finance Committee tomorrow, April 12. I expect it to be on the House floor for a vote next week.

Though the fundamental goal of the high school competency test remains intact, the Legislature has made significant strides to improving the way it will be ultimately implemented. By combining the best elements of the Legislature's efforts to achieve this goal, Senate Bill 133 will ensure that a high school diploma represents meaningful achievement, that our educational system is properly accountable to those who support it, and that our students are better prepared to enter careers or college. Its passage into law would bring lasting benefit to the people and the state of Alaska.

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