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HIGH SCHOOL PROFICIENCY TEST

House Bill 5228 (Substitute H-1)
Sponsor: Rep. Sharon Gire

House Bill 5229 (Substitute H-1)
Sponsor: Rep. Mark Schauer

House Bill 5230 (Substitute H-1)
Sponsor: Rep. Ron Jelinek

House Bill 5231 (Substitute H-1)
Sponsor: Rep. Rose Bogardus

House Bill 5232 (Substitute H-1)
Sponsor: Rep. Jessie Dalman

House Bill 5233 (Substitute H-1)
Sponsor: Rep. James Agee

House Bill 5234 as introduced
Sponsor: Rep. Clyde LeTarte

House Bill 5235 (Substitute H-1)
Sponsor: Rep. Kwame Kilpatrick

First Analysis (10-14-97)
Committee: Education

House Bills 5228-5235 (10-14-97)

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

A special subcommittee of the House Education Committee held extensive hearings throughout the spring and summer on the state's high school proficiency test. This controversial new test is intended to be taken midway through the junior year in Michigan high schools to determine if students are eligible for an "endorsed diploma" when they graduate. The endorsed diploma concept has been around for a number of years, but the high school proficiency test was first administered in the spring of 1996. It is actually a series of tests or assessments. There are three sections to the test correlating to the three areas in which a student can earn an endorsement -- mathematics, science, and communication arts. Further, the communication arts endorsement involves two assessments, one in reading and one in writing. (A social studies assessment is planned for the Class of 2000.) Until recently, students were ranked as

"proficient", "novice", or "not-yet-novice". Only a proficient ranking qualified a student to

received an endorsed diploma, but the indication of a novice score also was placed on the student's transcript. (Recent legislation has eliminated the "novice" category.)

This new test, say state education officials, is not a basic skills test but is a rigorous test based on high expectations. It is designed to be aligned with the Michigan model core curriculum outcomes. It is not the typical multiple choice standardized test but focuses on the application of knowledge, problem solving, and critical thinking. It assesses what students are expected to know by the end of 10th grade, and the test itself was designed "to model good instructional practice." The first scores reported showed less than half of the test takers proficient in mathematics; less than one-third proficient in science; about 40 percent proficient in reading; and about one-third proficient in writing. About one-half of the students received a novice score on the science, reading, and writing portions, and 38 percent received a

novice score in mathematics. However, after several opportunities for retesting, the final Class of 1997 scores were 52.5 percent in mathematics; 41.6 percent in science; 48.6 percent in reading; and 41.7 percent in writing. The scores of first-time test takers from the winter 1997 testing of the Class of 1998 showed an increase in student achievement in reading, science, and mathematics, and a slight decline in writing performance, according to the Department of Education.

As might be expected, the test has become quite controversial and aroused significant public opposition. Numerous questions have been raised about its purpose and suitability. Criticisms range from technical matters, such as the time and complexity involved in its administration and methods of scoring, to political ones, such as whether the test is designed to embarrass public schools and public school students. One common criticism is that the test offers no benefit to students, only negative consequences. Students gain little by doing well, since colleges and employers do not appear to make use of the scores, but can be stigmatized by a poor performance. Such concerns led many anxious parents in one affluent suburban area to opt their children out of the test. (These concerns were not eased by stories of outstanding students failing to achieve proficiency in one area or another.) Educators complain that the students receive back scores and the categories into which they fall, but no indication of what they did right or wrong. The writing test is not returned or critiqued. So students are given no guidance for retaking the test. Others criticize the test for assessing students on what a state model suggests they should know, which is not necessarily what their local curriculum has taught them. This is unfair to students, they say, particularly to those not college-bound, and leads to a "one size fits all" attitude towards the state schools and students.

Defenders of the test say that, despite its problems, some of which stem from simply being new, the high school proficiency test is working to achieve its aim of raising standards and focusing local school districts attention on the state's model core curriculum outcomes. Business leaders, who were in the forefront of creating the concept of endorsed diplomas and proficiency testing, have testified that the test emphasizes the kind and quality of school performance expected of students if they are to succeed in today's working environments.

A special subcommittee of the House Education Committee has developed recommendations for improving the test in response to many of the criticisms at hearings held around the state during the spring and summer. Legislation has been introduced to implement those recommendations.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILLS:

The bills would amend several acts to make changes in the administration of the high school proficiency test. (The test is generally referred to in the bills as "the assessments used for state endorsement.") Unless otherwise noted, the bills would amend the Revised School Code (MCL 380.1279 et al.). The bills are all tie-barred to one another. Generally speaking, the bills replace the terms "proficient" and "proficiency" wherever they appear with "competent" and "competency."

Under House Bill 5228:

-- The assessments would be administered to students during the first semester of Grade 12.

(Because the routine administration of the test would be moved from the 11th grade to the 12th grade, students scheduled to graduate in 1998 who took the assessments during the 1996-97 school year would be allowed to repeat one or more assessments during the 1997-98 school year. The Department of Education, in cooperation with school districts and public school academies, would have to make arrangements for repeat assessments to be available for these students in each school district operating a high school in 1997-98 in time for them to earn state endorsement before graduation. The repeat assessments could be administered at times other than regular school hours.)

-- The Department of Education would have to ensure that the assessments were scored and the scores returned to students, parents or guardians, and school districts or public school academies no later than the end of the first semester of 12th grade. The returned scores would have to indicate the student's numerical score for each subject area and the range of scores that constitute each performance category. Not later than Fall of 1999, the department would have to arrange for those portions of the test that cannot be scored mechanically to be scored by persons holding a valid Michigan teaching certificate, by retired Michigan teachers, or by Michigan school administrators trained for that purpose. In reporting the scores, the department would have to provide specific, meaningful, and timely feedback on the areas that need improving for a student to achieve proficiency and a state endorsement.

-- The State Board of Education would be required to develop three categories of state endorsement for each subject area, indicating basic competency, above average, and outstanding. The actual names to be given to those categories and the required assessment scores for each would be determined by the state board. (At present,

students receive scores of proficient, novice, and not-yet novice, with only the proficient score qualifying for an endorsement.)

-- The department would be required to ensure that the assessments themselves and the combined total time necessary to administer all of the assessments, including social studies, takes the shortest time possible while maintaining the necessary degree of reliability. The department would be required to ensure that the maximum total combined length of time students are allowed for completion of all of the assessments does not exceed six hours.

-- The department would be required to submit a comprehensive report to the legislature on the status of the state endorsement program not later than July 1 each year until 2000. The report would have to include the annual student assessment data; the description of feedback provided to students, parents, and schools; a description of any significant alteration made in the program by the department or state board; and any recommendations for legislative changes.

-- No later than 90 days after the bill's effective date, the State Board of Education would be required to appoint an 11-member assessment administration advisory committee to advise them on MEAP tests and on the high school proficiency test. The committee would be composed of representatives of school districts, school administrators, teachers, and parents, with the appointments to reflect the geographic and population diversity of school districts in the state. The committee would have to evaluate the various tests and make recommendations related to administration, scoring, and the reporting and use of results. The evaluation would have to cover, among other things, the length of the tests; the time of the testing period during the school year; feedback provided to students, parents, and schools; accurate and relevant reporting of results to the general public; the selection of a retesting period and procedures for repeating tests; local scoring and other scoring-related issues not addressed by the technical advisory group; the categories of scoring; and professional development for teachers.

-- Not later than 90 days after the bill's effective date, the state board would have to appoint a 7-member technical advisory group to advise the board and department on the technical aspects of MEAP tests and the high school proficiency test assessments. The group would be made up of experts in measurement and assessment. They would review the tests and advise the state board and department on the validity, reliability, and other technical standards of the tests and on the administration and use of the tests.

-- References to a state-endorsed diploma would be deleted. Instead, the act would require that state endorsements that would be included on a student's transcript, with the category of endorsement for each subject area indicated.

-- The department would be required to establish, schedule, and arrange periodic retesting periods throughout the year for individuals who wanted to repeat an assessment. The department would coordinate the arrangements for administering the repeat assessments and ensure that the retesting was made available at least within each intermediate school district and, to the extent possible, within each school district. An individual could repeat any of the assessments during any time established as a retesting period. (As now, an individual could be reevaluated, without cost, at any time a district administered an applicable assessment instrument, as could any graduate who had not taken an assessment.)

-- A child who was a student in a nonpublic school or home school would be able to take an assessment. The home school student would have to contact his or her local school district and the district would administer the assessment. Upon the request of a nonpublic school, the department would have to supply assessments and the nonpublic school could administer them to its students. (This is said to be current state education department policy.)

-- A statement of purpose would be added to the act regarding the assessments, to read as follows: "The purposes of the assessments under this section is to assess pupil competency in mathematics, science, social studies, and communication arts for the purpose of improving academic achievement and establishing a statewide standard of competency. The assessment under this section provides a common measure of data that will contribute to the improvement of Michigan schools' curriculum and instruction by encouraging alignment with Michigan's curriculum framework standards. These standards are based on the expectations of what pupils should know and be able to do by the end of Grade 11. Pupils indicating basic, above average, and outstanding competency in mathematics, science, social studies, and communications arts will qualify for state endorsements in each of these areas."

-- Definitions of the terms "communication skills" and "social studies" would be added to the act, with the former referring to "reading and writing" and the latter to "geography, history, economics, and American government."

House Bill 5229 would put the provisions described above in the State School Aid Act (MCL 388.1704a), except for those regarding the assessment administration advisory committee and the technical advisory group.

At present, students who are in grade 10 and above are allowed, upon the written request of a parent or guardian, to take an assessment without charge whenever a district regularly administers it, or when it administers a retest, for the purpose of qualifying for one or more postsecondary courses under the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act. A school district is not required to include in an annual education report or any other accreditation-related report submitted to the Department of Education the results of tests or assessments taken by a student in grade 10. House Bill 5230 would specify that a student who was in grade 10 or above could take an assessment during a retesting period established by the Department of Education under House Bill 5228. Also, the bill would specify that school districts are not required to report the results of tests or assessments by a student in grades 11 or lower until the results of that student's graduating class are otherwise reported.

House Bill 5231 would require the legislature, beginning in the 1998-99 fiscal year, to appropriate additional funds for professional development related to the endorsement assessments. Specifically, the funds would be used for training teachers concerning teaching students in the locally adopted core curriculum and concerning the assessments used for state endorsement and providing students with the skills and knowledge required to achieve state endorsement. Professional development funds currently can be used to address the use of data and assessment instruments to improve teaching and learning for all students. The bill would include as a goal the identification of students who need additional assistance and would specifically include MEAP tests and the state endorsement assessments among the assessment instruments.

House Bill 5232 would amend the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act to take into account the effect changes in the administration of the state endorsement assessments would have on eligibility for the dual enrollment program. Students in Grades 11 and 12 would be eligible for dual enrollment in a subject area for which they had earned an endorsement (as well as a foreign language not offered by the district, computer science, and fine arts).

House Bill 5233 would require that school improvement plans consider the results achieved by students on the MEAP tests and on the state endorsement assessments in determining whether or not the existing school curriculum

is providing students with the education and skills needed to fulfill the adult roles graduates are expected to fulfill. (That determination is one each school is required to make in its school improvement plan.)

House Bill 5234 would require that school accreditation standards include student performance on the state endorsement assessments and multiple year change in student performance on those assessments.

Currently, a school board is required to provide a core academic curriculum, learning processes, special assistance, and sufficient access to each of those so that students have a fair opportunity to achieve a state endorsement. House Bill 5235 would require a school board to use MEAP test results as an indicator of which students need special assistance to have a fair opportunity to achieve state endorsement and of whether the district's curriculum is aligned adequately to prepare students to achieve state endorsement. The special assistance could include at least one meeting attended by the student and a member of the district staff or a local or intermediate district consultant competent in the measurement and evaluation of students. The district could provide the meeting as a group meeting for students in similar circumstances. If the student is a minor, the district would have to invite and encourage the parent or guardian to attend and would have to mail a notice of the meeting to them.

The purpose of the meeting and any subsequent meeting would be to determine an educational program for the student designed to assist the student to reach competency in each subject area in which he or she was assessed as not competent. Subsequent meetings could be provided to be conducted by a counselor or teacher designated by the school principal. The district could provide special programs or develop a program using educational programs regularly used by the school district.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The House Fiscal Agency has reported that the fiscal impact of the proposals is uncertain, but says that it is possible that both state and local costs would increase with changes to the assessment process. It is also possible that moving the test to the 12th grade could result in savings since there would be fewer windows for testing. Among the items that could lead to cost increases are the faster turnaround in test scoring; the creation of two advisory groups; the required Department of Education report; additional professional development funding; and possible increased participation in dual-enrollment programs. (For more detail, see the discussion in the HFA's Fiscal Notes dated 10-9-97)

ARGUMENTS:**For:**

The bills would implement a series of recommendations for change in the state's high school proficiency test made by a House subcommittee after several months of hearings around the state and subsequent deliberations.

The subcommittee consensus was that the test has value as an instrument for evaluating students and improving schools, but has flaws that need to be addressed. Among the recommendations and their rationales are:

-- The test would be moved from the middle of the 11th grade to the first semester of the 12th grade, with scores to be returned by the end of the first semester of 12th grade. This addresses the criticism that the test is given too early, with the result that schools are being forced to push their curriculums downward. This can mean denying students the opportunity to take valuable, enriching elective courses whose subject matter will not be on the test (including music, art, etc.). Pushing the test back will restore some flexibility in curriculum design for school districts and students. Plus, by returning scores by the end of first semester, there will be opportunities for retests. (This provision would delay the general administration of the test for the Class of 1999 until the fall of 1998. At present, they are scheduled to take the test in January or February of 1998.)

-- Specific, meaningful, and timely feedback would be required when scores are reported on the areas in which a student needs to improve to achieve an endorsement in a subject area. Currently, students receive little useful information on their performance, critics say, which limits the value of retesting.

-- Portions of the test not scored mechanically would be scored by Michigan educators. Currently, to cite the prime example, the writing test is sent to North Carolina for scoring, which appears to have added to the public skepticism about the fairness of the test (particularly since students as a whole have not done well). Scoring by Michigan teachers would also assist them in better teaching the students the skills the test demands.

-- Three categories of endorsement would be developed under this proposal to replace the current pass/fail test, with the categories roughly approximating basic competency, above average, and outstanding. (The actual category titles will be developed by the State Board of Education.) This will provide a better accounting of the various levels of student achievement on the test.

-- The concept of an endorsed diploma would be replaced by individual subject matter endorsements that would be recorded on a student's transcript.

-- The test would be shortened. The proposal calls for the test to take no more than 6 hours. There have been complaints that the administration of the test takes too much school time and is too disruptive to high schools generally. Some people describe it as an 11- or 12-hour test. Department of Education officials say the actual test taking time should be about 8 hours and 40 minutes.

(Only the writing portion has actual time limits.) This is without the addition of a social studies component scheduled for implementation soon. The proposed 6-hour maximum would include the social studies test.

-- The proposal includes a statement of purpose to appear in statute, to answer complaints and questions about what the test is supposed to be accomplishing. The statement intends to make it clear that the test intends both to assess student competency and improve the curriculum and instruction in the state's schools by encouraging alignment with state model content standards.

-- Two advisory groups would be established to provide ongoing assistance to the Department of Education on school testing. One would be a technical group made up of experts in measurement and assessment; the other would be focused on the administration of the test, including its length, scoring, feedback, reporting of results, and other matters, and would be made up of educators, parents, and school district representatives.

-- Emphasis would be put on using MEAP tests as an indicator of which students are likely to encounter difficulty in achieving state endorsements when in high school. This allows for early intervention to provide special assistance to students and to school districts whose curriculums are not offering students an opportunity to succeed.

-- Additional professional development funding would be made available to ensure that educators are familiar with the standards on which the endorsement assessments are based and to assist them in teaching students the knowledge and skills needed to achieve state endorsements.

Response:

Some of these recommendations raise concerns. Wouldn't it be better to ask the Department of Education to try to shorten the test without specifying a 6-hour limit? Besides, the current test does not seem that long compared with the amount of time devoted in high school to other far less important events and activities. The test ought to be seen as a meaningful part of the learning experience in high school, not as a nuisance and an add-on. Shortening the test could affect its reliability and

validity. Further, while the State Board of Education has expressed its desire to have the writing test scored in Michigan, it might not be feasible by the 1999 deadline imposed here, particularly if the pool of potential scorers is limited to people holding teaching certificates, retired teachers, and administrators. That leaves a lot of potential scorers out, and teachers may not be interested in participating. Also, the current test is based on what students have learned by the end of the 10th grade, while the proposed legislation would base the test on what students are supposed to have learned by the end of the 11th grade. What effect will this have on the test? Will it make it more difficult? And how will it affect attempts to shorten the test?

Against:

Critics of the test, some of whom would like it eliminated, say that it is taking away local school flexibility and encroaching on local decision making by forcing schools to adapt their curriculums to the test. It should be noted that there is no mandated statewide curriculum, even though the test functions as if there is. The test is forcing districts to change course offerings, limit choices and opportunities previously available, and emphasize a college-bound model, even though many students are not preparing to attend a four-year college. The college bound student already takes a multitude of tests that are recognized by the schools they plan to attend, and other employment-related tests are available for the student going directly to the workforce.

POSITIONS:

There are no positions at present.

Analyst: C. Couch

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