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BILL ANALYSIS

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Senate Bill 1124 (as enrolled)
House Bill 5606 (as enrolled)
Sponsor: Senator Wayne Kuipers (S.B. 1124)
Representative Brian Palmer (H.B. 5606)
Senate Committee: Education
House Committee: Education (H.B. 5606)

PUBLIC ACT 124 of 2006
PUBLIC ACT 123 of 2006

Date Completed: 4-28-06

RATIONALE

There is growing concern that public high schools in Michigan are not preparing students adequately for the challenges they will face in the workplace. As the State's economy changes, and is faced with competition from other states and countries, many believe that education is an increasingly important factor for the success of people entering the workforce and for the economic vitality of the State. At the same time, many businesses and postsecondary educational institutions report that high school graduates frequently lack essential skills. Colleges and universities often must offer remedial courses for students, and companies sometimes must test high school graduates for basic math and language skills. In response to these concerns, Michigan has looked at ways to improve its high school education system and develop a more highly educated workforce. (Please see **BACKGROUND** for details.)

Many agree that rigorous statewide graduation requirements could improve students' performance by raising expectations and setting high standards for all high school graduates. Until now, however, the only statewide requirement has been one semester of civics. In December 2005, the State Board of Education unanimously approved a recommendation for statewide graduation requirements, and there was widespread agreement that such requirements should be enacted.

CONTENT

Senate Bill 1124 and House Bill 5606 added Sections 1278a and 1278b, respectively, to the Revised School Code to require pupils, beginning with those entering 8th grade in 2006, to earn the following credits under the "Michigan Merit Standard" before receiving a high school diploma (subject to modifications described in the bills):

- **Four credits in English language arts.**
- **Four credits in math (including algebra I and II and geometry).**
- **Three credits in science (including biology and chemistry or physics).**
- **Three credits in social sciences (including U.S. history and geography, world history and geography, economics, and civics).**
- **One credit in visual, performing, or applied arts.**
- **One credit in subject matter that includes health and physical education.**
- **Beginning with pupils entering 3rd grade in 2006, two credits in a language other than English.**

In addition, the bills do the following:

- **Require the Department of Education (DOE) to develop subject area content expectations and guidelines for the required credits, and develop subject area assessments to evaluate whether students have met the expectations or guidelines.**

- Require the DOE, in developing the expectations and guidelines, to solicit input from experts in the field, parents, teachers, administrators, representatives from colleges or universities, representatives from the business community, government officials, and others.
- Require the State Board of Education to approve the expectations and guidelines before they take effect.
- Allow a student to earn credit in a subject area by achieving a sufficient score on the subject area assessment for that credit.
- Require all high school students to participate in an online course or learning experience.
- Allow a pupil's parent or legal guardian to request a personal curriculum for the pupil, to be developed with the pupil's counselor or other designee, that may modify certain math, social science, and other requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard (other than the English and science requirements).
- Require each pupil, before entering high school and with the supervision of a counselor, to develop an educational development plan.
- Require a school district to notify a pupil's parent or legal guardian (or if the pupil is 18 or an emancipated minor, to notify him or her) of the availability of tutoring or other services if the pupil is not successfully completing a credit required for graduation.
- Allow a school district or public school academy (PSA) to meet the curriculum requirements using alternative delivery methods, including alternative course work, humanities sequences, or career and technical education.
- Allow local school districts to specify additional graduation requirements, including completion of subject area assessments, the Michigan Merit Examination, or the MI-Access assessments.
- Allow school districts that are unable to comply with all requirements under the bills to submit to the DOE a plan to phase in the requirements.
- Require the DOE to work with a school district or PSA that is unable

to hire enough highly qualified teachers to meet the requirements of the bills, to develop a plan allowing the district or PSA to hire enough qualified teachers.

- Require the DOE to submit to the Legislature an annual report on the overall success of the required curriculum, the rigor and relevance of the required course work, the ability of public schools to implement the curriculum, its impact on student success, and other information.
- Allow the Superintendent of Public Instruction to designate up to 15 specialty high schools that are exempt from certain requirements of Michigan Merit Standard.

House Bill 5606 also amended Section 1280 of the Code to specify that, beginning in 2008-2009, a high school may not be accredited unless it ensures that all students have access to all elements of the curriculum required under the bills, and require the Superintendent of Public Instruction to update the accreditation standards annually.

The two bills took effect on April 25, 2006, and were tie barred to each other.

Senate Bill 1124

Required Credits

Except as otherwise provided in the bill, beginning with pupils entering 8th grade in 2006, the board of a school district or board of directors of a public school academy may not award a high school diploma to a pupil unless he or she has successfully completed the following credit requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard:

- At least four credits in math, including completion of algebra I, geometry, and algebra II, or an integrated sequence of this course content that consists of three credits, and an additional math credit such as trigonometry, statistics, precalculus, calculus, applied math, accounting, business math, or a retake of algebra II. Each pupil must complete one math course successfully during his or her final year of high school.

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- At least three credits in social science, including one credit in U.S. history and geography, one credit in world history and geography, one half credit in economics, and the civics course currently required under the Code.
- At least one credit in subject matter that includes health and physical education.
- At least one credit in visual arts, performing arts, or applied arts, as defined by the DOE.
- The credit requirements specified in Section 1278b(1) (English and Science, under House Bill 5606).

The math and social science credits must be aligned with subject area content expectations developed by the DOE and approved by the State Board of Education. The health and physical education credit and the arts credit must be aligned with guidelines developed by the DOE and approved by the State Board.

Online Course Requirement

Under the bill, a student may not be awarded a diploma unless he or she has successfully completed at least one course or learning experience that is presented online, as defined by the DOE, or unless the pupil's school district or PSA has integrated an online experience throughout the high school curriculum by ensuring that each teacher of each course that provides required credits of the Michigan Merit Standard has integrated an online experience into the course. A school district or PSA must provide the basic level of technology and internet access required by the State Board of Education to complete the online course or learning experience.

Language Requirement

Beginning with pupils entering 3rd grade in 2006, the bill prohibits the board of a school district or board of directors of a PSA from awarding a diploma to a pupil unless he or she has successfully completed two credits in a language other than English between 9th and 12th grades, or has successfully completed, any time between kindergarten and 12th grade, course work or other learning experiences that are substantially equivalent to that requirement, based on standards developed by the DOE. For the purposes of this requirement, American sign

language is considered to be a language other than English. A pupil may meet all or part of the requirement with online course work.

Earned Credits

The bill provides that a pupil is considered to have completed a credit if he or she successfully completes the subject area content expectations or guidelines for that credit. A school district or PSA must base its determination of whether a pupil has successfully completed the content expectations or guidelines at least in part on the pupil's performance on the subject area assessments developed or selected by the DOE (as required under House Bill 5606) or developed or selected by the school district or PSA, measuring a pupil's understanding of the content expectations or guidelines for that credit.

A school district or PSA also must grant a pupil a credit if he or she earns a qualifying score, as determined by the DOE, on the DOE assessments or those of the district or PSA.

Local Requirements

The bill states that the requirements of Sections 1278a and 1278b are in addition to any local requirements imposed by the board of a school district or board of directors of a PSA. As a local requirement for a high school diploma, a board may require a pupil to complete some or all of the subject area assessments, the Michigan Merit Exam, or the MI-Access assessment, if appropriate for the pupil.

Specialty Schools

The bill allows the Superintendent of Public Instruction to designate up to 15 high schools as specialty schools. Subject to that maximum, the Superintendent must designate a school as a specialty school if it incorporates a significant reading and writing component throughout its curriculum, and it uses a specialized, innovative, and rigorous curriculum in such areas as performing arts, foreign language, extensive use of internships, or other learning innovations that conform to pioneering innovations among other leading national or international high schools.

House Bill 5606

If a high school is designated as a specialty school and it meets the requirements above, the pupils of the high school are not required to complete the four credits in English language arts or the three credits in social science otherwise required, and the school district or PSA is not required to ensure that each pupil is offered the curriculum necessary to meet those requirements.

A school may retain its status as a specialty high school only if the mean scores of its pupils on both the math and science portions of the ACT are at least 10% higher during the most recent year for which data are available than those mean scores for the pupils of the school district in which the greatest number of the high school's pupils reside. Also, for the most recent year for which data are available, a specialty school must have had a graduation rate of at least 85%, and at least 75% of the pupils who graduated from the high school in the previous year must be enrolled in a postsecondary institution.

In addition, all pupils of the high school must be required to meet the math credit requirements of the bill, with no modification of those requirements under Section 1278a(5), (which allows the development of a personalized curriculum under certain circumstances). Also, all pupils of the high school must be required to meet the science requirements under Section 1278b(1), and to complete successfully at least one additional science credit, for a total of at least four science credits, with no modification of these requirements. Each pupil must be offered the curriculum necessary to meet all of the math and science requirements.

To maintain its designation as a specialty high school, a school must clearly state to prospective pupils and parents that it does not meet the requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard, but is exempt from some of those requirements, and that a pupil who enrolls in the school and subsequently transfers to a nonspecialty high school will be required to comply with the Michigan Merit Standard requirements.

Credit Requirements

Under the bill, beginning with pupils entering 8th grade in 2006, the board of a school district or the board of directors of a PSA may not award a high school diploma to a pupil unless he or she has completed all of the following credits before graduating from high school:

- At least four credits in English language arts.
- At least three credits in science, including completion of at least biology and either chemistry or physics.
- The credit requirements specified in Section 1278a(1)(a) (math, social science, health/physical education, and arts, under Senate Bill 1124).

The English and science credits must be aligned with subject area content expectations developed by the DOE and approved by the State Board of Education. The bill states that pupils are strongly encouraged to complete a fourth credit in science, such as forensics, astronomy, earth science, agricultural science, environmental science, geology, physics or chemistry, physiology, or microbiology.

If a pupil successfully completes one or more of the high school credits required above before entering high school, he or she must be given high school credit for that credit.

The bill specifies that Sections 1278a and 1278b do not prohibit a pupil from satisfying or exceeding the credit requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard through advanced studies such as accelerated course placement, advanced placement, dual enrollment in a postsecondary institution, or participation in the international baccalaureate program or an early college/middle college program.

If a pupil is not successfully completing a credit required for graduation, or is identified as being at risk of withdrawing from high school, the pupil's school district or PSA must notify his or her parent or legal guardian or, if the pupil is at least 18 or is an emancipated minor, the pupil, of the availability of tutoring or other supplemental

educational support and counseling services that may be available to him or her under existing State or Federal programs, such as those available under the State School Aid Act for at-risk pupils or under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Subject Area Content Expectations & Guidelines

Under the bill, the DOE must develop subject area content expectations for the required credits in English, science, math, and social science, and develop guidelines for the remaining credits required under Sections 1278a and 1278b, including the online course or learning experience and the foreign language requirement.

The subject area content expectations must be consistent with the model core curriculum content standards recommended by the State Board under Section 1278. (That section requires the State Board of Education to develop and recommend to school districts model core curriculum standards, in the form of knowledge and skill content standards, that set forth desired learning objectives in math, science, reading, history, geography, economics, American government, and writing for all pupils at each stage of schooling.) Content expectations or guidelines must not include "attitudes, beliefs, or value systems that are not essential in the legal, economic, and social structure of our society and to the personal and social responsibility of citizens of our society". The expectations must require pupils to demonstrate critical thinking skills, and must state in clear and measurable terms what pupils are expected to know upon completion of each credit.

The DOE must complete development of the content expectations for algebra I and guidelines for the online course or learning experience by August 1, 2006. Development of all other content expectations and guidelines must be completed not later than one year before the beginning of the school year in which a pupil entering high school in 2007 would normally be expected to complete the credit.

If the DOE has not completed development of content expectations or guidelines for a particular credit by the date required above, a school district or PSA may align the

content of the credit with locally adopted standards.

At least every six months the DOE must submit to the legislative standing committees responsible for education legislation a report on the status of the development of the content expectations and guidelines, until all expectations and guidelines have been developed by the DOE and approved by the State Board of Education. The report must explain the reasons for any failure to meet a deadline specified in the bill.

The DOE must develop and implement a process for developing the subject area content expectations and guidelines that provides for soliciting input from all of the following:

- Recognized experts in the relevant subject areas.
- Representatives from colleges, universities, community colleges, and other postsecondary institutions.
- Teachers, administrators, and school personnel with specialized knowledge of the subject area.
- Representatives from the business community.
- Representatives from vocational and career and technical education providers.
- Government officials, including officials from the Legislature.
- Parents of public school pupils.

The development process also must include a review of the subject area content expectations or guidelines by national experts, and must provide a period of at least 15 business days for the public to review and offer input on the proposed expectations and guidelines before they are submitted to the State Board for approval. The State Board must approve the subject area content expectations and guidelines before they take effect.

The DOE also must determine the basic level of technology and internet access required for pupils to complete the online course or learning experience requirement specified in Senate Bill 1124, and submit its determination to the Board of Education for approval.

Assessments

Within three years after the bill's effective date, the DOE must develop or select and approve assessments that school districts and public school academies may use to determine whether a pupil has successfully completed a credit required under the Michigan Merit Standard. The assessments for each credit must measure a pupil's understanding of the content expectations or guidelines for that credit. The DOE must develop or select and approve assessments for at least each of the following credits: algebra I, geometry, algebra II, earth science, biology, physics, chemistry, world history, United States history, economics, civics, and English in grades nine through 12.

In addition, the DOE must develop and make available material to assist school districts and PSAs in implementing the requirements of Sections 1278a and 1278b, including developing guidelines for alternative instructional delivery methods.

Personal Curriculum

The bill allows the parent or legal guardian of a pupil to request a personal curriculum for that pupil that modifies certain requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard requirements. The personal curriculum must be developed by the pupil, at least one of his or her parents or his or her guardian, and his or her high school counselor or other designee selected by the high school principal. Revisions to a personal curriculum may be made if they are developed and agreed to in the same manner as the original personal curriculum.

The personal curriculum must incorporate as much of the subject area content expectations of the Michigan Merit Standard as is practicable; establish measurable goals that the pupil must achieve while enrolled in high school; provide a method to evaluate whether he or she met those goals; and be aligned with the pupil's educational development plan (which a pupil must develop before entering high school, under the bill).

The pupil's parent or legal guardian and the superintendent of the school district or chief executive of the PSA or his or her designee

must agree to the personal curriculum before it takes effect. If a pupil is at least 18 or is an emancipated minor, he or she may act on his or her own behalf under these provisions.

The parent or guardian must be in communication with each of the pupil's teachers at least once each calendar quarter to monitor the pupil's progress toward the goals in his or her personal curriculum.

The English language arts requirements and the science requirements specified in the bill are not subject to modification under a personal curriculum.

The math requirements under Section 1278a may be modified only after the pupil has successfully completed at least two and a half credits of the required math credits, and only if he or she completes at least three and a half credits of the required math credits before completing high school. The requirement that a pupil complete at least one math course during his or her final year in high school is not subject to modification. The algebra II credit requirement may be modified only if the pupil has completed at least two of the required math credits successfully, and meets one or more of the following: has successfully completed the same content as one semester of algebra II; elects to complete (and successfully completes) the algebra II content over two years, with a credit to be awarded for each year; or enrolls in a formal career and technical education program or curriculum in which he or she completes the same content as one semester of algebra II, as determined by the DOE.

The social science credit requirements in Section 1278a may be modified as part of a personal curriculum only if the pupil has successfully completed two credits of the required social science credits, including the required civics course, and if the modification requires the pupil to complete one additional credit in English language arts, math, science, or a language other than English, in addition to the number of those credits otherwise required under the Michigan Merit Standard.

The visual arts, performing arts, or applied arts credit requirement may be modified as part of a personal curriculum only if the

modification requires the pupil to complete one additional credit in English, math, science, or a language other than English, in addition to those otherwise required.

If all of the above requirements are met, then the board of a school district or the board of directors of a PSA may award a high school diploma to a pupil who successfully completes his or her personal curriculum even if it does not meet the requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard.

The provisions for the development of a personal curriculum do not apply to a pupil enrolled in a specialty high school (as designated under Senate Bill 1124.)

Accommodations for Pupils with Disabilities

If a pupil receives special education services, his or her individualized education program, in accordance with the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, must identify the supports, accommodations, and modifications necessary to allow him or her to progress in the curricular requirements of Sections 1278a and 1278b, or in a personal curriculum, and meet the requirements for a high school diploma.

Highly Qualified Teachers

To the extent required by the Federal No Child Left Behind Act, the board of a school district or PSA must ensure that all components of the curricular requirements under Sections 1278a and 1278b are taught by highly qualified teachers. If a school district or PSA demonstrates to the Department that it is unable to meet these requirements because it is unable to hire enough highly qualified teachers, the DOE must work with the school district or PSA to develop a plan allowing it to do so.

Educational Plan

The bill requires the board of a school district or board of directors of a PSA to ensure that each pupil in 7th grade is given the opportunity to develop an educational development plan, and that each pupil has developed such a plan before he or she begins high school. The pupil must develop the plan under the supervision of his or her counselor or other designee selected by the

high school principal, and the plan must be based on a career pathways program or similar career exploration program.

Phase-In of Requirements

The board of a school district or board of directors of a PSA that operates a high school must ensure that each pupil is offered the curriculum necessary to meet the curricular requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard, by providing the credits specified in Sections 1278a and 1278b, or by using alternative instructional delivery methods such as alternative course work, humanities course sequences, career and technical education, industrial technology courses, or vocational education, or through a combination of these. The bill encourages school districts and PSAs that operate career and technical education programs to integrate the credit requirements into those programs.

If a school district or PSA is unable to implement all of the curricular requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard for pupils entering grade 9 in 2007 or is unable to implement another requirement of Section 1278a or 1278b, the school district or PSA may apply to the DOE for permission to phase in one or more of the requirements. The district or PSA must submit a proposed phase-in plan to the DOE, which must approve the plan if the Department determines that it will result in the school district or PSA making satisfactory progress toward full implementation of the requirements. If the DOE disapproves a proposed phase-in plan, it must work with the district or PSA to develop a satisfactory plan that may be approved. These provisions do not apply to a high school that is designated a specialty school.

In addition, the phase-in provisions do not apply if legislation is enacted to allow school districts and PSAs to apply for a contract waiving certain State or Federal requirements. Instead, if such legislation is enacted, a school district or PSA that does not offer all of the required credits or provide options to have access to them is encouraged to apply for a contract under that legislation.

Reporting Requirement

The bill requires the DOE, by April 1 of each year, to submit to the Legislature a report evaluating the overall success of the curriculum required under Sections 1278a and 1278b, the rigor and relevance of the course work required by the curriculum, and the ability of public schools to implement the curriculum and the required course work, and detailing any activities that the DOE has undertaken to implement the requirements or to assist public schools in implementing them.

Accreditation

Under the bill, the board of a school district or board of directors of a PSA that operates a high school must ensure that all elements of the curriculum required under Sections 1278a and 1278b are made available to all affected pupils, for the high school to be accredited under Section 1280 of the Code. If all credits are not offered, the board must ensure that the pupils have access to the required credits by another means, such as enrollment in a postsecondary course under the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act, enrollment in an online course, a cooperative arrangement with a neighboring school district or with a PSA, or approval for the pupil to be counted in membership in another school district.

The Code provides for the development of accreditation standards according to a specified process, which includes the development of proposed standards by the DOE; statewide public hearings on the proposed standards; reviews and any appropriate revisions by the DOE and the Superintendent of Public Instruction; and approval by the House and Senate standing committees dealing with education. The bill requires the Superintendent of Public Instruction to review and update the accreditation standards annually according to this process.

Under the Code, the standards for accreditation or summary accreditation must include, but may not be based solely on, pupil performance on Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) tests and the percentage of pupils achieving State endorsement under Section 1279. The bill also requires the accreditation standards to

include pupil performance on the Michigan Merit Exam. In addition, under the Code the standards must include multiple-year changes in pupil performance on MEAP tests and in the percentage of students achieving State endorsement. The bill also requires multiple year changes in pupil performance on the Michigan Merit Exam to be included. Under the bill, the percentage of pupils receiving State endorsement is to be included until the Michigan Merit Exam has been fully implemented.

(Section 1279 requires the Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop assessments for each subject area, for which a pupil's score may be categorized as follows: "exceeds expectations", "meets expectations", "basic", or "below basic". If a student's score on an assessment falls within the range for "exceeds expectations", "meets expectations", or "basic", the pupil has achieved State endorsement in that area.)

Under the bill, beginning with the 2008-2009 school year, the DOE may not accredit a high school unless the Department determines that the high school is providing or has ensured that all pupils have access to all of the elements of the curriculum required under Sections 1278a and 1278b. If it is necessary for the Superintendent to revise the accreditation standards in order to comply with the changes made to Section 1280 by the bill, the revised standards must be developed, reviewed, approved, and distributed using the process specified in the Code.

MCL 380.1278a (S.B. 1124)
380.1278b & 380.1280 et al. (H.B. 5606)

BACKGROUND

The Cherry Commission

In June 2004, Governor Granholm created the Lieutenant Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, commonly known as the Cherry Commission after Lieutenant Governor John Cherry. The Governor charged the Commission with making recommendations for improving the skills of the workforce, doubling the percentage of Michigan residents with postsecondary degrees or other credentials, and aligning the State's educational

institutions with economic opportunities in the State.

The Commission's final report, issued in December 2004, included a recommendation that the State Board of Education develop a rigorous set of standards to ensure that high school graduates have the necessary skills to succeed either in postsecondary education or in the workplace. The Commission recommended that the State Board develop these standards with input from employers, labor organizations, institutions of higher education, and high school parents, students, and teachers.

Development of the Michigan Merit Standard

In the fall of 2005, Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Flanagan assembled a research group to examine high school education standards in Michigan. The group was composed of people from a variety of backgrounds, including school administrators, special educators, and representatives from the Department of Education, and was headed by Dr. Jeremy Hughes, Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction. The group met in September through November and reviewed policies enacted in several other states, including Arkansas, Indiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Rhode Island.

After reviewing the research and the experiences of other states, and evaluating which policies might work best for Michigan, the work group developed a set of recommendations for statewide graduation requirements in Michigan, similar to those enacted in other states. The work group made its recommendations to Superintendent Flanagan, who then presented them to the State Board of Education. The proposed "Michigan Merit Curriculum" was unanimously approved by the Board on December 15, 2005.

ARGUMENTS

(Please note: The arguments contained in this analysis originate from sources outside the Senate Fiscal Agency. The Senate Fiscal Agency neither supports nor opposes legislation.)

Supporting Argument

The bills will standardize high school graduation requirements in Michigan, replacing the system in which every school district has had its own different requirements, and improving the consistency of education across the State. Currently, not only do graduation requirements vary from district to district, but the course content presented is not necessarily consistent either. In some cases, courses with the same title may present very different content, leaving some students less well prepared than others. Under the bills, the DOE must develop content area expectations or guidelines for each of the required credits, and school districts must develop courses that meet those expectations and guidelines, ensuring that all students in Michigan are receiving the same content. For the sake of Michigan's economic future, it is essential to give all students in the State a high-quality education, and to increase the rigor and relevance of the high school curriculum. The Michigan Merit Standard largely reflects the Michigan Merit Curriculum adopted by the State Board. Under the bills, all students will have to take rigorous courses that will give them the skills to compete in today's economy. This should increase the State's performance in math and science, and help ensure that schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act.

High school graduation requirements in Michigan are lower than those in many other states, and also are below educational standards in other countries such as India and China, particularly in math and science. Knowledge in these areas is crucial to technological development and participation in some of the fastest growing industries, such as biotechnology. In order to compete in the global marketplace and attract businesses to the State, Michigan needs to develop a more highly skilled and educated workforce. The bills will require all students to take upper-level math and science, building skills they will need for the jobs of tomorrow, while improving the economic outlook for the State.

Many students already are taking classes that meet the new requirements, so the changes will not be difficult to implement. The bill simply will extend those

requirements to all students to make education uniform across the State, and give all students the necessary skills to gain employment or pursue a postsecondary education. The Michigan Merit Standard will provide more equal access to a high quality education than the current structure, in which requirements vary from district to district, and college prep and vocational tracking systems offer students very different courses of study and opportunities. The traditional approach of tracking students is no longer effective, because the skills required in the workforce have converged with those needed to continue on to college.

A poll conducted by EPIC/MRA and WXYZ TV from January 15 to 25, 2006, showed strong public support for the requirements proposed by the State Board, even after respondents were told about some of the potential negative effects of the plan. Most respondents believed that Michigan needed to make changes to improve its educational system.

Response: Increasing requirements alone will not be effective without also developing ways for students to meet those requirements. Innovative teaching methods and alternative methods of reaching students should be integral parts of any effort to improve high school education in Michigan, and further reform will be needed to overcome the funding and institutional inequities in Michigan education. Also, in many cases students' difficulties begin much earlier than high school. Without adequate preparation in earlier grades, it is questionable whether all students will be able to meet the new requirements.

Supporting Argument

The opt-out provisions in the bills provide an essential element of flexibility to allow students to earn a high school diploma in Michigan that is rigorous and relevant. Some were concerned that allowing students to opt out of the graduation requirements would "dumb down" the standards or create loopholes that would allow students to avoid taking difficult classes. Others were concerned that not providing an opt-out would set an impossibly high barrier for some students, who would be unable to graduate if they could not pass algebra II, or some other particular course. As enacted, the bills strike a balance between the need for rigor and for flexibility. The opt-out

provision sets limits on when students may establish a personal curriculum, and requires students to take additional credits in another area to replace the waived requirements. A student must develop the personal curriculum with his or her parent and a guidance counselor, and it must be in keeping with the student's career plan. Students who opt out of the requirements will have to take a rigorous course of study, but it will be more focused on their individual interests and career objectives.

Opposing Argument

The bills represent a one-size-fits-all approach that does not take into account the different goals and abilities of students. Schools already offer advanced courses for those who wish to take them, but should not force all students to take those specific classes at the expense of others that are more suited to their interests and abilities. The bill assigns 18 required credits out of 24 that a high school student typically earn. (When the language requirement takes effect, the total required credits will be 20 out of 24.) Given those extensive requirements, students might not have enough opportunity to take alternative courses that would allow them to explore their true interests, or prepare for a career.

In addition, the statewide requirements will remove local control from school districts, which traditionally have been able to establish graduation requirements that are most suitable for their students. School districts in Michigan are very diverse and should be allowed to pursue alternative ways to provide a relevant, quality education to their students. The statewide requirements may stifle creative approaches to educating students that do not fit within the framework of the bills' requirements.

Response: The bills allow local districts to determine how they will meet the requirements, and provide enough flexibility that all districts should be able to comply. The bills do not dictate specific courses, but instead require that students demonstrate comprehension of the subject matter. School districts are encouraged to find creative ways to present the material that meet the requirements of the bills.

Opposing Argument

The bills represent an unfunded mandate from the State government, establishing

new requirements without providing any increased funding for school districts to implement them. The bills will take effect for students entering high school in the 2007-2008 school year. Before that time, some districts will have to make significant changes, including redesigning their curricula and course offerings to meet the new requirements. Many districts will have to hire new teachers, and some school districts, faced with tight budgets and no additional funding, might have to lay off art teachers or reduce offerings of electives in order to hire additional teachers in other areas.

In addition, there may be a shortage of qualified teachers to meet the new requirements. Math and science teachers are in particularly high demand already, and mandating that all students take upper-level math and science courses will require districts to offer more sections of those classes. The sudden spike in demand for these teachers could create bidding wars among districts, and leave some districts with insufficient teachers to offer all required classes. Furthermore, many small rural districts might not be able to afford to hire the specialized teachers qualified to teach some courses.

Response: In some cases, two or more districts might share specialized teachers, spreading the cost and easing the shortage of teachers. Students may take classes online if a school is unable to offer certain courses. The bills also allow districts to phase in the new curriculum if they are unable to hire sufficient teachers or have other problems implementing the requirements, and the DOE must work with a district to develop a plan to hire sufficient highly qualified teachers.

Opposing Argument

Requiring algebra II will not fix the problems with math education in Michigan, where many students are struggling with basic arithmetic. In many cases, employers complain that their workers lack basic math skills, not that they have insufficient knowledge of complex algebra. The bills do not address the fundamental problems with math education in the State.

In addition, many students will never need Algebra II. Even in today's high-tech job market, complex algebra is unnecessary to

excel in many professions. In some fields, statistics or another course might be more relevant to a student's prospective employment. Algebra II should be recommended, not required, allowing students to choose the math course that suits their interests and career goals, and attention should be given to teaching students the fundamental mathematical concepts necessary to understand higher-order math.

Similarly, a second language is not a universal necessity for all high school graduates. Furthermore, the languages that might be of economic benefit, such as Chinese or Arabic, are not commonly taught in high schools, because there is a shortage of qualified educators to teach those languages. For those who are interested, language courses are available, but they should not be required for all students. This requirement will present a barrier to graduation without providing any real benefit to students.

Response: Algebra II is tested on the ACT (American College Test), which high school juniors will be required to take as part of the Michigan Merit Exam starting in 2007. It is unfair to test students on material that they were never taught. Also, the bills provide several ways for students to request modifications of the algebra II requirement, including a two-year course covering the content normally covered in one year, that will allow teachers to slow down and help students having difficulty with the subject matter. The math content also may be presented in other contexts, such as in a career and technical education program, that may make the material more relevant and accessible to some students.

The foreign language requirement will be beneficial for students in several ways. Many colleges and universities require incoming students to have taken two years of a foreign language, so the graduation requirement is aligned with the college entrance requirement. In addition, although languages such as Chinese may be helpful in the global marketplace, other more commonly taught languages such as Spanish can be equally useful to students. Less common languages may be taught through online courses or other arrangements. Moreover, the mental discipline and effort required to learn a foreign language will help

prepare students for postsecondary education. Since the bills do not require students to take a foreign language for six years, next year's third graders will be the first class of students affected by this requirement. Many schools already require a foreign language, however, and others may choose to implement the requirement more quickly.

shift existing resources to satisfy the different requirements.

Fiscal Analyst: Kathryn Summers-Coty

Opposing Argument

Many are concerned that the bills' rigorous requirements, particularly the math and world language requirements, will lead students to give up and drop out of school. Students may find the course content too daunting, and consider it irrelevant to the type of work they wish to pursue. For many students who are considering dropping out, elective courses that capture their interest are sometimes the factor that keeps them in school. High schools should be given the flexibility to engage these students and keep them enrolled. Students at risk of dropping out would benefit more from alternative courses and a curriculum that matches their career goals.

Response: If a student is unable to meet the bills' requirements, the student and his or her parent or guardian may consult with the school to develop a personal curriculum that modifies some of the requirements. This will give students a degree of flexibility, and may prevent some of the frustration that might lead them to drop out of school.

Legislative Analyst: Curtis Walker

FISCAL IMPACT

State: The Department will see increased costs associated with developing and implementing subject area content expectations that apply to the credit requirements of the Michigan Merit Standard required by the bills. The magnitude of the costs will depend upon the current state of the Department's subject area content expectations and how well they align with the Michigan Merit Standard.

Local: School districts and public school academies may see increased costs if the requirements of the high school curriculum are substantially different from what a district or academy currently implements, and if a district or academy cannot quickly

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