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Simpler education reform bill unveiled

Board would do heavy lifting, not new panel

By Berny Morson ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Colorado public schools would focus on preparing children for college or the workplace from the time they entered preschool until graduation, under a bill that Gov. Bill Ritter unveiled Wednesday.

The version of the bill that now goes to the state Senate for debate is simpler than drafts that have been circulating for weeks. It would delegate most of the tough work of crafting the reforms to the Colorado Board of Education, instead of to a new commission.

The bill would ask the board to come up with criteria for school readiness that would be applied to preschool and kindergarten children. Kids who were not ready would receive extra help.

The board and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education jointly would adopt a definition of readiness for college or the workplace. The public school curriculum would be revised to prepare students to meet the new criteria.

Statewide achievement tests would be overhauled to reflect the new curriculum.

Leaving the details to the board would avoid the roadblocks that have come up previously when lawmakers have tried to hammer out a reform program themselves, Ritter said.

“We’ve decided not to let the conversation break down over the (number of) years that you have a certain science or a certain discipline,” he said.

The reforms would take effect in 2011.

Education commissioner Dwight Jones and higher education director David Skaggs would play major roles.

“I know the devil’s in the details, but if we put the right people and task the right people to do this, we’ll get there,” Ritter said of the key players.

In recent decades, the major role in school reform has been played by the legislature, eclipsing the state Board of Education. Board member Evie Hudak said that the panel is eager to play a greater role.

“It’s a very good thing,” Hudak said. “It’s entirely appropriate. We are the state Board of Education, and we should be doing it. We are not shy about doing work, and we have a staff to help.”

The bill has bipartisan backing in the House and Senate.

The key Republican sponsors of Ritter’s bill brought legislation last year to increase the amount of math and science needed for high school graduation.

Rep. Rob Witwer, R-Genessee, a sponsor of last year’s bill, said he backs the governor’s bill this time because it would direct the board of education to follow the most rigorous academic standards that can be identified in the U.S. and other nations.

"I'm very comfortable with that," he said.
morsonb@RockyMountain News.com or 303-954-5209

Letter

Unfair advantage

I hope this letter is only one in a firestorm of public protest about students at Manual High School receiving pay for taking the CSAP tests this year ("Cha-ching! fills every chair at Manual for CSAP tests," March 14).

I am a third-grade teacher. I work in the Montbello area of Denver Public Schools. Our students face the same personal, educational and societal obstacles as students at Manual. We did not pay them to take the CSAP tests.

It is a double-standard and gave the students at Manual unfair advantage over every other student in Colorado. In my opinion the scores of the school should be thrown out as misadministered.

Marie Myfanawy, Aurora

Denver Post

Thursday, March 20, 2008

New slate of school reforms

Bill aims to cut dropout rates, reliance on remedial college classes

But the bipartisan K-12 plan lacked too many specifics for some. Gov. Ritter says the details will be ironed out.

By Jessica Fender The Denver Post

Pharmacy major Reneice Carr started college this year academically unprepared, despite being among the students in the Aurora school system singled out for honors classes and extra help getting into a university.

Counselors told her friends not to bother retaking the ACT because community colleges wouldn't need them, she told onlookers at a news conference Wednesday announcing plans for more rigorous education standards.

"Have you ever felt like you were not sufficient enough? That's the way I felt the moment I entered college," said Carr, who attends Regis University. "I still feel like I write like an eighth-grader."

Flagging graduation rates, an overreliance on remedial college courses and the face of education as Colorado knows it stand to change for the better, say the bipartisan authors of a long-anticipated K-12 reform plan unveiled Wednesday.

The bill directs state education boards to determine what knowledge and skills a college freshman needs and then work backward, developing a system of benchmarks and tests for each grade level. The scheme should be in effect by fall 2011.

Missing Wednesday were concrete details about the number and type of courses students would have to take and how progress

would be measured. But that's by design, according to Gov. Bill Ritter.

"The devil's in the details," Ritter said. "We've tasked the right people to do this. We'll get there."

Critics pointed out a lack of consequences for students who don't meet the to-be-announced standards. Nothing in the bill would keep schools from graduating unprepared children.

Others groaned at the idea of another study committee to solve the state's educational problems.

"I thought last year was the year of study," said Senate Minority Leader Andy McElhany, R-Colorado Springs. "It's time to get some movement here. Blue-ribbon commissions have generally proved to be fruitless."

The bill, which reportedly has the backing of many state educational groups, will probably face debate first in the Senate.

The proposed reform arises against a backdrop that shows Colorado — one of the most educated

The proposed reform arises against a backdrop that shows Colorado — one of the most educated states in terms of higher-education degrees — among the least likely to send a child to college, lawmakers said.

As many as a third of college freshmen need remedial classes.

Republican House sponsor Rob Witwer of Genesee warned that Colorado children are facing stiff global competition. The bill

requires the education boards to adopt standards that reflect both national and international demands.

“Our only choice is whether or not we meet those standards.”

Aside from demonstrating proficiency in traditional academic subjects such as math, English and art, tomorrow’s students also will be assessed on workplace skills such as creativity, self-direction and problem solving.

Those who pass the tests designed to assess those skills will receive state-endorsed diplomas saying so.

High achievers will receive special notations on their diplomas in an effort to provide students with incentives and to combat the apathy that has stymied the state’s current standardized tests.

But that’s not enough, said Sen. Shawn Mitchell, R-Broomfield, who was concerned that students who did not prove themselves proficient in English would be able to graduate. He postponed a bill to instate that requirement earlier this year in hopes that Ritter would include it in this broader education reform.

“These are good intentions on a wobbly foundation,” Mitchell said. “There’s no real consequence for failure. There’s no real consequence for success. I’m wondering where the beef is?”

Jessica Fender: 303-954-1244 or jfender@denverpost.com