

Education reformers push early graduation



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High school students could graduate by age 16 if a new, more rigorous academic plan in a sweeping education bill becomes law.

The measure, set to be introduced today, is an attempt to reconcile comprehensive education reform with state budget cuts, said House Education Committee Chairman Rich Crandall, the bill's sponsor.

The "Move on When Ready" initiative aims to give high school students an incentive for choosing a tougher academic path, Crandall said.

"What we're saying to kids is, if you achieve this high bar, we'll reward you," he said.

Under Crandall's bill, high schools across the state would be eligible, but not required, to offer an alternative, internationally benchmarked two-year curriculum to their freshmen.

Those students who choose to study under the new program would be required to take rigorous college and career readiness exams at the end of the two years.

Some of the exams being discussed include the ACT, Cambridge, and Edexcel exams.

High school sophomores who pass the assessment would then receive a so-called "Grand Canyon diploma" and be able to pick one of three options:

- Enroll in community college courses. Students choosing to stay on their high school campus to take the courses could participate in extracurricular activities, such as sports.
- Enroll in a special continuation program, offered by the high school, to prepare them for college.
- Move on to a full-time technical school.

In addition to graduating early, students in the program would be eligible to receive community college and university scholarships. The bill also would give cash bonuses to outstanding teachers.

And all of it would be done with no extra money from the state, Crandall said.

"This moves funding around so it's an incentive rather than a disincentive," he said. "We're using the money much more efficiently."

Schools would continue to receive state funding through 12th grade for the students who graduate early. The school would then pay the community college for the courses in which its graduates are enrolled.

Schools would get to keep the remaining balance to use toward program expenses, including exams and financial incentives for teachers and students.

Sybil Francis, executive director of the nonprofit Center for the Future of Arizona, said the program will have a transition cost during its first couple of years.

Schools that decide to participate in the plan will have to pay \$100 for each student who enrolls, she said. After kids begin graduating early, the money the state saves from the students' last two years of school would repay the investment.

But even with the startup cost, Francis said, 15 school districts are already willing to sign up.

"I'm not going to minimize some of the concerns," she said. "But most districts we've talked to have shown interest."

Francis said AIMS, the high-stakes test given in the 10th grade, is not preparing kids for college admission exams and that most seniors who successfully complete AIMS do not know they're not ready.

Moreover, she said the bill is an attempt to improve stalled high school and college graduation rates in Arizona.

She also said it would help many high school dropouts who lose interest in their studies because they do not feel challenged by them.

"They would feel much more empowered to take their future in their own hands," she said.

High school students already have the option of graduating early under Arizona law, said Penny Kotterman, chair of the Education Coalition, a collection of advocacy groups.

"We just don't have it very well systemized," she said.

She said she likes the concept of "Move on When Ready," but hopes lawmakers are also considering students who take longer to learn.

Francis said schools could give more assistance to struggling students with the money that early graduates will save the state.

The initiative is part of a national push to standardize education curricula. Behind the effort is "Race to the Top," a federal competition for \$4.5 billion that will be distributed to states taking bold steps toward education reform.

Arizona is one of roughly 10 states that signed up for a Board Examination Systems consortium aiming to jointly set higher bars for their students.

"In Race to the Top, they're really looking for extremely innovative states that are pushing higher standards," Crandall said.

Moreover, Crandall said the consortium would allow for states to get a better deal on exam prices from providers.

The governor's office is supportive of the "Move on When Ready" bill, said Karla Phillips, Gov. Jan Brewer's education advisor.

This bill is one of five initiatives the governor's office is pursuing this session to help make Arizona's application more competitive, Phillips said. The state stands to win up to \$250 million in federal Race to the top grants.

But the proposed national standardization is worrying some education experts.

Jaime Molera, former state school superintendent and a member of the state Board of Education, said what other states believe is important for their education systems may not work for Arizona.

"Whatever they believe in Massachusetts, New York, South Carolina, that may be different for Arizona," he said. "We should prioritize what we think is important."

He also said the new programs would take much authority away from local school boards.

"It's all starting to gravitate toward Washington D.C.," he said. "We have a constitutional duty to oversee state education."

Senate Education Chairman John Huppenthal said he supports the measure and thinks it could "potentially shake the foundation" of the state's high schools.

"It's a big deal," he said.