

Alternative needed for qualifying exam

By Senator Gretchen Guess

Diploma denied. Hundreds of high school seniors could hear these words from Alaska's schools this spring. This is the first year the High School Qualifying Exam is scheduled to determine a student's eligibility to graduate. By state law, student who have not passed all three sections of the exam (reading, writing and mathematics) will not receive a high school diploma -- regardless of whether they have passed their district requirements.

Although discussed and debated during two past legislative sessions, policy of this magnitude merits another discussion because the consequences, positive or negative, will impact Alaska's youth forever, beginning with the class of 2004.

As part of this critical dialogue, I will introduce legislation offering an alternative approach to the current high stakes testing requirement of the qualifying exam. The focus and intent of the qualifying exam will remain the same: A high school diploma should mean something to employers, higher education institutions and the community. My approach, however, will recognize the need to empower our students to gain the skills and confidence necessary to lead productive lives rather than creating roadblocks so early in life.

My bill will continue to mandate the qualifying exam for students and require the exam be a part of our state and federal accountability system. This bill will not, however, prohibit students from receiving a diploma if a student does not pass one or more of the exams. Instead, it will require the student's exam results become part of their permanent record. By mandate, students will continue to retest on the portions of the exam they do not pass, thus giving them an opportunity to improve their records in the future.

With this approach, students are still rewarded for passing their high school requirements, but an employer or higher education institution can also look beyond the diploma to see individual proficiencies and improvement areas as indicated by the qualifying exam scores. This alternative helps everyone involved by providing a more complete picture of the student and his or her academic capabilities.

Additionally, if the qualifying exam is an evaluation tool rather than simply a barrier, we may create an opportunity to raise the standards in reading, writing and math. This bill will not impact local control. Because the qualifying exam will still be mandated, local districts and communities may opt to make it a requirement for earning a diploma.

It is true, many examples exist of successful adults who did not graduate from high school, but we also know the absence of a high school diploma stays with a person through every job or school application for the rest of his or her life. Look in the classified ad section -- to apply for a courier job, you need a high school diploma. We owe it to our kids to prepare them for the workforce and higher education, which means a reasonable opportunity to earn a high school diploma.

The qualifying exam has refocused our educational system for the better. The exam ensures our graduates can read, write and compute to a set standard. Yet the question for all of us this year is whether one test should determine if a student meets the standards, regardless of passing all district requirements.

We owe it to the people of Alaska, to future generations and to the class of 2004 to hold a bipartisan policy discussion and decision. Denying diplomas has critical ramifications because we cannot go back and change results for affected students and their families. If in the end, through the process of discussion, we decide this approach is best route for our kids, then so be it. We owe it to our students to scrutinize the qualifying-exam requirement one more time before graduation day.

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