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November 13, 2006

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Education Study Committee

FR: Sharon S. Caballero

RE: STAFF BRIEF: COLLEGE/WORKPLACE READINESS AND HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN: GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

During the 2006 interim, the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) includes a series of presentations on College/Workplace Readiness and High School Redesign. This presentation focuses on graduation requirements for public schools.

Issues:

Rigor in High School

Across the nation at least half of the states are studying graduation requirements and considering strengthening them, some responding to research that indicates that a more rigorous curriculum is an indicator of postsecondary success whether in college or the workplace.

- One approach that 25 states, New Mexico among them, have taken is to join the American Diploma Project (ADP), sponsored by Achieve, Inc., aimed at increasing the rigor of high school curriculum and graduation requirements. The ADP and other organizations such as ACT, Inc. recommend that students take four years of English, and math through at least Algebra II as explained more fully under Initiatives in Other States (see p. 5).

- According to two recent reports, the “Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School Through College,” and “The Toolbox” from the US Department of Education, written by senior analyst Dr. Clifford Adelman, shows that not only is a rigorous high-school curriculum the best ticket to success in college, but more specifically, that the highest level of mathematics is a key marker in pre-collegiate momentum.
- *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?*, a report by ACT, Inc., provides evidence that whether planning to enter college or workforce training programs after graduation, high school students need to be educated to a comparable level in reading and mathematics. High school graduates must be prepared to succeed in college-level courses without remediation and to enter workforce training programs ready to learn job-specific skills.
- There are consequences to a high school curriculum without rigor according to a report in the June 2004 Harvard Education Letter:
 - Although elementary schools have grown more effective over the past two decades, the value added by secondary schools has declined.
 - While achievement problems are not unique to low-income and minority students, their problems are much more severe. At the end of high school, African American and Latino students have skills that are at the same level as white students at the end of middle school.
 - About half of all newly enrolled college students must take some form of remediation; and nearly one-third never make it to the sophomore year of college.
 - Only about half of the students who enter college complete a postsecondary degree within six years.
- To address rigor, several states, such as Texas, Arkansas, and Indiana have legislated a college-prep curriculum as the “default curriculum” for their state. A “default curriculum” is one that is recommended for all students usually without other recommended choices. Students and parents can opt out of the more demanding academic plans as a safety net to obtaining a diploma.
- As states consider increasing the rigor, decision makers are faced with the dilemma of possible increased high school drop-out rates as well as the need to provide remedial courses in math and English for as much as 50 percent of entering college freshmen. To further add to these concerns, is meeting the adequate yearly progress mandate in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* for an annual increase in graduation rates.
- Those concerns notwithstanding, current studies indicate that raising standards may actually improve retention while building the knowledge and skill levels of students preparing for college or the workplace.

New Mexico High School Graduation Requirements

- For graduation, the provisions of the *Public School Code* require successful completion of a minimum of 23 units aligned to the state academic content and performance standards which include:
 - four units in English, with a major emphasis on grammar and literature;
 - three units in mathematics, at least one of which is equivalent to Algebra I level or higher;
 - two units in science, one of which must have a laboratory component; provided, however, that with students entering grade 9 beginning in school year 2005-2006 that three units in science is required with one unit being a laboratory component;
 - three units in social science, which must include United States history and geography, world history and geography, and government and economics;
 - one unit in physical education;
 - one unit in communication skills or business education, with a major emphasis on writing and speaking and that may include a language other than English;
 - one-half unit in New Mexico history for students entering grade 9 beginning in school year 2005-2006; and
 - seven and one-half elective units for students entering grade 9 in school year 2005-2006. Student service learning can be offered as an elective.
- Students who were already enrolled in high school at the beginning of school year 2005-2006 are required to take nine elective units and do not have a New Mexico history requirement.
- The act also requires an interim next-step plan between the grades 8 and 11 that sets forth the coursework for the grades remaining until high school graduation. A required final next-step plan during the senior year and prior to graduation is intended to show the student's commitment, or plan to commit, to college or university, a trade or vocational program, internship or apprenticeship, military service, or a job. Both plans must be signed by the student, parents, and student's guidance counselor or other school official.
- Another requirement for graduation is that students must also pass the New Mexico High School Competency Exam (NMHSCE) in the areas of reading, English, mathematics, science, and social science. Seniors who do not pass the examination but fulfill the other course and credit requirements are given the option of exiting with a certificate of completion or returning within five years to retake the examination, pass it, and receive a diploma. (A certificate of this type is not considered a regular diploma for accountability purposes under state law or the federal *No Child Left Behind of 2001*).
- The Public Education Department (PED) rule gives students several opportunities to pass the exam:
 - Sophomores who fail any part of the examination have another chance in their junior year and two chances in their senior year to successfully complete the examination before graduation deadlines.

- Current PED rule provides for English Language Learner students to be exempted from the NMHSCE, determined by alternate assessment methods implemented by districts.
- In school year 2004-2005, 66.3 percent of tenth graders passed the examination. In 2003, 69 percent of 10th grade students passed the examination.
- PED states that the current NMHSCE examination is a basic skills test that is not aligned with state high school standards.

Status of New Mexico High School Graduates

- While New Mexico's requirement of 23 units for graduation measures well compared to units required by other states, in most national reports other measures such as high school curriculum, preparation of students, and high school graduates do not fare so well.
- Using school year 2002-2003 enrollment data, national reports indicate that New Mexico's public high school graduation rates were 56.7 percent, compared to the national average of 69.6 percent. The graduation rate is based on a "cumulative promotion index" to estimate the probability that a student in grade 9 will complete high school on time with a regular diploma. Only two states ranked lower than New Mexico: Georgia (56.3 percent) and Nevada (55.9 percent).
- In *Measuring Up 2006*, the annual US report card on education, New Mexico was one of two states in 2006 to receive an "F" in preparing students to succeed in college. (Louisiana was the other). The report points to lack of rigor in the curriculum from middle school through high school as a primary reason for the low mark compounded by under prepared teachers in the secondary schools. To substantiate this grade the report indicates that:
 - A very small percentage of eighth graders take algebra, despite substantial improvement on this measure over the past 12 years. Likewise, very small proportions of high school students enroll in upper-level math and science courses. Even though there has been some improvement on these measures, the state has not kept pace with the nation over the past 12 years.
 - Hispanics in grades 9 to 12 are about two-thirds as likely as whites to enroll in upper-level math courses, and one-half as likely as whites to enroll in upper-level science courses. Native Americans in grades 9 to 12 are one-half as likely as whites to enroll in upper-level math and science courses.
 - Only about one-half of secondary school students are taught by teachers with an undergraduate or graduate major in the subject they are teaching. The state ranks well below top-performing states on this measure.
 - The percentage of eighth graders performing well on national assessments in reading has decreased substantially over the past seven years, showing one of the steepest declines in the nation on this measure.
 - Among young adults, 7.0 percent receive a General Educational Development (GED) diploma rather than a high school diploma, one of the highest percentages in the nation.

PED's annual report of schools making adequate yearly progress (AYP) in August 2006 indicated that of the 416 schools that did not make AYP, 397 missed the mark because of low-student performance on state reading and math assessments.

Initiatives in Other States

An October 2006 report from the National Conference of State Legislatures provides a survey of what other states are doing to increase graduation requirements. According to the report, in 2005 only Arkansas and Texas had graduation requirements for all students at the level of rigor that Achieve considers college and work-ready – four years of rigorous English and four years of math through at least Algebra II. In 2006, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, Oklahoma, and South Dakota joined the list. Most of these states allow parents to opt their children out of the college- and work-ready courses by signing a waiver acknowledging the risks and puts the responsibility on students and parents and requires states to monitor and evaluate the reasons students choose not to take the core curriculum.

- Indiana's Core 40 program, developed with input from business and higher education leaders, raised standards with more rigorous math and English classes and fewer students dropped out and more were graduated and went to college. Other data on Indiana's program shows that:
 - Since 1994, participation in the Core 40 has been voluntary, but in 2005 legislators voted to require it for all students. Core 40 becomes Indiana's default high school curriculum in the fall of 2007. To opt out requires parental consent.
 - Students can earn Core 40 with Academic and Honors and Core 40 with Technical Honors diplomas.
 - Since the 1980s Indiana has moved from 40th to 10th in the nation in the percentage of high school graduates going to college.
 - Students who drop out before reaching 18 without their parents' and principal's approval can lose their driver's license and work permits.
 - High school completion programs are offered at community college so dropouts can earn regular high school diplomas instead of GEDs.
- Arkansas has implemented the Smart Core Curriculum, developed in 2003 by representatives from the state department of education, higher education leaders, and representatives from the business community.
 - The Smart Core Curriculum requires four years of English, math through Algebra II, three years of science, and three years of social studies. (One math course must be taken in grade 11 or grade 12).
 - Since implementation of the Smart Core Curriculum student scores have improved in state and national tests including ACT and SAT.
 - Participation in taking the ACT tests has risen from 19 percent to 71 percent.

- Texas passed legislation in 2005 that made a college-prep program the default curriculum.
 - Three graduation plans are available in Texas, but one, the minimum high school program of 22 credits, is being de-emphasized because of concerns that it does not contain courses required for success in college. Now all students, beginning with ninth graders from school year 2004-2005, have to enroll in the recommended high school program of 24 credits or the distinguished achievement program of 24 credits.
 - Legislation passed in 2005 also provides incentives for college:
 - requires the P-16 Council to review existing dual credit and concurrent enrollment programs and study the feasibility of offering a recommended high school program that would provide graduating students with at least 12 hours of college credit;
 - created a pilot program which began in fall 2006, which would allow participating junior colleges to waive tuition and fees and provide free textbooks for educationally disadvantaged high school students enrolled in concurrent credit courses; and
 - requires every institution of higher education in Texas to grant at least 24 semester credit hours to students who graduate from high school with an International Baccalaureate diploma.
- Three of six states – Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania – which leave high school graduation decisions to local school districts have made some progress in setting minimum requirements.
 - Minnesota passed legislation this session that requires a minimum of 21.5 credits for the class of 2008.
 - Iowa and Michigan plan to phase in a minimum number of required credits for the class of 2011. Iowa will require 13 credits and Michigan, 16 (jumping to 18 for 2016).
 - Michigan’s move to raise graduation requirements is especially noteworthy because of its strong tradition of local control and it’s higher than average dropout rate.
 - until school year 2005-2006, Michigan only had one state requirement which was one unit of civics. Michigan’s new requirements will start with the ninth graders entering high school in fall 2007. Michigan honored its tradition of local control by leaving much of the decision making to schools and districts, holding them accountable for the ultimate success of the students.
- Other state graduation requirements range from a low of 13 credits required in California, Wisconsin, and Wyoming to a high of 24 credits in Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

According to *Closing the Expectations Gap 2006*, governors and education officials at the Achieve Governor’s summit in 2005 agreed that the overriding goal for high schools should be increasing the percentage of incoming ninth graders who graduate ready for college and work. No state has yet made this the centerpiece of its high school accountability system, although a number are moving in this direction.

Background:

New Mexico's high school graduation requirements have undergone several changes in recent years.

- Prior to 1986, when high school graduation requirements were established in statute, the State Board of Education was authorized to “prescribe courses of instruction, requirements for graduation and standards for all public schools....” In 1981 the state board established 20 units in a four-year school or 15 units in a three-year school as graduation requirements for a high school diploma. Among other requirements:
 - language arts was required for all years; and
 - math and science were only required for one year.
- Subsequent amendments to the statute did not occur until 1995 and 2001 with the implementation of the requirement of the New Mexico constitution being part of the state competency examinations (1995) and changing the state competency exam to the state graduation exam and inserting “writing” as a significant part of the test (2001).
- In 2003, along with the public school reforms, changes were made in graduation requirements with:
 - the insertion of “scientifically based reading research;”
 - a requirement to align 23 units required for graduation with state academic content and performance standards;
 - mandating that of the three units required for mathematics at least one had to be equivalent to Algebra I or higher;
 - students entering grade 9 beginning in school year 2005-2006 must complete three units in science, one of which must have a laboratory component;
 - the insertion of one-unit of business that may meet the one unit in the communication requirement; and
 - the change from nine to eight elective units for students entering grade 9 in school year 2005-2006.
- Other amendments in 2005 changed the elective units for students entering grade 9 in school year 2005-2006 in order to include a required one-half unit in New Mexico history. (The eight elective units above apply only to students in grade 9 in school year 2005-2006.)

Questions the committee may wish to consider:

1. What level of rigor does New Mexico believe is necessary for students to compete in a global marketplace?
2. If New Mexico increases the rigor of the high school curriculum, does New Mexico have an adequately prepared pool of middle and high school math and science teachers to meet new curriculum standards?
3. What kind of a safety net could be implemented for students who may struggle if increased rigor in the curriculum is instituted?
4. What role should the institutions of higher education play in assessing rigor for high school curriculum?