

Panel's diploma answer: We pass

Minner expected advice on three-tiered system

By CECILIA LE / The News Journal

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After months of waiting for a thumbs up or thumbs down on the three-tiered diploma, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner got neither from the expert panel she asked last year to study the issue.

In a report released Wednesday, the panel said the three-tiered high school diploma system is a policy matter that should be left to elected representatives. The group, which was asked to study the state's student testing program, made no recommendation on the controversial diploma system.

Minner has said for months she would wait for the panel's findings to propose changes.

"She's a little surprised," said Minner spokesman Gregory Patterson. "The governor had hoped and expected the panel would address the issue of whether or not it's a good idea to have the three-tiered diploma. Those experts said, 'It's not our job.' She's going to take the rest of the work they did and move forward with that. There's a lot of findings outside of whether to have a three-tiered diploma."

Minner said the class of 2005 should receive diplomas in the same two-tiered manner as last year's seniors: Those scoring high on 10th-grade tests would get a distinguished diploma, while others get a regular diploma.

Legislators would have to act on Minner's two-tiered diploma recommendation; otherwise, the three-tiered diploma would remain in effect for this year's seniors. A bill introduced last month would abolish the three tiers.

The Department of Education will study whether other factors such as grades should determine diploma type for the class of 2006, and form tougher graduation requirements for the class of 2007 and beyond.

"Her intent is that the [Delaware Student Testing Program] will be a part of the diploma but not be the be-all and end-all," Secretary of Education Valerie Woodruff said.

Beyond the diploma issue, the panel said the state's grade 8 and 10 math tests meet national standards and professional expectations, and gave a host of recommendations to improve the system.

A separate panel studying math curriculum said only six of 19 districts and one charter school have math curricula that are well aligned to Delaware's math standards.

It said there's little consistency among districts in the guidance they give teachers on what to teach, and that most districts and charters depend on a textbook series to act as a de facto curriculum framework.

Meant as a compromise

The three-tiered diploma was adopted as a legislative compromise in 2000 to make students take state testing seriously. Based on 10th-grade test scores, students would get a basic, standard or distinguished diploma. Critics assail the three-tiered diploma for its reliance on one test and because it would give most minority students the lowest diploma.

Minner last year ordered the expert panel to study the testing program and put the diploma system on hold. Out of concern over low test scores in eighth- and 10th-grade math, another panel was ordered to study districts' math curriculum.

But the assessment panel, which made many technical recommendations about the testing program, said the diploma issue was a policy issue outside its purview.

"The desirability of awarding different types of high school diplomas is one example of such an issue," it said. "As psychometricians, we are able to comment authoritatively on matters related to test construction, equating, test score reliability, validity and so on, but we defer to the authority of elected representatives and other policy-makers to make judgments as to the propriety or desirability of the methods for pursuing social, educational, political or economic goals."

'They passed the buck'

Yvonne Johnson, co-chair of Advocates for Children's Education, a parents group that opposes the three-tiered diploma, said she was disappointed with the panel's report.

"They passed the buck," Johnson said. "What shocks me is that these experts can't see the problems with the three-tiered diploma. What they do over their four-year high school career should be more important than one test. We're telling them, 'We don't care if you do your homework, but you'll get a distinguished diploma if you get a 4 or 5 on this test.' "

Minner also asked the Department of Education to create more rigorous graduation requirements for 2007 and beyond.

A recent study by Achieve found that Delaware's graduation requirements are minimal and its standards do not meet requirements for higher education or work readiness.

The panel studying curriculum found that just six of 19 districts and one charter school had a math curriculum framework well aligned to the standards: Appoquinimink, Cape Henlopen, Capital, Delmar, Christina, Seaford, and Newark Charter School.

The curriculum report says in all the documents reviewed, almost no attention was given to teaching the state's math process standards. A major issue, it said, is the "middle school shift" from having skills to applying skills and understanding why a certain calculation is used to solve a problem.

The reports cost the state about \$150,000, Woodruff said.

The assessment panel was Gregory Cizek, professor in the school of education at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; George Engelhard Jr., professor in the division of educational studies at Emory University; and Mark Moody, education consultant with Hillcrest and Main Inc.

The Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based consulting group, convened the curriculum panel: Douglas Ratay, Ph.D. in physics and math, consultant at Education Trust; Thomas Bullock, master of science, math and math education, assistant to the president at Georgetown University; and Eleanor Dougherty, M.S. in education, senior associate at Education Trust.

Contact Cecilia Le at 324-2794 or cle@delawareonline.com.