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EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Senate Bill 123 (Substitute H-4)
First Analysis (4-3-90)

Sponsor: Sen. Nick Smith
Senate Committee: Education & Mental Health
First House Committee: Education
Second House Committee: Appropriations

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Concern over an apparent decline in student achievement has led many people to question what graduation from high school is supposed to signify. Various studies on the status of education generally agree that the knowledge and skills acquired by students prior to graduating high school are inadequate to meet the demands graduating students face in today's world. Graduating a high school student who is unprepared, some people contend, devalues the meaning of a high school diploma, provides students with, at best, a false sense of accomplishment, and feeds the perception that high school is a place where students merely mark time until they can graduate or drop out altogether. Employers who might otherwise be inclined to hire Michigan's high school graduates are forced to reconsider due to the strong possibility that potential hirelings lack even the minimum skills needed to perform a job adequately (or the skills needed to learn how to work effectively). To ensure that high school graduates possess at least minimal academic and employability skills; some people have proposed a program designed to assess the proficiency of students in various subjects and skills considered essential for nearly every job experience that would begin evaluating students before they were legally allowed to leave school.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend the School Code to require local school districts to implement an "essential and employability skills assessment program" using various "instruments" — i.e. written, oral, or other assessment methods — to assess each pupil's academic or employability skills. An assessment program used by a district would have to be approved by the State Board of Education and would assess a student's "skills inventory" beginning in the eighth grade until he or she was proficient in all subject areas (although the state board could exempt special education students).

Advisory Committee. The state board would have to appoint an essential and employability skills advisory committee made up of persons representing parents, community citizens, labor, management, businesses, and education organizations and associations. The state board would make available to the advisory committee technical consultants to advise on the validity, reliability, and other technical standards of the skills assessment instruments (which would be used to determine a pupil's proficiency in communication skills, mathematics, science, and other subject areas defined by the state board).

Program Implementation Schedule. The program would be implemented in school districts throughout the state under the following schedule:

- January 1, 1991: The advisory committee would have to recommend to the state board guidelines for the

development and administration of program instruments and could recommend consolidating the instruments with the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) tenth grade test.

- March 1, 1991: Considering guidelines recommended by the advisory committee, the state board would have to adopt and provide to local school districts guidelines for them to consider when developing or selecting and using skills assessment instruments, including instructions on how to interpret results.
- January 1, 1992: The state board would have to develop or select and make available to districts skills assessment instruments. Periodically, but at least every 5 years, the state board would have to evaluate and make recommendations for upgrading the program instruments.
- June 1, 1992: Each local school district would have to indicate by board resolution to the Department of Education whether it would use the skills assessment instruments developed or selected by the state board or, instead, submit to the department for state board approval the district's own locally developed or selected skills assessment instruments. If requested, the department would have to provide technical assistance to a district for developing, selecting, and administering its skills assessment instruments.
- September 1, 1992: Each school district's board would have to provide that for each pupil enrolled in the eighth grade of a public school a "skills inventory" was developed that included, but was not limited to, the pupil's results from skills assessment instruments and other evidence of academic, teamwork, and personal management skills. A pupil's skills inventory would be evaluated and an educational program developed for the pupil before the end of the ninth grade or before the pupil was age 16, whichever occurred sooner. Thereafter, the educational program would be reviewed periodically with the pupil.
- January 1, 1996 (and annually thereafter): The state board would have to submit in writing a summary analysis of the skills assessment program to the House and Senate committees responsible for education legislation.

Reevaluation of Non-Proficient Pupils. A pupil (which, in addition to persons enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, would include adult education students) who was assessed as not proficient in a tested subject or skill area would have to be reevaluated each school year until he or she was deemed proficient in the subject or skill area. Also, the board of the district in which the pupil was enrolled would have to provide that there was at least 1 meeting attended by at least a certified staff member of the district, the pupil, and in the case of a minor, a parent, legal guardian, or person in loco parentis of the pupil. The purpose of each meeting would be to revise within existing

district resources a pupil's educational program with the goal of having the pupil become proficient in every subject or skill area that he or she was not proficient. A pupil could be reevaluated whenever the district administered the skills assessment instruments.

Annual Public Report. Each school district board would have to make available to the public in an annual report the results of the skills assessment program on a district and building-by-building basis.

Special Education Pupils. The state board could exempt special education pupils from the bill's requirements but would have to provide that these pupils had available an assessment and certification of their proficiency in various subjects and skills before they completed instruction at a public supported school. A special education pupil's educational planning committee would have to make use of the state board assessment instrument designed specifically for these students and provide that any assessment of a pupil was in a form appropriate for the pupil's special needs.

MCL 380.1282a

HOUSE COMMITTEE ACTION:

The House Appropriations Committee adopted Substitute H-4, which differs markedly from the Senate-passed version of the bill. The Senate-passed version would require a pupil's transcript to show the results of a competency and employability skills test; the House Appropriations Committee deleted this provision. (In fact, the "test" described in the Senate-passed version is referred to in Substitute H-4 as the "essential and employability skills assessment program" which would use "instruments" to assess a pupil's proficiency in various areas.) Substitute H-4 would require every school district to adopt an employability skills assessment program, whereas the Senate-passed version would allow districts to opt out of providing the test. The Senate-passed version calls for the test to be offered to and taken by tenth grade students (and annually thereafter until proficiency was achieved), whereas the House substitute specifies a process of evaluating a pupil's "skills inventory" beginning in the eighth grade and re-evaluating a pupil annually until proficiency was attained. (Both versions would allow for the testing concept to be incorporated into the Michigan Education Assessment Program tenth grade test.) Also, Substitute H-4 would implement the program using a slightly different schedule than the Senate-passed version, and instead of providing for the testing of competency in English, among other required skills, the House substitute would provide for assessing proficiency in "communication skills." Finally, Substitute H-4 would require a local school board to make available to the public an annual report showing program results.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the House Fiscal Agency, estimated costs for implementing the program for fiscal year 1990-91 would be \$994,000, which would include the cost of 4.0 FTEs. The Department of Education said approximately \$550,000 has already been set aside for funding the employability skills program. Thus, approximately \$450,000 of additional funds would be needed to implement the bill's provisions. (3-30-90)

Also, according to the Senate Fiscal Agency, the bill would have added costs to local school districts for reinstruction of pupils found not proficient in specific areas. The amount

of these costs could not be determined as the number of students who would need reinstruction is not known. Although the cost of reinstruction would be borne by local districts, these costs could require reimbursement by the state under the Headlee Amendment if they were considered to be state-mandated costs. (3-13-89)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The concept of monitoring students just before they enter high school (and before they turn 16) to see whether they possess basic skills needed for employment could help improve the state's educational and economic climate for the following reasons:

- Instead of evaluating a student's "job preparedness" based solely on test scores or grades (whether from regular class-work throughout a student's life or from the MEAP test taken at the fourth-, seventh-, and tenth-grade levels), the bill would use other assessment tools to determine a pupil's ability to communicate with others, solve minimum necessary mathematic computations, get along with others, and manage various responsibilities related to his or her life. Under the bill, a more concentrated process of evaluation would begin when a student reached the eighth grade to determine how prepared he or she was to leave school (as the legal school-leaving age now is 16) and then become gainfully employed. As weak areas were discovered school staff would work with a student and his or her parents to develop an educational program catered to meet the student's specific needs. Each year thereafter until graduation the student would be reevaluated in those weak areas until proficiency was attained, and students could even return after formal graduation for reevaluation.
- The bill could save employers throughout the state time and money as newly-hired high school graduates would not have to be retrained in certain basic skills. According to the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, employers throughout the country spend \$25 billion annually teaching new employees the basic skills of reading, writing, and computing — skills that really should be learned in school. Many of today's blue collar jobs, for instance, require an eleventh grade reading level and training programs for these jobs require even a higher level; the typical minimum competency tests, however, uses an eighth grade reading level. Current economic challenges (on a global scale) demand that the state's educational system be revitalized to ensure that workers of the future are prepared to meet these challenges. The program could help schools respond to the needs of the business community by putting in place a system that thoroughly scrutinizes each student to determine weak areas that need to be improved.
- The bill would complement the work already undertaken by the Employability Skills Task Force, composed of governor- and state board-appointed representatives of business, industry, and education. The purpose of the task force has been to advise education officials on the development and uses of a skills-assessment program that could be used to evaluate students before they enter today's highly technical world of employment.
- The Senate-passed version allowed for schools to opt out of providing the test, while the House substitute allows

no such option. School districts under the House substitute would either have to develop their own assessment program (approved by the state board) or use the program developed by the state board.

Against:

Several problems have been raised concerning the concept of the bill, and specifically to the House substitute:

- There would be no need for the bill if public schools were already fulfilling their task of adequately training the state's children. Students who show they do not possess basic skills at early levels are allowed to pass on to the next grade all the way up until graduation (or until they decide to drop out at age 16). How will this process differ under a new program? Part of the reason schools now pass under-educated students on to the next level is due to the limited time and resources (money) available for working with non-proficient pupils. The bill's specified process of pupil remediation, alone, would cost individual districts a great deal of money to successfully implement. If voters refuse to spend money on elementary and secondary education — as the defeat of proposals A and B last fall so clearly showed — and the legislature fails to provide an equitable framework of financing school improvement, how can schools and school personnel be held responsible for the lack of skills exhibited by many high school graduates?
- The Senate-passed version of the bill calls for a basic and employability skills test that would be used by schools, the results of which would be included on student transcripts. The House substitute would work, instead, according to a process of evaluating a student's "skills inventory" — using a vague set of "instruments" to determine strengths or weaknesses — and removed the provision that would require results to be reported on student transcripts. As such, potential employers would have no way of judging the abilities of a person who holds a high school diploma. In fact, the bill should go even further by denying a diploma to students who fail to exhibit skills in areas that can be objectively tested. According to the education department, nearly 30 states have tied high school graduation to student performance on achievement tests. Some schools in Michigan, too, are now using basic skills testing as part of high school graduation requirements (which, in itself, argues against the need for the bill).
- Michigan currently requires all public fourth, seventh, and tenth grade students to take the MEAP test. By providing for the program to be operated in conjunction with the MEAP test, the bill itself acknowledges that no need exists to create a new program. Also, the education department is already working on developing a basic skills testing program and has over \$500,000 set aside for the program. The bill would be a costly duplication of these efforts, and the intended purpose of improving educational results could be accomplished without the bill.
- Although Substitute H-4 does not use the word "test," one assumes the program described would utilize some form of a test or tests ("instruments") to evaluate students. By avoiding the requirement for a specific skills test, perhaps the bill's proponents hope to skirt the legal implications of such a requirement. Apparently, a group of Florida students sued that state after they initially failed to pass a state-mandated test (which, under that law, prevented them from receiving their diplomas). The suit argued that due to the inequalities in Florida's

educational system some students received an inferior education and thus were not prepared adequately for the test. Though they upheld the state's right to deny graduation certificates to students who failed the test, the courts required Florida to establish the validity of the skills tested. The state was also required to demonstrate that all students received adequate instruction on skills tested. A similar scenario could result in Michigan under this bill if the state fails to eliminate the huge disparity in per-pupil spending that now exists between schools.

POSITIONS:

The State Board of Education supports the bill. (3-30-90)

The Michigan Manufacturers Association supports the bill. (4-2-90)

The Michigan Federation of Teachers supports the bill. (3-30-90)

The Michigan Association of School Boards has not yet taken a position on the bill. (4-3-90)

The Michigan State Chamber of Commerce is reviewing Substitute H-4 and has not yet taken a position. (3-30-90)

The Michigan Association of School Administrators opposes the bill. (4-2-90)

The Michigan Education Association strongly opposes the bill as it would unnecessarily duplicate current efforts of the education department to implement an employability skills testing program. (3-30-90)