

Legislative Analysis



PERSONAL CURRICULUM FOR HIGH SCHOOLERS

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House Bill 6247 (Substitute H-3)
Sponsor: Rep. Hoon-Yung Hopgood
Committee: Education

Revised First Analysis (9-25-08)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would modify the process by which a personal curriculum can be sought for a high school student in order to modify the standard Michigan Merit Curriculum. It would specify that a personal curriculum could be sought for a student who had completed Grade 9 and would expand the list of those who could request the personal curriculum for a student. In addition, the bill would allow modification of the high school mathematics requirements to occur after a student had completed 1-1/2 credits of math (without necessarily having attained a passing grade), instead of having successfully completed 2-1/2 credits.

FISCAL IMPACT: House Bill 6247 would have no significant fiscal impact on the state or school districts.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

In April 2006, the legislature enacted two laws--Public Acts 123 and 124--to establish the Michigan Merit Curriculum for high schools. See *BACKGROUND INFORMATION*. The curriculum, one of the most rigorous in the United States, began with students who entered Grade 8 in 2006. It was adopted in response to a growing concern that public high schools in Michigan were not preparing students adequately for the challenges they faced in the workplace, and that their lackluster skills burdened the state's overall economy.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum requires that while in high school a student complete four credits of math (including algebra I, geometry and algebra II, or an integrated sequence of this content, and also a fourth year of mathematics taken in the senior year of high school); four credits of English language arts; three credits of science (including biology, and chemistry or physics); three credits of social science (including U.S. history and geography, world history and geography, economics, and civics); one credit of physical education and health; and one credit in visual, performing, or applied arts.

The mathematics requirements pose a challenge to many high school students and their teachers. Indeed, during the first two academic years of implementation, some schools have reported algebra failure rates of over 30 percent of all first-time students.

The current law allows parents and guardians to request a personal curriculum for students, but only after the student has successfully completed 2-1/2 credits of mathematics--customarily in the middle of the junior year. A personal curriculum

modifies the Michigan Merit Curriculum, generally reducing its rigor, if not its intellectual challenge. (The law does require school districts to approve requests for personal curricula.) Legislation has been introduced to allow parents and teachers to request a personal curriculum for students after they complete Grade 9.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would modify the process by which a personal curriculum can be sought for a high school student in order to modify the standard Michigan Merit Curriculum. It would specify that a personal curriculum could be sought for a student who had completed Grade 9 and would expand the list of those who could request the personal curriculum on behalf of a student. In addition, the bill would allow modification of the high school mathematics requirements to occur after a student had completed 1-1/2 credits of math, (without necessarily having attained a passing grade), instead of having successfully completed 2-1/2 credits.

Currently under the law, a student or a student's parent may request a personal curriculum in lieu of the standard high school curriculum, and a high school diploma will be awarded if that alternate curriculum is successfully completed. However, the mathematics credit requirement of the standard curriculum can be modified only after the student has successfully completed at least 2-1/2 credits of the mathematics credits required for high school completion.

(The Revised School Code, however, does not require that a school district provide a personal curriculum to a student nor would the bill do so.)

When a personal curriculum can be requested. House Bill 6247 modifies the law to specify that a personal curriculum could be sought for a student who has completed Grade 9. (Currently the timing of the request is not specified in the law, other than for mathematics.) Further, the bill specifies that the mathematics credit requirements can be modified as part of a personal curriculum after the student has completed (not necessarily successfully) at least 1-1/2 credits of the math required for high school graduation (down from having successfully completing 2-1/2 credits). [The requirements that a student successfully complete at least 3-1/2 total credits of mathematics, including one mathematics course during the final year of high school enrollment would not be modified.]

Who may request a curriculum. Currently, a personal curriculum can be requested by a parent or guardian or by an emancipated student. Under the bill, the personal curriculum could also be requested by one of the student's teachers with expertise in a subject area proposed for modification or one who is determined by the principal to have qualifications otherwise relevant to developing a personal curriculum, or a school counselor or school employee qualified to act in a counseling role.

The bill also says that a teacher, school counselor, or a school employee qualified to act in a counseling role could contact a student's parent or legal guardian to discuss the possibility and potential benefits of a personal curriculum.

Curriculum development group. Currently, a personal curriculum is developed by a group that includes at least the student, a parent or guardian, and the student's high school counselor. (The act says a school psychologist "should also be included" for a student receiving special education services). House Bill 6247 would add one of the student's current high school teachers to this group, and specify that the teacher be one whose expertise was in a subject area that would be modified or a teacher determined by the principal to have the qualifications otherwise relevant to the group.

Finally, the bill requires that not later than June 1, 2009, the Department of Education do all of the following:

- Meet with and solicit input from career and technical education teachers and others with expertise in career and technical education, industrial technology, or vocational education to determine how the curricular requirements can be met through career and technical education, industrial technology courses, or vocational education, or a combination of these.
- Compile and make available a report on its findings that provides specific direction on how to meet the curricular requirements through career and technical education, industrial technology courses, or vocational education, or a combination of these.
- Notify school districts and public school academies of the availability of its report.

MCL 380.1278b

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Cherry Commission. In June 2004 Governor Granholm created the Lieutenant Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, commonly known as the Cherry Commission after Lieutenant Governor John Cherry. The Governor charged the Commission with making recommendations for improving the skills of the workforce, doubling the percentage of Michigan residents with postsecondary degrees or other credentials, and aligning the state's educational institutions with economic opportunities in the state.

The Commission's final report, issued in December 2004, included a recommendation that the State Board of Education develop a rigorous set of standards to ensure that high school graduates have the necessary skills to succeed either in postsecondary education or in the workplace. The Commission recommended that the State Board develop these standards with input from employers, labor organizations, institutions of higher education, and high school parents, students, and teachers.

Development of the Michigan Merit Standard. In the fall of 2005, Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Flanagan assembled a research group to examine high school education standards in Michigan. The group was composed of people from a variety of backgrounds, including school administrators, special educators, and representatives from the Department of Education, and was headed by Dr. Jeremy Hughes, Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction. The group met September through November and reviewed policies enacted in several other states, including Arkansas, Indiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Rhode Island.

After reviewing the research and the experiences of other states, and evaluating which policies might work best for Michigan, the work group developed a set of recommendations for statewide graduation requirements in Michigan similar to those enacted in other states. The work group made its recommendations to Superintendent Flanagan, who then presented them to the State Board of Education. The proposed "Michigan Merit Curriculum" was unanimously approved by the Board on December 15, 2005.

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The bill will revise the process by which a student can obtain a modification of the standardized high school graduation requirements through a personal curriculum; it aims at providing greater access to a personal curriculum and provide greater flexibility for students. (The personal curriculum allows a student to meet different requirements from those in the Michigan Merit Standard Curriculum.)

The bill would allow a student to seek a personal curriculum after completing Grade 9 (rather than later in the high school career) and allows modification of the math requirement after having attempted 1-1/2 credits rather than, as now, having successfully completed 2-1/2 credits. It also allows a teacher to request a personal curriculum for a student (rather than allowing just a parent or guardian to seek the modification), and allows teachers and counselors to reach out to families to discuss the benefits of a personal curriculum.

In effect, the personal curriculum option serves as an opt-out provision in the law. It provides an essential element of flexibility to allow students to earn a high school diploma in Michigan that is rigorous and relevant. While some are concerned that allowing students to opt-out of the graduation requirements will "dumb down" the standards or create loopholes that will allow students to avoid taking difficult classes, others fear that not providing an opt-out sets an impossibly high barrier for some students, who would be unable to graduate if they could not pass algebra II or some other particular course.

This bill strikes a balance between the need for rigor and for flexibility. The opt-out provision sets a limit on when a student may establish a personal curriculum and requires students to take additional credits in another area to replace the waived requirements. A

student must develop the personal curriculum with his or her parent, a teacher, and a guidance counselor, and it must advance the student's career plan. Students who opt-out of the requirements will have to take a rigorous course of study, but it will be more focused on their individual interests and career objectives.

For:

Many are concerned that the law's rigorous requirements, particularly the math requirements, will lead students to give up and drop out of school. Students may find the course content too daunting and consider it irrelevant to the type of work they wish to pursue. For many students who are considering dropping out, elective courses that capture their interest are sometimes the factor that keeps them in school. High schools should be given the flexibility to engage these students and keep them enrolled. Students at risk of dropping out would benefit more from alternative courses and a curriculum that matches their career goals. This bill will likely keep more students in high school, and engaged in learning.

Against:

For the sake of Michigan's economic future, it is essential to give all students in the state a high-quality education, and to increase the rigor and relevance of the high school curriculum. The Michigan Merit Standard and its accompanying content area expectations largely reflect the Michigan Merit Curriculum adopted by the State Board of Education. Under the law, all students should have to take rigorous courses that will give them the skills to compete in today's economy. This should increase the state's performance in math and science, and help ensure that schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Before the Michigan Merit Standard curriculum was enacted into law in 2006, high school graduation requirements in Michigan were lower than those in many other states, and also far below the educational standards in other countries such as India and China, particularly in math and science. Knowledge in these areas is crucial to technological development, and to participation in some of the fastest growing industries, such as biotechnology. In order to compete in the global marketplace and attract businesses to the state, Michigan needs to develop a more highly skilled and educated workforce.

This bill reduces (and for many students could well eliminate) the requirement to take upper-level math and science. It is likely to reintroduce "tracking" of high school students, an ineffective strategy since the skills required in the workforce have converged with those needed to continue on to college. The students who take less rigorous coursework will be unable to build the skills they will need for the jobs of tomorrow, and their lack of skills will slow economic improvement for the state.

Response:

As the early implementation years of the Michigan Merit Standard Curriculum have clearly illustrated, increasing requirements alone is not effective without also developing ways for students to meet those requirements. Innovative teaching methods and alternative methods of reaching students should be integral parts of any effort to improve high school education in Michigan, and further reform will be needed to overcome the funding and institutional inequities in Michigan education. In many cases, students'

difficulties begin much earlier than high school. Without adequate preparation in earlier grades, it is questionable whether all students will be able to meet the new requirements.

POSITIONS:

The Michigan Department of Education supported House Bill 6247 (H-2) without amendments. (9-23-08)

The Calhoun Intermediate School District supports the bill. (9-23-08)

The American Federation of Teachers-Michigan supports the bill. (9-23-08)

Michigan Charter Schools supports the bill. (9-23-08)

The Kalamazoo, Muskegon, and Ottawa Intermediate Schools Districts support the bill. (9-23-08)

The Michigan Chamber of Commerce and the Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence support the bill as amended. (9-23-08)

The Michigan Association of School Boards supports the bill. (9-23-08)

The Michigan Association of School Administrators supports the bill. (9-23-08)

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.