

Legislative Analysis



MODIFY MATH GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS AND PERSONAL CURRICULUM

Mitchell Bean, Director
Phone: (517) 373-8080
<http://www.house.mi.gov/hfa>

House Bill 4511 (Substitute H-2)

Sponsor: Rep. Douglas Geiss

Committee: Education

First Analysis (8-25-09)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would alter the process to be used when modifying the Michigan Merit Curriculum, (1) specifying that a personal curriculum could be sought for a student who had completed Grade 9, and (2) expanding the list of those who could request the personal curriculum on behalf of a student to include teachers and counselors (in addition to parents). 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: The changes in the personal curriculum provisions and the mathematics requirements would likely have no fiscal impact on the state or local 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 three academic years of implementation, some schools have reported algebra failure rates of over 30 percent of all first-time students. County-wide rates are also high. According to research by Dr. Derrick R. Fries of Eastern Michigan University, 27 percent of all freshmen in the graduating class of 2011 failed

algebra I in Oakland County, while 29 percent of those freshmen failed algebra I in Macomb County.

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:

House Bill 4511 (H-2) would amend the Revised School Code (MCL 380.1278b) to alter 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.

Personal Curriculum Provisions

Who may request a curriculum. Currently, the *parent or legal guardian* of a student may request a personal curriculum that modifies the Michigan Merit Standard Curriculum requirements. If all of the requirements for a personal curriculum are met, then the board of a school district or charter school may award a high school diploma to a student who successfully completes his or her personal curriculum. (The Revised School Code, however, does not require that a school district provide a personal curriculum to a student nor would the bill require that a school district do so.)

House Bill 4511 would modify the personal curriculum provision to expand who could request a personal curriculum so that it would apply to (1) a parent or legal guardian of a student who had completed Grade 9; (2) a teacher who was teaching the student and who taught in or had expertise in a subject area that would be modified by the personal curriculum or who was determined by the principal to have qualifications otherwise relevant to developing a personal curriculum; or (3) a school counselor or school employee qualified to act in a counseling role.

In addition, the bill specifies that a teacher, school counselor, or school employee qualified to act in a counseling role under Section 1233 or 1233a of the code could contact a student's parent or legal guardian to discuss the possibility and potential benefits of a personal curriculum.

Curriculum development group. The law currently requires that a personal curriculum be developed by a group that includes at least the student, at least one of the student's parents or a legal guardian, and the student's high school counselor or another designee qualified to act in a counseling role selected by the high school principal. House Bill 4511 would expand this group to include a teacher. The teacher included in the group developing the personal curriculum would be one who was teaching the student, who taught in (or whose expertise was in) a subject area being modified by the personal curriculum, or who was determined by the principal to have qualifications otherwise relevant to the group.

Mathematics Credit Requirement

Currently under the law, the mathematics credit requirements of the Michigan Merit Curriculum can be modified as part of a personal curriculum only after the student has *successfully* completed at least 2 -1/2 credits of the mathematics credits required, and only if the student successfully completes at least 3-1/2 total credits of the math credits before completing high school. Under House Bill 4511, the mathematics credit requirements of the personal curriculum could be modified after the student had completed "without necessarily having attained a passing grade in" at least 1-1/2 credits of the math credits required.

At present the Algebra II credit that is required can be modified as part of a personal curriculum only if the student has successfully completed at least two credits of the mathematics credits required under the Michigan Merit Curriculum. House Bill 4511 would delete this requirement.

The bill would retain the language that says the Algebra II credit can be modified as part of a personal curriculum if the student meets one or more of the following: (1) has successfully completed the same content as one semester of Algebra II, as determined by the Department of Education; (2) elects to complete the same content as Algebra II over two years, with a credit awarded for each of those two years, and successfully completes that content; or (3) enrolls in a formal career and technical education program or curriculum and in that program or curriculum successfully completed the same content as one semester of Algebra II, as determined by the department.

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 Lt. 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 or counselor to request a personal curriculum for a student (rather than allowing only 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 a 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 example, the mathematics requirements pose a challenge to many high school students and their teachers. During the first three academic years of implementation, some schools have reported algebra failure rates of over 30 percent of all first-time students. County-wide algebra failure rates are also high. According to research by Dr. Derrick R. Fries of Eastern Michigan University, 27 percent of all freshmen in the graduating class of 2011 failed algebra I in Oakland County, while 29 percent of those freshmen failed algebra I in Macomb County.

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 mathematics 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 supports the bill. (8-19-09)

The Michigan Association of School Administrators supports the bill. (8-19-09)

The Association of Secondary School Principals supports the bill. (8-19-09)

The Association of Michigan School Counselors supports the bill. (8-19-09)

The Michigan Association of School Social Workers supports the bill. (8-19-09)

Michigan's Children supports the bill. (8-19-09)

The Michigan Association of School Psychologists supports the bill. (8-19-09)

Ottawa, Muskegon, Kalamazoo ISD supports the bill. (8-19-09)

Macomb ISD supports the bill. (8-19-09)

The American Federation of Teachers-Michigan supports the bill. (8-19-09)

Legislative Analyst: J. Hunault
Fiscal Analyst: Mary Ann Cleary
Bethany Wicksall

■ 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.