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Senate Fiscal Agency

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS:

The Michigan Merit Curriculum Proposal

by

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INTRODUCTION

Many states are exploring ways to improve the quality of high school education in America. The high school system that was designed to prepare students to enter an industrial economy now is struggling to prepare students to enter a new and uncertain economic future. There is widespread concern that the United States is falling behind its global competitors in science and math, and that countries with a more highly educated workforce will gain a competitive advantage over this country. As part of the continuing effort to improve high school education, Michigan's State Board of Education recently recommended the adoption of its "Michigan Merit Curriculum", which would establish statewide graduation requirements for all high school students. The proposed curriculum was unanimously approved by the State Board of Education on December 15, 2005. Before going into effect, however, the curriculum also will have to be approved by the Legislature.

Michigan currently leaves most graduation requirements up to local school districts; the only statewide requirement is one semester of civics. (The Revised School Code also requires health and physical education courses to be provided to all students, and every student who is able to participate must take physical education. The specific requirements are left to the discretion of the local school district, however.)

This paper will provide a brief review of the status of high school education in Michigan, examine the proposed Michigan Merit Curriculum, and compare the proposal with current requirements in Michigan and other states. It also will describe legislation that has been introduced in response to the proposal and provide a summary of some of the arguments for and against the Michigan Merit Curriculum.

HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION IN MICHIGAN

Many believe that Michigan is not doing enough to prepare students adequately for the job market and for college. It has been said that in today's job market, a high school diploma is sufficient for only about 10% to 15% of jobs. The rest require some additional education or training.¹ Because of Michigan's history as a manufacturing center, the previous generation of high school graduates could count on plentiful, well-paying jobs that required only a high school diploma or less. The job market has shifted dramatically, however, and the number of manufacturing jobs in Michigan has dwindled. The remaining jobs often require some technical expertise beyond a basic high school education. Some have questioned how well high schools are preparing students for these new challenges. Employers often complain that high school graduates lack essential skills needed in today's workplace, and colleges and universities frequently must offer remedial classes for students who are not prepared to take college-level courses.

Michigan is said to have the worst ranking in the Midwest in preparing students for postsecondary education.² The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education evaluates states based on various factors, including the percentage of students who complete high school; are proficient in English, math, science, and other subjects; participate in advanced placement exams; and score in the top 20% on college entrance exams. Using these data, the Center issues biennial "report cards" grading each state on its performance. In 2004, Michigan received a C for its performance in preparing students for higher education. The grade was due in part to the small percentage of students taking upper-level math and science courses. Only 40% of students took at least one upper-level math course, and only 27% of students took at least one upper-level science course. The national average percentages are 48% and 31%, respectively. In the best performing states, 59% of students took one or more upper-level math course, and 41% took one or more upper-level science courses. Although it is clear that there is

significant room for improvement, Michigan is not the only state struggling to improve the quality of high school education. Nineteen other states received a C, C+, or C- in this area. Only seven states received an A or an A-.

Michigan's Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Flanagan came into office on May 18, 2005, with the stated goal of increasing the quality of public education in Michigan. He has argued that rigorous statewide graduation requirements could improve students' performance by raising expectations and setting high standards for all high school graduates.

THE MICHIGAN MERIT CURRICULUM

In the fall of 2005, Superintendent 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 in September through November and reviewed policies enacted in several other states, including Arkansas, Indiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Rhode Island. In addition, the research group reportedly was influenced by the work of Achieve.org, an organization dedicated to increasing standards in high school education and preparing all students for postsecondary education. Achieve.org has worked with other states to improve academic standards and methods of assessment.

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, and those recommendations were the basis for the Michigan Merit Curriculum, which Superintendent Flanagan presented to the State Board of Education.

The proposed Michigan Merit Curriculum consists of a Merit Core and a 21st Century Applied Learning Core. The Merit Core would require students to earn a specific number of credits in subject areas including English, math, science, and social studies. The Applied Learning Core identifies certain skills, such as global literacy, that students would need to demonstrate before graduating. All students would have to complete both the Merit Core and the 21st Century Applied Learning Core in order to graduate.

The Merit Core would require students to earn credits in the following areas:

- 4 credits in English
- 4 credits in Math, including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. (A Math course would have to be taken in the senior year.)
- 3 credits in Science, including Biology and Physics or Chemistry
- 3 credits in Social Studies, including Civics, Economics, U.S. History, and World History. (Geography would be integrated with the History courses.)
- 1 credit in Health and Physical Education
- 1 credit in Visual and Performing Arts
- 2 credits in World Languages

In all cases, the school district would be free to meet these requirements in varying ways, through special focused programs or a career and technical education sequence. For example, students could meet the math requirements through an integrated math sequence or a career and technical education sequence. Similarly, English credits could be earned through a

Humanities sequence or a career and technical education sequence. Superintendent Flanagan has repeatedly said in hearings that it is possible to teach the Pythagorean Theorem in a building trades course, the implication being that math credits could be taught in a practical setting, imbedded in a technical education program. The material could be tailored to the interests and different educational needs of individual students. Regardless of how the material was presented, schools would have to be able to demonstrate that the sequence met the Merit Core content standards.

The proposed Merit Curriculum is not a tracking system that would set different standards for college-bound students, those pursuing technical education, or those entering the workplace. The underlying content requirements for all students would be the same regardless of the context or manner of presentation. All students would be required to earn credit in Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, for example, regardless of whether they learned those concepts in a college prep course or in technical education curriculum. According to Superintendent Flanagan, the reason for the stringent standards is that in today's high-tech job market, the skills necessary to gain employment have converged with the skills needed to continue in postsecondary education. He has argued that all students need higher-order math, science, and English skills, whether they are bound for a university or the job market.

The 21st Century Jobs Applied Learning Core has received less attention than the Merit Core requirements have, but many consider it an important part of the proposal. The Applied Learning Core would require students to demonstrate literacy in a variety of areas, including global literacy, civic literacy, financial, economic, and entrepreneurial literacy, and information and communications technology literacy. Students also would have to demonstrate problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills, and communication skills. How students met these requirements would be up to the local districts, but the State Board of Education has recommended specific classes that might give students an opportunity to learn the required skills. For example, a student might learn global literacy through studying a world language, which also would count toward the language requirement in the Merit Core. Other courses suggested by the Board of Education include music or performing arts, philosophy, anthropology, or sociology.

The proposal would give local school districts and students some flexibility in meeting the requirements of both the Michigan Merit Core and the Applied Learning Core. Also, school districts that were unable to implement all of the requirements immediately would be permitted to phase in the requirements over a period of time.

CURRENT LOCAL REQUIREMENTS

In September 2005, the State Board of Education conducted a survey of current high school graduation requirements in local school districts across the State.³ Table 1 compares the results of the State Board's survey with the proposed Michigan Merit Core requirements.

Table 1

Subject	Current Local Requirements	Proposed Merit Core Requirements
English	61% require four credits.	Four credits
Math	5% require four credits. 41% require three credits. 37% require two credits.	Four credits (including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II)
Science	38% require three or more credits. 46% require two science credits.	Three credits (including Biology and Physics or Chemistry)
Social Studies	78% require three or more credits.	Three credits (including Civics, Economics, U.S. History, and World History)
Health and Physical Education	The survey did not indicate the number of districts that require health or physical education.	One credit
Arts	38% require at least one credit. 5% require half a credit. 56% either had no requirement or did not respond.	One credit
World Languages	4% of school districts require two or more credits. 5% require one credit. 88% either had no requirement or did not respond.	Two credits

Source: Michigan Department of Education

The most common requirements indicated in the survey were four English credits, two to three math credits, two to three science credits, and three social studies credits. Although these average findings correspond fairly well with the average requirements in other states (which are described below), a significant number of districts would have to increase their requirements to meet the proposed new standards, particularly in math, but also in science, the arts, and world languages.

Simply comparing required credits does not give a full sense of the extent to which districts might have to alter their requirements, however. It is unclear from the survey how many schools currently require the specific sequences of courses indicated in the Merit Curriculum. School districts that require four math credits, for example, still might need to modify their requirements to include Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. Schools frequently require a certain number of credits but do not require students to take specific courses. According to the Department of Education, less than a third of school districts require all students to take Algebra I to graduate. Typically, only students who intend to continue to college take higher-order math and science classes. The proposed Merit Curriculum would represent a significant departure from that system, instead requiring all students to take higher-order math, science, and foreign languages. In that sense, the proposed requirements go beyond what presently is required in most high schools in Michigan.

GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS IN OTHER STATES

Almost all states have established statewide high school graduation requirements.⁴ Aside from Michigan, only three states (Colorado, Massachusetts, and Nebraska) leave graduation

requirements up to local school districts. Although the specific requirements vary widely, the most common requirements in other states are four years of English, three years of math, and three years of science.

English: Almost all states require four years of English. Only six states have a three-year requirement.

Math: Only two states, Alabama and South Carolina, require four years of math. Twenty-five states require three years, and 16 require two years.

Science: Only two states, Alabama and North Dakota, require four years of science. Twenty states require three credits, and 20 states require two. Illinois requires one science credit.

Arts: Twenty-seven states require some participation in the arts.

Physical Education: Thirty-two states have a physical education requirement.

World Languages: New Jersey requires one credit in a world language. Some states require students to take either a world language or an alternate course. In Maryland, for example, students must earn two credits either in a world language or in an advanced technical or a career prep area.

It is not clear from the experience in other states whether increased graduation requirements necessarily lead to better performance. For example, Alabama, which has struggled to improve its education system, has adopted some of the highest graduation requirements in the country. The state's so-called 4x4 curriculum requires students to earn four credits each in English, math, science, and social studies, and also includes requirements in physical education, health, the arts, and computer education. The math credits must include Algebra I and Geometry, and the science credits must include Biology and a physical science.⁵

The requirements were adopted in 1996, but did not take effect until the 2000-2001 school year. It is unclear yet whether the higher standards will improve education in that state. The state's performance in math and science is relatively low compared with the country as a whole. Only 23% of high school students in Alabama took at least one upper-level science course, and only 34% of students took at least one upper level math course, according to the 2004 report of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.⁶ (As noted above, the national averages are 31% and 48%, respectively.)

Since Alabama's new standards only took effect several years ago, it remains to be seen whether they will have a long-term positive impact on students' performance in that state. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Alabama has improved its secondary educational system over the past decade, but the state still received a grade of D- in 2004.⁷ The state also has one of the lowest graduation rates in the country, at 82%.⁸

Indiana also recently adopted higher graduation requirements. Beginning with freshmen entering in the 2007-2008 school year, all students will be required to complete the state's Core 40 curriculum, which consists of 40 semester-long credits. In Indiana, one credit represents one semester, so two credits equal one school year. The Core 40 requirements include eight credits (four years) of English, two years of math (including Algebra I), two years of science (including Biology), and two years of social studies (including U.S. History and U.S. government).⁹ Students may opt out of the Core 40 requirements with parental consent.

Students in Indiana also may earn an Academic Honors Diploma by taking a more rigorous curriculum that includes Geometry and Algebra II, chemistry and physics, a foreign language requirement, and an Arts requirement. As in Alabama, because the new standards are still being implemented, it remains to be seen whether they will have a positive impact on students' performance.

In addition, a number of other states recently raised graduation requirements, or are considering doing so.¹⁰ It is clear, however, that graduation requirements alone do not determine the success of a state's high schools. Massachusetts, for example, leaves graduation requirements almost entirely up to the local school districts, yet the state received one of the highest ratings in the country from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. In Massachusetts, 59% of student took at least one upper level math course, and 38% took at least one upper level science course, according to the Center's 2004 report. The high school graduation rate in Massachusetts is 91%, and a high percentage of students in the state continue on to higher education.¹¹

PROPOSED LEGISLATION

In Michigan, legislation has been introduced in both the House of Representatives and the Senate in response to the State Board of Education's recommendations. Below is a summary of the three bills as they relate to the proposed Michigan Merit Curriculum.

Senate Bill 1124 was introduced on March 9, 2006, by Senator Wayne Kuipers, and was reported by the Senate Education Committee on the same date. As reported, Senate Bill 1124 (S-1) would require students, beginning with those entering eighth grade in 2006, to earn the following credits before graduating:

- 4 credits in English, including writing, speaking, representing, reading, listening, viewing, literature, culture, and language.
- 4 credits in math, including algebra I, geometry, algebra II, and an additional math course such as trigonometry, statistics, precalculus, calculus, applied math, accounting, business math, or a retake of algebra II. If a student earned credit in algebra I or II or geometry before entering high school, that credit would count toward this requirement. Students would have to complete one math course in the 12th grade.
- 3 credits in science, including earth science, biology, and chemistry or physics. A student would be given high school credit for any of these credits earned before entering high school. Students would be strongly encouraged to complete an additional credit in science, such as forensics, environmental science, geology, physics or chemistry, physiology, or microbiology.
- 3 credits in social science, including one credit in U.S. history, one credit in world history, ½ credit in economics, and the civics or government course currently required under State law. The history credits would have to include geography.
- 1 credit in health and physical education.
- 1 credit in visual arts, performing arts, or applied arts, as defined by the Department of Education (DOE).

All credits would have to be aligned with subject area content expectations and guidelines developed by the DOE.

Students also would have to complete elective course requirements as established by the school district or public school academy. Each elective course would have to include at least one of these 21st century teaching and learning skills: global literacy; civic literacy; financial,

economic, and entrepreneurial literacy; information and communications technology literacy; and learning skills.

Students would have to complete at least one course online. This requirement could be met if a school district or public school academy integrated an online experience into all courses that provided required credits under the Michigan Merit Curriculum.

Beginning with students entering 9th grade in 2009, students would have to earn at least two foreign language credits to graduate. If a student had earned equivalent foreign language credits in earlier grades, those credits would count toward this requirement.

In addition, students would have to complete either the Michigan Merit Exam or certain subject area assessments, which would have to be approved by the DOE within three years of the bill's effective date. The assessments would have to determine whether a student had met the subject area content expectations for each of the required math, science, English, and social science credits. As an alternative, students needing special education services would have to participate in the MI-Access assessment test.

When a student had completed or was about to complete the first semester of the 11th grade, the student's parent or legal guardian could request a modification of the math or science credit requirements. Upon request, the school district would have to work with the parent or guardian to develop an individualized learning plan for the student. If a student were 18 years old or older, or were an emancipated minor, he or she could request an individualized learning plan on his or her own behalf.

The bill would require school districts to provide a career pathways program or similar career exploration program to students in 7th grade, beginning in the 2006-2007 school year.

A school district that was unable to implement all of the requirements under the bill for students entering 9th grade in 2007 could apply to the DOE for permission to phase in one or more requirements.

Senate Bill 1021, introduced by Senator Irma Clark-Coleman on February 1, 2006, would require students to complete all of the following before graduating from high school:

- The Michigan Merit Exam or an approved alternative assessment test.
- The course credit requirements of the Michigan Merit Curriculum.
- Elective courses that were aligned with the 21st Century skills as specified in the Michigan Merit Curriculum.
- One online course.

Under the bill, the Department of Education would have to develop content expectations for all parts of the required Michigan Merit Curriculum, and would have to provide guidance to school districts and charter schools (public school academies) regarding electives and the 21st Century skills.

The bill would allow a student in the 11th grade who had completed at least three years of the Michigan Merit Curriculum to request a modification of the requirements. He or she could work with the school district and a parent or legal guardian to develop an individualized learning plan, and if the student completed that plan, he or she would be eligible to graduate.

If a school district or charter school were unable to implement all of the requirements under the bill immediately, it could request permission to phase in the graduation requirements over a period of time, subject to approval by the Department of Education.

House Bill 5606 was introduced on January 24, 2006, sponsored by Representative Brian Palmer, and was passed by the House on March 2, 2006. As passed, House Bill 5606 (H-7) would establish course requirements similar to those proposed under the Michigan Merit Curriculum, except that it would not include a foreign language requirement. The bill would require the Department of Education (DOE) to develop subject area content expectations for the required credits in English, math, science, civics, history, and geography, and to develop content guidelines for the credits in health and physical education and in the arts.

The subject area content expectations and guidelines would have to be developed with input from recognized experts in the relevant subject areas, representatives from the business community, teachers and administrators, representatives from colleges and universities, government officials, and parents. In addition, the expectations and guidelines would have to meet specific criteria identified in the bill, and would have to specify clearly what students would be expected to know upon completion of the credit.

The content expectations and guidelines would have to be approved by the State Board of Education before they would go into effect. The deadline for approval would be April 15, 2006, except that the English content expectations for sophomores, juniors, and seniors could be approved in later years.

The bill would require students to take one course online as proposed under the Merit Curriculum. If a district were unable to provide an online course, or were unable to meet any other requirements under the bill, the district could apply for an education mandate rollback under House Bills 4079 (H-2) and 4080 (H-1). Under an education mandate rollback, the State Superintendent could waive specific requirements for a district for a maximum of five years, though the State Board of Education would have the authority to override that decision. House Bill 5606 (H-7) is tie-barred to House Bills 4079 and 4080.

House Bill 5606 (H-7) also would allow a student to request a personalized curriculum modifying his or her graduation requirements in 11th and 12th grades, or in any semester after the student turned 16. The personalized curriculum would have to be developed by the student, his or her parent or guardian, and a high school guidance counselor or other school official. (If the student were 18 years or older or were an emancipated minor, he or she could request that the parent or guardian not be included.) If the student completed the requirements under the personalized alternative curriculum, he or she would be eligible to graduate. The bill also would allow a student who received special education services to graduate under an individualized education plan.

The bill would require school districts to offer all components of the curriculum to all students, or to make the courses available by other means, such as through a cooperative arrangement with a neighboring school district or a postsecondary school. The DOE would have to report annually to the Legislature on the ability of public schools to implement the required curriculum, the rigor and relevance of the course work required under the curriculum, the impact of the curriculum on student success, and other matters.

Beginning in 2007-2008, a high school would have to ensure that all students had access to all of the elements of the required curriculum in order for the school to maintain accreditation by the DOE.

THE DEBATE OVER THE PROPOSED REQUIREMENTS

The proposed graduation requirements have been the subject of much public debate. Some have argued that the proposal is a one-size-fits-all approach that does not take into account the different goals and abilities of students. Schools already offer advanced courses for those who wish to take them, but many believe that schools should not force all students to take those specific classes at the expense of others that are more suited to the students' interests. Given the extensive academic requirements under the Merit Curriculum, it has been suggested that students might not have enough opportunity to take alternative courses that would allow them to explore their true interests, or prepare for a career. Some have recommended that schools offer two alternative diploma options, one to prepare students for a four-year college, and one to prepare students for a technical college or the workforce. The flexibility of such a system, they argue, would provide students with the skills they need more effectively than would the requirements of the Merit Curriculum.

Others have contended that the statewide requirements would take away local control from school districts, or that the requirements do not take into account schools with nontraditional teaching structures such as block schedules. The proposal, however, would allow local districts to determine how they would meet the requirements, and supporters of the plan say that there would be enough flexibility that all districts should be able to comply.

One frequent argument is that the requirements represent an unfunded mandate from the State government. The proposal does not provide any increased funding for school districts to implement the new higher standards. If the requirements went into effect in the 2006-2007 school year, some districts would have to make significant changes, including redesigning their curricula and course offerings to meet the new requirements. Many districts would have to hire new teachers to offer more sections of the required upper-level math and science courses. Arguably, faced with tight budgets, some school districts might have to lay off art teachers or reduce offerings of electives in order to hire additional math and science teachers and make room for added sections of required courses.

In addition, some are concerned that there could be a shortage of qualified teachers to meet the new requirements. Math and science teachers are in particularly high demand, and if all students were required to take upper-level math and science courses, districts would have to offer more sections of those classes. Furthermore, many small rural districts would not necessarily be able to afford to hire the specialized teachers qualified to teach some courses. In more densely populated areas, this might be less of a problem, as two or more districts could share specialized teachers, spreading the cost somewhat. Some also have suggested that students could take classes online if a school were unable to offer certain courses. Although critics point out that not all schools and not all individuals have equal access to the internet, offering online courses through schools could give students valuable technological experience while providing classes that otherwise might be unavailable.

Supporters of the plan have pointed out that many students already are taking classes that would meet the proposed graduation requirements, so the changes would not be difficult to implement. The Merit Curriculum, however, would require that all students and all school districts meet the same standards. That is very different from the current structure, in which requirements vary from district to district, and college prep and vocational tracking systems offer students very different courses of study and different opportunities. The benefits of equalizing standards could be considerable, if schools were able to present the material effectively to all students, and if all students were given a real opportunity to excel under the new curriculum. Other states' experience, however, suggests that increasing standards alone may not be enough to increase student performance. Many believe that innovative teaching methods and

alternative methods of reaching students are necessary parts of any effort to improve high school education in Michigan.

Critics of the proposal say that the specific course requirements go too far. The Algebra II requirement, in particular, has been contentious. Some have argued that even in today's job market, not all students need Algebra II, and that the course should be recommended, not required, or that students should be allowed to take a substitute course instead. Supporters of the requirement point out that Algebra II is tested on the ACT (American College Test), which all high school juniors will be required to take as part of the Michigan Merit Exam starting in 2007.¹² They argue that it would be unfair to test students on material that they were never taught. Since Algebra II content makes up as much as 15% of the of the ACT test,¹³ all students will need to take Algebra II to prepare them to do well on the exam.

A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*¹⁴ raised other concerns about the proposed math requirements. According to the article, in 2003, the Los Angeles Board of Education established new graduation requirements that included one year of algebra and one year of geometry. Students had difficulty meeting the new requirements, however. The article stated that 44% of ninth graders who took Algebra I in 2004 failed the class, and nearly three quarters of those who retook the class failed a second time. The State of California has since adopted the algebra requirement as part of its statewide graduation requirements. Reportedly, there is little recourse for the large number of failing students who are unable to pass the class, and therefore unable to graduate. The only option is to take the same class over again, sometimes from the same teacher. Critics of the algebra requirement in California have argued that the hopelessness caused by forcing students to take the same class repeatedly, requiring them to complete requirements that they are unable to achieve, will lead many to give up and drop out. Others have argued that although the dropout rate is a concern, softening the curriculum is not the answer. In the article, the sponsor of the legislation, California State Senator Chuck Poochigian, said that rather than lowering the graduation requirements and diluting the significance of a high school diploma, the state needed to find ways to inspire students to meet the higher standards. On the other hand, some contend that the difficulties may begin before high school. If students do not have a solid mathematical foundation from elementary school, they will be unable to master algebra in high school.

Some believe that the Michigan Merit Curriculum could create similar problems here, and that the new requirements might raise the bar so high that some students would not see any realistic way of being able to graduate, and would drop out of school. For those students, however, the Merit Curriculum would offer a safety valve in the 11th grade (or in the eighth grade under the House bill). If a student were unable to meet the requirements, he or she could consult with the school and his or her parent or guardian to develop an alternative educational plan. If the student completed that alternative plan, he or she would be able to graduate. That provision would give students a degree of flexibility, and could prevent some of the frustrating and hopeless repetition of classes seen in California.

Also, according to proponents of the Merit Curriculum, it would encourage districts to present material in a relevant context, and to identify alternative ways of presenting material that may reach more students. Not all students learn the same way, or at the same rate. Supporters believe that most students are capable of meeting the rigorous requirements set forth in the Merit Curriculum, if students are allowed to proceed at a pace that is appropriate to them, and if the material is presented in an appropriate way.¹⁵ The plan does not specifically address how that would be done, however. The implementation would be left up to the local school districts, and it is unclear whether they would be successful in reaching most students, or if the results would more closely resemble those seen in Los Angeles.

The world language requirement has raised some concern with many people, who believe that it is unnecessary for all students. They argue that many students rarely if ever will have the need for a second language in their work, and point out that language courses are available to those who are interested. Furthermore, the languages that might be of economic benefit, such as Chinese or Japanese, are not commonly taught in high schools, because there is a shortage of qualified teachers to teach those languages. Some are concerned that the foreign language requirement would present a barrier to graduation without providing any real benefit to students. Others argue that schools should focus on improving students' understanding of English before requiring a second language.

On the other hand, some claim that foreign languages would be beneficial for students in several ways. Most colleges and universities require incoming students to have taken two years of a foreign language, so the graduation requirement would be aligned with the college entrance requirement. In addition, although Chinese or Japanese may be useful, languages such as Spanish that are more commonly taught in high schools also can be helpful in the global marketplace. Moreover, the mental discipline and effort required to learn a foreign language arguably would help prepare students for postsecondary education.

Proponents of the Michigan Merit Curriculum say that it would require all students to take the rigorous courses that would give them the necessary skills to succeed in today's economy. In a poll conducted by EPIC/MRA and WXYZ TV from January 15 to 25, 2006, 78% of respondents approved of the proposed requirements, and 67% continued to favor the proposal even after hearing about some of the potential negative effects of the plan, such as a possible increased dropout rate among high school students, an increased cost to schools that would have to hire more teachers, or the loss of local control by school boards.¹⁶ The survey was given to 603 adults in Michigan, 400 of whom said they had school-age children living at home. The results for those with school-age children were similar to those for the entire population sample. In the survey, 60% of respondents agreed that "Michigan public schools must change the way [they teach] students in order to provide a quality education."¹⁷

Supporters believe that the Merit Curriculum would increase the State's performance in math and science, and help ensure that schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act. According to the National Report Card issued by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, only a minority of high school students in Michigan enroll in upper-level math and science courses. The Merit Curriculum would require such courses for all students.

Others are concerned that there is an undue focus on the potential economic benefits of the proposal. Educational reform should not be seen as economic stimulus, they argue, but instead should be considered an attempt to give every child in Michigan a high-quality education that will allow him or her to achieve his or her life goals. Some question whether the Merit Core alone would be enough to overcome the funding and institutional inequities in Michigan education. Others wonder whether, without adequate preparation in earlier grades, all students would be able to meet the strict new requirements. In trying to achieve a more meaningful high school diploma, they fear that the State may drive more students to drop out instead.

Despite these and other concerns, recent polling suggests that a strong majority of Michigan citizens support the idea of statewide graduation requirements. Many newspaper editorial pages have come out in support of the idea, although some have expressed concern over aspects of the specific legislative proposals. Superintendent Flanagan previously had said that legislation needed to be enacted by March 1 to give schools time to have the requirements in place for the 2006-2007 school year.¹⁸ More recently, he has indicated that the deadline could be extended until the end of March.¹⁹ If the Merit Curriculum were implemented next year, the

graduating class of 2010 would be the first class affected by the new requirements. Under Senate Bill 1124 (S-1), the requirements would be implemented in 2007, first affecting the class of 2011.

CONCLUSION

The Michigan Merit Curriculum would represent a significant change for the State, which traditionally has allowed local school districts to establish graduation requirements. The Merit Curriculum would require all students to meet rigorous graduation requirements, including courses currently required in only a small percentage of Michigan high schools. The proposal is an attempt to realign the State's educational system with the changing economy, and to prepare high school students for the challenges they will face. As Michigan's economy changes, some argue that its future depends on a well educated workforce that can compete on a global scale.

There is a great deal of debate over ways to improve the quality of education, in Michigan and in other states. As part of this effort, many states have increased high school graduation requirements in recent years, although the impact of the increased requirements is not clear. Many factors contribute to the quality of education in a State, and some have suggested that improving education in Michigan may require more than simply establishing graduation requirements. Others believe that graduation requirements represent a necessary first step in improving the quality of education and making a high school diploma meaningful and relevant.

END NOTES

¹ Interview with Lee Schleicher, Dean of Washtenaw Technical Middle College and member of the committee that made recommendations to Superintendent Flanagan that were the foundation for the proposed Michigan Merit Curriculum.

² National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, "Measuring Up 2004: Michigan Presentation".

³ The survey was conducted on September 9, 2005, through September 22, 2005. The questionnaire was sent to all 647 public high schools and public school academies in Michigan, and 45% of the districts responded by September 22. The cited percentages were derived from the published results of the survey by dividing the number of schools reporting a particular requirement by the total number of respondents.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, "State Education Reforms". Located 2-27-06 at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/res/res_tab5.asp?reformid=3&TableID=5.

⁵ Alabama Focus, "High School Graduation Requirements in Alabama". Located 2-27-06 at http://www.aasfaaonline.org/focus/focus_grad.htm.

⁶ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, "State Reports: (Alabama, 2004)". Located 2-27-06 at <http://measuringup.highereducation.org/stateprofilenet.cfm?myYear=2004&statename=Alabama>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Indiana Department of Education, "Academic Standards: Core 40 Curriculum Chart". Located 2-27-06 at <http://doe.state.in.us/asap/core40.htm>.

¹⁰ "States Raise Bar for High School Diploma", *Education Week*; 6-22-05.

¹¹ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

¹² MCL 380.1279g.

¹³ "High School Bill Likely to Include Algebra II", *Gongwer News Service*; 2-28-06.

¹⁴ "A Formula for Failure in L.A. Schools", *Los Angeles Times*; 1-30-06.

¹⁵ Interview with Lee Schleicher.

¹⁶ "Statewide Survey on Educational Curriculum & Graduation Requirements", *WXYZ TV 7 and EPIC-MRA*; 2-7-06.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "High School Requirements: Tougher Standards for Grads Supported", *Detroit Free Press*; 2-13-06.

¹⁹ "March 1 Deadline is Out", *MIRS Capitol Capsule*; 2-14-06.