

Senators support deferral of end-of-course exams' effect on final grades

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AUSTIN — Key senators said Monday that they would support a one-year deferral of a state requirement that would count the new high school end-of-course exams as 15 percent of the final grade in each subject tested.

A letter from the four senators to Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott said the commissioner can waive the 15 percent requirement for one year while the new end-of-course exams are being introduced into high schools, starting with ninth-graders this year.

Scott is now considering a waiver even though he voiced doubts about his ability to delay the 15 percent rule during a conference of school administrators in Austin last month.

“We believe that you have authority by virtue of the transition plan authorized [under state law] to defer the requirement that an end-of-course assessment count as 15 percent of a final grade until the 2012-13 school year,” said the letter, signed by Sens. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano; Royce West, D-Dallas; Dan Patrick, R-Houston; and Kel Seliger, R-Amarillo.

All four are members of the Senate Education Committee. Shapiro is chairwoman of the committee and sponsored the 2007 law that created the end-of-course tests for high school students.

“I respect their opinion and want to thank them for expressing their feelings on this, publicly and privately. Obviously, I would also like to hear from the House of Representatives,” Scott said Monday.

“I will carefully review this correspondence and any correspondence from the House.”

House members are already on record as supporting a delay in the rule, having passed a bill calling for one in the 2011 legislative session. The House bill died in the Senate.

School superintendents across the state have been critical of the 15 percent requirement, contending that it interferes with local authority to determine grading policies. The Legislature was vague on how the end-of-course test scores would be calculated, raising concerns that students might be treated differently depending on their school district.

In addition, there have been concerns about how the exams' results might affect a student's four-year GPA and class ranking — measures that are important in college admissions.

The end-of-course exams, part of the new State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, will test high school students in 12 subjects, three each in English, math, science and social studies. In addition to the 15 percent mandate, students must get a passing average on the three exams in each subject area to receive a diploma.

Shapiro and the other three senators emphasized there can be no waiver of the graduation requirement that the tests must be passed to graduate from high school.

“A waiver of the graduation requirement is explicitly prohibited,” the letter said.

Scott said at the school administrators conference that he would delay the 15 percent rule if he had legal authority, to give schools more time to adjust to the new testing requirements.

One opponent of easing up on the requirements is Texas Association of Business President Bill Hammond, who has urged lawmakers not to backtrack on the standards because they are important to improving public schools.

“Clearly, the status quo education and accountability system is not acceptable. Texas is on a road to ruin if we do not raise our standards in public education. Today, only 16 percent of ninth-graders in Texas public schools are career- and college-ready as they graduate from high school,” Hammond said.