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High schools may pay for college gap

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Texas education officials plan to ratchet up the state's accountability system by finding ways to hold high schools responsible for their graduates' college performance.

The state already tracks student performance from pre-kindergarten through college. The next step would mean students who need remediation in college could hurt their high school's ranking under the state's accountability system. Texas ranks schools exemplary, recognized, academically acceptable or unacceptable based on test scores and graduation rates.

DeEtta Culbertson, a Texas Education Agency spokeswoman, said the plan, mentioned in a national report on college and work readiness released Wednesday, is still in the early stages. She said state education officials have to figure out who would be responsible for tracking the students and reporting the information, and if there would be any privacy issues that could cause roadblocks.

"It's part of the overall package to improve education and increase college-readiness standards," Culbertson said. "We've already put in place a more rigorous curriculum and we're implementing several projects that are going to have an effect."

John Folks, superintendent of the Northside Independent School District, said the state's high school curriculum, while rigorous, is still not aligned with what colleges expect.

"There's probably a high percentage of kids that could pass the exit-level TAKS that might need college remediation," he said. "If we can do a better job of making sure the high school curriculum prepares students for what colleges need, I'd be open to it, but we have an awful lot of accountability measures in place now."

Gov. Rick Perry proposed holding high schools accountable for student college performance in December.

Last year, two states, Texas and Arkansas, required high school students to take a curriculum that includes higher-level science and math, such as algebra II, to earn a diploma. Now six other states have raised their graduation requirements to that level and 12 more are toughening standards.

The Class of 2008 will be the first in Texas to graduate under the curriculum. Judging by

college remediation rates, the tougher standards are necessary.

Last year, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board estimated that half the students entering the state's public colleges and universities needed at least one remedial course in math, reading or writing.

Ohio Gov. Bob Taft, who also serves as the co-chair of Achieve Inc., the Washington-based research group that released the study, said the problem is a national one.

"This is a serious threat to America's economic vitality and the need to improve high schools is absolutely critical," he said.

Achieve Inc.'s study ranked states on five factors: Whether or not their high school standards meet real-world expectations; if a state's graduation requirements are aligned with college and workplace expectations; if states use existing high school tests, such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, for college admissions or placement; if the state is tracking students from pre-kindergarten through college; and if states hold high schools accountable for how students perform after graduation.

Texas either has policies in place or plans to implement all five suggestions. Mike Cohen, president of Achieve Inc., praised the state.

"Texas is on the forefront in two ways. The state has put policies in place to strengthen high school standards and has a long history in standards-based reform," he said. "Texas has made some of the greatest gains in the early years, fourth and eighth grade, of any state in the country, and now it's beginning to pay serious attention to high school."

Achieve Inc.'s study grew out of the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, in which 45 of the nation's governors joined leaders from education and business to make high school reform a national priority.

In December, Perry announced a \$71 million investment for 35 high schools to create academies focusing on science, technology, engineering and math. The money, funneled through the Texas High School Project, comes from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, the Texas Education Agency and the Communities Foundation of Texas.

Cohen called the Texas High School Project "very impressive," adding: "The question is, is there a plan and a strategy for making sure those kinds of reforms reach every Texas high school."

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