

Business group applauds new proficiency tests

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

The jury will be out — maybe five years — on the question of whether employers and colleges pay attention to new, state-endorsed high school diplomas.

"I'll be at least five years before there will be any impact," predicted Art Ellis, state superintendent of public instruction, when the State Board of Education met Sept. 18.

One purpose of the Michigan High School Proficiency Tests was to give grads who got "proficient" results a special stamp on the diploma or transcript. It is supposed to tell corporate personnel departments and college admissions officers that the bearer had passed state tests.

So far, many high school principals and K-12 superintendents say no one is paying attention.

Ellis said it's too early to tell.

And a business group applauded the Michigan Department of Education for establishing "a rigorous test with a reasonable standard of expectation."

That group is the Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence (MBLEE). Its members include the Big 3 automakers, Dow Chemical, Kmart, Mead Paper, Pharmacia & Upjohn, Comerica Bank, Whirlpool, Michigan Chamber of Commerce and the University of Michigan. They employ 500,000 of the state's 4.4 million workers.

"For years we assumed that any child completing 13 years of schooling would be equipped with these skills (math, science, reading and writing)," said Jim Sandy, MBLEE executive director. "Unfortunately, we were wrong, but these tests and the endorsed diploma will send the message that these skills are necessary and important."

Statewide test results were released Sept. 13 in Lansing. Ellis said he encouraged local school districts to call local news conferences to release their results.

There was much dismay and hand-wringing at some of the

results, particularly at the 93,000 11th graders performances (in percentages):

- Math — 47.7 "proficient," 38 "no credit," 14.5 below.
- Science — 32 "proficient," 52.2 "novice," 16.8 below.
- Reading — 40.2 "proficient," 51.3 "novice," 8.6 below.
- Writing — 34.4 "proficient," 53.1 "novice," 12.5 below.

But State Board members had other complaints: Students and parents weren't being told their test scores, and so they were unable to decide how to brush up for "makeup" tests in October.

"The individual student doesn't know how he or she did. Can we correct that?" asked board member Dorothy Beardmore, R-Rochester.

"My daughter took the tests," said board member Sharon Wise, R-Owosso, "and hasn't had the results. She doesn't know what to study for a re-take. I wonder if we're giving students the tools, or we're dooming them to perpetual failure."

"It surprised me. The schools

have them," replied Anne Hansen, a member of Ellis' staff. Two members said the public — such as MBLEE — put too much emphasis on how many students achieved proficiency on the new tests, administered last March.

"I'm concerned about the perception of failure. It's not a pass-fail system," said Louis Legg, R-Battle Creek, newly appointed board member.

Gary Wolfram, R-Hilledale, agreed. "On the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test for college admission), no one comes in and says, 'my kid flunked.' It's a continuum."

Wolfram said it's possible only one point or two on the exam made the difference in deciding

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whether huge numbers of students were "proficient" or not.

Kathleen Tabor, a Bath School District parent, warned against

pessimism in interpreting test results. "A very small percentage did not do well," she said. "The ones is on business and higher."

See TFO, A18

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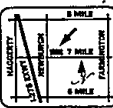
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