In Support of a More Rigorous and Relevant High School Curriculum

This week, Governor Charlie Crist will make yet another critical decision about another overhaul of public education in Florida. On April 15th the legislature passed, Senate Bill 4, which:

- Increases high school graduation requirements, beginning with students entering grade 9 in the following years, to include:
  - Geometry (2010-2011 school year);
  - Biology I (2011-2012);
  - Algebra II (2012-2013);
  - Chemistry or Physics (2013-2014);

- Requires students to pass a statewide, standardized end-of-course (EOC) examination in the following courses for students entering grade 9 in specified school years:
  - Algebra I (2011-2012);
  - Biology I and Geometry (2012-2013);
  - Algebra II and Chemistry or Physics (2014-2015);

- Requires students to pass district, standardized EOC assessments for other courses, when they are developed; and

- Discontinues the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) for mathematics (Grades 9 and 10) and science (Grade 11), as EOC assessments are implemented.

Unlike the controversial Senate Bill 6, this bill passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in the Florida House and Senate. Education leaders and policy makers recognize the need to add rigor and relevance in the high school curriculum so that Florida’s graduates are prepared to compete in the national and international job market. The reform aligns Florida with national efforts to boost high school graduation requirements, particularly and most importantly the Common Core Standards initiative of the National Governor’s Association.

There are legitimate reasons to be cautious and concerned about the implementation of this sweeping reform. Miami-Dade Superintendent Alberto Carvalho supported the reform but encouraged teachers, students, and educators to brace themselves “for a decrease in [high school] graduation rates as there is a natural adjusting to the requirements.” Jim Notter, Superintendent of Broward Schools wondered whether his district would be able to find enough qualified teachers for advanced math and science courses.

We should not, however, keep our standards low and let our graduates enter the market or higher education without the skills and competencies they need to succeed. Our students will rise to our expectations. ENLACE Florida, which has long advocated for more rigor and relevance in our high school curriculum, is convinced that all students, including the limited-income students and racial and
ethnic minorities that we serve, will exceed our expectations. Indeed, our students have asked us to raise high school standards. In February 2010, 65 students from 11 universities assembled in Tampa for the 2nd Annual ENLACE Florida Student Education Policy Conference passed a resolution calling for stronger high school graduation requirements. Many of these students, who had graduated at the top of their high school classes, found themselves unprepared for the more demanding classes and requirements they found in college. We do no service to them by holding on to a curriculum that doesn’t prepare them for success in either college or their career.

While we applaud the effort to add rigor and relevance to the curriculum, we must all recognize that success will require systematic planning and a coordinated implementation strategy. Far too students are currently enrolled in college preparatory courses. According to data from the Florida Department of Education, less than half of Florida’s students currently participate in courses that may soon be required of them. The low levels of participation in college readiness curricula or programs, detailed in the table below, highlight the importance of developing a comprehensive plan to promote college and career readiness in high school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Readiness Indicator</th>
<th>2008 Participation Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of graduates who complete a college preparatory curriculum</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of graduates who complete at least one AP, IB, AICE, or Dual Enroll-</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of graduates who complete one level 3 math course</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of graduates who completed at least one level 3 high school sci-</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
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Source: http://data.fldoe.org/readiness/

As Florida moves to overhaul its high school curriculum and its testing system, it is imperative for our education leaders and policy makers, including representatives from teachers, administrators, school boards, and districts around the state, to work out the details of how to implement the reform. To deliver more high quality, college prep courses in high school, we will need to attract, retain, reward, and support effective teachers. Educators and policy makers work best when they work together. There are many dedicated champions of public education throughout the state, from the Commissioner of Education, who has led the campaign to develop meaningful end-of course exams and raise high school standards, to a first grade teacher in a struggling school, who has seen her students make learning gains despite the many obstacles they must overcome. They all have something to contribute to improving our public education system, and our chances for success improve dramatically when we all come together.