

Plan in Need of Remediation

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State education officials are considering a proposal aimed at reducing the appallingly high percentage of students who need remedial courses in college because they weren't properly prepared by the end of high school. But instead of trying to bolster basic skills, they want to require more advanced-level math and science course work that some fear could come at the expense of vocational education.

There are several troubling aspects to the proposal. Foremost is moving toward a one-size-fits-all curriculum aimed at steering more students into a college-prep track, regardless of their career aspirations.

In New Jersey, nearly 80 percent of community college students require remedial classes. Forty percent of four-year college students need the extra help. But how will forcing a more rigorous curriculum on students who haven't mastered the basics of grammar and math fix the problem? State Education Commissioner Lucille Davy's nonchalant attitude toward funding to cover new initiatives makes the proposal even more troubling.

Courses in chemistry, Algebra II, biology and geometry would be required, as would a second language. The proposal includes plans for new science labs, new technology, teacher training and increasing the number of standardized tests.

Davy should keep the proposal, presented to the state Board of Education Wednesday, on the table for further consideration and debate with a variety of education professionals. There are too many examples in New Jersey of top-down departmental decisions that have been made without full consideration of the educational and financial ramifications.

A cost analysis of the program should be a prerequisite to any decision by the state board. For new science labs and other costly projects, Davy said money is available from the \$3.9 billion the state agreed to borrow for school construction. Isn't that money already earmarked? After the last school construction fiasco, Gov. Corzine should insist that funds be spent on what has already been promised, not directed toward new programs.

Pushing more advanced work on students having difficulty with the fundamentals makes no sense, and would likely result in even more of them dropping out. Vocational school educators fear, perhaps rightly, that their programs would be a casualty of the push toward an enhanced college-prep curriculum.

Davy should head back to the drawing board, and bring the proposal's critics with her. The education board shouldn't move ahead unless all the academic and financial concerns raised about the program have been fully addressed.