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California mandates testing every eighth-grader in algebra -- ready or not

Critics say the expected three-year time frame for implementing the rule is unrealistic. School districts will need help to prepare students, they add.

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Every California eighth-grader will be tested in algebra -- ready or not -- under a policy approved Wednesday that could make the state the first in the nation to require an upper-level math class before high school.

The state Board of Education voted for the change under pressure from federal officials and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who broke months of silence by siding this week with advocates who want algebra to become mandatory in eighth grade within three years.

Proponents say the new policy will push school districts to ensure that eighth-graders are ready for the demands of algebra. Critics say the anticipated three-year time frame is unrealistic. The new mandate, they contend, overlooks the real need to help school districts better prepare students.

Lucila Zetino, a summer school student at Monroe High in North Hills, typifies both the state's aspirations and its failings.

Zetino, 18, was part of an early push to get all students into Algebra 1 in eighth grade. Zetino flunked the class and has been flunking it ever since. Now she is attending classes after her senior year -- giving it another try, determined to earn her high school diploma.

Zetino's struggles demonstrate the depth of the challenge. Her math slide began at Millikan Middle School in seventh grade, she said. Then came eighth-grade algebra, when her teacher quit and was followed by several long-term substitutes. "I don't think I was prepared. I think they just, like, pushed me into algebra. . . . Math was like a different language I never understood. I felt hopeless."

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, more than half of eighth-graders, along with more than 2,000 seventh-graders, took algebra in 2007. But only 21% of eighth-graders tested proficient. About two-thirds of those who failed the class passed on their second try.

At many low-performing campuses, the picture is more dire. At Gompers Middle School in Watts, for example, only 30% of eighth-graders took algebra, and only 15% of those scored proficient. Moreover, only 1% of students in general math, an easier course, tested proficient.

The state's curriculum for eighth grade has long included algebra, and schools get penalized on their own report card, the state's Academic Performance Index, for every eighth-grader who doesn't take the algebra test.

The next step, the state board decided, was to force all students to take the test -- and thus an algebra course -- at a younger age. Under the likely terms of an agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, the state would have three years to make the transition.

State Supt. of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell had proposed instead a second, easier, algebra test as a fallback for some students. That test, already in development, would have been ready in spring 2010.

Requiring all students to take algebra "will hurt kids and contribute to other problems; I pray that I'm wrong," O'Connell said after the vote. "Absent additional resources, we're setting our students up for failure."

Statewide, only 24% of students, regardless of age or grade, scored proficient in algebra in 2007.

In eighth grade, 38% tested proficient -- a number virtually unchanged since 2003. But more students are taking algebra: less than a third in 2002 and more than half today.

For months, O'Connell's two-test option had considerable support. The governor's office raised no objection, and state board President Ted Mitchell co-signed a letter to federal officials with O'Connell.

"Board members were uncomfortable with a second test that would create the appearance of mastery of algebra but not actually do that," said Mitchell, explaining why he and other board members altered their positions.

Federal officials have complained that California established algebra as eighth-grade material but didn't require students to take the algebra test. Instead, they could take the more basic general math test. The requirements and the test have to match under federal law.

Washington couldn't tell California exactly how to comply with the law, said Holly Kuzmich, deputy chief of staff to U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. "But education policy is leading us to getting kids access to algebra by the eighth grade, and we know that's what leads kids to jobs and college."

She added: "We are delighted at the governor's push for high standards." Kuzmich said she knew of no other state that required algebra as early as eighth grade.

For months, advocates lobbied against O'Connell's approach.

"This \$1-million proposed 'algebra light' alternative test will be a disaster for California kids and teachers," said Jim Lanich, president of California Business for Education Excellence, before the vote. "It will be a watering down of academic standards. . . . It will institutionalize a lower expectation for minority and low-income kids."

There also were critics from a nearly opposite perspective who wanted a test that matched the state's new "algebra readiness" curriculum. Some of these advocates wanted the state to wait out the Bush administration.

For them, even the easier algebra test was "meaningless and cruel" for students who, because they weren't ready, hadn't taken algebra, testified Charles T. Munger Jr., a math curriculum expert.

The state board postponed the decision in May and also punted in June, but had to act this month to avoid possible sanctions.

The federal government could have stripped away several million dollars that the state uses to oversee programs for students from low-income families. The state also could have lost flexibility for developing reforms.

The approved solution creates another problem. If 95% of eighth-graders don't take the algebra test, a school could be judged as "failing" under federal rules and subject to penalties.

Schwarzenegger stayed out of the debate until 24 hours before trustees were to act.

"We must set our goals higher," the governor wrote to the state board. "Algebra is the gateway to critical thinking, pivotal for success in science, engineering and technology."

To graduate, California students must pass two years of high school math, including Algebra 1, and the high school exit exam. To enter the California State or University of California systems, students need a C or better in three years of high school math, which usually takes them at least through Algebra 1, Geometry and Algebra 2.

In L.A. Unified, as in other urban districts, students will need more help before eighth grade. The district has had trouble attracting and keeping qualified and effective math teachers.

Its teaching corps needs training in imparting the concepts of math as well as skills that will lead to algebra, said Jeanne Ramos, director of secondary mathematics.

Zetino's current teacher, Brian York, is taking part in a new effort among schools in his area to coordinate early math instruction.

"You can't just say, 'Eighth-graders, you're taking algebra,' " York said.

Despite clear explanations, good humor and words of encouragement, York can expect only about 50% of his class of algebra repeaters -- some of whom barely speak English -- to make it through, based on past experience. But he's going to keep trying.

So is Zetino, who wants to be a cosmetologist or find a job in the arts.

"I really want to graduate from high school," she said. "I'm hoping I do good in this class."

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