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Trustee hopes to test law on exit exams

By Shirley Dang
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In defiance of state law, a West Contra Costa school board member is pushing to award diplomas to students who fail the high school exit exam.

California requires seniors to pass the English and math test to graduate from high school starting this year. Nearly 48,000 students have failed so far, according to state results released last week.

School board member Dave Brown is proposing that his 32,000-student district allow seniors to graduate if they meet credit requirements and either pass the test or clear some other hurdle, such as presenting a portfolio of school work.

To deny students a diploma on the basis of the test alone is unfair, he said.

"I think that's wrong," he said. "It's morally wrong, and I think it's constitutionally wrong."

The school board is expected to discuss the legal implications during closed session Wednesday and to vote April 10. If Brown's resolution passes, it would represent the first major opposition to the test by a district, though the exam is the subject of two lawsuits filed by advocacy groups and parents.

Representatives from the state Department of Education said that disregarding the exit exam in granting diplomas would be illegal.

"It would be a clear violation of the Education Code if any district were to offer a diploma to a student who has not passed the California high school exit exam in addition to other graduation requirements," said Hilary McLean, department spokeswoman.

As with other violations, she said, the department could pursue remedy through the courts or withhold funding.

The state Legislature approved the test as a graduation requirement in 1999. State Superintendent of Schools Jack O'Connell, then a state senator, wrote the law to give the diploma a baseline value, rather than relying on district interpretations of what constituted a sufficiently prepared high school senior.

The test measures 10th grade English and middle school math. As of November, 11 percent had failed statewide.

In the West Contra Costa and Oakland school districts, 21 percent have failed. The Antioch school district posted an 13 percent failure rate, while 9 percent of Mt. Diablo school district seniors missed the bar. In San Ramon, only 1 percent of seniors did not pass.

The figures do not include special education students, who have earned a one-year exemption as a result of a lawsuit. Another complaint filed in February names multiple Richmond High School students as plaintiffs.

Among other complaints, opponents argue that the state did not adequately look into alternatives to the test for awarding the diploma. The state Board of Education voted against alternatives last month.

That is when Brown said he decided to take matters into his own hands.

"We're creating our own alternative to the exit exam," he said. "There are other ways to demonstrate their preparation for success after high school."

A draft of his resolution calls for creating "Senior Year Demonstration," which would entail "rigorous, research-based measures of academic achievement such as portfolios, exhibits, presentations and action research."

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a male high school graduate earns about \$35,412 a year. Those without diplomas earn \$26,468 a year, a difference of nearly \$9,000 annually.

"There's a lot at stake here," Brown said. "That diploma is valuable."

On Monday, Bay Area youth advocacy groups Justice Matter and Youth Together applauded Brown's effort to defy the exit exam. The groups plan to hold a joint news conference before the school board meeting Wednesday.

"There are core problems in schools for students of color," said Lisa Gray-Garcia, Justice Matters spokeswoman. "We need to get at those, rather than slapping a test on top and hoping that that will resolve the problem."

Brown may face resistance from state lawyers. However, he could hear objection from his four fellow school board members.

"It's not for us to take alternative actions that go against the California Department of Education," said Charles Ramsey, West Contra Costa school board president.

"We all took an oath of office," said Ramsey, referring to the school board. "We took an oath to uphold the law."

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The West Contra Costa school board meets for closed session at 4 p.m. Wednesday at Lovonya DeJean Middle School, 3400 Macdonald Ave., Richmond.

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