Local News

La Center 'ahead of curve' on graduation reform

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RENTON (AP) — School officials in La Center aren't waiting for the state of Washington to finish reforming high school graduation requirements.

The small Southwest Washington school district has decided to adopt a version of a 24-credit high school graduation requirement while implementation of State Board of Education's "Core-24" plan is still being discussed by that panel and the state Legislature.

State board member Eric Liu said at the board's meeting Thursday that La Center is not alone in its desire to "get ahead of the curve" on education reform. He said school officials around the state are watching the process and figuring out how to adopt the changes that seem inevitable.

La Center Superintendent Mark Mansell said his district didn't feel it had a choice about implementing the new high school graduation standards — the students and parents in his community were demanding higher academic expectations.

"We kept hearing the same thing," Mansell said.

So he decided to study the transcripts of the district's high school graduates and find out how far away they were from meeting the "Core-24" guidelines being developed by the state board.

"It was very, very enlightening. I wish that every district in the state could do this," Mansell said.

La Center already required 23 credits to graduate, but they weren't the same credits the state board had put into its new guidelines. "Core-24" calls for more math, more science, and two years of a world language, among other requirements.

Mansell discovered the kids in his district weren't that far from already meeting the new guidelines: 60 percent of 2008 graduates earned 24 or more credits; 45 percent met the proposed "Core-24" standards; 54 percent met the requirements the state Higher Education Coordinating Board says are needed to get into a four-year university in Washington state.

La Center learned it needed to increase requirements in math, science and the visual and performing arts to make the district's diploma more closely mirror the proposed new state standards.

They came up with a plan, moved some money and people around and made it happen.

"I've never been one who has let money stand in the way of what we wanted to accomplish," Mansell said. "This was the right thing to do for our kids."

He emphasized, however, that money wasn't the biggest hurdle to making such a change happen since his district already had a six-period day even though the state only pays for about five and a half periods. The biggest hurdle for any district would be to making the leap toward the unknown, Mansell said.

Mary Jean Ryan, chairwoman of the State Board of Education, said she would like to help other districts find the money and the will to move toward the new graduation requirements. She suggested some districts may be able to get a federal grant for innovation to pay for early implementation.

Bellingham is another district working toward early adoption of the new standards and Ryan said she expected would find they are close to the new standards if study their transcripts like La Center did.

Ryan said she was delighted the project the state board has worked so hard on has such an articulate champion in Mansell. "Core-24" was adopted by the state Legislature earlier this year as part of its education reform bill.

The state's new Quality Education Council has been charged with creating a plan to phase in many education reforms, including "Core-24," and with finding the money to pay for them.

La Center calls its new high school plan Pathways to the Future.

Students are given the choice of three different paths to follow in high school: one would prepare them for technical college or on-the-job training, the second would get them ready for college, and the third would prepare them for a more competitive four-year university and graduate school.

Mansell described the 24 credits as a means to the end. The real goal of the new diploma is to help kids think about what they want to do with their life and then get the education they need to make their dream happen.

Among the other topics on the agenda at the State Board of Education meeting that continues Friday were federal government school reform initiatives, online learning and the state's new assessment system.

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