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Learning Results hiatus backed

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A legislative committee strongly backed a proposal Friday to suspend implementation of Maine's controversial learning standards for a year. During the delay, a task force would redesign and narrow the focus of the standards. The panel would do that by developing a standardized course of study and assessment system for high school English and mathematics. Graduation standards for science, social studies and visual and performing arts would be eliminated.

The measure approved by the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee now goes to the full Legislature.

Education Commissioner Susan Gendron asked lawmakers for time to rework the standards. She said a review of 165 Maine school administrative units showed they were bogged down in trying to implement Maine Learning Results, the state's system for setting academic standards and testing student achievement.

Gendron said the state needs time to simplify and narrow the focus of its learning standards. "We need to pause," she said.

The Learning Results system has been widely criticized by teachers and administrators who say the system is so unwieldy it robs students of instruction time.

Originally, high school seniors in the class of 2008 would have been required to show they had mastered eight subject areas in order to graduate. Implementation was later pushed back until 2010.

Last year more than 15 bills were filed to modify the learning standards to make them more manageable.

The standards were adopted in 1996 during a wave of nationwide educational reform aimed at making schools accountable for the education of students. Maine's system gave local districts control over determining whether their students were meeting standards; other states adopted a more standardized approach, such as high school exit examinations.

Meanwhile, Maine students failed to show any improvement on state and national achievement tests, in sharp contrast to some other states, including Massachusetts, where student scores have surged.

Gendron told the committee that the review of 165 school districts showed most are only about midway through implementing the standards. The goal when they were adopted 10 years ago was to have them fully in place by this year.

"The good news is people are engaged and they have taken this work seriously," said Gendron.

The statewide review mirrored the findings of a study of Maine Learning Results just completed by the Center for Research and Evaluation at the University of Maine's College of Education and Human Development.

The university study also concluded that Maine educators support the concept of learning standards but that progress in adopting them is slow. The delays were attributed to time, money and the inability of most districts to use the data they collected on student achievement to make changes in curriculums and teaching methods.

Rep. Edward Finch, D-Fairfield, questioned whether the committee was rushing through the moratorium proposal and needed to give the public a chance to speak on the issue.

Other committee members said the complaints and concerns about Maine Learning Results had come before them for several years and it was time to act.

"We have been plowing this field for two years," said committee Chairwoman Sen. Elizabeth Mitchell, D-Vassalboro.

Rep. Vaughn Stedman, R-Hartland, was the only committee member to vote against the moratorium.

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