

Date of Hearing: March 20, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
Al Muratsuchi, Chair
AB 2251 (Connolly) – As Introduced February 8, 2024

SUBJECT: Graduation requirements: local requirements: exemptions

SUMMARY: Authorizes the governing board of a school district to, in its discretion, exempt students from any coursework requirements it adopted which are in excess of state graduation requirements. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Authorizes the governing board of a school district to, in its discretion, exempt students from any coursework requirements it adopted which are in excess of state graduation requirements.
- 2) States that this authorization does not affect the rights of foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, and other highly mobile student populations to be exempted from local graduation requirements, as specified under existing law.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Specifies coursework requirements for graduation from high school, including three courses in English, two courses in mathematics, two courses in science, three courses in social studies, one course in visual or performing arts or world languages or career technical education (CTE), two courses in physical education, and, commencing with students graduating in the 2029-30 academic year, subject to an appropriation, a one-semester course in ethnic studies. (Education Code (EC) 51225.3)
- 2) Authorizes the governing board of a school district to adopt coursework requirements adopted in excess of the coursework requirements of the state (EC 51225.3)
- 3) Requires local educational agencies (LEAs) and charter schools to exempt students in foster care, those who are homeless, students who transfer from juvenile court schools, students from military families, migrant students, and newcomer students who transfer between schools any time after the completion of the students' second year of high school from all coursework and other requirements that are in addition to state graduation requirements, unless a school district makes a finding that a student is reasonably able to complete the school district's graduation requirements in time to graduate from high school by the end of the student's fourth year of high school. (EC 51225.1)
- 4) Requires that LEAs, charter schools, and the State Special Schools for the Deaf and the Blind exempt an individual with exceptional needs whose individualized education program (IEP) team has deemed the student eligible to take the state alternate assessments and who is required to complete state standards aligned coursework to meet the statewide course requirements for graduation from high school, to from all courses and other requirements adopted by the governing board or governing body of the LEA that are additional to the statewide course requirements and award the student a diploma of graduation from high school. (EC 51225.31)

FISCAL EFFECT: This bill has been keyed non-fiscal by the Office of Legislative Counsel.

COMMENTS:

Need for the bill. The author states, “Students struggling with their mental or physical health should not be penalized for unavoidable lapses in attendance, and these students should be afforded a manageable pathway to graduate high school with their peers. While it is important for students to reach their school district’s mandated benchmarks for graduation, we should not delay their life milestones because of circumstances outside their control.”

School districts can raise and lower graduation requirements above the state minimum course requirements. Current law establishes requirements students must fulfill to earn a diploma of graduation from high school. As noted below, the state does not maintain information about these local graduation requirements, but data collected by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) suggests that it is relatively common for LEAs to impose additional coursework requirements.

School districts can exempt students from local graduation requirements at their discretion. The Education Code is permissive, and since nothing in the law prohibits or prescribes whether or how students may be exempted from local graduation requirements (with the exception of the provisions specifically for highly mobile students and some students with disabilities), school districts have the authority to determine whether, and how, to exempt students from their local graduation requirements. In spite of this, some school districts have been hesitant to exempt students without explicit authorization in the law.

Certain groups of highly mobile students are granted exemptions from local graduation requirements. Current law requires school districts to exempt students in foster care, those who are homeless, students who transfer from juvenile court schools, students from military families, migrant students, and newcomer students, who transfer between schools any time after the completion of the students’ second year of high school, from all coursework and other requirements that are in addition to state graduation requirements, unless a school district makes a finding that a student is reasonably able to complete the school district’s graduation requirements in time to graduate from high school by the end of the student’s fourth year of high school.

For highly mobile student groups, a consultation on the impact of exemptions on college eligibility is required when they are exempted from local graduation requirements. Current law, as it applies to foster youth and other highly mobile student groups, requires that when exempting a student, LEAs consult with the student, and the person holding the right to make educational decisions for the student, about how remaining in school for a fifth year to complete the LEA’s graduation requirements (which the student is entitled to do) would affect the student’s ability to gain admission to a postsecondary educational institution.

This provision is included in the law because some school districts adopt local graduation requirements to align with the admissions requirements of the UC and CSU, and not completing them would make students ineligible to apply to those institutions directly from high school.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some students were exempted from local graduation requirements. Amid concerns that significant numbers of students might not be able to graduate from high school due to the COVID-19 school disruptions, the state, through AB 104 (Gonzalez), Chapter 41, Statutes of 2021, exempted some students from local graduation requirements.

AB 104 required LEAs and charter schools to exempt a student who was enrolled in their third or fourth year of high school during the 2020–21 school year and who was not on track to graduate in four years from all local coursework and other requirements that were in addition to the statewide coursework requirements.

The state needs data on local graduation requirements. The California Department of Education (CDE) does not collect data on local graduation requirements, so it is difficult to assess the impact of legislation which exempts students from these requirements. Perhaps more importantly, in the absence of clear information about what students are doing to graduate from high school, the state does not really know what a California high school diploma means.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a common local graduation requirement is a course in Health, and that some districts, such as the San Diego Unified School District, align their graduation requirements with the A-G admissions requirements of the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU).

The Committee may wish to consider that a better picture of local graduation requirements would be useful for both the Legislature’s understanding of what a California high school diploma really signifies, of the impact of higher graduation standards on academic achievement and postsecondary outcomes - particularly on different subgroups of students - and for use in future discussions about changes to California’s graduation requirements.

The only data suggesting a statewide picture comes from a survey and a website scan conducted by the PPIC.

A PPIC report, *California’s High School Graduation Requirements* (Gao, 2017), found, based on survey data, that:

- During the 2015–16 school year, 63% of unified and high school districts required an additional year of math for high school graduation.
- Districts with more than 20,000 students were somewhat less likely to require an additional year of math.
- Four in ten districts required an additional year of science; unified school districts were more likely than high school districts to do so.

In a more recent PPIC report, *Does Raising High School Graduation Requirements Improve Student Outcomes?* (Gao, 2021), the PPIC found that:

- 59% of California districts (serving 66% of the student population) supplemented statewide minimum requirements by requiring three or four years of math, and 22% required three or four years of science.

- The prevalence of higher graduation standards did not vary widely across districts according to poverty rates, geographic location, or staffing levels. High-need districts, in which more than 55% of students were low income, English learners, homeless, or foster youth, are just as likely to have higher graduation requirements as other districts. So are low-staffing districts, where student-staffing ratio is at the top quartile. Among districts with higher science standards, 90% also had higher math standards.
- Districts with larger shares of Latinos, African Americans, low-income students, English Learners, and students with non-college educated parents are about as likely to have higher math requirements (three or four years) as are other districts.
- Students in high-poverty schools with higher requirements are 31% more likely to take advanced science courses and 2% more likely to graduate. Outcomes for students in rural schools appear unchanged.

PPIC recommended that the state collect data on local graduation policies so that researchers and policymakers can evaluate their impact and identify areas for improvement, especially when it comes to ensuring such policies benefit Latinos, African Americans, low-income students, English learners, and students with non-college educated parents.

Recommended Committee amendments. Staff recommends that this bill be amended as follows:

- 1) Authorize LEAs to adopt a policy to exempt students from local graduation requirements, so that there is transparency and community input into this process, and to ensure that exemptions are uniformly applied.
- 2) Include a statement of intent that when exempting students from local graduation requirements that this involve a consultation with the student and parent to clarify any impact on postsecondary admissions eligibility.
- 3) Clarify that this authority would not affect students' rights under statute authorizing exemption from local graduation requirements for certain students with disabilities (EC 51225.31).

Related legislation. AB 104 (Gonzalez), Chapter 41, Statutes of 2021, as an urgency measure, requires LEAs, upon receiving a request, to offer the parent a consultation regarding whether a student, excluding a student in grade 12, should be retained; created a process for parents to request that students receive a "pass" or "no pass" instead of a letter grade in the 2020-21 academic year and requires that specified institutions of higher education accept a "pass" for credit for admissions purposes; and required that students who were in their third or fourth year of high school in the 2020-21 and not on track to graduate in the 2020-21 or 2021-22 school years be exempted from local graduation requirements and be given the opportunity to complete the coursework required for graduation.

AB 181 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 52, Statutes of 2022, authorized an alternate pathway to a high school diploma for students with disabilities who take the state alternate assessment and exempted them from local graduation requirements.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

None on file

Opposition

None on file

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