Panel backs delaying grad test for 1 year

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Eleventh-graders are off the hook, but 10th-graders will have to pass a state test to earn a diploma if the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education goes along with one of its committees.

Frustrated by legal and bureaucratic roadblocks to the first standard check on how much students learn in Louisiana's public high schools, the panel on Tuesday proposed postponing for one year the already long-delayed graduation test.

Even if approved by the full board on Thursday, the latest schedule still might face a court challenge.

Also up in the air is whether students should take part of the test early in their high school careers to avoid a backlog of makeup classes, and who will pay for those extra classes, which might enroll 40 percent of the senior class.

Some board members loudly vented their anger over the need to put off an education reform that's been discussed for years.

"Every time we delay . . . we're denying some students a better opportunity for an education," said board member Jesse Bankston of Baton Rouge.

"I'm bitterly disappointed that it takes eight years to get any kind of test going," said board member John Bertrand of Crowley.

But both went along with the delay after board members were told that an earlier effective date would invite lawsuits from students who could claim the U.S. Constitution gives them a right to more official warning about the test.

The four-part exam is designed to measure students' grasp of the math, language, science and social studies courses that are taught as part of a tougher curriculum ordered by the board in 1984.

To ensure that the stiffer courses aren't just watered down so students can pass, the standard, statewide test was ordered as another requirement for graduation, beginning with the seniors who graduated last May.

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On Tuesday Education Superintendent Wilmer Cody urged a return to the 1992 schedule.

He said legal cases show federal courts won't hold students to a graduation test unless they are told about the requirement when they enter ninth grade. Any less notice violates a student's constitutional right of due process, several federal judges have ruled.

Tenth-, 11th- and 12th-graders can be given the test, but they can't be denied a diploma if they flunk, Cody said.

The committee, in effect, compromised by delaying the graduation requirement for one year, making this fall's 10th-graders the Vanguard of the testing program.

Bertrand said a federal court decision in one state allowed a graduation test to proceed with much notice as long as students who flunk are given another chance to learn basic high school skills.

Cody said that, based on other states' experience with graduation tests, as much as 40 percent of the first tested class might flunk part of the test.

Summer makeup classes for those students could cost $7 million, he said.

The committee made no decision on funding those classes, which would be held in the summer of 1990. The board controls a special school improvement fund that totals about $17 million a year, but much of the money is committed to developing other, long-term education programs.

Cody also suggested that half of the four-part test — questions measuring students' knowledge of language and math — be given at the end of the 10th grade, giving students more time to make up any deficiencies.

Students then would take the science and social studies parts of the test at the end of 11th grade.

Board members debated the pros and cons of early, divided testing, but made no decision.

The board could debate the issue Thursday when it takes up the testing schedule.