Senate committee backs graduation test

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A Senate panel went along with a statewide high school graduation test Thursday after deciding to give students two more years to prepare for the exam that would determine if they receive a diploma.

Students who fail the test — even if they pass all their courses — would receive only a “certificate of attendance” at graduation ceremonies.

The test would be administered first to the graduating class of 1990 — this fall’s ninth-graders. Originally, the requirement would have started in 1988.

Members of the Senate Education Committee said the first class affected by the test should have its whole high school career to prepare for it.

Requiring students to pass a standard statewide exam would “make youngsters work harder” and make public schools concentrate on “achievement and not just schooling,” said Rep. B.F. O’Neal, R-Shreveport.

His bill ordering a test, HB1565, already has passed the House and now goes to the full Senate for debate.

A state board already has ordered a similar test, but it has been delayed by lack of money to develop it.

Opponents said the bill would brand students as failures even before they start their adult life.

The bill “establishes a dual diploma system that would stamp as inferior large numbers of youngsters who would not be able to master some of the rigorous requirements we have in place” in the high school curriculum, said Rep. Alphonse Jackson, D-Jackson.

“It would be far kinder to a student” to let him know he has not mastered high school work “rather than to find out from (potential) employers that their diploma doesn’t mean anything,” countered Jackie Ducote, speaking for the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, which supports the test.

REQUIRE STANDARDS ON DIPLOMA

“Everybody has a different concept of what high school is supposed to be,” said Ann Ours, representing the Louisiana Association of Educators.

She said students attend high school for varying reasons — to prepare for college, to prepare for vocational training or to prepare to enter the working world immediately after graduation.

It’s difficult to draft a single test to serve all those goals, she said.

The test would be chosen or drafted by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and would be reviewed by the Joint Legislative Committee on Education before it could be used to deny any student a diploma.

Two years ago, at the same time it increased the number of tough courses students must pass to graduate, the education board ordered development of a graduation test as a check to ensure the courses would not be watered down to make them easier to pass.

However, the Department of Education has been unable to find money to draft the test.