

Money sought for graduation projects

Love: State should pay for mandate

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A state legislator says the state should pay school districts' costs to oversee the projects that high schoolers must complete before getting their diplomas.

Calling the new graduation requirement an unfunded mandate, Rep. Jimmy Love, a Democrat from Sanford, said he is considering a proposed law to allow school districts to drop the requirement unless the state pays for it.

The State Board of Education is requiring all high school students, starting with the class of 2010, to complete an ambitious project. The students will have to write a paper, create a product and present their work to a panel of judges. Students must find mentors familiar with their research topics to guide them through the project.

"The graduation project is OK as long as you provide the money," said Love, who also serves as the attorney for the school board in Lee County. "I'm looking to put the thing off until the legislature funds it or somebody funds it."

It is not clear how much the graduation project costs. Local school districts do not have uniform rules, and the state Department of Public Instruction did not estimate how much it would cost districts.

Many school districts are performing criminal background checks on the mentors, just as they do on other school volunteers. Some school districts have hired project coordinators to work in the high schools and are printing instruction manuals for students and parents.

Bill Tatum, Lee County's school board chairman, estimated the project would cost his district \$80,000 this year, including \$10 each for mentor background checks for about 600 students.

It is a particularly bad time to ask Lee County schools to spend money on a new program, Tatum said, noting that the state Department of Public Instruction has asked his district and others to return money because of a large hole in the state budget.

State school board members this week affirmed their support for the projects, though vocal critics say the idea suffers from poor planning and unrealistic expectations. For example, school administrators and parents say students are having trouble finding mentors.

Board members acknowledged that schools and parents have questions about the project and that some schools are setting rules that ignore state guidelines. The board voted Thursday to make the state graduation project guide the official rule book for school districts.

"This is one of the most progressive, positive things we've done," said board member Kathy Taft.

Though districts report paying up to \$20 or more for each mentor background check, Taft said districts could find pre-screened mentors through a nonprofit called Futures for Kids, which offers students in 30 counties "virtual mentoring" through online discussion boards.

The board made no promises to ask the legislature for money to pay for the project.

Before it asks the legislature for money, the board needs to know Gov.-elect Beverly Perdue's education and budget priorities, said Howard Lee, chairman of the state education board.

"That's what we'll advocate for," he said. "We won't lobby for funds outside her budget."

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