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SBOE gives final approval to new graduation program

AUSTIN - The State Board of Education gave final approval today to the state's new high school graduation program, which gives students added flexibility to follow their academic interests. The Texas Legislature last year created the new 22-credit Foundation High School Program, which allows students to earn performance acknowledgments and four-credit endorsements in specific subjects but left decisions about many details of the plan to the State Board.

Over the course of this week, the board considered 34 amendments to the graduation plan and approved most.

Math debates captured much of the attention.

Under the state law, students following the Foundation High School Program must earn three credits of math that include Algebra I and Geometry as well as a third course. Students may select the third course from a long list of mathematics courses. The board expanded the options further by directing the development of two new courses called Algebraic Reasoning and Statistics and Risk Management. The two new courses are expected to be available for districts to offer beginning in the 2015-2016 school year.

Students who want to earn the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) endorsement must take Algebra II, chemistry and physics as well as four additional courses in the STEM area.

Students who hope to gain automatic admission to the state's public universities under the top 10 percent rule also must meet requirements that include earning credit for Algebra II or meeting performance requirements on a college readiness assessment.

Under the new graduation plan, speech satisfied by a Communications Applications class will no longer be a required credit for all students. However, districts will be required to ensure that students learn key communications skills such as delivering clear verbal messages and choosing effective nonverbal behaviors. Districts may incorporate these skills into an existing class, such as English, or continue to require a separate communications class.

The Communications Applications class had been a Texas graduation requirement since the mid-1990s.

Many key changes approved this week clarified the courses students must take to earn an endorsement in STEM, Business and Industry, Public Services, Arts and Humanities or Multidisciplinary Studies. Numerous course combinations can be used to earn these endorsements.

The board:

- Clarified that students must take a coherent sequence of four credits from one or two disciplines (art, music, theater or dance) to earn an Arts and Humanities endorsement and may not earn the endorsement simply by taking introductory courses.
- Agreed that students would earn a Public Services endorsement, rather than a STEM endorsement, if they complete a coherent sequence of courses in health sciences.
- Added computer science courses as a route to obtain a STEM endorsement, while other technology applications courses, such as web communications, 3-D Modeling and Animation and Digital Video and Audio and Design, would apply to a Business and Industry endorsement.
- Added advanced journalism courses in newspaper and yearbook as options for earning a Business and Industry endorsement. Additionally, students wishing to take classes such as Communications Applications, creative writing or literary genre can earn an Arts and Humanities endorsement.

Under the new graduation program, students may earn performance acknowledgments by demonstrating outstanding performance. One way to earn an acknowledgment is by earning a score of 3 or higher on an Advanced Placement test or a score of 4 or higher on an International Baccalaureate examination. Originally, the board set the higher score requirements but adjusted those standards after listening to public comments.

Students currently in the 8th grade – the class of 2018- will be the first group required to graduate under the Foundation High School Program.

Current high school students remain under the previous three graduation plans – the Minimum High School Program, the Recommended High School Program and the Distinguished Achievement Program. However, these students may opt to move to the Foundation Program.

All the amendments approved by the board this week will be incorporated and the final program, as approved by the board, will be posted on the Texas Education Agency's website in approximately two weeks.