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EDITORIAL: Diploma Project will change schools for better

Staff Reports

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The online material explaining the Tennessee Diploma Project closes with a thought from William Daggett, president of the International Center for Leadership in Education and mover and shaker for improving school curriculums: "We won't create change until there is more pressure for change than resistance to change."

Daggett's comment is a good starting point for the project, which kicks off its implementation phase this year.

Some schools in the state already have begun the 2009-10 academic year, with Knox County's starting on Monday. Those in the ninth grade and below will find the course work ratcheted up a few notches, and teachers have been busy improving their part of the project. Students in grades 10 through 12 are grandfathered under the old system.

Those students will be the last ones taking the Gateway exams, a series of tests the state required of students to receive a high school diploma. The tests were considered too easy, and they will be replaced with end-of-course exams that will count for 25 percent of a student's overall course grade.

Starting with this school year, the state Department of Education will require students to take math all four years of high school. They also must take chemistry or physics in addition to biology. English and communications skills will be emphasized.

In the elementary grades, students will be learning some material a year earlier than in previous years. Students also will be introduced to concepts and critical thinking at an earlier grade level.

Tennessee's project is part of a national effort, the American Diploma Project, that includes at least 30 states. Its aim is not merely to improve graduation rates but to provide students with the skills and knowledge they need to hold jobs of the future.

For example, the Tennessee project reported that, in 2002, for each 100 students entering the ninth grade, 59 graduated from high school on time, 36 enrolled in a university or community college, 25 enrolled for the sophomore year, and 15 graduated within six years.

Further, according to Education Testing Service, two-thirds of the new jobs in this decade alone require a bachelor's degree or some post-secondary education. To that end, we like the emphasis

on requiring high school students to take challenging courses that prepare them for the next phase of their lives.

One challenge locally will be to ensure that parents are informed of the curriculum improvements. In fact, they should be among the agents for change Daggett mentioned if they want a brighter future for their children.

And, while the strong emphasis on math and English is good, there should be a renewed emphasis on the social sciences -- particularly history, geography, economics and government. One goal of the project, for example, is to have students work together "to solve real world problems." It will be difficult to accomplish that without the context and perspective that the social sciences can provide. Perhaps an assessment once the project is underway will place more emphasis on those time-honored courses.

As this school year begins, we wish the best for the project and urge teachers, students and parents to rise to the challenges that lie ahead.