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## R.I. breaking the high-school mold

**Traditional system is out in favor of one stressing proof of proficiency**

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Rhode Island is conducting an experiment in public education unlike any other in the nation.

If it succeeds, the traditional comprehensive high school, organized around 50-minute periods and a system of isolated departments, could be a thing of the past.

Beginning with this freshman class, students will no longer be able to graduate from high school by sitting through four years of classes and accumulating so many credits.

Instead, seniors must prove they have mastered certain skills. Some will put together a portfolio of their best work: essays, projects and artwork. Others will complete a senior project that involves work experience and culminates in a public presentation. Still others will take end-of-course exams or perform problem-solving exercises in class.

This year, high schools must choose two out of four types of assessment to measure student proficiency. They might choose a portfolio and a senior project, or end-of-course exams and a Certificate of Initial Mastery. The certificate is a multiyear project that incorporates portfolios, testing and senior projects.

Then the schools must make sure that all their students have ample opportunity - through internships, research projects or classroom assessments - to prove mastery in English, math, science, social studies, the arts and technology.

While about half of all states require high-school students to pass an exit exam to graduate, Rhode Island Education Commissioner Peter McWalters and the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education have decided to take the road less traveled. They think it is unreasonable and unfair to judge a student's career on the basis of one test.

Instead, they want students to show that they can solve problems and communicate through a multitude of measures.

"You don't test a piano player by asking her to take a test. You test a piano player by asking her to perform a recital," McWalters said.

This is a high-stakes system, McWalters said. If a student doesn't show that he has mastered certain skills, he won't graduate.

"Right now, everyone gets the same diploma, but it doesn't always mean the same thing," said Colleen Callahan, a leader in the reform effort.

"Some kids take the most rigorous course available. Some don't have access to those courses. And some don't take them because they're either not ready or not interested."

"American education stops being good in fourth grade," McWalters said. "By 10th grade, American students lag far behind their international peers. The current education system only serves the top students."

Many students quickly become disenchanted. According to 2001 statistics, 32 percent of freshmen nationwide who began high school did not complete it within four years.

The biggest challenges are making sure that measures of proficiency are academically rigorous and consistent from one district to another.

"How do you move to an approach that recognizes individual achievement while still having a common standard?" asked Jack Jennings, director of the Center for Education Policy, a nonpartisan advocacy group for public schools. "A student may shine with personal characteristics but he may not be able to read or write."

According to McWalters, two tests - the statewide assessments in English and math as well as the National Assessment of Educational Progress - will help the state measure whether districts are teaching students how to read and write.

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