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State board hearing opinions on changes to school standards

By MATTHEW BOWERS, The Virginian-Pilot

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TO COMMENT

Written comments on the proposed revisions will be accepted until Jan. 31 at P.O. Box 2120, Richmond, VA 23218-2120, at policy@doe.virginia.gov or by fax at (804) 786-5389. The proposal may be viewed at www.doe.virginia.gov.

CHESAPEAKE — Continue to allow students to earn credits toward graduation through vocational certification tests.

Require schools to enlarge and update their libraries.

And skip the punitive when it comes to improving schools.

“The goal here must be to facilitate positive change ... not punish,” Mary Swears said Tuesday night at Jolliff Middle School.

The PTA district officer was one of four speakers at a Virginia Board of Education public hearing that lasted 10 minutes. It was one of five scheduled across the state to receive comments on proposed revisions to the Standards of Accreditation. Those are the rules governing how the state’s public schools are run.

Among the biggest changes being considered was the one concerning Swears: providing for the first-time sanctions against schools that lose accreditation because of low test scores.

Those include replacing a school’s staff or closing the school altogether. This year will be the first in which schools can lose accreditation, the state’s seal of approval.

Elsewhere, representatives of JustChildren, a youth advocacy group based in Charlottesville, planned to attend several of the hearings to push for adding “reasonable, common-sense” levels of graduation rates to state accreditation requirements for high schools, said Angela Ciolfi, a staff attorney, in an earlier interview Tuesday. Virginia bases accreditation now on test pass rates alone.

In some divisions where all high schools are fully accredited, fewer than 60 percent of students graduate within the standard four years, Ciolfi said. The longer past four years that students stay in high school, the less likely they’ll earn diplomas, she said.

She called graduating students the “ultimate” performance measure for a school.

“We just want to put it on the board’s radar and have a conversation about it,” Ciolfi said.

JustChildren cites state Department of Education statistics showing that 2005 graduates earning diplomas of various sorts in Norfolk accounted for 38 percent of the ninth-grade class four years earlier and 41 percent in Portsmouth.

The same measure reached 70 percent or higher in Chesapeake, Suffolk and Virginia Beach. All high schools in the five cities are fully accredited.

The analysis compares only class sizes and doesn’t account for conditions such as students graduating early or late, or demographic changes such as students moving into or out of a school division.

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Reach Matthew Bowers at (757) 222-5120 or matthew.bowers@pilotonline.com.

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