



## Bill to pause grad projects gains ground

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A bill being pushed by N.C. Rep. Angela Bryant to stop a statewide high school graduation project while it is studied moved to the N.C. Senate after passing almost unanimously in the N.C. House.

The bill to remove the N.C. Graduation Project as a requirement for earning a high school diploma prior to July 1, 2011, also directs the N.C. General Assembly's program evaluation division to study the cost and effectiveness of requiring the task.

Bryant, D-Nash, said she is concerned that mandating the project will increase the dropout rate without adding value, particularly in small towns. The project requires students to complete a research paper, a product related to the paper's topic, a related portfolio and an oral presentation to a panel of community members by students' final year of high school. The bill still allows for districts that want a high school graduation project to have students complete one.

"I didn't get contact locally from anybody who supported the graduation project," Bryant said. "People said it was duplicative of projects they were already doing, it takes teachers' time away from the core curriculum, it requires other staff to get involved to mentor at a time when salaries and staff are being cut."

Bryant said that the bill's primary co-sponsor, N.C. Rep. Jimmy Love Sr., D-Lee, and other lawmakers were concerned about the project being an unfunded mandate.

The legislature doesn't give schools additional funds toward the project and schools sometimes have to pull from other resources, human and otherwise, to complete it, Bryant said. She said the portion of the bill designated to study the project would investigate the amount of time the project takes and its cost.

Bryant said students without resources, networks and parental support may suffer when they're already trying to pass core courses. There's no evidence that it's worth the effort except "to give additional experience to the 60 percent that are going to graduate anyway," Bryant said.

"If the project would cause one person to dropout, with the rates we have, it's not worth it," she said.

Nash-Rocky Mount Public Schools and Edgecombe County Public Schools have continued to work on graduation projects. Local school officials have said they support having a mandatory graduation project and said it benefits the students. Three representatives also voted against the bill — opting instead to keep the mandatory project in place.

"We should be encouraging our students to learn more, not less," said N.C. Rep. Ric Killian, R-Mecklenburg.

N.C. Rep. William Current Sr., R-Gaston, said graduation rates won't improve by reducing what has to be done to graduate. He also said the project could generate more creativity if resources aren't there.

"You shouldn't assume that just because some are not as well off as others they can't find a way to work above it," Current said.

The passage of the bill in the House comes after the N.C. State Board of Education in April approved a one-year delay to the project requirement to give schools more time to implement it. The four-prong assignment will be mandatory for the first time for students who entered ninth grade in the 2007-08 school year because of the delay.

N.C. State Board of Education Chairman and CEO Bill Harrison has said that many schools across North Carolina have had a graduation project in some form for a decade or more.

"By giving the entire state more time to implement The North Carolina Graduation Project, we can ensure its success in every school and community," Harrison said.

The bill has been referred to the Senate Committee on Higher Education.

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