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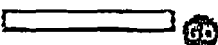
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USA TODAY Washington

09/15/99 - Updated 05:47 PM ET

Education chief calls for graduation tests

WASHINGTON (AP) - Every American student should pass a test to get out of high school whether college is planned or not, Education Secretary Richard Riley said Wednesday, reversing his past opposition to such win-or-lose measures.

"Years ago, I opposed high-stakes exit exams because minority students really had less chance to succeed in the days immediately following integration," Riley said in his fifth annual back-to-school talk at the National Press Club.

But the former South Carolina governor believes the nation is now ready to require all students to meet high educational standards. "Our schools need to give this growing number of young people both the capacity to do college-level work and the essential skills to prosper in our new economy," he said.

But, he added, high school students must receive the individual support they need to pass such exams. And the tests should be used to promote success for all.

"We still seem to be using America's high schools as sorting machines, tagging and labeling young people as successful, run of the mill or low achievers," he said.

Currently, 19 states require students to pass exit exams to graduate high school. Another seven plan tests by 2003. Federal law does not require high school tests.

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Gerald N. Tirozzi, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, said schools need extra help if these tests are to become a national standard.

"The time has truly come to find out what kids don't know. That information is important and meaningful as long as we have the resources to help the kids," Tirozzi said in an interview after Riley's speech.

Reciting a wish list, Riley also called for every high school student to be fluent in a foreign language by graduation, parents to curb their teens' working hours to 20 hours a week and states to provide more teacher training, advanced high school courses and mental health counseling.

His focus on high schools comes at a time when record-breaking school enrollments over the next decade will bring 1.3 million additional students in 9th grade through 12th grade. He said states and local school districts need long-term plans to prepare for the influx of high school-age children. Their teachers also need special attention, he said, calling for four to six week of extra training, which equals summer vacation for most children.

And he said teachers should be paid more.

Concerns over school violence, following April's shooting at a Littleton, Colo., high school, highlight the need to pay more attention to the nation's adolescents, said Riley, who also called for more mental health counseling in America's high schools.

"Tragedies like Columbine have made all of us take a second look at the American teenage experience," Riley said. "We can make sure that every high school student has an advisor for all four years that the student can count on all the time. Certainly we need to have many more counselors and mentors in our high school and not just to help young people get ready for college."

Riley called on Congress to increase funding for mental health counselors as well as a host of other Clinton Administration initiatives that include federal money to build schools and hire 100,000 new teachers over seven years.

Congress is set to renew the bulk of the nation's federal education laws this year. Federal involvement in the nation's 86,000 schools is limited to 7% of funding.

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HUMANIZING AMERICA'S HIGH SCHOOLS

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