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Contingency plan is part of a proposal that would reduce the budget by \$13.7 million

State mulls cutting number of Regents exams

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State education officials are considering eliminating a wide range of Regents examinations, New York's traditional measure of high school student achievement.

The contingency plan would eliminate all Regents exams in foreign languages, three of four Regents exams in science and two of three in math. Regents exams would no longer be given in global history and geography or U.S. history and government.

The proposal, part of a package that would save \$13.7 million, will be discussed by a Board of Regents committee Monday afternoon. But the plan fails to answer a host of crucial questions:

- What would become of the state's all-Regents high school graduation standards?
- How would it be determined whether students should receive course credit?
- Without standardized Regents exams, how can student performance be compared between individual schools and between school districts?

State Education Commissioner David Steiner described the contingency plan as part of a broader look at the department's budget crunch, and not an indication that Regents exams will actually be scaled back.

"We're saying: 'Here's our budget situation,'" Steiner said. "'Here are our challenges.' There is no implication that any particular line of action be recommended. This is about budget information that is

accurate and transparent.”

With the state facing a severe fiscal crisis, it is important that the Regents understand “what the key elements are and what they cost,” Steiner said.

The proposal also would stop giving Regents exams in January and August, making the tests available only in June.

It also would no longer let students take retests on particular portions of math and English exams they previously fell short on. The practice of translating tests into Chinese, Haitian-Creole, Korean and Russian also would end.

“It’s mind-boggling that they would propose this,” said John D. Carlino, executive director of the New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers and a German teacher at Kenmore West High School. “How could this possibly be real?”

The proposed cuts would “literally gut standards-based education in New York and could potentially cost thousands of teachers their jobs if courses and exams that were always required no longer were,” Carlino said. “What is being proposed is a scaling back of the New York State assessments to the bare minimum that is required by the [federal] No Child Left Behind Act.”

Regent Robert Bennett, a resident of the Town of Tonawanda, said the contingency plan results from a request from the Regents for “a very straightforward picture” of the cost and effectiveness of a broad range of state Education Department programs.

“I think this will get a lot of good discussion,” he said.

Bennett said the review will likely tweak the Regents program by placing greater emphasis on critical thinking skills or vocational training, but will not result in the wholesale elimination of Regents exams.

For example, he said, if only a small number of students benefit from the retesting on portions of Regents exams, “there must be a better way to help students” and save money at the same time.

“We’re still going to have measurements of student achievement and report them to the public,” Bennett said. “I can’t envision us abandoning those exams.”

The Regents program hasn’t been closely examined for 11 years, “and it’s worth a look,” Bennett said.

A memo to the Regents from John B. King Jr., senior deputy commissioner of the state Education Department, calls the measures “contingency plans and options for the board’s consideration to reduce operating costs” in 2010-11. “We have not included any actions that would compromise our compliance with No Child Left Behind requirements,” King said.

King said the state and federal budgets are among the “many variables that may impact our future choices.”

The need for cuts also will depend on whether New York receives funding in the first round of the federal government’s \$4.35 billion “Race to the Top” grant program, King said. New York this week was named one of 16 finalists for a share of that money.

In a letter to a member of the Board of Regents, Joanne E. O’Toole, past president of the New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers, said there would be “potentially devastating effects” to eliminating Regents exams in foreign languages.

“Eliminating our assessments would serve to lower, if not destroy, the high standards we have set for the students of New York State,” said O’Toole, a language teacher at two State University of New York campuses. “In addition, we would lose our place in the country as leaders in foreign language education.”