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Providence officials question why NECAP waiver excludes students admitted to CCRI

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PROVIDENCE — Both the Providence School Board and the City Council are worried that urban students will be disproportionately hurt by a high school graduation waiver that excludes students who apply to the Community College of Rhode Island.

The state Department of Education recently created a waiver that says students who are admitted to an accredited two- or four-year college that is not an “open-enrollment” institution are eligible for a waiver. The waiver would not require them to pass the statewide NECAP test, which, for the first time this year, is one of several high school graduation requirements.

CCRI was excluded from the waiver because it has an “open enrollment” policy, which means there are no entrance requirements, according to Elliot Krieger, a spokesman for the state Department of Education.

“Getting into CCRI demonstrates nothing about proficiency,” Krieger said. “Some students are ready for college ... but 75 percent of the students need remediation.”

But many of CCRI’s most popular programs require a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma, a community-college spokeswoman said. For the fall semester, 91 percent of CCRI’s students had one of these credentials.

School Board and City Council members say the refusal to relax the policy for those admitted to CCRI could prevent students from attending the college, which for many urban students is a gateway to higher education.

The waiver also might jeopardize financial aid because, as of July 1, 2012, all students must possess a diploma or a GED to receive assistance. During the 2011-2012 academic year, 72 percent of the college’s full-time students received financial aid.

Officials at CCRI have declined repeated requests for a comment on this issue.

But Krieger said that statement presumes that more students won’t receive a diploma under the new graduation requirements. He said it’s too soon to speculate whether there will be a major uptick in students who don’t earn a diploma.

“But we do anticipate that our graduates will better prepared,” he said.

Keith Oliveira, president of the Providence School Board, said his members want the state Education Department and state Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist to revisit the entire policy linking graduation to the NECAP.

“That the department is creating all of these avenues to graduate students speaks to the flaws of the policy itself,” Oliveira said.

Starting with this year’s seniors, students must earn a score of partial proficiency on the NECAP in order to graduate. Students can also graduate if they retake the test and pass, show improvement on the NECAP or take an alternate test like the SAT.

But school districts have the authority to issue waivers to those students who have demonstrated that they are ready for college.

For many Providence students, CCRI is their entrance to higher education, Oliveira said. Excluding students from entering CCRI because they do not have a diploma, he said, adversely impacts the state’s neediest students.

“I think the department recognized that they would have a lot of middle-class families whose children have been accepted to college but may not have passed the NECAP,” he said. “They recognized that there would be a huge backlash against this policy” if the department didn’t do something.

State education officials say they aren't trying to deprive anyone of a diploma. According to Krieger, the department issued the waiver for those admitted to other colleges because those institutions assess a student's academic ability before deciding on admission.

"No one at CCRI is making a decision about a student's college readiness," Kreiger said.

He also said that the school district can still grant individual waivers to students who have shown that they meet the state's graduation standards in other ways, such as course work, despite failing to pass the NECAP.

But Samuel Zurier, who chairs the City Council's subcommittee on education, said the "intellectual bankruptcy of this new 'batch' waiver cannot be overstated."

He said the waiver policy divides students with low test scores into two groups, those with a college admission letter and those without. This policy "damages the future of the second group" even though both groups failed to pass the NECAP.

The City Council on Thursday approved a non-binding resolution asking the state Education Department to postpone linking the NECAP to graduation until all students have a fair opportunity to achieve success on the test without waivers.

Nic Hemond, a Providence School Board member, takes issue with using the NECAP as a requirement for graduation.

"We are walking down a road that we know will increase the dropout rate," he said.

Instead of putting all of these resources into getting high school juniors over the NECAP hurdle, Hemond said, districts should put their time and money into early childhood, when children begin to fall behind.

Providence Supt. Susan Lusi said she is "increasingly conflicted" about the NECAP requirement. Although she admits her district has a long way to go, she worries that the waiver process will drain too many resources away from teaching and learning.

She said the new waiver is a concern because "we have so many students for whom CCRI is a viable option economically and a viable stepping stone into four-year institutions."

Correction: An earlier version of this report included an incomplete quote from Elliot Krieger, a spokesman for the state Department of Education. His full quote is: "Getting into CCRI demonstrates nothing about proficiency."



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