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Nassau Eyes Own Physics Test; Schools may dump troubled Regents

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Exasperated by the state's indecision over revamping a controversial Regents physics exam, Nassau schools are taking an unprecedented step toward offering their own countywide test, starting next spring.

Supporters say the project aims at ensuring that thousands of high-school students meet objective standards in physics, while avoiding the high failure rates accompanying recent state exams. At a meeting last week of 47 Nassau school superintendents, a show of hands showed near-unanimous support for the idea.

"We're all frustrated - that's what it is," said one supporter, Stephen Leitman, superintendent of Garden City schools.

"The exam clearly is a failure on the part of the state, and the state isn't owning up to it," said Herman Sirois, the superintendent in Levittown. Enthusiasm also is voiced by administrators in districts including Baldwin, Herricks, Hewlett-Woodmere, Long Beach, North Shore, Oceanside, Plainview-Old Bethpage, Rockville Centre and Seaford.

So far, the idea remains in the planning stage, and many supporters say they would drop the project if the state softens its own approach. Still, time for compromise appears to be running out. Weary of what they see as state foot-dragging, some local school officials want to put a countywide test in place as an insurance policy, even if the state shows a willingness to bend.

Albany, for its part, is urging patience. Earlier this month, a divided state Board of Regents named a four-member task force to look into the question of just how difficult a physics exam should be. Recommendations are expected prior to the Regents next meeting Oct. 8.

"I would hope," said Tony Bottar, a Syracuse attorney heading the Regents task force, "that the superintendents who met last week would give us an opportunity to make recommendations, and give the board an opportunity to reflect on those recommendations."

The controversy arose in the spring of 2002, when the state introduced a revamped Regents physics exam with a tough new scoring scale that ran counter to the recommendations of teachers hired as consultants. Thirty-nine percent of teens taking the

new exam failed statewide, compared with 17 percent the year before.

Teachers complain that the state provides only general guidelines for what should be taught in physics courses, rather than a detailed syllabus, and that this makes it doubly difficult to prepare students for what is already a challenging exam. As an example, teachers cite three questions on last spring's exam that dealt with electromagnetic applications, even though the topic wasn't included in a state-provided reference table. For teens, this can be unsettling.

"What I've seen is this physics [exam] scares them," said Kim Pritchard, a Syosset physics teacher.

Nassau superintendents say they could avoid such problems by hiring teachers and other consultants to write their own test. The estimated cost is \$20,000, and districts outside Nassau will be invited to join, once the project is under way.

A half-dozen districts across the state already offer their own physics tests in place of **Regents exams**. Regents physics exams are optional for students, unlike exams in four other subjects that are required for graduation.

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