

**LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE
BILL ANALYSIS**

Bill Number: SB 157

52nd Legislature, 1st Session, 2015

Tracking Number: .198409.1

Short Title: High School Work Force Assessment System

Sponsor(s): Senator Mary Kay Papen and Representative W. Ken Martinez

Analyst: Christina McCorquodale

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Bill Summary:

SB 157 makes an appropriation to the Workforce Solutions Department (WSD) to implement a nationwide workforce assessment system in reading and mathematics in public high schools. For those students who participate in a workforce-bound program, the nationwide workforce assessments would replace the reading and mathematics examinations currently required for graduation.

Fiscal Impact:

\$35,000 is appropriated from the General Fund to the WSD for FY 16. Any unexpended or unencumbered balance at the end of FY 16 shall revert to the General Fund.

Fiscal Issues:

Neither the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) nor the Executive recommendation includes funding for this purpose; however, the WSD currently has funding from various grants to offer the ACT WorkKeys assessment (see “Background, *ACT WorkKeys Assessments*,” below) at local workforce connection offices at no cost to the participants.

Technical Issues:

On page 1, line 21 SB 157 uses the term “work force-bound” which is not defined. The *Public School Code* does use the related terms “career cluster course” and “workplace readiness” yet it is not clear if those terms apply to “work force-bound” students. In addition, rule of the Public Education Department (PED) recognizes other seemingly related terms, “career and tech education,” “career and tech course,” “career cluster,” “career pathway,” and “career readiness program” that may or may not apply to “work force-bound” (see “Background, *Clear Definition of Career Pathways*,” below).

Among its provisions, the *Assessment and Accountability Act* requires PED to establish a statewide assessment and accountability system aligned with state academic content and performance standards. The act also requires PED to establish a readiness assessment system to measure the readiness of every high school student for success in higher education or in a career. Because the nationwide workforce assessment system in SB 157 seems to relate to each of these requirements, the sponsors may wish to consider making some reference to the *Assessment and Accountability Act*.

Substantive Issues:

According to the WSD analysis, the department “is positioned to administer these funds and supports education and workforce working together to increase the employability of students by validating the skills and competencies of current and future job seekers.” In addition, the WSD is currently using a national skills assessment tool to measure “foundational skills” like reading, math, and locating information, the results of which can benefit both employers and potential employees.

The PED analysis indicates that beginning in school year 2014-2015, New Mexico is administering the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers in grades 3-11 in order to meet the requirements of the federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) for New Mexico. This bill does not intend to replace the assessments required for federal accountability, but rather to replace the high school competency exit exam for those students who are workforce-bound.

The PED analysis also notes that New Mexico does not currently specify an acceptable workplace readiness exam or appropriate cut scores adding that WSD would need to coordinate with PED to ensure that the assessment system that WSD develops, measures appropriate reading and math ability as aligned to New Mexico content standards. Even so, PED suggests the ACT WorkKeys which the WSD offers as a possibility for the nationwide assessment system in SB 157.

ACT WorkKeys assesses:

- skill level requirements for specific jobs;
- applied mathematics used for reasoning, critical thinking, and problem-solving techniques for work-related problems;
- reading text for information; and
- varying levels of complexity.

In addition, ACT WorkKeys (Reading for Information and Applied Math) has been aligned to scores on the College Readiness Benchmarks on the ACT Reading and Mathematics¹. The benchmarks reflect the ACT scores students need to earn to have at least a 75 percent or greater chance of obtaining a course grade of C or better. Level 5 of ACT WorkKeys assessment for reading and math are comparable to these benchmarks. However, because ACT WorkKeys and the ACT do not measure the same things and are not perfectly correlated, scores on the two tests are not interchangeable.

¹ Level 5 in WorkKeys Reading for Information and Applied Math are comparable with the College Readiness Benchmarks in Reading and Math, based upon analysis of Illinois high school criteria. For more information, go to http://www.innovate-educate.org/files/uploads/SummaryReady_For_CollegeReadyForWorkStudy.pdf.

Background:

College and Workplace Readiness

In current law, the provisions relating to the statewide college and workplace readiness system require the components to test:

1. in grade 9, a short-cycle diagnostic assessment in reading, language arts, and mathematics to be locally administered in the fall and at least two additional times during the year;
2. in grade 10, a short-cycle diagnostic assessment in reading, language arts, and mathematics that also serves as an early indicator of college readiness, to be locally administered at least three times during the year; and
3. in grade 11, in the fall, one or more of the following chosen by the student:
 - a college placement assessment;
 - a readiness assessment; or
 - an alternative demonstration of competency using standards-based indicators.

ACT WorkKeys Assessment

ACT WorkKeys is an assessment system designed to measure the skill that employers have identified as crucial to success in today's work environment. Educators can use ACT WorkKeys to assess whether students are gaining the foundational skills necessary for success in the workplace and to identify necessary curricular changes.

There are three components to ACT WorkKeys, which can be used independently but are designed to be used together:

1. skills assessments: ACT WorkKeys assessments measure “foundational workplace skills” in the 10 areas of applied mathematics, applied technology, business writing, listening, locating information, observation, readiness, reading for information, teamwork, and writing. The assessments are available in both computer-based and paper-based formats;
2. job analysis: the WorkKeys system includes processes to determine what types of skills are needed for success in a particular job. The most intensive process is called job profiling, which involves focus groups and employee collaboration. The types of jobs that have been profiled by WorkKeys include manufacturing, healthcare, law enforcement, hospitality, and a range of white-collar professional jobs such as accountants and Web masters; and
3. training: ACT offers a variety of training options, many of which focus on WorkKeys skills. In addition, ACT certifies training programs offered by other organizations that align with the WorkKeys goals.

Clear Definition of Career Pathways

During the December 2014 interim meeting, the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) heard testimony on a preliminary analysis conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). The report indicated that New Mexico needs a clear definition of high-quality career

pathways that connect high school and postsecondary studies with 21st Century job opportunities. The Senior Vice President of SREB informed the committee on the following Career Technical Education (CTE) attributes for New Mexico:

- high school students have access to at least 320 CTE courses;
- over 130,000 students were enrolled during school year 2013-2014 in one or more CTE courses;
- about 46 percent of seniors in school year 2013-2014 will complete four or more CTE courses; and
- not enough students are completing a sequence of four CTE courses in a planned, structured career pathway.

The SREB representative summarized the preliminary analysis by stating that, while there was a sufficient quantity of courses, they were not a well-defined set of expectations for courses that were linked to postsecondary study and employment opportunities. He further noted that most of the courses appeared to be at the introductory level, although there were over 130,000 students enrolled in CTE courses. He added that the analysis also indicated the following:

- small schools have limited capacity to offer quality career pathways;
- few students take advanced/capstone CTE courses or participate in work-based learning experiences;
- online and dual credit CTE courses are limited, introductory, and often are not part of a structured career pathway; and
- fewer than 400 high school students earned credible industry credentials or licensures in 2013.

With regard to the analysis, the SREB representative noted that New Mexico not only should clearly define a career pathway but also should include a rigorous program that is aligned with employment opportunities such features as:

- rigorous, relevant, career pathways;
- college- and career-readiness standards in literacy and math;
- increase number of young adults earning credentials by age 25;
- restructure low-performing high schools with low graduation rates and create a guidance system for career information, exploration, and advisement; and
- attract, prepare, and retain high-quality CTE teachers.

Finally, the SREB representative recommended that New Mexico provide all high school students in the many diverse regions of the state with access to high-quality career pathways that lead to advanced credentials and good jobs. The state can use various policies and incentives to encourage districts, postsecondary institutions, and employers to develop career pathways that include:

- access to early advanced credential programs or early college programs that will enable them to enroll in occupational programs;
- offer high-quality, web-based CTE courses; and
- establish in policy a definition of what constitutes a career pathway/program of study.

Committee Referrals:

SEC/SFC

Related Bills:

SB 217 *Individual Choice on Some School Tests*

SB 390 *Align School Code with Assessment Practices*

HB 15 *Limit School Days for Statewide Tests*

HB 129 *Clarify School Test Individual Choice*

HB 178 *Career Technical Education Courses & Terms*

HB 308 *School Workforce Assessment System (Identical)*