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HEADLINE: Public high schools scrap graduation exam

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High school students in Hawaii no longer will have to take a test that students have had to pass for the last 16 years before they could graduate.

State schools superintendent Paul LeMahieu said Wednesday a new test will be developed to reflect the Department of Education's new performance standards.

The Hawaii State Test of Essential Competencies was developed in the 1970s and used to make sure graduates had a basic knowledge of various subjects and issues.

It covers reading, math, writing, filling out forms, measurement, visual symbols, government, citizenship and distinguishing between fact and opinion, among other things.

The test checks for a minimum level of competency that is inadequate to prepare today's graduates for what they will face in the world, the schools chief said.

"The guidance around programs 20 years ago was that it be around minimum competencies," he said. "You can't move the agenda toward higher expectations with a test that's about low expectations."

Seniors in the class of 2000 won't have to take the test. The new test is still being developed and will be given to 10-grade students in 2001, LeMahieu said.

The new test will be tougher than the present one, which has 150 multiple choice questions and nine items on communication that are graded by teachers, Lemahieu said.

"It will be so demanding that to pass it, you will have to be performing at a level that is acceptable for success in the world's marketplace and in higher education," he said.

A draft of proposed new content standards will be distributed to schools this year. The performance standards will be developed during the school year.