

SCHOOL REFORM TOPS LEGISLATURE'S YEAR

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MONTGOMERY - Sweeping changes in public schools, such as tougher math and science requirements, testing of new teachers and state funding that favors schools in poorer areas, already have passed the Legislature and become law this year.

Here's a look at those changes and an ethics and bicycle-helmet law passed since state lawmakers started meeting April 18:

A school **accountability** law pushed by Gov. Fob James takes effect with the upcoming school year, requiring public school students in third through 11th grades each year to take a national achievement test such as the Stanford Achievement Test.

The law requires high school students to take an additional year of math and of science to qualify for graduation.

It also requires the state school superintendent to take control of any public school or any city or county school system if a majority of students fall one or more grade levels below the national average on the achievement test and no improvement in student achievement has been made after three years.

To avoid takeover, a school or school system simply would have to show some improvement in achievement in at least one year of a three-year period.

The law also requires each public school system to issue an **accountability** report on each school, including national test scores and measures of student safety and discipline.

A school-funding law pushed by James takes effect with the upcoming school year and rewrites the school-funding plan Alabama has followed for six decades.

The old law, which gave roughly the same amount of state tax dollars to each student in public schools statewide, was declared unconstitutional in 1993 by Montgomery Circuit Judge Gene Reese.

The new law gives a larger share of state tax dollars to school districts with lower property values that raise less money from local property taxes. Under the plan, schools in wealthier areas, such as Homewood and Hoover, could see no increase in state funding for at least four years. The new law calculates how much money each school district will get for basic operations, or foundation program, based on the number of students by grade, the experience and **education** levels of teachers and the proportion of students enrolled in special **education** or vocational classes.

For the upcoming school year, the state will pay the total cost of each school system's

foundation program, minus the value of 5 mills of local property tax collected by the school system.

In 1996-97, the state will pay the entire cost minus the value of 7.5 mills of local property tax. Starting in 1997-98, the state each year will pay the entire cost minus the value of 10 mills.

A testing law requires would-be teachers to pass the National Teacher Exam or similar exam before starting to teach in Alabama. The state Board of **Education** will set the passing grade. The law does not require testing of people who already teach.

A new ethics law that takes effect Oct. 1 for tens of thousands of state, county and city employees and elected officials will let the state Ethics Commission on its own, by unanimous vote, make an ethics complaint against a public official or employee.

The Ethics Commission now cannot start ethics complaints on its own. It can respond only to written complaints filed by others.

The new law also will ban a candidate for public office from accepting a campaign contribution except within 12 months of an election in which the person will be a candidate or 120 days after an election in which the person ran.

The law also will require public officials to wait at least two years after leaving office before working as a paid lobbyist before the state or local agency where the person was a member.

A helmet law requires anyone 15 or younger who rides a bicycle on a public roadway, bicycle path or other right-of-way or in a public park to wear a protective helmet.

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