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## Editorials

# The diploma gap

■ Requiring 12th graders to have 8th grade skills is a modest improvement — and a sign of how far we have to go.

If it weren't so painful, it might be funny. But there's nothing funny in the State Board of Education's plan to raise minimum high school graduation standards to an eighth grade skill level.

For 18 years, the minimum standard has been a sixth grade level, and both the state board and a separate commission on education standards want to set the standard where it ought to be: 12th grade education skills for graduation from high school.

But the state board has all but decided not to raise it that high right away. Why? Because up to a third of the state's high school seniors would fail, the Department of Public Instruction says.

That's as much a commentary on the progress of nearly two decades of education reform as it is on policymakers' wisdom. But it masks the fact that when Gov. Jim Hunt in 1977 proposed the competency testing that gave us the sixth grade standard during his first term as governor, that weak standard was defended on the same grounds — that a higher standard would cause more failures.

Politicians and educators may be right that raising a standard too high would cause a great deal of disruption. Among other things, public support for schools would decline further, teachers and administrators might be held accountable for the massive failures and many school districts would find themselves with large numbers of high school seniors who needs years of remedial work.

That's why the State Board of Education plans on adopting an interim minimum gradu-

ation standard of eighth grade skills. While that standard hardly gives parents, teachers or students much to cheer about, it at least represents a positive step. The plan is to screen students in grades K-2 and provide a range of programs beginning in the third grade to bring them up to par: longer school days, Saturday classes, special homework, summer school, retention in grade, smaller classes and alternative schools.

The list of programs is ambitious. It needs to be, because the point is to require higher performance from students who fall behind. Legislators should keep that in mind when they contemplate cutting the state budget and trimming spending to permit a tax cut.

Gov. Hunt has campaigned in recent years to adopt a rigorous new high school graduation standard by the year 2000, and to guarantee that our high school graduates can do the work their diploma says they can do. To accomplish that worthy goal, education officials and state legislators must cooperate to continually upgrade the program of instruction — and keep on boosting minimum standards for graduation.

Adopting an eighth-grade standard for high school graduation is a step in the right direction, but it's obvious to everyone that it's a mighty small step. The fact is that a diploma signifying a person can do eight-grade work isn't worth much in a world where good jobs will require a lot higher skills. High school graduates who go directly into the work force must understand that high school isn't the end of their education, it's just the beginning.