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Finance course stirs debate over state's role in education

Some parents, educators say Va. is meddling in matters best left to schools, students

BY KEVIN SIEFF

When Virginia officials decided every student should take a course on personal finance and economics, their goal was to ensure that high school graduates have practical skills in the wake of the global financial crisis.

But some Northern Virginia educators and parents now accuse Richmond of needless meddling in local academics, robbing busy students of a precious elective. These critics say the content should be melded instead into existing math or civics curricula.

At issue is a course requirement the state Board of Education approved in 2009. The General Assembly, after some debate, rejected efforts this year to water down the requirement. Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R) gave the rule final approval in March, and it will take effect for incoming high school freshmen in September.

The course will include lessons on balancing a checkbook, the U.S. banking system and the laws of supply and demand.

Advocates say the subject is vast and

challenging enough to warrant its own year-long course. "This is in the vital interest of Virginia students, who will soon be consumers and investors," said Sarah Finley, executive director of the Virginia Council on Economic Education. "It's disappointing that parents don't understand or appreciate the value of this education."

But Northern Virginia officials say some of the material is already taught in math and civics courses. They say wedging another class into schedules will force some ambitious students to choose between a high-level course in their field of interest and a fine-arts class such as band or chorus.

"This could have been embedded in other courses," said Fairfax County School Board member Jane K. Strauss

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ROBERT MCCARTNEY

Robert McCartney is away. His column will resume when he returns.

State's role in local education debated

CLASS FROM B1

(Dranesville). "Now it's one less opportunity to take an elective in a field that they really want to focus on."

Local control over school policy is an issue that resonates strongly in Virginia. The state is one of a handful that have declined to endorse national academic standards in English and math. Virginia officials say that their standards are superior and that they will resist efforts from Washington and elsewhere to dictate policy for their local schools.

But Richmond's reach into classrooms is also a point of contention.

Debate over state intervention in local academic affairs has become more common in recent years. Lawmakers approved a bill this year to require physical education in all four years of high school. That would have had a major effect on students and schools, but McDonnell killed the bill with the first veto of his term.

At least three states require a finance course for high school graduation: Utah, Missouri and Tennessee. A number of others are weighing similar policies.

Maryland and the District have no personal finance education requirements. In Maryland,

lawmakers backed down from a proposal to require the course after the State Department of Education said it would cost \$16 million to implement.

In Virginia, the Fairfax Arts Coalition for Education was one of the first groups to protest the financial literacy requirement. "It was a real eye-opener — first finance, then P.E.," said Mary Wagner, a coalition leader, referring also to the bill McDonnell vetoed. "It floored me that they would make such major changes without considering the impact."

One of the General Assembly's most memorable interventions in school policy was the 1986 statute known as the "Kings Dominion" law, referring to the amusement park north of Richmond. The law, requiring school boards to set the first day of instruction after Labor Day, was strongly backed by leaders of the hotel, recreation and resort industries who wanted families to vacation into early September.

Some local educators want to revise the law because they say it hinders their efforts to extend the school year.

Educators are also raising concerns about funding for the personal finance course. Even though the course is mandated by the state, officials say it will be funded largely with local money.

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