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OUR VIEWS

Honest diplomas would be nice

North Carolina's schools may be poised for a breathtaking leap toward excellence: Students would be promoted only when they had mastered required material. High school diplomas would actually mean something.

None of the state's education reform efforts so far even approaches the likely effects of that commonsense idea. The state school board deserves enthusiastic support—even when problems and questions arise, as they inevitably will.

If it's easy to state the obvious—promotions and diplomas should signify specific achievements—it will be difficult to get to that point.

The board wants students to pass tests in the third, fifth and eighth grades before being promoted. It wants seniors to pass a series of exams and prepare a project.

By 2003, "social promotion" would be an unlamented relic of the past—one of those good intentions that backfired.

Doubtless there will be arguments over the validity and fairness of the tests, and doubtless they will have their shortcomings. That's life.

But the board isn't suggesting that kids who flunk the tests stay in the same grade for years on end. It wants those who do poorly to get extra help. The idea is to give them every chance to succeed.

That will cost money, of course. But letting students slide through the grades without learning enough costs, too.

We waste money while they're in school.

We lose money when they graduate unprepared for work and unable to manage their lives.

And our country loses wise guidance when they graduate unprepared to play responsible roles as citizens in a democratic society.

The cliché about the Devil being in the details has never been more appropriate. Translating the board's noble goal into a working system will be complicated and quite possibly politically explosive.

But the goal is noble.

It is to stop giving students fraudulent credentials that fool no one and have little value.

It is to fulfill the historic promise of American public schools: a good education for all.