

High school redesign to bring students up to par Panelist: Current high school model more than 100 years old

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MIGUEL JUAREZ staff Judy Rabinowitz, Ocean Township, asks a question during the regional meeting on the future of New Jersey high schools held at Long Branch Middle School Feb. 22.

Tomorrow's jobs don't yet exist and high schools are under pressure to prepare students for the unknown.

"Between 70 and 80 percent of jobs that will be available to students who are now in kindergarten have not even been thought of yet," according to Edwina Lee, executive director of the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Lee addressed members of the public at the Long Branch Middle School last week during a public meeting of the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee.

Lee was a part of a panel discussing the future of New Jersey high schools and what steps need to be taken to make sure that the state's high school graduates are competitive when entering college or the work force.

A five-step plan is being put in place by the steering committee to revamp and redirect the state's public high schools.

Jay Doolan, assistant commissioner of education and a member of the panel, outlined the plan at the meeting.

The meeting was the third of four public meetings held throughout the state to discuss the need for high school redesign and how those changes may be implemented.

In addition to Doolan and Lee, Mary O'Malley, executive director of New Jersey United for Higher School Standards, and Dana Egreczky, vice president of work force development for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, were also on hand to answer questions.

The impetus for the meetings and the five-step plan is that, according to O'Malley, research has shown that many students who graduate from high schools in New Jersey are neither prepared to attend college nor enter the work force.

Input gathered will be included in a series of recommendations presented to Gov. Jon Corzine and other members of the state Legislature to be implemented in high schools throughout the state.

The first step of the Department of Education's plan would be to ensure that the standards for language arts, math and science in each school are aligned to the state and national benchmarks.

"That work is finished," said Doolan, "and we're ready to take it to the state Board of Education. After it is adopted, we will work with educators in the state to implement it."

Doolan said that the second step in the process of reorganizing high schools statewide, will be to restructure requirements for students.

"We still believe that all students should take four years of English," he said, "but we need to better define what is English I, English II and so on."

Doolan said that middle schools are being encouraged to offer algebra at the eighth- grade level, so all students entering high school will take geometry or Algebra II.

Doolan said that students should be taking more science classes, and that only about 14 percent of the state's high school students take a physics class during high school.

"It is very important to connect what students are learning today with what can be achieved in the future," Doolan said.

The third step in the plan would be to encourage schools to raise the level of classes, and to eliminate lower-level classes, said Doolan.

According to a presentation during the meeting, even low achieving students learn more in rigorous courses than in low-level courses.

A bar graph showed that low-achieving students may increase their test scores by almost 9 percent in math and by almost 5 percent in reading.

Doolan said that steps four and five are the most important for achieving the goal of up-dating high schools.

"The fourth step would be to assist middle schools and high schools in their redesign programs," he said. "We're already doing a lot of work with the 31 Abbott School Districts with the High Schools That Work program. It's showing a lot of promise."

The fifth step would include training for teachers and administrators to help prepare them for the changes that will occur once the schools have been redesigned.

"This is just the beginning of a long improvement process," she said, adding that feedback from the public, teachers, administrators and students will be used during the process to make sure that the changes being implemented will work for everyone involved.

Egreczky said that the current high school model was designed more than 100 years ago, in response to the country's industrial revolution.

"Times have changed," she said, "and we have outlived that design. Growth in technology is eliminating lower skill jobs."

Egreczky presented a list of technologies that are in everyday use today that were not prevalent ten years ago, including cell phones, laptop computers and wide use of the Internet.

"All of this technology is impacting employment," she said. "EZ Pass has taken over the jobs of toll collectors, which was a low-skill job. Now, engineers and computer technicians are needed to keep EZ pass running, and special training and high math skills are needed for that. Phone operators have been replaced by voice recognition systems, and bank tellers have been replaced, although not entirely, by ATMs.

"Those used to be low-skill jobs that offered benefits and life-long employment. This technology has elevated the amount of skills needed for jobs."

Egreczky said that American students are less prepared to enter the work force than their contemporaries in other countries.

Jim Horn, an instructor in educational foundations at Monmouth University, said that he sees a pattern in American history with American businesses and corporations using "various arguments to grab a foothold in the American education system."

"Are you saying that the reason jobs are going overseas is because American high schools are weak?" he asked, "or is that a decision made by American companies because they want to pay their workers 10 cents an hour? There is not a shortage of American workers, but there is a shortage of American workers willing to work for 10 cents an hour."

Although Egreczky said the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce works with companies who employ overseas workers to make sure the workers get comparable compensation, O'Malley said that American businesses do deserve some of the suspicion Horn presented.

"Businesses have a vested interest because schools produce their work force," she said. "Our communities thrive, we all thrive, when our people are well educated and can earn a living wage. We all have to get involved, and get involved in meaningful ways."

Egreczky said that there is an expected decrease in overall earned wages.

"The baby-boomer generation is the most educated this country has seen," she said, "and they are getting ready to retire. Predictions are that the national average salary will drop by 15 percent across the board.

Lee said that by the time today's kindergartners reach the work force, 84 percent of jobs will require a college degree.

"Our goal should be graduating our students as equals," said Lee, "so they can compete in the job market. Out of the 90 percent of our students who graduate high school, only about 25 percent earn a college degree."

Lee said that students who require remedial education in college are less likely to acquire a college degree.

"More than two-thirds of new jobs require at least post-secondary education," she said.

Lee said that New Jersey is among the best states in the nation in terms of student graduation rates, far surpassing the national average, but students remain unprepared for whatever path they take after graduating high school.

According to the presentation, interest among high school students in participating in advanced courses exceeds the availability of those courses, and a significant number of students would have taken more advanced classes in high school if they had been aware of the requirements in college and the work force.

Carol O'Bryan, South Brunswick, said that she thinks the community's expectation of schools should change.

"Schools are expected to be everything to children," she said. "Schools have to ask themselves: Do we want to educate students, or do we want to be everything to them? I think more outside community organizations should be utilized."

Members of the academic community, as well as the general public, are encouraged to inform the steering committee of their comments and concerns. They can do this by visiting www.njhighschoolsummit.org. The Power Point presentation from the public meeting is also available for download.

Lee said that is the reason the discussion about high school redesign was brought to the public.

"This is still a very unique experiment," she said, "this country called America. Public education is open to all. We value our students and teaching them, and we don't just dump them at the school door. The community has to stand up and say that this, education, is the most important thing."