



## The Coming High School Makeover

By Scott Goldstein - 9/11/2006

TRENTON - Gov. Jon Corzine, saying that too many high school graduates are not ready for college or the workplace, has thrown his support behind a plan that would create tougher graduation requirements in the state's 300-plus high schools.

"No matter what our high school students plan to do after their graduation, we have a moral obligation and vested economic interest in equipping students with the tools to build successful lives," Corzine said.

The plan is gaining the support of Garden State employers, who have long complained that there is a shortage of highly skilled workers in the state.

"Years ago, a strong back and a willing heart were enough to allow a person to make a decent living," said Prudential CEO Arthur F. Ryan, a co-chairman of the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee that has sought to coordinate school curriculums to meet the demands of both the workplace and higher education. "Today, a person's ability to use his brain will determine his success." The committee, a coalition of business and education leaders, has spent a year studying the issue of toughening educational standards.

"We need to push kids into college prep [courses] no matter what their career goals are. They need it for good jobs and good salaries. Without the classes, students have minimal chance of success," added Dana Egreczky, vice president of work force development at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

She said the state must not wait to strengthen its high school offerings, citing studies suggesting that in two decades 80% of the country's jobs will require an associate's or bachelor's degree. In the meantime, nationwide census figures show that only 34% of whites, 18% of blacks and 9% of Hispanics have four-year college degrees.

"This is alarming because jobs that don't require degrees are being outsourced overseas," Egreczky said. "These kids will not get hired."

The plan, which was announced last month, has been adopted from model standards by the American Diploma Project that are now being considered in 20 states. It calls for requiring high school students to take not just three years of math and science classes, but to take specific courses such as algebra, geometry, biology and chemistry. The plan may also call for students to take exams after completing some courses to demonstrate proficiency. The American Diploma Project is a partnership of several national organizations and states that aims to ensure Americans graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills necessary for success.

Under New Jersey's plan, English classes would emphasize communication skills "so future workers can articulate, speak in front of groups, read with understanding and observe and write critically," said Jay Doolan, the state Department of Education's acting assistant commissioner in the divisions of educational programs and assessments.

"With realities like globalization and new technologies, we need to educate all of our students in the important context that will best prepare them in career and possibly secondary education, said Doolan, a member of the redesign committee.

The High School Redesign committee will hold information sessions this fall to take comments and argue the necessity of reform. It will make recommendations to the state education commissioner next year.

Six states have already adopted reforms based on the American Diploma Project's work, including Indiana, Michigan and Texas, said Egreczky, who sits on the redesign committee. "In those states, you walk into high school and you are told, 'This is your course load, unless your parents excuse you from that course load,'" she said.

But there are concerns, such as fears that higher standards could lead more students to drop out, especially in urban districts that already suffer from low graduation rates.

"This is going to be a heavy lift," acknowledged Egreczky, who thinks there is little choice. Employers have been complaining that today's high schools and colleges produce too many workers who don't think analytically. "The main complaint from employers is that [recent graduates] don't have the logical processes in their head to solve complex problems," she said. "Part of the problem is cuts to public school budgets [that] have led to business courses being eliminated."

Even those high school students working part-time at places like fast-food restaurants show insufficient promise, Egreczky added. "Employers are saying that they do not have any sense of work ethic, particularly when it comes to attendance and punctuality. They don't understand what it means to put in a full day's work for a full day's pay. They'd rather stand around on the clock."

In his news conference, Corzine announced that the state is endorsing the reforms supported by the American Diploma Project.

Doolan, of the state Department of Education, said, "For the first time, we have standard expectations of what students need to know to be successful in the workplace."