

Headline: N.J. goal: Upgrading students' key skills

BY TOM BALDWIN

GANNETT STATE BUREAU

TRENTON -- With school bells set to ring, New Jersey leaders want to remake high schools so students bound for careers tuning cars and tracking overnight deliveries will possess the same math and reading skills as scholars off to college campuses.

But they shied away from calling for dramatic change in the school calendar, such as shortening school breaks, particularly the long summers off. Shorter summer vacations are common in other countries, but the idea has been resisted in the United States, where students and teachers get two months or more off.

Telling a news conference Thursday that students will be chasing after jobs in a global market, Gov. Corzine said: "The competition is not your next-door neighbor. It is across the globe.

"It's not a matter of if you have a high school degree or a college degree.

You have to have those technical skills," said Corzine, hammering home the notion that a student in vocational and technical tracks should now take the same math, English, reading and science courses as classmates aiming for college and graduate school.

He said they need this to land jobs of the future, even those not specifically minted for fancy degrees, such as a repairman, a parts manager, an assembler or even a trucker.

The officials announced they plan to spend the coming months working on a gradual toughening of New Jersey's high school curriculum standards, assessment tests and graduation requirements to address concerns students aren't keeping pace with the nation or the world.

Unveiled at the news conference was the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee, which is made up largely of educators and business people representing the state Chamber of Commerce.

Public will get a say

Acting Education Commissioner Lucille Davy said the special committee will conduct meetings throughout the state with teachers and school officials and hear from the public

Arthur Ryan, chairman and chief executive officer of Prudential Financial, said, "We want our kids to win, not just get on the playing field."

Corzine and Davy said the plan calls for **New Jersey** to work with the American Diploma Project Network, a coalition of 23 states dedicated to ensuring curricula and assessments match the demands of college and work.

A study by the coalition recently determined students need four years of science, for instance. **New Jersey** requires only three years of science courses.

Davy said as many as 80 percent of freshmen at some of the state's community colleges require remedial education, with as many as 50 percent of the freshmen at some of the state's four-year colleges requiring at least one remedial class.

"These numbers are staggering, and they require our immediate attention," Davy said.

What will it cost?

When Corzine was asked how he planned to bring about improvements in schools at a time when he also wants to lower property taxes, the governor said "We will fix efficiencies," without providing details.

School spending makes up the largest segment of municipal property tax rates.

Corzine jumped in at one point when Davy was asked about shorter school breaks -- summer primarily -- to help students retain knowledge.

"I don't think that is an either-or situation," said Corzine. "There is a big policy decision, an economic decision. . . . It comes with a cost."

Summer vacation gives students work experiences, particularly at the Shore, where businesses depend on seasonal help. But Davy acknowledged that taking nine weeks off from learning creates built-in lapses.

An Internet check of school calendars around the world showed that Russia has a nine-week summer break, Mexico and China have seven-week breaks and The Philippines, France and Japan have six weeks off. South Africa has an eight-week summer break over Christmas, with two weeks off in July, the Southern Hemisphere's midwinter.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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