

N.J. looking to improve education

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TRENTON - With school bells set to peal, New Jersey wants 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 New Jersey is shying away from dramatic change such as shortening school breaks, marked by the long summer off.

Truncated summers are an idea that is accepted in a number of overseas capitols but one that in New Jersey would be sure to enrage the teachers' union, the New Jersey Education Association. Teachers here, like students, get summers off.

Saying Jersey students will be chasing after jobs in a global market, Gov. Jon 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 erstwhile vo-tech courses 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, assembler or even a trucker.

The unveiled New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee consists primarily of educator unions, the NJEA included, and associations, joined by the State Chamber of Commerce.

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

Corzine was asked how he planned to change schooling at a time when he says he wants to lower property taxes. School spending is said to drive the property-tax rate, as districts spend, and then turn to homeowners to pay the costs.

"We will fix efficiencies," said the governor, without providing details.

Corzine jumped in at one point, when Acting Education Commissioner Lucille Davy was asked if she could shorten school breaks -- summer primarily -- to help students retain.

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

Summers off gives students work experiences, and New Jersey's Seashore economies depend on that low-wage summer help so often remunerated in tips.

With Corzine and Davy arguing that Jersey students will compete for jobs against graduates in far-flung global corners, it may be noted that not many high schoolers in other nations have the three-month summer suspension that Davy acknowledged creates built-in lapses.

An Internet check of school calendars showed that many systems where U.S. graduates might compete for work do not offer the nine-week summer popularized here.

Russia has a nine-week summer break, but Mexico and China have seven-week summer breaks. The Philippines, France and Japan have six-week schools-out summers.

South Africa has an eight-week summer break over Christmas, with two weeks off in July, that being midwinter in the Southern Hemisphere.