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NEW YORK PREPARES A NEW EXAM TO BOOST CAREER TRAINING

By Leslie Brody
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New York students would be able to use an exam in culinary arts, welding, accounting and other trades to meet one of their graduation requirements under a plan expected to be approved Monday by the state Board of Regents.

Supporters say the change would help many teenagers stay motivated in high school and get ready for jobs that pay well. The proposal has a broad spectrum of backers, including business representatives and New York State United Teachers.

One goal is to address concern among employers that many young people with high-school diplomas lack the advanced skills that are increasingly necessary to thrive in the workplace. Now, by state count, only 37% of New York high-school students graduate with test scores showing they are ready to succeed in college and careers.

Some skeptics of the “multiple pathways” plan caution it would have a significant impact only if it goes beyond simply swapping exams, and includes a major push to give students more on-the-job training with employers who might hire them.

“It’s a good first step and acknowledges the reality of the economy,” said Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution. “But it’s insufficient and will fail...if it doesn’t involve a serious investment in apprenticeships.”

Proponents of the change say it would underscore the academic value of career training and because tests often drive what is taught, it would spur schools to expand vocational programs.

Now, students need to pass five Regents exams: one each in math, English and science, and two in social studies.

Under the proposal, students could choose to skip one of the social studies exams—either American history or global history — and take one in Career and Technical Education, or an extra science or math exam. If adopted Monday, the change would affect current seniors.

The options could grow, but 13 proposed Career and Technical Education tests now include graphic arts, electronics, carpentry and hospitality management, and the exams would reflect several years of coursework. They are industry-certification tests such as the CompTIA A+, a test created by a consortium of information-technology companies.

Using that technical exam appeals to Nikolay Yunger, a 17-year-old senior in Rochester, N.Y., who has been studying computer networking and repairs at school. He said discovering his knack for this work motivated him in class, boosted his grades and fueled his desire to go to college.

"It really helped me find what I wanted to do in life," said Mr. Yunger, whose father is a maintenance employee and whose mother works in a factory. "It made me realize school is in my hands."

While some social-studies teachers worry that New York is retreating from their favorite subject, state officials said students will still need to pass four years of social studies in high school to get diplomas.

State Education Commissioner John B. King Jr. said while many people assume vocational education has less rigor and fewer opportunities, career and technical-education courses have become more complex and demanding, and prepare students for fields with good pay. He said rather than diverting students from college, such routes often inspire them to pursue higher education, even if after a stint in the workplace.

He said the technical tests would be at least as tough as the Regents exams. He said the National Electrical Code studied by teenagers who want to be electricians, for example, has a "degree of text complexity that is at least as high, if not higher, than novels that would be typically read by 12th-graders."

Merryl Tisch, chancellor of the Board of Regents, said the U.S. lags behind much of the world in providing career and technical education. Offering courses tied to potential jobs prevents dropouts, she said, adding it boils down to "relevance, and paying attention to what makes kids persist in school."

Dr. Tisch said as New York City education officials devise ways to improve the most struggling high schools, she hopes they will expand career and technical-education options to get students engaged and give them confidence. City education officials say they are committed to enhancing those programs and increasing internship opportunities.

Now, 12% of New York state high-school students concentrate in a career and technical-education field. That includes students in schools such as P-Tech in Brooklyn, where they spend six years and finish with an associate degree.

President Barack Obama applauded the school in his 2013 State of the Union speech. On top of changing graduation requirements, state education officials want more funding to expand P-Tech schools and regional career and technical education programs.

If adopted, the change in graduation regulations would be subject to public comments and have a second vote in January. The second vote is usually a formality, Mr. King said.