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CHICAGO MAYOR TOUTS NEW REQUIREMENT TO GRADUATE: PROOF OF A PLAN

Public high-school students would have to show a job or college acceptance to get a diploma

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Chicago Public School students who want to graduate will have to show proof that they have a plan after high school – such as providing an offer letter for a job or acceptance into college or military service, under a plan expected to be approved next month.

The initiative, pitched by former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and carried by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, is targeted at encouraging students to plan for life after high school. It likely goes farther than any other public-school initiative to encourage postsecondary preparation. Mr. Emanuel called it a “game-changer.”

“The goal here is to no longer have 12th grade be the end of our responsibility,” Mr. Emanuel said in an interview. “The economy and business today require a minimum of two years post-high school.”

Students also could show acceptance letters for a job program; a trade or apprenticeship program; or a “gap-year” program, which could include travel, volunteer work or research before resuming the academic career. Those who have a job would be covered.

Exemptions would be available for undocumented students and those with life challenges, such as criminal records.

The Chicago Board of Education will consider the proposal next month. Mr. Emanuel assured that the board, which he appoints, would pass the measure.

The program – called “Learn. Plan. Succeed” – would go into effect for this year’s freshmen graduating in 2020.

But the plan could be challenged legally.

Miranda Johnson, associate director of the Education Law and Policy Institute at Loyola University Chicago, said that while state law allows school boards to adopt additional graduation requirements, a concern with the CPS proposal is that it involves third-party approval that could be out of students’ control.

“My concern is that it seems to go beyond coursework or community service requirements,” Ms. Johnson said.

Mr. Emanuel said the plan would pass legal muster and brushed aside a question on what would happen to those students who don’t have a plan. He said Chicago students have shown that they will adhere to graduation requirements.

School districts in recent years have become more focused on getting students career- and workforce ready as some students don't want to go to college. Chicago officials believe their plan will help students make the transition.

"If they have a plan in place, they're more likely to land something once they complete high school," said Janice Jackson, chief education officer for Chicago Public Schools. "With the current economy that we live in, a high-school diploma is just not sufficient anymore."