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Vocational education upgrade: Chicago schools roll out 7-year makeover

Revamp includes clustered academies, better staff training, new internships

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The Chicago Public Schools system is overhauling its Career and Technical Education program to provide about 25,000 teens the skills they'll need to land well-paying jobs -- such as those in the medical or electrical fields -- right out of high school.

The seven-year plan, rolled out Monday by Mayor Richard Daley and schools chief Ron Huberman, calls for scrapping the unfocused vocational programs now spread across 70 city schools and consolidating them at 35 schools with better trained staff, more focused curriculum and more opportunities to earn vocational credentials in addition to a diploma.

Ultimately, students would graduate from these programs prepared to land what Daley termed "middle-skill" careers, such as electricians, auto mechanics, medical technicians or licensed practical nurses. "In today's economy, it is essential that we graduate students with the skills they need to go directly into a good job and a long-term career," Daley said, speaking to students at Harlan Community Academy on the South Side.

The mayor cited a recent study by The Workforce Alliance that concluded 45 percent of jobs by 2014 will be in so-called middle-skill occupations -- those requiring more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree.

In years past, vocational education was seen as second-class education, the path for those who were not considered college material. But a national focus on serving a high-tech economy that demands more highly skilled workers forced a change in vocational programs about a decade ago. Even the name changed; the term "vocational education" was replaced with the lofty "career and technical education."

But Chicago Public Schools have struggled to create a quality career prep program. This is the third time in a decade that city and school leaders have launched highly touted reforms, none of which have proved terribly successful.



Students in the career and technical education programs should graduate prepared to land well-paying jobs. But district research has shown they do only slightly better than other Chicago public school students.

Now, the district offers 250 programs, everything from culinary arts at Clemente Community Academy on the West Side to brick masonry at Dunbar Academy on the South Side. That will narrow to 80 career tracks at 35 schools.

Relabeled "College and Career Academies," the first will roll out next school year at 11 high schools. The remaining programs will phase in over seven years.

Students from across the city can apply to any program, but preference will be given to students at grade level in the core academics, especially those who live within the schools' neighborhood boundaries.

Huberman said the district developed the new plan after working with the Chicago Workforce Investment Council to study regional labor-market trends, then compare them with the district's vocational offerings.

"This is not about sitting around and thinking, 'What do we want to teach at CPS,' " he said. "Rather, we started with, 'Where are the jobs, and what should we be teaching to prepare our kids to compete for the jobs that make \$40,000, \$50,000, \$60,000 a year?' "

It quickly became clear that the district could not run 250 programs at a high level, Huberman said, so officials will scrap some.

Take plastic fabrication. Huberman said the district's current career track in plastic fabrication has not kept pace with the evolving field.

A district spokeswoman said programs will be phased out so students can opt to finish in their field.

Huberman also said the district will ratchet up requirements to ensure teachers have proper teaching certification and experience in their field of expertise. The district will provide professional development for those who need it, he said.

The new plan also calls for students to gain real-work experience through internships and job-shadowing. The district is working with area businesses to offer 1,200 internships next year.

Currently, the district spends about \$40 million to enroll about 25,000 students in career and technical education programs, and Huberman said those figures will not change. The only new expenditures will come from improving outdated labs, at a cost of about \$4 million to \$5 million annually for five years.

Rachel Unruh, associate director of The Workforce Alliance, said school districts have not historically spent enough on career and technical education, despite the obvious need for it.

"The horrible irony of this recession is that even with these large unemployment numbers, there are key jobs in health care and manufacturing where businesses can't find people," said Unruh, whose group helped analyze economic trends.

"We've put out this cultural message in this country that every job requires a college degree. So young kids don't look at these jobs as an option."

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