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16 New Jersey districts in school pilot program

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Sixth- and ninth-grade students in 16 New Jersey schools will begin developing personal learning plans this year by examining their interests, strengths and goals as part of a two-year statewide pilot program to get kids looking toward their futures.

The Personalized Student Learning Plan Program is part of new graduation standards, adopted by the state Board of Education in June, that aim to make high school more rigorous. After the two-year pilot, the state DOE will review the learning plan program and decide how to continue it.

Twenty states and the District of Columbia require learning plans for all students. Another five states encourage their use, according to the New Jersey Department of Education.

Too often some students reach their senior year in high school and discover they should have taken different courses or worked harder to achieve their academic goals, educators say. The aim of the learning plan program is to help students set scholastic, career and personal goals and develop a path to reach them, officials said.

"Sometimes they realize too late that 'My freshman grades did count,' or 'I need more math classes because I want to go in to this field,'" said Fran Schlenoff, a school counselor at Sparta Middle School, one of the pilots. "It helps them to understand that the choices early on are important."

As part of the learning plan program, students will be surveyed on their personalities, interests and learning styles.

For sixth-graders, many of whom are beginning middle school, that may mean understanding how they best learn: visually, by listening or by doing hands-on work, for example. Throughout the year, they may explore career areas that mesh with their interests and learning styles.

("It's) not pigeon-holing someone in one career," said Dennis Lepold, principal of Thomas R. Grover Middle School in Mercer County, one of the pilots. "You can look at some (career) clusters that might be something they hadn't thought about."

For ninth-graders, the learning plan program will help teens select courses during high school that are related to their interests and college and/or career goals. It also may assist them in finding internships or other independent learning opportunities.

Sixth-graders and ninth-graders in the pilot schools will begin using the program this year. Next school year, those same students will continue with the program as seventh- and 10th-graders, and incoming students in the lower grades will also start the learning plans.

Participating districts piloting the program will be eligible for up to \$7,500 each year from the state to help with costs, including curriculum materials and Web-based programs.

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