

A better way to learn *S~9/11*

A new program that helps students map their own course on what they learn is being tried out on sixth- and ninth-grade students in 16 New Jersey schools.

Part of the new graduation standards, the state's Personalized Student Learning Plan program aims to challenge students to work harder and smarter by designing a program that matches their individual academic and career goals.

The Department of Education's plan is to deal with a basic problem — how to raise student interest in learning. Recent changes to the state's elementary and middle school proficiency tests, designed to make them more rigorous, have sent scores plummeting, especially in some urban districts. The new learning plan, it is hoped, will stem or reverse that trend.

Twenty states already have such learning plans in place.

At Bloomfield High School, all ninth-graders will have a faculty adviser to help them put together their plans. Participating high schools also will help make sure students have access to internships and other independent learning opportunities.

Sparta Middle School is participating in the pilot program as a way to help students learn that early choices are important. Students there will be able to pick plans that take into account their personalities and what ways they learn best.

And while the learning plans still take state Education Department standards into account, allowing students to pick courses they're passionate about is seen as a common sense way to stimulate interest in learning and school itself.

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