

# Job seekers can earn certificate

**A free program measures skills in reading, locating information and applied math.**

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BROOKSVILLE - On paper, a job candidate with decent high school grades might look like a good hire.

But do those grades translate into job skills?

Under a new state program being unveiled this winter at Nature Coast Technical High School and other sites, employers can find out exactly what skills applicants bring to the job interview.

Launched in 2006, the Florida Ready to Work program measures skills in three key areas: reading for information, applied mathematics, and locating information.

Students and adult job-seekers soon will be able to take a free online assessment and tutorials and leave with a gold, silver or bronze certificate that employers will value, said Hernando County adult education coordinator Harry Wilson.

"It's based on actual work skills," Wilson added, describing the assessment test development process. "They surveyed 13,000 different jobs."

The program, which is free for job applicants and employers, is funded by a \$17.2-million state grant.

It was developed in partnership with the state Department of Education, the Worldwide Interactive Network and the national ACT WorkKeys program. Similar programs have been introduced in 40 other states.

Earning a certificate gives job-seekers a competitive advantage, said program coordinator Rick Chalue.

"It immediately informs the employer what the person's background is academically," he added. "It gives them an edge."

Students at Nature Coast are piloting the tests, and adult learners can visit the school beginning in February to take part. Testing facilities are also being developed at all Pasco-Hernando Community College campuses and Career Central sites, as well as other Florida counties, Chalue said.

Building awareness of the program among local businesses is a key challenge. Employers are being encouraged to stop by and take the test to see exactly what it measures, Wilson said.

They'll find it doesn't measure some of the so-called soft skills like punctuality, attitude and poise that businesses say they need in entry-level applicants.

But some high schools are already working on those issues, holding senior "exit interviews" to give students help with such skills. And the Ready to Work program will provide another helpful measure of their preparation, said Mike McHugh, the county director of economic development.

"The better preparation those students have for the real world and the environment they'll be exposed to when they come into the work force, the better," he said.

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