



Collier school system looks at possible overhaul of career academies

By KATHERINE ALBERS

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NAPLES — College or the workforce?

Students used to have to choose.

As she watched hundreds of Lely High School students travel from booth to booth during a career and job fair last week, Deb Hooper, the career education counselor at Lely and Golden Gate high schools, said that is no longer the case.

"We want them to see what different career opportunities are out there, as well as speak to some of our local post-secondary institutions like Edison (College), Hodges (University) and Lorenzo Walker (Institute of Technology)," she said. "In the past, the better jobs required a college education. Now that is changed."

Alicia Jean-Jacques, 16, hopes to become a nurse anesthetist. As she walked through the fair, Alicia said she is considering all her options.

"I spoke to the lady at (Florida Gulf Coast University) about their six-year program, but she told me that Edison's program was just as good and it was cheaper," she said. "It doesn't affect my choice of job, but it is going to affect my school."

The Collier County School District is looking to develop a plan that will make it easier for students like Alicia to make those choices. The district is working on its second Career Education five-year plan, which outlines the district's priorities for career education.

The Collier County School District established a Career Education Task Force in 2003 and the group developed a five-year plan for the 2004-05 school year.

The major accomplishments of that plan have been the construction and development of the Lorenzo Walker Technical High School, the Immokalee Technical Center, improvements to the career education curriculum and the development of academies at the high schools.

There currently are 405 students enrolled in the Lorenzo Walker Technical High School in grades nine to 11. There are an additional 2,185 enrolled in post-secondary and dual enrollment programs at the Lorenzo Walker Institute of Technology and the Immokalee Technical Center. There also are more than 3,000 students enrolled in career academies at the district's high schools.

The district was able to develop partnerships with local businesses and establish advisory boards for the career academies with local employers and experts in the field.

But the situation has changed in Florida since the last plan was established, said Cynthia Janssen, assistant

superintendent of non-traditional schools and programs and the facilitator of the county's Career Advisory Board.

Businesses and employees are less able to support programs and there has been a decrease in state funding to the district.

The district also is moving high school students from an eight credit year to a seven credit year, which could affect career education programs at the schools.

"The students might not have enough time in their schedules to take that career class because they need to take something else," she said.

The Career Advisory Board has been meeting since October to come up with goals and recommendations for the district to address in the next five years. Those goals and recommendations were presented to the Collier County district's education subcommittee last week.

The goal areas are: Academy refinement and development; counseling services; ready to work and industry certification; developing more articulation and dual enrollment agreements with post-secondary institutions; and increasing collaboration with post-secondary institutions and business organizations.

The group is looking at the career education opportunities in place and re-evaluating them. Some suggestions the group made to the education subcommittee include reducing the academies at the high schools as a result of the schedule change and declining enrollment at Collier County schools.

This means that the district could look at its medical science academies, which are at Palmetto Ridge, Gulf Coast and Golden Gate high schools, and reducing them to two based on enrollment. The district would allow students at high schools that don't offer the program to change schools to accommodate that desire.

The Career Advisory Board also told the education subcommittee that the board thought the district should provide transportation to the students who want to move to take classes at an academy.

"I think we are going to get into true choice if we reduce programs," Janssen said. "Currently, we have students provide their own transportation and we have only had two students take advantage of the academies at other schools, one at Naples and one at Gulf Coast."

The Career Advisory Board also is suggesting that the district create entrance requirements and an application process for each academy.

"We want to get students in there who truly want to be in the academy," Janssen said.

The district also is looking to require background checks for students who want to be in the criminal justice and teaching academies.

"The students currently have to sign an affidavit that says they recognize they cannot get a job in those two fields with a record," Janssen said.

Chief Instructional Officer Martha Hayes said she loved that idea.

"We don't want students in the academy studying a field that they will not get into," she said.

In addition, Collier County high schools will be assessing all of its juniors and seniors this year with Florida Ready to Work, a credentialing program that tests and scores job skills and work habits.

Students can be credentialed at a bronze, silver or gold level. A higher level qualifies a student for a better job,

according to Janssen.

"Our goal is that 100 percent of the students will be at the bronze level by graduation," she said, adding that early results from the high schools found 70 to 91 percent of the student scoring at least a bronze on the test. "It is an assessment they can take again and again."

The district plans to put the credential on students' diplomas.

Joe Paterno, executive director of the Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board and the former co-chair of the Career Education Task Force, said the business community wants to see gold on the Florida Ready to Work credential, but said having the credential at all can give a student a leg up going straight into the workforce.

"If you come in with a silver, you will get credit for that. It can benefit you over someone who has not taken the test," he said.

The Career Advisory Board also had some suggestions for the subcommittee, including that they think about merging Lely High School into Golden Gate High School to create another career and technical high school.

But subcommittee members quickly shot down that idea.

The second idea was to integrate career counseling into the role for all counselors or increase career counselors to one full-time position for every high school.

Subcommittee members urged the Career Advisory Board to develop a priority list for the district of the most doable items and come back to the committee with a recommendation.

"I think we should keep the momentum," subcommittee member Libby Anderson said.

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