New York mulls work-readiness certification for teens
Pass/fail test would assess basic workforce skills like responsibility, problem-solving

The New York State Board of Regents today will consider a pilot certification program aimed at ensuring that all young people entering the workforce after high school have the business skills necessary to handle an entry-level job.

The 16-member Board of Regents will evaluate the Equipped for the Future (EFF) work-readiness certification, prepared by the State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB) and its affiliates in Florida, New Jersey and Washington.

The EFF began two years ago as an initiative of the U.S. Education Department’s National Institute for Literacy and is sponsored by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

The proposed pass/fail test is part of a growing national trend to boost high school standards across the curricula, advocated by President Bush (ED, Jan. 13), businesses, educators, parents and advocacy groups like Achieve Inc. (see story, p. 4).

If the EFF is approved, New York would be the first state to issue a work-readiness credential to high school students who pass the skills test, which covers 10 areas, including communication, directions-taking, basic decision-making and English speaking skills.

What employers want

SWIB member Sherryl Weems, executive director of the University of Buffalo (N.Y.) Educational Opportunity Center, said the test is the product of extensive field work to determine what employers are looking for in the workforce.

“The skill sets that have been agreed upon to be introduced in this examination have been cross-corroborated among various communities across the state,” Weems said.

She explained the test would certify a student’s “soft skills,” such as knowing proper office etiquette and how to address supervisors.

Pilot testing is expected to begin this spring and, if deemed successful, statewide testing could begin as early as next fall.

Keys to success

The planned Equipped for the Future (EFF) credential the New York State Board of Regents is considering would assess 10 broad sets of skills that businesses have said are keys to success in entry-level positions.

The EFF will test how well high school students:

• Acquire and use information.
• Use technology.
• Use systems.
• Work with others.
• Know how to learn.
• Exhibit responsibility.
• Exhibit integrity.
• Manage themselves.
• Allocate resources.
• Solve problems.

No decision has been reached, however, on whether high school seniors would have to qualify for a diploma to take the work-readiness test.

Regent Harry Phillips said he expects the board to approve the program, even though some members have expressed concern about adding another graduation requirement.

“We don’t want to make this burdensome administratively or on the kids,” he said.

Some proponents want students to meet age or graduation requirements as a prerequisite to taking the test, so as not to create an inducement to drop out and forgo a diploma.

Opponents suggest the test is just another set of standards in a state that has long required high school students to pass rigorous statewide Regents exams to graduate.

But as Weems explained, “You’re looking at companion development” of standards, not one set “supplanting another.”

For further details, see www.regents.nysed.gov.

—David Hubler