
Area leaders, state board differ on value of career/tech courses

By Anonymous

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Jimmy Howell's son took a welding class after his junior year of high school. That training provided him a welding job every summer of his four-year college career that helped pay tuition.

Howell, president of Longview Partnership, says that's one of many reasons career and technology courses should continue to receive grade-point average consideration for high school students.



The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board doesn't want grades for most career/technology and vocational classes to count toward high school grade-point averages. Raymond Paredes, the board's commissioner, said such classes do not prepare students for universities' professional programs and admission standards.

Paredes spent Tuesday afternoon at Longview's Workforce Solutions East Texas, meeting with school and business leaders, including Howell. At times terse, their conversation centered on an assertion of most local superintendents that not including technical courses in GPAs continues a negative stigma among parents about vocational courses. They worry that the stigma could keep students away.

Among all 50 states, Texas ranks among the bottom 10 in the percentage of high school graduates who attend college, Paredes said. Four out of five students taking remedial university courses had a B average or better in core subjects in high school.

Local leaders said career/technology classes can spark student enthusiasm and thus lower dropout rates.

However, Paredes said, "There is no evidence statewide or nationally that career/technology education courses improve graduation rates. We will not count courses that do not prepare students for university programs."

Technology over core

A local workforce development task force chaired by Longview ISD Superintendent James Wilcox has asked state lawmakers and Texas Education Agency officials to consider letting students take a related career/technical course in place of a required core class. Beginning with this year's ninth-graders, students must complete four years of math, science, English/language arts and social studies to graduate from high school.

Two-year community colleges that provide career programs, such as Kilgore College, have open admission, meaning that high school grade-point averages are not a factor, Paredes said.

Texas law guarantees admission into any state college or university for students who graduate in the top 10

percent of their class. That requirement could result in a political fight between rural and urban school leaders, some superintendents said Tuesday.

Students from large or property-wealthy school districts such as Dallas, Highland Park and Southlake Carroll are at a numbers disadvantage in getting into the top 10 percent versus small schools such as Spring Hill and Tatum, said Kilgore Superintendent Jody Clements. That could lead lawmakers to cut GPA consideration for career/technical classes, he said.

White Oak Superintendent Mike Gilbert added that parents at his schools have led their children away from career programs to boost their GPA and top 10 chances.

“The 10 percent rule causes students and parents to start planning their coursework in junior high,” said Pine Tree ISD Superintendent Lynn Whitaker. “Grades are so competitive that students wanting to be in the top 10 percent cannot afford to take coursework that does not have a high weight associated with it.”

Paredes said there's no disadvantage when kids compete against kids within their own high school. However, “simply giving students access to a university if they can't do the work doesn't help anything. In the overwhelming majority of cases, career/technical education doesn't help students succeed at a university.”

Academics for everyone

Texas has a shortage of welders, machinists and computer technicians but also pharmacists, computer scientists and math and science teachers, he said. Yet, it produces 800 math majors annually from its 35 public universities, which is not sufficient to accomplish Gov. Rick Perry's \$3 billion initiative to expand cancer research in Texas, Paredes added.

“We have to develop an educational plan in Texas that gives every child that comes out of high school a solid academic foundation so they can take any route they want so they're prepared to go into the skilled workforce,” Paredes said. “That's what we need in Texas. If we don't do it, we're going to suffer economically.”

Wilcox worries that the Coordinating Board's proposal to omit career/technology and vocational classes from being included in grade-point averages could mean sending all students down the same path.

Before his arrival at Longview ISD in 2007, the district saw about 500 dropouts among its more than 3,500 high school and middle school students. Expanding career/technology education and International Baccalaureate programs has reduced that dropout rate, but the state proposal will cheat kids at both ends of the education spectrum, he said.

“This area is built on people who worked with their hands,” Wilcox said. “We have people here who are educated, but they're going to have to have people who work with their hands.”

Howell added that universities have several tools - standardized tests, college entrance exams and transcripts - for admissions consideration other than grade-point averages. “I think we need to do everything we can to promote career and technology.”

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At a glance

Ten area school systems joined the Workforce Academy earlier this year to provide more career education choices to students. The academy was developed through Longview Economic Development Corp., the Mayor's Task Force on Workforce Development, Kilgore College and Texas State Technical College-Marshall to provide dual-credit, career and technical courses at area high schools.

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Tuition at Kilgore College is \$25 per credit hour for Kilgore, Gladewater, White Oak, Sabine, Leverett's Chapel and Overton schools, and \$50 per credit hour for students outside the college's taxing district.

Kilgore College (registration Jan. 6-7 on KC campus)

Course

Credits

Days

Times

Location

Computer-aided drafting
Welding
Process technology
Medical technology

3
4
3
3

Mon/Tues
Mon/Tues
Mon
Wed

6-8:50 p.m.
6-8:50 p.m.
6-8:50 p.m.
5-7:40 p.m.

Longview HS
Longview HS
Longview HS
KC-Longview Center

TSTC-Marshall (Jan. 9 registration deadline)

Course

Credits

Days

Times

Location

Computer-aided drafting
Computer-aided drafting
Computer-aided drafting
Welding
Basic electrical theory
Computer maintenance and repair II
Intro to PC operating systems
DC circuits

3
3
3
4
3
3
3
3
3

Mon/Wed
Mon/Wed
Mon/Wed
Mon/Wed
Tues/Thurs
Mon/Wed
Mon/Wed
Mon

6-8:55 p.m.
6-8:55 p.m.
6-8:55 p.m.
6-8:55 p.m.
6-10 p.m.
6-8:55 p.m.
6-8 p.m.
6-10 p.m.

Hallsville HS

Pine Tree HS
New Diana HS
Pine Tree HS
Gladewater Center for Community Education
New Diana HS
Gladewater Center for Community Education
New Diana HS