'Career diploma' promises Louisiana high school graduates good jobs -- without four years of college

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After decades of taking a back seat to the college preparatory curriculum, vocational-technical education is on the rise in Louisiana. A proposal to the state education board Friday would rejuvenate the high school "career diploma," promising to open high-paying jobs to graduates - without college.

Although state and national education attention has largely focused on the Common Core academic standards and college, Louisiana Education Superintendent John White has been hammering away at the career education issue for a year. President Barack Obama called for a new focus in his 2013 State of the Union address, praising Germany for "graduating their high school students with the equivalent of a technical degree from one of our community colleges."

White considers the initiative both a moral and business necessity. Only 28 percent of Louisiana's high school students earn an associate's or bachelor's degree in college, according to the state Education Department. Meanwhile, Louisiana's powerhouse industries -- energy, agriculture, commerce -- have jobs that go begging. These jobs don't require a college degree but do demand some advanced technical training.

At the college level, Gov. Bobby Jindal wants to spend $40 million for workplace training, to align coursework with industry needs. That also makes the state more attractive to companies.

At the high school level, the new career diploma and Jump Start career education track could make a world of difference. Schools may start the program as early as this fall. Two years after that, all Louisiana public high schools must participate.

No one would graduate with the diploma until 2018. But one New Orleans school already is showing what a program like this might look like.
NOLA Tech

On Thursday afternoon, David Jones, a senior at Joseph S. Clark Preparatory High, was reviewing basic fractions. "Seven eighths. What's half of that," teacher William Wilson asked. Jones, upbeat with Bart Simpson dreads and a letter jacket, called out the answer.

Jones wasn't in his usual Clark classroom surrounded by 15-year-olds, inspirational slogans and college banners. He was in an unadorned beige classroom at Delgado Community College, working toward a National Center for Construction Education and Research core curriculum certificate. And Wilson was explaining how important it is for a welder or shipfitter to read a tape measure and make mental calculations.

"You have to do that in a hurry on the job," he said. "When I was working in Avondale Shipyard. ..."

At his Treme high school, Jones is part of a small pilot program that this fall will become "NOLA Tech," a school-within-a-school that could enroll a quarter of Clark's sophomores, juniors and seniors.

Nationally, the education reforms of the past 10 years or so have been criticized for concentrating on college, to the exclusion of other options. It was a focus that long seemed appropriate to Jay Altman, chief executive of the FirstLine charter group that took over Clark in 2011. He has spent years running college-prep elementary schools that take students to visit colleges, not shipyards.

But Altman gradually became convinced that New Orleans needed career options. The city had half-day "signature schools" before Hurricane Katrina, plus Rabouin Career Magnet High School. All have since closed. John McDonogh and Landry-Walker are among the few public high schools that offer any vocational options. "We're obviously not meeting the needs of all the students," Altman said.

Some students aren't prepared for college. Others aren't interested and want to be, say, an auto mechanic. Some have repeated grades and want a more grown-up school experience. Some have children to support. "Why wouldn't we help that student be successful?" Clark Principal Reginald Coleman said.
Altman said he is certain the career diploma will pass the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on Friday. But if it didn't, Clark would continue with NOLA Tech anyway.

**Proposed state rules and requirements**

Louisiana already has a career diploma now, requiring a six-course area of concentration. But it "does not necessarily lead to a credential in these areas ... and is often offered in career areas that offer little economic opportunity," Education Department staff wrote in a presentation. Evidence of its ineffectiveness: Only 1 percent of students graduate with it.

In contrast, the new career diploma would require at least nine course units in one of **10 fields**: construction crafts; agriculture, food and natural resources; architecture and construction; arts, audiovisual technology and communication; health science; hospitality and tourism; human services; information technology; manufacturing; transportation, distribution and logistics.

The program must culminate in an approved technical credential that is meaningful to employers. For example, students could earn a National Center for Construction Education and Research Level 1 certificate in carpentry, an American Design Drafting Association apprentice drafting certificate or a National Federation of the Blind certificate in literary Braille transcription.

The options available in a given area will be set by regional Jump Start teams that include representatives of colleges and industry. They will decide what fields need workers locally.

Career diploma students aren't off the hook for conventional academics. Their ninth and 10th grades will be spent in ordinary classrooms. They must take four years of English and mathematics and the ACT college-entrance exam. Like their college-track peers, they must pass end-of-course exams in at least three subjects. Some schools might also require ACT's WorkKeys job skills test.

These academic requirements ideally mean career-diploma students can switch easily back into the college-prep program, should they choose.
The vision for NOLA Tech

At Clark Prep, entry to NOLA Tech will be competitive, with individual interviews to ensure participants are independent enough to handle traveling to and from Delgado on their own. (The school provides bus fare.)

With no regional team yet to shape the program, Clark administrators simply met with business leaders to learn about their workforce needs. FirstLine then chose nine Delgado programs, including pharmacy technician, paramedic, motor vehicle technology and skilled crafts and trades. As with the career diploma, NOLA Tech students will graduate with an approved industry certification.

From those conversations with business leaders, and the pilot, Clark administrators also decided to institute a life skills class for all students. Beginning this fall, the course will include job exploration, generic on-the-job skills and writing college applications.

Sophomore Kerrielle Eaglin wants to be in NOLA Tech, having gotten past her apprehension about the workload. "I think it's like showing me what life is going to be," she said. "If you don't do your homework, that's all on you."

Administrators reassured her the courses would be manageable. "I don't like challenges but I'll take this one. Because I need to graduate and be something," she said.

For Jones, the Clark senior, NOLA Tech worked in a way regular high school didn't. "I didn't really like school, so at one point in time I was going to stop going to school. I was going to get my GED," he said. NOLA Tech, he said, turned his life "360, all the way around."

In fact, he presented it as a no-brainer. "Start early in life and get a free college education," he said. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me."

A perennial concern with career education is whether students might gettracked one way or another depending on their socioeconomic status. For example, would a teenager in a wealthy school be counseled to major in engineering in college, while a student at a high-poverty school like Clark be directed to a vocational welding program.
Coleman, the principal, said it didn't have to be either/or. Clark graduates with technical certifications can continue with college - and get better-paying jobs to support themselves during those years.

That's what both Jones and Eaglin envisioned for themselves. "I'm going to continue with the welding. And I'm also going to take engineering (in college) so I can have the upper hand in both," Jones said. Eaglin wants to graduate from Clark with a health sciences certification then pursue nursing at college or in the military.

Coleman is a licensed electrician and certified pharmacy technician himself. "My purpose in doing this is to give students options," he said.

He didn't know what the state's career diploma program was called, but he unknowingly used the Education Department's language anyway: "This is for them to get that jump start."

### Proposed basic career diploma requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject area</th>
<th>Number of units</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>4 units, including English I and II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>4 units, including Algebra I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>2 units, including Biology I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>2 units, including U.S. History and two of the following: Civics, Economics, U.S. Government and Politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Education/Health</td>
<td>2 units</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jump Start classes, workplace-based learning</td>
<td>9 units</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACT exam</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Approved statewide or regional technical credential</td>
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*Louisiana Department of Education*