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## Middle College

### **Rell Plan To Merge Technical High Schools, Community Colleges Controversial**

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One of the most intriguing, and puzzling, ideas proposed by Gov. M. Jodi Rell in her budget address Feb. 4 was the merger of the state's technical high schools and community colleges into a "middle college" system.

Capitol wags quickly dubbed it the "Middle-earth" proposal. It made some people nervous because state officials said it would save \$4 million and cut 22 jobs in the next two years. But other educators called it a brilliant idea that would give 10,000 technical high school students a seamless transition to associate's degrees and good jobs in such fields as green technology and health care.

"This is too elegant an idea to not make it work," state Education Commissioner Mark McQuillan said.

Some Democratic legislators, however, called the idea "slapdash" and "dreadful." They said Rell's proposal doesn't follow the true spirit of middle colleges, in which high school students and college students learn together on the same campus. They wondered how it would save money if students from the 17 technical high schools would be bused to the 12 community colleges, some of which are 20 miles apart.

Connecticut now has no middle colleges resembling Rell's proposal — combining technical high school students and community college students from different campuses. The state does have at least three public middle colleges combining regular high school and college students on the same campus. At some middle colleges in Connecticut and elsewhere, students graduate having earned enough credits for the first year of college for free.

Asked if Rell's merger proposal would fly, state Rep. Andrew Fleischmann, D- West Hartford, said, "If you took the front end of a Cessna and the back end of a 747 and mashed them together, will it fly? You can ask the same thing here."

Whatever the prospects of Rell's idea, those who operate middle colleges in Hartford, Manchester and Danielson are pleased the proposal has focused attention on the innovative way they're serving a growing number of students.

"I think it's an idea that's long overdue," said Steve Perry, principal of Capital Preparatory Magnet School at Capital Community College in Hartford.

## **What's A Middle College?**

The middle college movement traces its beginnings to 1974, when the New York City school board and LaGuardia Community College in Queens started one. It operates today with about 465 students.

The idea of middle, or early, colleges has gained momentum in recent years as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has funded a number of schools.

Under Rell's proposal, none of the technical high schools or community colleges would be closed.

The new system would operate under a Middle College Board, to be staffed by the state Office for Workforce Competitiveness, which would offer advice on the jobs that are in demand in the state. The technical high schools and the community colleges would continue to have two separate boards.

Michael Webb, of Jobs for the Future, which coordinates the early college initiative nationally for the Gates Foundation, said Michigan, Texas and North Carolina have statewide programs similar to Rell's idea.

In North Carolina, high school students can earn an associate's degree or a technical certificate, such as in plumbing or computer graphics, while still in high school.

A recent Nellie Mae Education Foundation study found that a middle college system can give students more varied career paths for the 48 percent of today's jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree.

That's similar to what's happening at Capital Prep, Great Path Academy at Manchester Community and Quinebaug Valley Community College in Danielson, which opened a middle college in September with 34 high school sophomores.

"The promise of the middle college is if you raise the expectations for behavior and achievement, you get better results and the students can make it to college," said Dianne Williams, Quinebaug Valley's president.

Not all middle colleges are the same. Some started as dropout prevention programs. Others are more academic and aimed at creative, independent thinkers. Some attract high school students who want to save money by taking free college courses.

"Earning 20 college credits for free in high school is a huge savings," Williams said.

Because Great Path, Capital Prep and Quinebaug Valley's Middle College High School are all regional magnet schools — with students enrolled through a lottery — they don't always attract students who are immediately ready for college, she said.

Since high school students tend to be boisterous, that can require an adjustment for the older college students, she said.

## **At Great Path**

On Friday, Brittany Kingsbury sat in the sunny atrium at Great Path in Manchester working on a pen-and-ink drawing for a class.

A 16-year-old junior from East Hartford, she's taking art history and filmmaking at MCC. She'll likely graduate with more than the first year of college already done.

At Great Path, which has 160 students in grades 10, 11 and 12, students can earn college credit if they get at least a C in certain high school classes or take MCC classes as juniors and seniors if they can pass placement tests, said Great Path's Principal Thomas M. Danehy.

The school is a much better fit for her than East Hartford High School was, both socially and academically, Kingsbury said.

"It's miles and leaps so much better," she said. "There's no drama, and students are on good terms with each other here."

She said she fit in well in her classes with MCC students.

"I've made friends with people who are 18 and 19," Kingsbury said. "I feel like I'm with my peers finally."

Nearby, Melissa Wright, 17, from East Hartford, was studying for her anatomy class.

She already has been accepted to the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford and will graduate in June with about 27 college credits.

Wright said her professors and her MCC classmates didn't realize she was a high school student until she told them early in the semester.

Great Path students need to be mature to handle its open campus, located in a wing at MCC, she said.

"You can get much more freedom here," she said. "You get to be more responsible."

About half of Great Path students, who graduate with an average of 30 credits, go on to attend MCC, while about half enroll at four-year colleges, Danehy said. The school will expand to 250 students next year when it moves into a \$32 million new addition. Districts pay \$3,000 a year for each student sent to Great Path.

Austin Pelletier, a 17-year-old senior from Coventry, has been accepted at the University of Connecticut, and has an interview at Dartmouth College this week. Since Great Path is a magnet school with integration requirements under the Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation agreement, it has 58 students from Hartford, including many students of color from the city and the suburbs.

That was a nice benefit of going to the school, said Pelletier, who is white.

"In Coventry, it felt like I was with a lot of the same people," he said. "This is more like a real situation."

Nicole Varney from Bolton, whose daughter Kailey Vale is a sophomore at Great Path, is glad Rell wants to extend the middle college idea.

"The open campus gives kids a chance to see what college is like, but it keeps the structure of high school," Varney said.

## **Pros And Cons**

Marc S. Herzog, chancellor of the Connecticut Community Colleges, welcomes the idea of aligning technical schools and the colleges to train students for jobs, but pointed out that the community colleges are already responsive to workforce needs. He also was concerned that the concept of middle college would too narrowly focus the more comprehensive purpose of the colleges.

"The mission of community colleges is a broader mission than meeting the needs of the workforce," he said, adding that the colleges also provide community service and student support services, as well as a bridge to four-year colleges.

State Rep. Roberta B. Willis, D-Salisbury, has called the proposal "dreadful."

Officials have worked for years to iron out transfer agreements between the community colleges, Connecticut State University and UConn, and Rell's idea could undermine those efforts, said Willis, co-chairwoman of the higher education and employment advancement committee.

"I worry this would diminish the community colleges," she said. "The universities would view these students as 13th- or 14th-graders, rather than as college-ready students."

She's not sure Rell's idea will make it through the legislature.

"If I was a betting woman, I would say I don't see the political will to move forward on it this year," she said.

Jeffrey Beckham, a spokesman for OPM, said Rell wanted to build on the success of middle colleges like Great Path and Capital Prep.

"We're always looking for innovations," he said.

Though many of the colleges and high schools are not right next door, most of them are fairly close together, so that should not be a problem, he said.

In response to the Democratic legislators, Beckham said, "The intent was not to mash things together but to build on something that already works and spread it across the state."

•*Courant staff writer Grace E. Merritt contributed to this story.*

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