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EDUCATION

'Middle College' System Proposed

Merger Would Aid Tech Students

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A big surprise in Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposed budget Wednesday was the proposed merger of the state's technical high schools with its community colleges into a new "middle college" system.

Robert Genuario, Rell's budget director, said it would give 10,000 technical school students free college courses and training for careers in health care, early childhood programs, computer support, automotive technology and "green" technology. The streamlined approach is designed to improve graduation rates and career prospects for these students while also meeting the state's labor needs.

The merger, which would put both systems under the state Office of Workforce Competitiveness, would save the state \$4 million over the next two years, Genuario said.

The middle colleges would be modeled on Great Path Academy at Manchester Community College and Capital Preparatory Magnet School at Capital Community College in Hartford.

While some educators were excited by the idea, a key legislator said it seemed rushed. "It's a rather slap-dash proposal," said state Rep. Andrew Fleischmann, D- West Hartford, co-chairman of the state legislature's education committee. "The governor is proposing to take two excellent systems and mash them together without a clear plan."

Higher Education Commissioner Michael Meotti called the concept "intriguing" but said it raises questions about governance.

"It really is a challenge of management and operation to make it work," he said. "It's a completely new idea in Connecticut."

Michael Webb, of Jobs for the Future, which coordinates the Early College High School Initiative nationally for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, said there are similar programs in Michigan, Texas and North Carolina.

North Carolina runs an initiative called Learn and Earn that gives high school students a chance to take college courses, mostly technically oriented, while in high school. Students can earn an associate degree or a technical certificate in such areas as plumbing or computer graphics while in high school.

"I think it's a brilliant idea," said Steve Perry, principal of Capital Prep, a school for 270 Hartford-area children in grades 6 to 12 that is located at Capital Community College. "Eighty-seven percent of our seniors graduate with the first year of college already done."

Capital Prep students have gone on to such four-year colleges as Wesleyan University, the University of Connecticut, Mount Holyoke College and Amherst College.

"Our children are able to prove they're college ready because they've already done college work," Perry said.

Gena Glickman, president of Manchester Community College, wants more details but sees a benefit in the middle college idea.

"I'm always interested in what's good for students," she said. "The Great Path students who come to us are very successful."

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