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“Soft Skills” Give Students An Edge

With advice from employers, high schools pilot Career Prep Certificate

A new certificate program being piloted in 29 Missouri schools this fall emphasizes the need for students to develop soft skills alongside their academics.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) launched the Career Prep Certificate Program in response to 2006 state legislation that required the development of a “ready-to-work” endorsement program. Members of the business community and the education community worked together to determine the components of the voluntary program.

The 29 schools piloting the program are spread across four projects, three in individual school districts and one a consortium made up of 22 schools in East Central Missouri. While most of the pilots are using this year to plan and promote the program, there will be seniors who graduate in May with the new Career Prep Certificate, in addition to their regular diploma.

The exact requirements for the certificates will vary across the pilot projects because each certificate will be tailored to the needs and desires of area businesses. However, all of the certificates will include some assessment of soft skills, such as attendance habits, professional and ethical behavior, and interpersonal skills, along with traditional academic indicators such as grades, test scores, and occupational training and certification. Certificates could also include information about graduates’ community service hours, extracurricular activities, awards and honors.

Meanwhile, a new report to be released from the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC) in October stresses the importance of soft skills. The most common shortcomings of recent job applicants, as reported by Missouri employers, involve a lack of such skills as attitude, work ethic and customer service.

“Everyone says kids need the basics, and we agree,” said Steve Coffman, director of Employment Training at DESE. “But in today’s world, the ‘new basics’ include applied skills and people skills, such as communication, critical thinking and problem-solving — not just the three Rs. Through the Career Prep Certificate Program, we’re making sure students know what employers expect, and we’re providing employers with a tool to ensure chosen applicants are ready for the workforce.”

The Four Pilot Projects

1. Fort Osage School District, Independence
2. Maryville School District
3. North Kansas City School District
4. East Central Consortium (22 schools)

Belle High School, Bourbon High School, Cuba High School, Four Rivers Career Center, Hermann High School, John F. Hodge High School (St. James), Licking High School, New Haven High School, Newburg High School, Owensville High School, Pacific High School, Rolla High School, Rolla Technical Institute/Center, Salem High School, St. Clair High School, Steelville High School, Sullivan High School, Union High School, Vienna High School, Warrenton High School, Washington High School, Wright City High School

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Full news release, fact sheet, graphs, and more information are available at www.dese.mo.gov/divcareered/missouri_connections_news_room.htm

The Missouri Connections Public Outreach Partnership workgroup represents a collaboration of state agencies concerned with education and workforce development who are helping inform and build awareness among the public, particularly students and potential students, of targeted careers, educational and industry trends, and workforce development priorities. Workgroup members represent the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Department of Higher Education; Department of Economic Development, Division of Workforce Development and Missouri Economic Research & Information Center; Missouri Center for Career Education; and Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Freelance writer is Anita Harrison.