

Education chief pushes tech study options
Thursday, January 27, 2011
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ALBANY — State Education Commissioner David Steiner questions why all students need to pass five Regents exams — math, English, global history and geography, U.S. history and government and science — to graduate.

If a student is strong in one area of study and not another, it does not make sense for the subject matter to be forced down his throat, he said.

No other industrialized country does this, Steiner said. Such an approach is turning off students and in some cases leading them to drop out of school. As an example, Steiner cited his own stepson who barely got through high school. However, now he is a paramedic and loves his field.

“Once he got into a really good technical program that showed what was waiting for him on the other end, he was studying like crazy. It was a transformation because he knew what he wanted to do,” Steiner said Thursday. He spoke at the 2011 Criminal Justice Studies/Technical Education Career Instructors Conference held at the Holiday Inn in Albany.

Among the proposals that the Board of Regents is considering is allowing students to substitute one of those five exams for a test in a career and technical education area of study such as criminal justice. One idea, Steiner said, is to require all students to take a math and English Regents exam but then allow them to choose some combination of the other subjects, which could include a vocational component.

He encouraged organizations like CJS/TECH to give their thoughts to state education officials about these proposed changes, which the Board of Regents is scheduled to act on in March or April.

“We need to hear your best ideas of how to ensure the quality of [career and technical education] programs so they can legitimately take their place alongside English, math, history and science as a graduation requirement,” he said.

Another idea is to allow students to earn school credit if they demonstrate competency in the subject — even if they have not taken the class.

“What if you could have gotten an ‘A’ on the first day? Why are you going through this instead of moving on to something that really challenges you?” Steiner said.

He said that school districts develop individualized educational programs (IEPs) for special-education students, so it should not be any different for all students.

The United States has created a tiered approach to education. English and math are in the top tier because students take standardized tests in those subjects and the results are used to determine whether the schools are making adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.

The other subjects like science and social studies are in the second tier and in the bottom tier are foreign languages, the arts and vocational studies. That needs to change, he said.

Also, the state should rethink how it defines instruction.

“We have got to escape this idea that education is a 50-minute period in a room with four walls. It’s a 24-7 opportunity with all the resources — physical, economic, geographic, industrial in this state available to kids.”

He also expressed support for pushing back the start time of high school to 10 a.m. because teenagers learn better later in the day.

About 50 criminal justice educators from around the state are attending the three-day event.

BOCES has one- and two-year programs in schools that cover a wide variety of topics including fingerprinting, radio communications, forensics and investigations, according to Doug Leavens, director of career and technical education at the Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex BOCES. These classes give students an edge when they get to college.

The group is continuing to work to raise the profile of criminal justice education.

“You can’t turn on the news now without seeing something that involves criminal justice studies,” he said.
