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Forced to Pick a Major in High School

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ENGLEWOOD, N.J. — Ninth graders often have trouble selecting what clothes to wear to school each morning or what to have for lunch. But starting this fall, freshmen at Dwight Morrow High School here in Bergen County must declare a major that will determine what electives they take for four years and be noted on their diplomas.

For Dwight Morrow, a school that has struggled with low test scores and racial tensions for years, establishing majors is a way to make their students stay interested until graduation and stand out in the hypercompetitive college admissions process.

Some parents have welcomed the requirement, noting that a magnet school in the district already allowed some students to specialize. But other parents and some educators have criticized it as preprofessionalism run amok or a marketing gimmick.

“I thought high school was about finding what you liked to do,” said Kendall Eatman, an Englewood mother of six who was president of the Dwight Morrow student body before graduating in 1978. “I think it’s too early to be so rigid.”

Debra Humphreys, a spokeswoman for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, called high-school majors “a colossally bad idea,” saying youngsters should instead concentrate on developing a broad range of critical thinking and communication skills.

“Today’s economy requires people to be constantly learning and changing,” Ms. Humphreys said. “A lot of jobs that high school students are likely to have 10 years from now don’t yet exist, so preparing too narrowly will not serve them well.”

Despite such naysayers, a number of school districts around the country are experimenting with high school majors, an outgrowth of the popular “career academies” that have become commonplace nationally, and in New York City, over the past decade. But while many career academies simply add a few courses to a broad core curriculum, majors require individual students to make a more serious commitment to a particular educational path.

Starting this month, Florida districts will require every ninth grader to major in one of more than 400 state-approved subjects, ranging from world cultures to fashion design to family and consumer sciences. South Carolina enacted a similar law last year, designating 16 career clusters, including architecture, government and agriculture.

In Mississippi, a $5 million pilot program in 14 districts this fall will have ninth graders following one of seven career paths, like construction and manufacturing or science, technology, engineering and math.

The Southern Regional Education Board, a nonprofit organization started by governors, said that of the 1,200 high schools it works with in 32 states, about half now require students to specialize, though not all have gone so far as to require majors. In New York City, where the small schools movement has spawned Food and Finance High School and the Academy of Hospitality and Tourism, education officials said that a handful of other schools that focus on business, science or math have established majors for their students.

“This is like the middle-class version of what affluent families have been doing for years,” said Mitchell Stevens, an associate professor of education and sociology at New York University, who sees the move as a way for public schools to provide a broader menu of educational choices. “They tailor academic instruction around the needs and desires of their children in order to encourage them to do well in school.”

Here in Englewood, every eighth-grader already works with a guidance counselor to formulate a six-year academic career plan that stretches through the first year of college. Elementary-school classrooms are named Harvard, Yale and Rutgers. The district’s 1,063 high school students attend classes in Gothic-style buildings on a 40-acre campus named for Dwight Morrow, a former senator and diplomat whose daughter, Anne, married Charles Lindbergh.

Surrounded by top-performing school districts, Dwight Morrow’s students have scored below the state average on basic skills tests. In the 2005-6 school year, 79.6 percent passed the state reading test and 65.4 percent the math test, compared with 83.5 percent and 75.9 percent statewide.

District officials said they are establishing the majors to personalize the learning experience and engage students, and because college admissions officers have said over the years that they favor students with expertise in particular areas since it demonstrates commitment and passion.

“We need to stay ahead of what traditional high schools are doing,” said the superintendent, Carol A. Lisa. “We felt in this district we had to level the playing field so our children could compete and go to top schools.”

Michael A. Polizzi, an assistant superintendent, said the district carefully researched future demand for jobs, examined college programs and surveyed students about their interests before settling on its first six majors: sports management, fine and performing arts, health sciences, international studies and global commerce, communications and new media and or liberal arts. In 2008, the school plans to add environmental studies and a “preteaching institute.”

Nicole Hutchison, 14, starting at Dwight Morrow next month, likes to make people feel better, so she imagines herself becoming a doctor, nurse or cosmetologist. But she picked performing arts because she loves to dance — and, she said, because she had not given much thought to the other options. “I think I’m too young to make a decision because I might change my mind later on,” she said.

While this fall marks the debut of majors here, Englewood has been experimenting with specialization since 2002, when the district created a magnet program to attract white students from surrounding districts, under the district’s efforts to desegregate. Today, three quarters of the high school students are black or Hispanic, and 60 percent poor enough to qualify for free and reduced lunches.

With more than 400 high-achieving students enrolled, the program —housed in its own building on the Dwight Morrow campus — offers concentrations in engineering, law and public safety, biomedicine, finance,

and information systems.

Glenn Garrison, the Englewood school board president, said the magnet's success sparked jealousy from parents, who requested a similar program in the traditional high school. He and other district officials said they had not received a single complaint about the move to require majors.

"When we went to high school, we majored in boys," said one supportive parent, Annette Miller, who has a 10-year-old in fifth grade in Englewood. "I think it's a good thing for them to be more serious. Have fun in the elementary schools."

The district has spent about $250,000 so far to accommodate the new specialties, hiring five additional teachers, reorganizing the existing faculty, and setting up advisory boards for each track that include performing artists, doctors and lawyers for the National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball. A speaker series will also bring professionals into classrooms: The comedians David Feldman and Rick Overton, alumni of the high school, are scheduled to conduct a comedy writing workshop in October.

"It eliminates the phrase, 'I'm never going to need that when I grow up,'" said Randy Sherry, a technology teacher, who sees majors as a way to emphasize real-life experiences. "I don't want to just throw education at them. I want them to be here for something they like, and that's what the majors can do."

Students entering the ninth grade applied for majors last spring by submitting essays about why they wanted to specialize in a particular field (the most popular was sports management). Every student was assigned their first or second choices; they are expected to stick with their major through four years unless they have a compelling reason to change.

Students will take a minimum of one course in their major every trimester, in addition to state-mandated requirements in core subjects. Performing arts majors like Nicole will also spend an extra hour a day in school to accommodate rehearsals.

Nicole's mother, Georgette Hutchison, said she liked the concept of majors, but wondered whether it was "premature" for ninth graders to make such choices. "I don't know what they're expecting out of these 14-year-olds," said Mrs. Hutchison, who drives a school bus. "I think they're going to have a lot of 'I changed my mind.' "

Akelia Morrison already has.

Two years ago, Akelia applied to the magnet program's law and public safety academy because she wanted to be a lawyer. But after finding many of the legal cases boring and hard to relate to, she was unable to take classes in other fields because she was locked into her specialization.

"Now I wish I had probably gone to another academy because I like computers," said Akelia, who is 16 and starting her junior year. "When you're 13, you don't realize how much work you have to put in to be a lawyer. It's not like you just go to court, and win or lose, you make a lot of money."