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High school graduates found lacking in job skills

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NEW YORK - As lawmakers and educators struggle to improve high schools in the United States, businesses and labor unions say they are alarmed that even job seekers with diplomas can't function in the workplace.

It's a problem, they say, that threatens to cripple American productivity at home and competition abroad.

Discouraged by the work habits of many new employees, a handful of states, led by New York, are working to create a nationally recognized "work readiness" credential. Proponents say the credential would certify that a prospective employee understands the importance of "soft skills" such as punctuality, a willingness to accept supervision and an ability to work in a group.

"You'd think people would know to call in sick when they're not coming to work, but that's not always the case," said Michael Kauffman, an executive at Anoplate Corp., a 175-employee metal manufacturer in Syracuse, N.Y. "We're having many more problems than in the past getting people who understand what it means to work in an office or a factory."

At a state job training and education center in New York City, the state's Workforce Investment Board recently began testing a "work readiness" exam developed by SRI International, a research group based in California.

Tests will also be held in Florida, New Jersey, Washington and Rhode Island, as well as the District of Columbia, all of which contributed funds to develop the exam.

Job seekers enrolled at the Brooklyn Educational Opportunity Center will be given a two- to three-hour exam that will check for reading and math skills in addition to speaking and listening habits. They will also be given "situational judgment" questions to gauge probable work performance.

Organizers say the credential should be ready by spring 2006 and would be administered by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in conjunction with local chapters and state agencies. Whether it would be required for high school students, said the chamber's Sondra Stein, would be up to individual states.

In March, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce took over responsibility for a federal program called Equipped for the Future, hiring the Department of Labor official who had previously administered it.

Skeptics of a work-readiness credential warn that it could distract students and educators away from "hard skills."

Phyllis Eisen of the Washington-based National Association of Manufacturers, counters that while schools should always focus first on hard skills, those alone are no guarantee that younger workers can move into high-tech factory jobs.

Employers polled by the National Association of Manufacturers in 2001 said that while 32 percent of job applicants had inadequate reading and writing skills, 69 percent lacked basic employability skills such as reading with understanding, speaking clearly, actively listening and resolving conflict.

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