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Horne wants education plan for each kid

Program would set goals for high school, beyond

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Once, it was enough for teachers to ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Now, if a proposed law passes, teachers would have to sit down with every seventh- through 12th-grader in Arizona and draw up a customized education plan.

Arizona schools chief Tom Horne is proposing that each student in those grades have a personal learning plan by 2011. It would be reviewed and updated at least once a year by parents and teachers. By 2013, every plan would be required to be accessible on a statewide Web site.

The purpose is to ensure that an educator sits down with every student, smart or struggling, and talks to him or her regularly about a course of study and what happens after high school.

Now, many kids rarely meet with guidance counselors, who are overwhelmed. Arizona averages one counselor for every 783 students, one of the highest ratios in the country.

Personal learning plans are part of a national high school reform movement, and 19 states are phasing the plans into their schools. Horne will try to sell the idea to lawmakers Wednesday during his State of Education speech. He needs \$400,000 this year to get personal learning plans started. He will need the same amount over each of the next two years.

The bill is being sponsored by Rep. Mark Anderson, a Mesa Republican and chairman of the House Education Committee.

The personal learning plan would be a big change for many schools.

Study plans at most schools traditionally begin with individual or groups of students meeting with a school counselor in the transition year between eighth and ninth grades. Each child's transcript is checked again in the senior year to make sure every student has enough credits to graduate or go to college.

The personal learning plan would go further.

Besides counselors working with students, teachers would also have to assume the

role of academic guidance counselor, checking a child's academic progress and helping focus on realistic career paths. Motivation would be a goal.

If a child wants to be a veterinarian, he or she must be told it is tough to get into college with fifth-grade reading skills and a transcript full of D's. He would be guided to do better.

The upside to the plan: It could push students to be more active in deciding what they are learning and understand why they are learning it. And it would get parents involved.

The downside: It would create more work for teachers. The money sought by Horne covers some statewide teacher training, but former Tucson Unified head counselor Judy Bowers said she wonders whether it would be enough. Many teachers may be uninformed about the details of getting kids into college, post-high school technical programs or building a resume on line. Bowers supports the individual plan but prefers that the money be spent on adding trained career counselors.

"Teachers are busy as it is. I'm not sure we should give teachers more things to do," she said.

Counselors also are overwhelmed.

Bueno High School in Sierra Vista, for example, has six counselors for 2,800 students, which is about the national average and a good rate for Arizona. Mark Boggie, head counselor and an Arizona School Counselor Association board member, said schools usually do a great job with seniors and a "pretty good" with freshmen.

"It's those middle years that sort of fall through the cracks," he said.

Some schools have such learning plans in place.

A program similar to what Horne wants is running at Glendale High School. Despite a 420-student caseload, counselors meet each year with students in groups and one-on-one to update the child's personal learning plan. The Web-based system includes career testing, links to career information and job mentors, colleges and technical schools and financial aid.

Head counselor Jeanine Phillips is integrating some counseling work into lesson plans, such as working with teachers to help students write essays about careers and learn how to write a good resume.

Next, Phillips would like to introduce the system into elementary schools that feed into Glendale High and help train teachers to guide students.

"If we're really going to touch the kids and make a difference in their lives, this is what we'll have to do," Phillips said.

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