

PK20 initiative seeks seamless education

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Alabama's educational system has a lot of holes for students to fall through, according to officials with the Alabama Commission on Higher Education.

A new ACHE initiative would seek to plug those leaks by coordinating schools and education initiatives into a seamless support system. The system would track students from pre-kindergarten through grade 20.

The goals are to align state and national education resources, improve early learning opportunities and expand access to college or employment opportunities.

The proposal would also involve sharing student transcripts electronically between high schools and colleges. The ease of access would allow guidance counselors to better gauge what a student must do to prepare for certain careers.

ACHE Executive Director Gregory Fitch says the system will not compromise student privacy because each student will have a special encrypted code.

"ACHE would consolidate the information so all (educators) would be able to see is aggregate data," Fitch said. "They wouldn't be able to see in third grade Jimmy had a problem with X. That information would be internal to the operation."

It will give students better support as they move through Alabama's educational system, he said.

"Let's say you're going through school right now," Fitch said. "... They transfer to another elementary school. That transcript is immediately sent with them. The counselor and the teacher will immediately have that transcript; as the child ages and moves through the program anything that's added or deleted will be immediately available to the counselor."

Like electronic medical records, these academic records will be an account of a student's educational history. When students get ready for college and start asking what they will need to get there, the system will give some of the answers, Fitch said.

"The counselor will be able to go online with what the student has, send it to the college, and an

immediate assessment can be made," Fitch said.

ACHE already has access to aggregate data on students from ninth grade through graduate school. The new database would extend this information all the way back to preschool and add electronic transcripts, he said. Fitch views the database as a recruiting tool that could aid with economic development in the state.

"So with that idea in mind we're able to go back and tell business and industry, and say right now if you have a demand in your company for engineers this is how many we have in our database that are taking engineering courses so we can give an aggregate number," Fitch said. "That's beneficial in your projections and your development of business."

Fitch and ACHE requested \$1.5 million to cover startup costs for the PK20 project from the Legislature this year, but didn't receive funding for it.

Fitch is proposing a PK20 council that would study the idea. He said he is hoping to address the new initiative with Gov. Bob Riley and get him to issue an executive order supporting PK20. It would include representatives of educational organizations, two- and four-year colleges, businesses and parents.

"I really see business as a key player, because we're preparing our graduates for higher education and employment," Fitch said.

Local educators said they were interested in hearing more about ACHE's proposed initiative.

"It would be good for us, just because when students transfer from one school to another we get a file on kids, and some schools keep more records than others do, and most of the time you don't get very much," Jacksonville City Schools Superintendent Eric Mackey said. "So if you had an electronic way of keeping up with those things and getting kids' academic records — that would be great."

Calhoun County Schools Superintendent Judy Stiefel said she had heard of the idea, but didn't know much about it. She added that she's for anything that would help students.

Jacksonville State University President Bill Meehan said while he isn't familiar with the proposal, he is a proponent of a "seamless" education system for Alabama students.

"Anything we can do to assist them is important," Meehan said.