

SSISD: Eighth graders now declaring 'majors' as they enter high school

Written by By FAITH HUFFMAN, News-Telegram News Editor, faith@ssecho.com
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Toward the end of the spring semester each year, eighth graders are asked to complete a four-year class plan, which not only directs what classes they will be assigned to as freshmen, but also the rest of their high school careers.

SSHS Endorsements and Focus Areas



This year, when eighth graders filled out their forms, they were asked not only to select which plan but also to do what college students are asked to do, essentially declare a major.

The change is thanks to House Bill 5, a more than 100-page document with 84 sections passed by the 83rd Texas Legislature, which includes numerous educational changes from beginning classes through graduation and post secondary preparation.

One component of HB5 established a single graduation plan called the Foundation High School Plan under which students earn “endorsements,” a distinguished level of achievement and performance acknowledgements for dual or college academic courses completed while in high school.

Incoming freshmen must declare an “endorsement” or major in one of five areas: science, technology engineering and mathematics or STEM for short; business and industry; public service; arts and humanities; or multidisciplinary. Each endorsement includes a particular career focus area designed to help prepare the student for a particular career field, Sulphur Springs High School counselors noted in a letter to parents on SSHS’ page on the district website.

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While this year's freshmen, sophomores and juniors have the option of staying with their current established plan — either minimum, recommended or distinguished high school plan — or switching to the foundation high school plan as they finish out their high school education, eighth graders were required to make choices and turn in a parent-signed completed FHSP.

According to SSHS Principal Josh Williams, the emphasis behind the plan is college and career readiness, to make students more prepared for the next step in life following high school graduation, whether that's entering or continuing in the workforce to support themselves and/or a family or going to college or a trade school to obtain a degree or certification in a chosen path. FHSP is also a tool to help reduce dropout rates by keeping students interested in school and, where possible, allowing them to enter the workforce with training or skills that could give them that extra boost above minimum wage or pad their resume.

"The thought is this is your major, this is your focus. If you focus students' interests — what they like to do — they'll be better at it, try harder," Williams said.

SSHS students will still have to get 22 regular credits, plus five elective classes — at least four of which must satisfy the endorsement curriculum requirements in their area of interest — or a minimum of 27 credits completed in order for 2017-2018 SSHS seniors to graduate. Those basic 22 classes would include a physical education credit, government and economics, and a personal health and finance credit.

The half credit each of personal fitness and finance goes a little bit further than the usual health class. It teaches them about calories and how to treat their bodies. The finance class will teach things such as interest rates, how to buy a house, 401Ks, paycheck advances and balancing a checkbook and other life skills that should help them better prepare for life after high school.

Selecting an endorsement may sound like a lot to ask of eighth graders — especially when some high school graduates and college students aren't sure what they want to do, but Williams said staff and counselors have spent a lot of time this year with eighth graders, trying to advise them and help them find the best option with their interests.

In fact, Williams said 90 percent of Sulphur Springs eighth graders have taken a high school success career cruiser class and survey to assess their interests and explore focuses. All

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eighth graders, Williams said, have sat with school staff to work on a plan that directs them toward an area they are interested in, then develop a four year high school plan around that focus. Counselors have worked with the students to help them fit their interests to the available options.

The business and industry endorsement includes focuses in agriculture — animal science, welding or plant systems; finance/accounting; hospitality and tourism culinary arts; marketing; arts/audio visual — newspaper, yearbook or broadcast news; information technology —programming, digital and interactive media, or computer maintenance and networking; transportation — collision repair or auto repair; and business management and administration.

The arts and humanities endorsement focuses on foreign language — specifically Spanish, French or both Spanish and French; music — instrumental or vocal; theatre arts; dance; art; and social studies.

The public service endorsement focuses on health science; education and training; or law, public safety, corrections and security.

The STEM endorsement focuses on math and science while a multidisciplinary endorsement would include a basic or advanced placement class focus.

In other words, if a student is interested in math, he'd select a STEM focus and select options based on the plan. If a student is interested in welding, she would be directed to the business and industry endorsement with a welding focus. The graduation plans (available on SSHS' page on www.ssisd.net) would show the basic courses needed, then those available for that focus.

And, if a student takes a class in his selected area freshman year and finds he doesn't like it, the student's plan would be "tweaked" his sophomore year to reflect a different focus. There's no set-in-stone plan; students' plans can be adjusted based on the students' changing interests and needs. And, if students as upperclassmen still haven't found a solid endorsement fit, they can always pick interdisciplinary studies then take a couple more basic or advanced placement classes.

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What classes are offered and how frequently will be determined by student interest as reflected annually in their plans. Williams said the school would ultimately like to be able to offer capstone courses, potentially industry certification or experience students can add to their resumes.

The district plans to continue partnering with Paris Junior College to offer even more opportunities for students in technical fields and college level courses. Williams said another area that's being explored is working with other school districts within Hopkins County to make more options available to SSHS and other county students.

Under FHSP, all students will be required to take and pass English I, English II, Algebra I, biology, U.S. History end of course exams, complete the FHSP and at least one endorsement.

"A big piece of House Bill 5 is college prep courses. Kids have to take five EOCs — STAARs," Williams said.

Students on the distinguished achievement plan will still have to take algebra II.

"There will be a few who can't be successful in Algebra II. But the others are perfectly capable of taking this," Williams said. "A 15-year-old may not know if they are going to college. We have PSP — post secondary prep — and CP— college prep classes. The TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills] are the same for both. To differentiate, the college prep are more rigorous. The other PSP, they get a little more help at the same time."

Students struggling in Algebra II might be put in a college prep class — saving them having to take a remedial math course prior to starting required algebra course work at the college level.

The distinguished achievement plan will also require students to take a total of four math classes (including algebra II), four science credits, and the other foundation plan curriculum requirements, and at least one endorsement. Students must earn distinguished achievement to be eligible for top 10 percent automatic college admission requirements.

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In addition to the distinguished achievement and endorsement, students may also earn performance acknowledgments on their diplomas or transcripts for outstanding performance in dual credit courses; bilingualism and bi-literacy by demonstrating proficiency in two or more languages; earn a three or higher on a college board advanced placement test; high scores on PSAT, SAT or ACT tests; or earning a nationally or internationally recognized business or industrial certification or license, according to the SSHS Graduation Plans Guide updated April 22.

To view or download the 40 page graduation guide, go to the the SSHS campus page on www.ssisd.net then click the "Graduation Plans" option on the left hand menu.