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U-46 leaders vetting ideas for additional high school academies

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

Elgin Area School District U-46 students soon might be able to pursue careers in health care, tourism, government and the military while still in high school.

Officials propose creating new high school academies or pathways providing students the opportunity to experience more integrated and project-based learning. New academies could be established as early as the freshman class of the 2020-21 and enroll 400 to 600 students each.

Administrators will update the school board on possible new educational career pathways June 4.

There are 16 in-demand [career clusters](#) based on national trends. Among the academy ideas: hospitality and tourism; government, public administration and safety, including ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps); education, training and human services; business, management, marketing and finance; engineering; manufacturing, transportation, distribution and logistics; and health care sciences.

"No final decision has been made on particular strands of focus," U-46 CEO Tony Sanders said. "We are trying to align to the business and industry that's in this region and what jobs will be coming forward. So many districts are doing this exact same thing."

Sanders said officials are seeking input from parents and the U-46 Citizens' Advisory Council to help vet ideas.

Revise current programs

Among the 11,346 students in U-46's five high schools this year, 1,322 are enrolled in subject-specific academies.

They are: Broadcast Education and Communication Networks (BEACON) Academy at South Elgin High; Gifted and Talented Academy at Elgin High; Science, Engineering and High Technology Academy at Bartlett High; Visual and Performing Arts Academy at Larkin High in Elgin; and World Languages and International Studies Academy at Streamwood High. Those programs are under review and expected to continue at least through 2021.

The BEACON Academy is getting an upgrade with new equipment and a revised curriculum to be implemented during the 2019-20 school year, focusing on digital media and including work-based learning experiences. The Gifted and Talented Academy could offer an [International Baccalaureate](#) program next school year. Officials also are trying to distinguish Bartlett's STEM Academy, which is built around Project Lead the Way courses, many of which are offered at other schools.

"We want it to be a unique program for the school, if (the academies) are going to remain magnet programs," Sanders said.

U-46 is collaborating with nearby districts to build regional pathways. Students from U-46 and Algonquin's Community Unit District 300 will be able to take veterinary science classes at Burlington Central High School by agreement with Central Unit District 301. Burlington students can participate in U-46's precision manufacturing course and District 300's welding program.

"That way we are complementing each other instead of competing with each other," Sanders said.

Emphasis on STEM

Sanders said U-46 likely will have more STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) pathways, such as precision manufacturing currently offered at South Elgin and Streamwood high schools and welding housed at Elgin High.

"We know that health care positions are going to be critical not just in this region, but nationally," Sanders said. "That will be certainly a strand that we are going to have to offer. There are students that want to go into the military ... an officer training program like (ROTC) within the high school could be a really good option for students."

All pathway programs would provide students opportunities for work-based training, internships and job shadowing.

Seventh-graders will be offered a career exploration class beginning with the 2019-20 school year and be able to choose an academy path in eighth grade after attending the district's fall curriculum and career expo.