

## **Program will help students graduate earlier**

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GREENWOOD, Miss. — A national initiative will allow Greenwood Public Schools students to receive high school diplomas after 10th grade beginning next August.

Excellence for All, formerly known as the Board Examination Systems Program, has been implemented by four states across the country over the past year. Greenwood Public Schools was one of four districts in Mississippi to be selected for implementation of the program.

Greenwood High School Assistant Principal Cassandra Hart, who helped write the grant to the state board responsible for selecting schools to participate in the program, said it "affords the students the opportunity to take classes that will gear them towards graduation as early as their 10th-grade year."

The Excellence for All standards are aligned with the Common Core State Standards Initiative, a program that has been adopted by 45 states across the country. Common Core is set to take effect in Greenwood Public Schools in two years.

Courses will be specifically geared towards an international standard of success, based on assessments from the College Board, the ACT and the International Baccalaureate (IB) program.

"The district has taken the approach early. We're putting ourselves on track to see what Common Core looks like before other schools in the state get a chance to see that. It won't be a surprise to us," said English teacher Cortez Moss.

As part of Excellence for All, students will take nine courses and will need to score proficient on exams offered in each to be considered for an early diploma. The proficiency standard, according to Moss, another member of the grant-writing team, will make Greenwood students competitive with students around the world.

"We're essentially saying that our students can compete with anyone when they leave

10th grade," said Moss.

Interim Superintendent Jennifer Wilson said training for the new, rigorous academic standard will begin in January at Greenwood High. The district has already begun working with eighth-graders at Greenwood Middle School, since they will be the first ninth-graders to take part in the program next fall.

Lorita Harris, federal program director for Greenwood Public Schools, said teachers are working directly with low-achieving eighth-graders to help prepare them for next year's curriculum changes.

"We don't want just our accelerated students to do well; we want all of our students to do well," she said.

Students who score proficient in their nine courses after 10th grade will be offered a number of options. They can choose to graduate from high school and enter the work place, a two-year community college or a four-year university, or they can choose to continue their education at Greenwood High, taking college-level courses on campus.

Those courses will be taught by high school teachers and adjunct professors at community colleges and universities in the area. Wilson said Mississippi Valley State University and Mississippi Delta Community College are two schools that Greenwood will look into partnering with.

Wilson said this kind of partnership is crucial to the Excellence for All initiative.

Greenwood High already offers some college-level classes but said Algebra I teacher Virginia Keel, "we're upping the resources.

"Common Core is significantly more rigorous, with a more world-thinking, explain-why sort of emphasis. So it's much more beneficial to me as a teacher and to students to gain those skills instead of just calculator skills for a test," she said.

Greenwood High faculty believes that Excellence for All will serve as an added incentive for students as they consider their educational and vocational futures.

"It's creating a pathway they can see in high school," said Moss. "What about a kid who may be on the verge of dropping out, and they see this program and they say, 'Man, if I go work hard for two years and get out of Greenwood High School, then I can go to a technical school or a workplace. I'm going to give it 200 percent for two years, and I'm going to get out?'"

Wilson said the goal is not to get the students out of school.

"The goal is to provide options," she said.

"It's going to increase our grad rate and decrease our dropout rate because now those kids have options, and it doesn't have to be just four more years of school. If you work hard, give it everything you have, then you've got options."

Moss said, "It's not the exit we're focused on; it's the preparation."

Hart said a student could potentially graduate with a high school diploma at age 18 and be ready to sit for an exam to become a registered nurse with an associate's degree earned at Greenwood High.

"It's a paradigm shift," said Harris. "You don't have to wait anymore. These kids are just somewhere where we weren't. So why put them through what we went through when everything is moving so much faster?"

Wilson emphasized the importance of choice, pointing out that some students might not be ready to leave high school, even though they are academically qualified.

"We don't envision that most of our students will exit, but that is an option," she said. "We envision that most of our students will stay here for two more years because of the things they will gain from being there."