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## Putting a new sprout on technical education

SCS revamps programs to match job market

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Memphis Commercial Appeal USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

After a long day of classes inside Bolton High, 17-year-old E.J. Akins likes to be outside.

He also likes gardens and helping his community, both of which led him to his school's greenhouse on the backside of the campus.

In the greenhouse, nearly half of the hundreds of tiny plastic seedling trays holding soil and budding plants have E.J.'s name on them. He tends to them daily, even over spring break, and once they grow a bit, he'll transfer them to one of several community gardens at the school and across the county. Next year, he'll get to fly the drone.

Bolton is adding an agricultural science, technology, engineering and math program, shortened to "agri-STEM." Students will learn hands-on skills that lead to an industry certification, like flying a drone to survey crops with technology that maps where more water or fertilizer is needed.

The program is part of a massive overhaul of the Shelby County Schools offerings for career and technical education. It will cost \$8 million, part of next year's budget.

The district will narrow its technical education focus to 8 areas: advance manufacturing, architecture, health sciences, information technology, marketing or distribution, STEM and transportation.

District leaders say it's an effort to increase the number of students earning a work certificate before they graduate high school and aligning programs to high-need and high-paying jobs in Memphis.

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**Miles Tamboli, an agri-stem teacher at Bolton High School, shows off some of the seedlings inside of the school's greenhouse.**

**Shelby County Schools is planning to spend \$8 million revamping its career and technical education programs to better align with the jobs available today.**

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## SCS

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### **Hold-harmless year**

Last year, only 120 students districtwide graduated with a work certificate.

"That's just not cutting it," Superintendent Dorsey Hopson said.

While the district has its eyes on an August start date for the new classes and focuses, many details are in flux and board member concerns have yet to be answered.

The district has not said which schools will offer which programs. Open enrollment for next year is ongoing, but it's first-come, first-serve, and the district began accepting applications in January.

District leaders envision students enrolling in certain high schools based on a career path, but a lack of transportation could prohibit students from fully

taking advantage of all the offerings. The district does not offer transportation to students who do not enroll in their zoned schools. Some board members as well as teachers have pushed back on the elimination of certain programs, concerned about current staff losing jobs and narrowing the offerings for students.

Students currently enrolled in any program across the district will be allowed to continue until they complete them, Hopson said. No one will be out of a job for the 2018-19 school year.

But the district will phase out some programs, and make others less of a focus. Classes in areas like cosmetology, law, finance and hospitality will still be offered, but not with the same previous intensity.

As a result, some teaching roles will change, Hopson said. The district will offer teachers a chance to perform other jobs in the district, and will provide the training to go with those new jobs.

Board member Kevin Woods, the former executive director of the Workforce Investment Network in Memphis, said if the programs aren't aligning students to jobs or further education as soon as they graduate, they have to change.

"I'm going to remind you that I see every day people who come into the workforce system, that have been pushed through elementary, middle and high school, that cannot get a job," Woods said during a board meeting. "That hand-write their

resumes. That cannot look you in the eye and shake a hand."

Making these changes, he said, should not be a hard decision.

"It is what we signed up for," Woods said. "What's a hard decision is looking these kids in the eye knowing that they're in a program that does not lead to them making a living when they're done."

### **Rebranding to CCTE**

Chief of Schools Sharon Griffin, who will soon leave SCS to head the staterun Achievement School District, said the program will be rebranded to "college, career and technical education," or CCTE.

"CTE was seen like a plan B," Griffin said.

The idea, she said, is that every child, starting in middle or high school, can explore careers and then have a path in mind when they reach high school. The \$8 million in investments includes 20 middle school teachers who will offer classes that explore various careers. Griffin said sparking an interest in a child can be as simple as them meeting someone who does that job, an opportunity too rare for many Memphis children.

"We are hoping that the revamping and refocusing on those areas, that our kids will be able to leave us and truly be career ready with work experience

and jobs looking for them instead of our students looking for jobs,” Griffin said.

### **15,000 open jobs**

In the Greater Memphis area, 15,000 jobs are currently open, according to the city. Of those, 9,000 pay at least \$12 an hour, and 6,000 pay at least \$15 an hour.

SCS Chief of Communications Natalia Powers said the career program redesign is aimed at lining up with the open jobs in the city.

It’s part of the district’s civic responsibility, she said, to improve the local workforce.

And students graduating not knowing what they want to do have a ripple effect on them for years, she said.

“They’ll go to college and then they’ll change majors, then that’s money out of the pockets of families, that’s credits they don’t need, then they’re behind,” Powers said.

In Tennessee, that can mean students blow through their state allotment of free semesters through the Tennessee Promise or Reconnect programs that offer two years of free technical or community college.

“We want students to be 100 percent confident that once they graduate from our schools, they’re going to be on a pathway for immediate career or college,” Powers said.

### **Real-world applications**

Back at Bolton High, E.J. is finishing planting his last group of seedlings and thinks back to watching his uncle tend to a massive garden at his house.

“It made me think, this is what I probably want to do when I get older,” he said.

His teacher, Miles Wolf Tamboli, is there to help him.

Tamboli said he hopes to expose E.J. and other students to as much of the computer science, robotics and other technology as possible, even if they are only in the program for their senior year.

“We really want to find opportunity in the industry and recruit students who have interests that are aligned,” he said.

Students will learn by doing projects, Tamboli said, like designing landscapes, writing computer code, flying drones and building gardens.

“We’re building our curriculum around what the real-world applications are in the industry,” he said.

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**E.J. Akins, a junior at Bolton High School, works to plant new seeds in the greenhouse at Bolton High School. Akins is starting seedings for two community gardens as well as plots around the high school. Shelby County Schools is planning to spend \$8 million revamping its career and technical education programs to better align with the jobs available today. BRAD VEST/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL**

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