**Georgia Senate backs delay in student career mandate**

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Georgia students would get a year's reprieve from having to pick a career path by ninth grade under a bill passed Wednesday by the state Senate.

The law currently requires ninth-graders starting this fall to settle on a job in one of 17 broad fields, or so-called "career pathways," such as agriculture, education or finance. They then would take some courses throughout their time in high school geared toward their career interests.

State education officials, however, said they wanted one more year to prepare for the mandate. The change, which they support, means it would go into effect for the 2013-14 school year.

"Too often in public education new programs are placed on teachers without proper implementation preparation," said Tom Wilson, the governmental affairs director for the state Education Department.

House Bill 713 would also increase the importance of career awareness and readiness from elementary school through college.

Career pathway programs have long been a part of high school vocational education. They are being expanded into the regular curriculum amid worries that too many students are graduating without basic skills and the ability to meet college or job market demands.

Critics argue a career pathway program could overshadow a well-rounded, rigorous academic program. Others have raised doubts that ninth-graders are mature enough to make a decision with potentially lifelong impact. But state education Superintendent John Barge supports such an expansion, as do state lawmakers.

Approved Jan. 24 by the House, HB 713 passed the Senate on a 44-8 vote. Because of some tinkering by the Senate Education and Youth Committee, it now goes back to the House for a second vote.

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