

STARTING FROM SCRATCH: THE LAUNCH OF NECA'S STEERING COMMITTEE

For a core group of partners working to launch Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA) in Connecticut, establishing a shared vision and taking collective action on key activities such as curriculum development and student recruitment was critical. Because they only had six months to launch the school, the partners had to figure out how to collaborate with speed and quality. By the fall of 2014, the partners had formed an effective steering committee, and NECA opened its doors to 89 enthusiastic 9th graders.

School: Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA) in Norwalk, Connecticut

Partners: Norwalk Public Schools, Norwalk Community College and IBM Corporation

Launch: September 2014

AAS Degrees: Mobile Programming and Software Engineering

Standout Fact: The first P-TECH 9-14 model school in Connecticut

THE CHALLENGE

In April 2014, a small group of people began working diligently to launch a P-TECH 9-14 model school in Norwalk, Connecticut. The mix of representatives from Norwalk Public Schools (NPS), Norwalk Community College (NCC) and IBM, faced a daunting challenge. NECA would be the first school in the state to blend high school, college, and workplace learning, and they had only six months before the first students would arrive for the school year.

They were committed to the model and empowered to make decisions on behalf of their organizations — and with the support of Governor Dannel Malloy, who brought IBM on board as the first of many Employer Partners to launch P-TECH across Connecticut. Even with this high-level support, they needed to figure out how to work together to effectively address a range of critical tactical and strategic challenges.

BACKGROUND

When Robin Golden, Early College Program Advisor with the Connecticut Board of Regents, first met with the other Steering Committee members, she recalls that they were primarily focused on what needed to be done to open the school doors to students.

NECA is a school-within-a-school, a dynamic that School Director Karen Amaker says meant an immediate need to address classroom space and other shared resources. The group also needed to recruit students, which required finding prospective parents and students and sufficiently developing the curricula to explain NECA – all within a short timeframe.

With everything that needed to be done, it was weeks into the process before anyone saw themselves as NECA's strategic leadership body. "There was never a formal ask," Amaker recalls. "People who were doing the planning were also decision-makers in our own right, and we became the steering committee. Because we were making things happen, it made sense to keep working with the small body of folks to keep things moving forward."

While the school welcomed its first class in August 2014, moving forward has continued to mean tacking between immediate concerns and strategic decisions required for a successful, sustainable school.

ORGANIZING STEERING COMMITTEES

For some P-TECH 9-14 schools, creating a steering committee is a deliberate process where members are appointed from the start. For NECA, assembling a steering committee was organic. Only after they had gained some traction did they begin to create more formal processes.

Looking back, committee members agree that it would have been best to develop guidelines and set expectations and working styles from the start. In fact, Amaker advises anyone looking to build a steering committee, “Do this in the reverse.” She continues, “Identify the person who runs the meeting, the person who sets the agenda, etc., first.” Even so, Golden says assembling the right mix of people is what’s most critical. The NECA steering committee’s informal beginning helped them develop mutual trust, respect, and understanding of members’ roles.

This deep trust has given the Steering Committee the ability to successfully define its goals and responsibilities and the flexibility to quickly address gaps as they arise. The steering committee has now defined its chief mission: To ensure that the school graduates students that are college- and career-ready and that the school is sustainable.

This focus has been critical for the first P-TECH model school to launch in Connecticut. According to Golden, “We are paving the way in Connecticut.”

NECA’S PROCESS

The NECA Steering Committee has more formally organized its approach to meetings and communication over time. The committee now follows a monthly meeting schedule and has developed a clear process to address issues during meetings.

Golden stresses that improved organization helps ensure that all of the moving pieces stay aligned with one another. This is particularly critical between partners, she says. “It’s important to raise all the issues and know how it impacts each partner.”

For this reason, every committee member is expected to be involved in important decisions. For example, the Scope and Sequence focuses on content, courses, schedule, and funding, which involves the district, the high school, the college, and IBM, with each piece falling in the domain of a different committee member. Even so, every partner has been involved in developing the Scope and Sequence as a whole, regardless of each partner’s individual level of involvement in a particular task. This approach ensures that decisions take into account the expertise and perspectives of each partner organization.

As NECA continues to evolve and mature, the Steering Committee will grow and grapple with new challenges. According to Ralph Valenzisi, Director of Technology for Norwalk Public Schools and a member of the Steering Committee, “We need to be nimble, make adjustments, and execute.”

Published October 2014

For more information about the shared decision-making in the P-TECH 9-14 model, please visit ptech.org