

EXCELSIOR STUDENTS MAKE THE MOST OF SUMMER

School started extra early for the 50 incoming ninth graders attending Excelsior Academy's inaugural Summer Bridge program in July 2014. This mandatory program was designed to foster high academic expectations and form strong peer and staff bonds before the start of the official school year. For Principal Kevin Rothman, the program would also minimize learning loss during the summer and ask students to reflect on their personal habits to improve the likelihood of their future success in this rigorous six-year program. Rothman knew that for the program to make the impact he envisioned, he needed adequate planning and commitment from students and educators alike.

School: Excelsior Academy in Newburgh, NY

Partners: Newburgh Enlarged City School District, SUNY Orange Community College, IBM Corporation

Launch: September 2014

Standout Fact: 95% attendance rate during 4-week summer program

Principal Rothman began planning the April before, working closely with the IBM industry liaison and the Steering Committee. They agreed that the summer curriculum and activities should target three student-centered goals: 1) Set a tone that would enable students to embrace the tremendous opportunity and responsibility they had been given; 2) Focus students on the long path ahead, emphasizing the importance of being college- and career-ready from day one; and 3) Foster a culture of respect and professionalism that supports students' belief that they are capable of earning their associate in applied science degrees and achieving career success.

To accomplish these goals, Principal Rothman felt the students needed an immersive experience. "Ninth graders are very focused on the present," said Principal Rothman. "To ensure students truly grasp the complexity of the school and the potential payoffs for their futures, we needed a full four weeks for students to interact with the college coursework, career skills, and student-led projects that will be integral to their (later) success."

The days, which ran from 8:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m., were structured to be a mix of instruction and reflection, small group projects, and individual student reflection. The whole-class instruction and discussion focused on the unique six-year path and key college and career program components in which they would be participating. The small group projects were designed to build students' collaboration skills and a sense of ownership over Excelsior Academy's policies and procedures.

The development of the curriculum for the summer was a collaborative effort between Excelsior's four teachers, the Industry Liaison, and Principal Rothman. Together, the team mapped out the daily curriculum in the days leading up to the summer. The curriculum primarily focused on whole-class work in the first days, and gradually shifted to more individual student work and small group work as the summer progressed. For example, students spent the first week learning about the six-year Scope & Sequence, the two Associate in Applied Science degree paths, and the possible jobs that would be awaiting them after graduating. By the end of the third week, students were completing individual reflections on their working styles and career interests. By the end of the fourth and final week, students created the Excelsior Academy slogan and whole-school values, declaring Excelsior a school that valued "Respect and Professionalism."

As the summer ensued, Principal Rothman and the rest of the team found that the early interaction with the students enabled them to quickly identify the struggles that some students would have adapting to the

school's rigor. They realized that the high expectations infused in every project, whether the daily individual reflections or group projects, were more challenging for this group.

Excelsior's teachers and staff addressed these issues by building in time for individual student conferences. The team was able to learn what motivated particular students, a key insight that they believe will help them anticipate and tackle challenges with these students during the school year.

Teachers also encouraged students to work through their initial struggles by giving them greater ownership over their projects as the summer progressed. The students decided to build water bottle rockets and created a four-level human pyramid. The greater freedom, along with the emphasis on classmates and learning from mistakes, also fostered key habits of mind. "Students became more willing to persevere and work through challenges with one another," said IBM Industry Liaison Cliff Archey. "One group couldn't get their water rocket to fly the first day. But with teacher guidance, they revisited their design. Their rocket flew higher than any other group's the second day."

The college and industry partners also helped make the connection between school and careers more tangible. SUNY Orange Community College hosted students, giving them a taste of the college courses they could take as early as their second year. IBM brought in an employee speaker, who shared his experience growing up in nearby Poughkeepsie and obtaining an associates degree in IT, eventually working his way up in IBM's Systems & Technology Group. His enthusiasm and relatability made a clear impression. One student, unsure of her career trajectory remarked, "I see you have to enjoy what you do in a career and want to be there every day."

At its conclusion, everyone agreed that the program had been an overall success. "The fact that we had a 95% attendance rate for the whole summer when students were expecting to be on vacation is very encouraging," said Principal Rothman. "The students are invested in this program, and the teachers already have strong relationships in place to hit the ground running in September."

Students also expressed excitement. One student wrote, "It didn't hit me until the summer program that my future starts *now* at Excelsior Academy. I smell the coffee now. I have to act right and I have to have a passion to achieve."

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For more information about the redesigned high school experience in the P-TECH 9-14 model, please visit ptech.org