

INDUSTRY LIAISON COLLABORATION: PREPARING STUDENTS AT EXCELSIOR ACADEMY FOR CAREERS

At Excelsior Academy, industry and education are uniting forces to make sure a group of 14-year-olds will be competitive for dynamic IT careers. Eric Waliszewski is Excelsior's math and Workplace Learning teacher, and has a key role in managing the overall Workplace Learning strand. Former high school teacher Cliff Archey is the IBM industry liaison to Excelsior and is responsible for implementing IBM's commitments to the school, including the workplace learning curricula, mentoring, worksite visits, speakers, project days, and internships. Together, they are helping to ensure that each student in Excelsior's inaugural class of 50 ninth graders will graduate with a high school diploma and an associate degree in Applied Sciences, and be ready to be successful in the workplace.

The following is an excerpted conversation with the two partners..

School: Excelsior Academy in Newburgh, NY

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

Launch: September 2014, as one of 16 new schools opening in the fall of 2014 as part of New York State's P-TECH 9-14 school rollout

Degrees Offered: AAS degrees in Cybersecurity and Networking

1. What are your goals for Workplace Learning and how are you working together to fulfill them?

EW: We want to get students excited about the careers that they can fill upon graduation – if they work hard and apply themselves. We know that Workplace Learning has to be a seamless collaboration between the industry liaison and the teachers, staff, and leadership. Cliff needs to be actively involved in the students' education. It's been like having another teacher in the room, but one with insight into the IT industry.

CA: I agree that collaboration is key. Through the coursework, we've begun to intentionally teach students the essential career-ready skills they will need to be successful once they graduate. But it's not just one thing that will prepare our students. We have to combine academic and workplace coursework with mentoring, site visits, speakers, and internships to ensure that our students graduate ready to fill well-paying jobs. I think we've done a good job at this thus far; the students are excited.

2. How are you collaborating to make Workplace Learning at Excelsior successful?

EW: To make Workplace Learning relevant to the students, the comfort level and willingness to work closely with each other is really important. Cliff is helping me determine the best way to bring IBM's expertise to the school, helping the school community understand the skills that employers want and then working collaboratively to build them.

CA: Building on that, I really do think it's a symbiotic relationship. I have teaching experience, which I think helps, but my role is to bring industry knowledge and experience into the school in a way that will better prepare students for college and careers. I absolutely rely on Eric to take the lead in making some of the career-heavy content more accessible to 14-year-olds. I also rely on him to be deliberate about referencing the career skills that come up during content-lessons so that the connections between the work they're doing in class and their future careers are clear.

3. How do you think the Workplace Learning course helps prepare Excelsior students for a career in IT?

CA: It's very difficult to get 14-year-olds to focus on the next class period, much less something so far down the line as a career. But developing that long-term career focus is a huge part of Workplace Learning.

We've structured our curriculum around computer science in order to teach concrete skills they may use in IT, such as coding and programming. But we are also teaching them broader career skills that any individual will need to be proficient – things like verbal communication and project management, which we will assess in part through weekly student self-evaluation.

4. What else is important when asking students to think about their careers?

EW: We constantly remind them how important each day is to their future goals. We emphasize setting weekly goals and weekly reflection on those goals to hammer home the point that they are working toward a fulfilling career each and every day. But it can be a slow process. For many, this is the first time they've thought about it.

CA: One of the things I've learned is that students have a better understanding of what their careers might look like if you are explicit in referencing how the work they are used to—math, computer science—prepares them for a tangible job. In both the short- and long-term, we want to immerse students in hands-on experiences. Like building a rocket – which we just did, or job shadowing and internships that will both build their skills and give them insight into the careers that they want to pursue.

5. How will your roles change as Excelsior grows and accepts more students?

CA: They definitely will change, and that's exciting to me professionally. Next year, we'll have to craft a new Workplace Learning curriculum that is less theoretical and more experiential. By Year Three, I will focus on securing skills-based paid internships for students that enable them to practice the skills they have learned in the classroom in a real workplace setting.

EW: I've taught for a while, so to me, one of the most interesting aspects of being the workplace learning teacher is that the role does change more than the role of a normal content teacher might. For example, as students mature in the program, I become more of a coach and mentor because students will mostly be at the college, taking classes, or in internships. However, they will still rely on me to ensure they are practicing and showcasing the career ready skills we've worked-on throughout the program.

6. What is your advice for creating effective Workplace Learning experiences at a P-TECH 9-14 school?

CA: First and foremost, total school buy-in is essential to the success of all aspects of workplace learning. The more that workplace learning is viewed as an essential aspect of the total school experience, the more successful all the workplace elements will be incorporated into the day-to-day learning under way.

EW: And start early. Give the teacher and liaison enough time to truly collaborate and flesh out all the key aspects that will impact success: the particular school context you have to operate within, the degrees students will be obtaining, and the fields they will be pursuing upon graduation. All of that takes time to get right, and the more time you have to build strong working relationships and plan how workplace learning will be woven into the fabric of the school, the better off the program will be.

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For more information about the Redesigned High School Experience in the P-TECH 9-14 model, please visit ptech.org