

DEVELOPING THE MINDSET FOR JOBS OF THE FUTURE

Learning about skills that students need for well-paying jobs is informative. That happens in many schools. But enabling students to practice and demonstrate those skills can be transformative. This is what happens at a P-TECH 9-14 school.

School: Hudson Valley Pathways Academy in Kingston, NY

Partners: Ulster BOCES, SUNY Ulster, SUNY New Paltz, MediaCom and the Hudson Valley Council of Industry

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: Network Administration and Manufacturing

No one understands this better than Jonah Schenker, principal of Hudson Valley Pathways Academy in New York and a champion of project-based learning. His school is a partnership between Ulster BOCES, SUNY Ulster, SUNY New Paltz, MediaCom and the Hudson Valley Council of Industry. The Council of Industry includes 125 businesses from the surrounding areas. After listening to industries' needs, the school's senior leadership determined to focus on two Associate in Applied Science degrees: Network Administration and Manufacturing.

For Schenker, preparing students for college and career means looking ahead to the jobs of the future. "The hard skills that manufacturers use today are not necessarily the same ones they will use in six years," says Schenker. "We have to help students learn complex math and language, but a task equally as important is to help them hone the problem-solving mindset that will enable them to make the leap easily to jobs that do not exist yet."

The need for academic, technical and employability skills means that hands-on and real-world opportunities are foundational. "Sometimes schools use 'project learning' to mean that you have all of these courses, and you find projects to lay on top of them." Schenker believes that misses the point. He continues, "Projects really need to be the basis of everything. And the content, curriculum and learning experiences must all grow from authentic experiences."

The school began developing its problem-solving mindset through meetings with BOCES content specialists, industry leaders, and high school and college faculty. This resulted in the development of learning threads that would be core to the school. They include: Leadership; Creativity; Multiple Literacy; Self-direction; and Global Citizenship. "You will see all of these learning threads in every class," says Schenker. "Our extended day allows us the opportunity to utilize a project- and problem-based approach to learning, coupled with academic seminars and classes, instead of trying to force it all into the box we (traditionally) know as school."

To enable teachers to bring these learning threads to life in their classes, the staff spent four weeks over the summer mapping out the curriculum. They developed four large concepts or themes: Problem Solving; Sustainability; Stability and Change; and Interaction and Interdependence. Each of these themes includes an explicit description of the "hard" and "soft" skills that students need to master.

The school's calendar was then divided into quarters, with each quarter devoted to a particular theme. Each course within that theme was further broken up into a series of applications or projects, each lasting 10

days. Many of the applications come from real life problems provided by industry to anchor the learning and ensure that the skills learned have both rigor and relevance.

Each month, for 10 months, a different Employer Partner visits the school and presents a real-world problem. The students then spend two weeks in their Workplace Learning Lab developing solutions before presenting their work to the Employer Partner. Students demonstrate their learning through a variety of mediums, including short films, podcasts, and written presentations. They are provided feedback on their work and are given time for reflection as a way to self-assess their growth and to refine their approach for the next month's Industry Challenge.

Schenker is confident in this complete immersion into project-based learning. "I know this will do good things for students," he says. It also promises to do a good thing for educational reform. "The piece I am most excited about is the chance to push back on traditional models of school. My focus is creating a learning school for both teachers and students that will prepare them for meaningful careers."

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