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P-TECH Schools Have Potential to Be 'Transformative'

The key is collaboration between school systems, community colleges, and employers.

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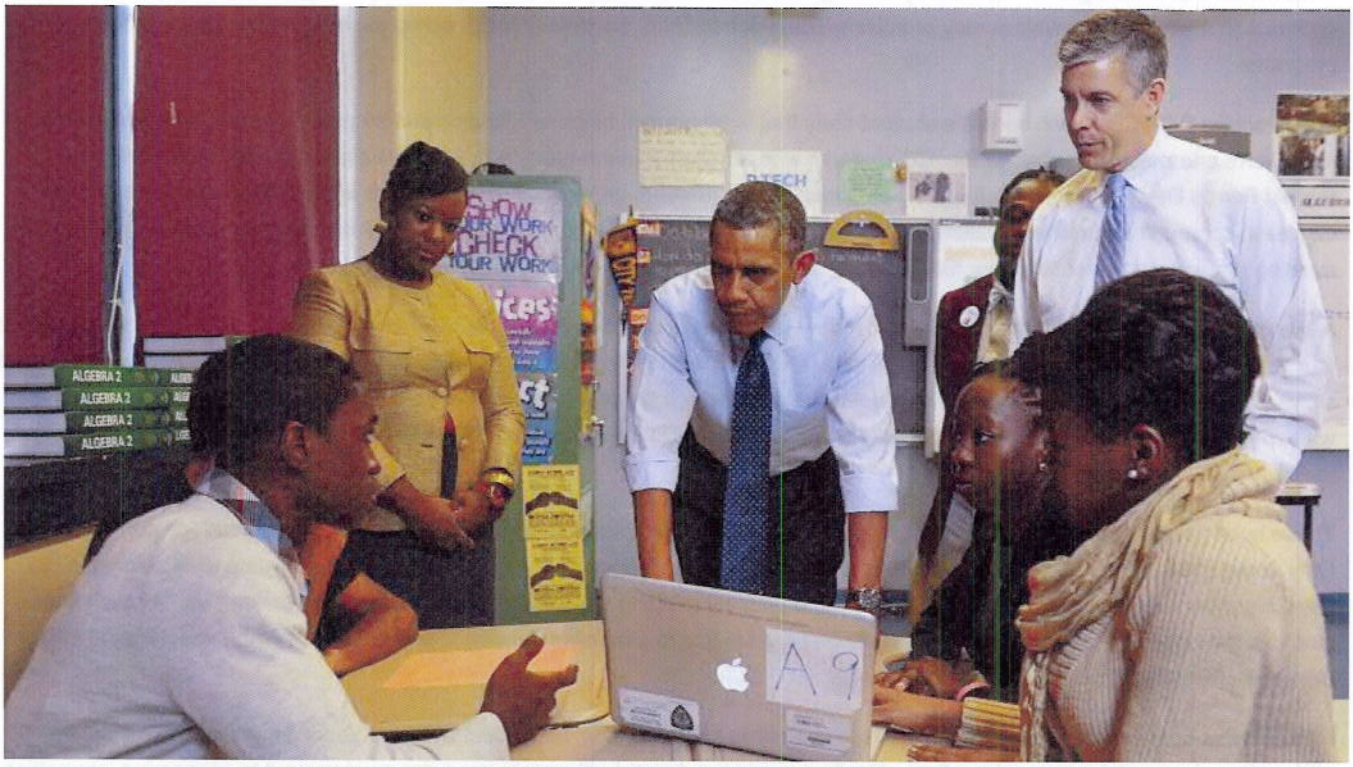

+ President Obama visited a P-TECH school in Brooklyn, N.Y., last fall. (Mandel Ngan/Getty Images)

The reinvention of the American high school advanced another step on Wednesday when some 90 ninth-graders filed into their first classes at the new Norwalk Early College Academy in Norwalk, Conn.

Workers were still carting desks into classrooms just two days before, and the administrative offices won't be finished until October, but Karen Amaker, the school's first director, was ebullient when we talked earlier this week. "We need to make sure that students get the message from the very first day of school: that we are in this together," she said in a phone interview.

The Norwalk academy marks the latest outpost for a growing network of so-called P-TECH institutions that are blending high school, community college, and work experience into a creative hybrid that offers young people a new path from the classroom to the workforce. Eventually this and like-minded innovations could help thousands of students obtain both secondary and college credentials at an affordable price—while ensuring employers a pipeline of trained workers.

At P-TECH schools (which stands for Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools), high-school-aged students simultaneously take secondary- and community-college classes while working with a private employer who provides mentors and a summer internship. "The goal was to smooth the transition from school to career, and to develop an innovative model that would get people from high school to their community college degree," says Stanley Litow, vice president of corporate citizenship at IBM, which led the design of the P-TECH model.

The first P-TECH opened in Brooklyn in September 2011 as a partnership between New York's public school system, its public colleges, and IBM. Since then, two more P-TECH schools have opened in New York City and five in Chicago. In addition to the Norwalk Academy, 16 more are opening this fall across New York state. IBM serves as the employer partner on four of these schools (including Norwalk); other firms involved include Verizon, Motorola, and Cisco.

P-TECH isn't alone: Alternative ways of linking high school, community college, and work experience have sprouted from San Antonio (with its vibrant Alamo Academies) to Los Angeles.

In April the federal Education Department distributed $107 million in Youth CareerConnect grants to encourage these experiments. "This model that links together the industry training with secondary education and the post-secondary elements so that students end up with multiple credentials is very promising," says Johan Uvin, the department's acting assistant secretary for career programs.

The Brooklyn P-TECH, which serves a student body that is 90 percent black or Hispanic and 85 percent low-income, shows this approach's enormous potential. Of the 103 students who enrolled as ninth-graders in 2011, 98 are still attending this fall, says Rashid Ferrod Davis, the school's founding principal. These students are working toward a high school diploma and a two-year degree in computer information systems or electromechanical engineering technology at a local community college, while also meeting regularly with mentors from IBM and completing an internship there this summer.

A few of the students will obtain both their secondary and community college degrees in spring 2015 (remarkably in just a combined four years), and most of the remainder are on pace to complete both degrees within a year after that—still less than the minimum of six years required by the traditional high-school-to-community-college progression. "They are coming in under the expectation that we expect you to complete the post-secondary credential," says Davis. All students who finish both degrees are guaranteed a first-in-line position for future IBM hiring.

These hybrid programs offer a fresh way to confront three interconnected educational problems. The first is college completion. Only about one in three high school graduates who enter community college obtains a degree even six years after starting, a shockingly low number. These programs improve the odds by creating an uninterrupted pathway to both degrees. "At each step, students get lost in the cracks ... but [these schools] are creating a seamless transition," says Joshua Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program.

And because students can complete that degree in a public school setting, this model tackles a second challenge by usually eliminating any cost for community college. Finally, by working directly with employers (who must commit to sponsoring internships, offering mentors, contributing to the curriculum, and providing the hiring guarantee), the model ensures that students are actually acquiring "the skills people need to get jobs," as Uvin says.

The critical question is how widely this model can spread. President Obama scrounged funds for his grant program by using dollars from visa applications, but will need congressional appropriations to continue it. And finding enough employers to shoulder the substantial requirements of participation could be another constraint. But Litow, a former New York City schools official, believes these hybrids could mark a turning point comparable to the one after World War II when states shifted to requiring students to complete 12 years of school, not just eight. "This is," he says, "a similarly transformative idea." He could be right—if enough school districts, community colleges, and employers step up.