

With IBM's Help, New School Hopes to Groom Students for Tech Jobs

by Brendan Pierson

Wednesday, March 16, 2011 12:00 AM



Photo [Paul Robeson High School](#) As the Department of Education "phases out" Paul Robeson High School, a new technology school, created in collaboration with IBM and CUNY, will open in the building next fall.

(This is the second of two articles on science teaching in New York City public schools. To read the previous article on city students falling short in science, go [here](#) .)

This September, if all goes according to plan, the New York City [Department of Education](#) , the [City University of New York](#) and [IBM](#) will unveil an entirely new kind of high school in Brooklyn.

Eventually the school will have about 600 students in grades 9 through 14. Those who successfully complete the six-year program will receive an associate degree in a computer science-related field “ and, in theory, first dibs on a job at IBM.

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In some ways, the plan fits into the prevailing narrative of the Bloomberg administration's approach to education: trying to fix what ails public education by looking for expertise in the private sector.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, [announcing](#) the project last fall, trumpeted the school as a way of "taking an education system that has fallen far behind the times, and moving it into the 21st century." He presented it as part of a broad initiative to modernize the city's schools, which includes increased funding for innovative new school models and linking teacher tenure and pay to merit.

While there is little if any opposition to the concept of the school, some question whether it will be able to deliver on its ambitious goals.

Breaking the Mold

The IBM school, called [Pathways and Technology Early College High School](#), or P-Tech, will not be a charter school but a regular public school working in partnership with IBM. The school is also the first grade 9 through 14 school in the country (someone dubbed it a hollege) where students can leave with an associate's degree in information technology -- though students may end up leaving after grade 12 and attending a CUNY school for grades 13 and 14, according to IBM. In either case, CUNY staff would be involved in teaching the technical side of the school's curriculum.

The school's staff will be drawn from a pool of New York teachers and administrators experienced in math and science education. Rashid Davis, currently principal of [Bronx Engineering and Technology Academy](#), has been chosen as its principal. IBM's role will be primarily to provide financial support and administer mentor and internship programs.

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IBM, for its part, conceives of the new school partly as a way to test a new model of education. The company has said that it sees public education partly as a kind of long-term investment -- a way of ensuring that the pool of trained technology workers stays strong.

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"It's looking at having a more vocational focus on a specific topic area where there's a need and a desire for those skills in the future," said IBM spokesperson Lisa Lanspery. Starting vocational training in grade nine, instead of waiting until a student community college, could be a "huge advantage," she said. She said students also would benefit from the mentor, internship, training and career placement programs IBM planned to offer at the school.

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"You think of a current high school today, they're not going to get access to mentors," Lanspery said.

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Ultimately, Lanspery said, the company might try to replicate the model elsewhere in New York and other cities â€” though for now, she said, the company is taking it "step by step."

Initial Supportâ€”

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In December 2010, IBM hosted a reception for New York public school and CUNY administrators to share their thoughts on the project and on challenges it might face. That reception was attended by principals of various New York public schools, especially those

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focused on science and technology, including Aviation High School, George Westinghouse High School and Midwood High School. Stanley Litow, IBM's vice president of corporate affairs and chairman of its foundation, represented the company. "Chiara Coletti, a spokesperson for the administrators' union, the [Council of School Supervisors and Administrators](#), said she has received "100 percent positive feedback" from members of her union and praised IBM's involvement. "They're really taking the initiative," Coletti said. "This is like a little laboratory of learning for doing this kind of thing."

While enthusiastic about the idea, the administrators cautioned IBM that the school would face unique challenges. Foremost among them is that, unlike existing technology-focused schools like [Brooklyn Tech](#), the planned IBM school will not choose its students through a competitive application process. September's incoming class -- about 100 ninth graders -- will be selected by lottery, with some preference given to students who attend an information session. As a result, those attending the school will likely have a wide range of abilities and aptitudes.

On its web site, the school says it expects students to be willing to put in extra hours, to be interested in computers, math and science and to be "curious, dedicated learners."

The school already has encountered opposition, largely because the city plans to put it in the Crown Heights building that now houses [Paul Robeson High School](#), which it is starting to [close](#)

Robeson, which itself was created as a technical high school in 1985, has had a particularly challenging student body. About one eighth of the students, according to a [report](#)

by the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School, is homeless or living in temporary housing, its graduation rate had dipped to 40 percent, and many of the students are overage, often indicating they had fallen behind in high school or been forced to repeat a grade earlier in their school careers. The school had launched efforts designed specifically to help struggling students, such as a program for students who had children of their own.

To critics of the IBM school, P-Tech looks like another flashy "innovation school" pushing out a struggling, but viable, traditional school. City Councilmember [Al Vann](#), who represents Paul Robeson High School's district, [told](#)

New York 1 that, while he supported the idea of the IBM school, closing Robeson is not fair to its students.

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In addition, having a corporate sponsor does not guarantee success. While some of the Department of Education's public-private partnerships -- used most notably in publicly funded, privately run charter schools -- have done well, other have faltered. The city founded [Metropolit an Corporate Academy](#)

in downtown Brooklyn with the help of

[Goldman Sachs](#)

, which provided mentors and internships. But this year, the city decided to shut the school, which had a crumbling facility in downtown Brooklyn and suffered from poor attendance.

IBM's Pledge

For all its commitment to the school, IBM's long-term role remains unclear. An important unanswered question is how strongly IBM has committed to hiring graduates of the school. When Bloomberg announced the school, he said in a [televised address](#) on NBC that that its graduates would be "guaranteed" jobs at IBM.

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In fact, IBM has said no such thing. What it is promising, according to Lanspery, is that graduates of the school will be "first in line" for any jobs at IBM for which they are qualified -- that is, that they will be considered for these jobs before other applicants.

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"It has to be an appropriate job with the appropriate credentials," Lanspery said -- and many jobs at IBM aren't appropriate for someone with only an associate degree in computer science.

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"If we're looking for someone with a business or graduate degree, probably someone graduating from a 9-14 school would not be the most qualified applicant," Lanspery said. More appropriate jobs, she said, might include "lower-level" programming and software development.

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Moreover, Lanspery said, given the rapid evolution of the technology sector, IBM's job openings might look very different by the time the school's first class graduates.

â€” "It's tough for us to say what those jobs are going to look like six years from now," she said. "Six years from now, the tech world is going to look totally different." â€”

Nonetheless, Lanspery stressed that graduates who don't get hired at IBM will hardly be adrift. Nearly every sector is creating more and more tech jobs, from telecommunications to energy, and graduates of the IBM school will have an excellent shot at those jobs, she said.

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To help make that happen, IBM plans to appoint a committee to develop a "core set of minimum requirements for entry-level IT jobs that will serve as benchmarks and targets" for the school. At this point, it is too early to say what those benchmarks might look like, or how they will be met.

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Department of Education spokesperson Jack Zarin-Rosenfeld said that the actual curriculum for the school, which will include both traditional instruction and vocational training during all six years, is still in the early planning stages. He said the department should be able to announce more details this spring.