



By Nancy Mann Jackson

Detroit, once the booming capital of the automotive industry, was one of the hardest hit cities by the Great Recession. Automakers sought government bailouts, and eventually, the city sought bankruptcy protection. As in many cities and towns where the local economy suffered, Detroit's schools—and students—have also suffered.

But now, as Detroit and its citizens work to rebuild “Motor City,” education is taking center stage. In an effort to prepare a qualified workforce that can bring Detroit back to its former glory, city and state governments have implemented rigorous changes in career and technical education (CTE) programs. Most notably, a new program in the lowest-performing schools in Detroit allows students to complete two years of college courses or long-term, paid apprenticeships while in high school.

“As Detroit families continue to fight to improve their livelihoods and the future of their children, Detroit must continue to create jobs and create a workforce that is ready to do those jobs,” says John Covington, chancellor of Michigan’s Education Achievement Authority (EAA). “This new program will help provide 1,000 students a chance to earn college credit at no cost to them while they are still in high school, and help them win paid, long-term employment in a related field of study. This effort can make an enormous difference in the lives of Detroit families.”

Schools in Transition

In 2009, the state of Michigan took over management of the Detroit Public Schools amid a \$300 million budget deficit, and 29 schools were closed. In 2012, the state formed the EAA, a new school district that is responsible for operating the lowest performing 5 percent of schools

in Michigan. The EAA started with 15 of the lowest performing schools in Detroit.

While the decision to launch a new, state-run district has been controversial from its beginning, district leaders say the experiment is working. “We set out to be a different kind of school system; one that is totally student-centered and is focused on making sure every student learns every day,” Covington says.

Spring tests showed that 53 percent of students had achieved two or more years of growth in reading, and 64 percent had achieved at least one year’s growth in reading. In math, 41 percent of students achieved two or more years’ growth and 68 percent had achieved at least one year’s growth.

After one year, six of the EAA schools received a “thumbs up” rating from Excellent Schools Detroit, an independent school scorecard organization. The district’s other nine schools received no



grade because they were classified as “fresh start” schools, with not enough information available yet to earn a grade.

To truly make a difference for the future of Detroit and the state of Michigan, a robust CTE program had to be part of the mix. In August 2013, EAA introduced a new program that allows students to earn up to \$30,000 of free college credits and secure paid apprenticeships while in high school.

Designing a New Program

This past fall, more than 500 juniors and seniors in EAA high schools started in the CTE program, which is possible through multiple partnerships with Detroit-area nonprofits, colleges and government organizations. A robust business and industry advisory committee helps lead the program and provide paid internships and apprenticeships. Participating students have the opportunity to try out

both college and careers while still in high school.

“Students need to be college- and career-ready when they graduate from high school,” says Judith Berry, assistant chancellor for instructional support and educational accountability. “This approach helps students focus on a career prior to the time they must begin paying for college or postsecondary training on their own. Moreover, the approach gives students the chance to determine whether or not they will attend college or go to work directly after high school. Students are able to try both options without a stigma attached to their choice.”

In addition to completing their core academic courses, students have the opportunity to try out CTE programs at nearby colleges, including Wayne County Community College and Henry Ford Community College. The program allows students to be dually enrolled in postsec-

ondary courses while in high school. The public school district pays for tuition, fees, transportation and instructional materials, including textbooks.

Enrollment in formal CTE postsecondary programs gives EAA students opportunities to earn stackable certificates that lead to the attainment of associate degrees, Berry says. “The stackable certificates allow for students to be completers of college credentials at various times and levels,” she says.

In addition to receiving college credit toward an associate degree, students may also gain related work experience while still in high school. These paid internships or apprenticeships permit students to experience what it is like to work in a specific profession before committing their lives to it, and they also give students opportunities to make valuable connections with employers. In addition to the local colleges, EAA’s other partners include

nonprofit workforce development agency Focus: HOPE, Detroit Employment Solutions, the U.S. Department of Labor and the Bureau of Apprenticeship-Michigan Office. These partners are helping to make connections for employment opportunities for students.

While most high school CTE programs focus on teaching students skills for employment, “the biggest difference is that our students will earn college credit and will get paid, long-term work experiences, including internships and apprenticeships, while attending high school,” Berry says. “Most (CTE) education programs at the high school level don’t do that.”

By partnering directly with colleges, the EAA program offers students direct college credit. Students complete a college admission application, which means a college transcript is activated. In contrast, “traditional high school (CTE) programs are offered on high school campuses or at career centers owned by the local district,” Berry says. “What this means is that students do not earn direct credit, [but] they may have the opportunity to negotiate articulated credit with a specific college.”

Articulated credit, while valuable, does not necessarily transfer to a college other than the one where the credit was earned. In contrast, with the direct-credit option, when a student transfers to another college or university, the college credit earned in the partner postsecondary program is on an official college transcript and can be evaluated like any other earned college credit. Articulated credit most often means that the student gets college courses waived, but must still make up the credit by taking a course or courses in the place of any articulated credit to meet the requirement for earning the degree. In addition, “Families understand earned college credit on a transcript,” Berry says. “Families more than likely do not understand articulated credit and rarely exercise their option to seek the credit once they enroll at a college.”

So far, response to the program “has been outstanding,” Berry says. One thousand students are expected to be enrolled in the CTE program by its second year. “It’s clear our families want their children to have an opportunity to get this kind of advanced education and training,” Berry says. “In this economic environment, families seem especially pleased that their young men and women are able to earn college credit and get jobs while they are still in high school.”

Not only are students becoming prepared for future careers, but they are also learning to accept responsibility now. Many students have learned “that they must be more organized and deliberate in completing their work each day,” Berry says. “They have indicated that their time-management skills need some work. Some students have shared that their reading and computation skills must improve for them to be successful. Some of the students are realizing the importance of the study-skills program that is available to them through Detroit Employment Solutions and the other partners.”

Learning from the Process

As the EAA career and technical education program builds a successful foundation, other school districts can learn from its process. School districts that want to implement a similar program “should form a strong planning and advisory committee with membership made up of senior-level high school and college administrators, as well as business and industry decision makers, to craft a shared vision and mission for the program,” Berry says.

Additionally, districts should survey students to understand their interest level. Beginning at least six months before the start date of the program, Berry recommends holding weekly town hall meetings for families and community members.

At least three months before the start of the program, Berry recommends launching a student enrollment period.

“Lots of communication should take place with counselors to ensure that career and technical education students get the same level of advising as the college preparatory students,” she says. “Counselors must not make students feel that this program is inferior to a college preparatory program. Invite people in to talk with school staff and parents about the need to be prepared equally for college and work.”

With a unique, broad-based CTE program, EAA promises to prepare Detroit-area students for a bright future. And that bright future won’t just serve the students and their families well; it will help return the city of Detroit to its former glory. ■

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