

Creating Industry Relationships THAT WORK

By Albert McLaverty, Stephanie Smith, Lisa Nutter and John Foster

Big cities across the country have been faced with an alarmingly low on-time graduation rate, with *The Washington Post* quoting figures as low as 53 percent in 2005.¹ And Philadelphia, unfortunately, has not been exempt from this trend. As members of the career and technical education (CTE) community are aware, however, many in the media recognize that CTE is an effective strategy for increasing graduation rates, an increase that can only be attributed to CTE when its programs are high-quality.

We know that unemployment due to insufficient education or technical preparation can have devastating consequences for an entire community. This cost can be felt individually through the increasing separation between the “haves” versus the “have nots.” This cost can also be felt by employers, who often cite the formidable challenge of finding skilled workers for their industries. Lastly, this unemployment also negatively affects the tax base, increases the cost of social services and has the potential to create a cycle of poverty that entraps many young people for their entire lives. From a bigger perspective, this lack of skills and knowledge can impede the nation’s global competitiveness. Fortunately, Philadelphia had other plans for its young people!

Redefining Education for Philadelphia

In response to Philadelphia’s education crisis, in 2008, during Mayor Nutter’s first term in office, he established two educational goals: increasing the graduation rate to 80 percent and doubling the number of residents who would obtain a postsecondary degree by 2018.² For these goals to be realized, it became apparent that many organizations and individuals would need to collaborate on possible solutions. This led to the creation of the Philadelphia Council for College and Career Success (PCCCS), a coalition of area leaders from industry, city government, the school district, higher education and non-profit youth development organizations—essentially a group of individuals who had the same goals for the youth of Philadelphia.³ This group would prove to be instrumental in educational innovation in the city.

Around the same time, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation awarded funds to Philadelphia to conduct a study of the city’s CTE and workforce development assets. The report, titled “Strengthening Career and Technical Education and 21st-century Skills in Philadelphia,”⁴ also known informally as the “Knight Report,” focused on a broad systemic analysis of the city in an attempt to create

a truly innovative approach to workforce development. The report scaffolded off the mayor’s educational goals, becoming part of the broader strategy to accomplish his goals.

Without going into too much detail, a number of big themes emerged from the report. It confirmed, for example, that CTE was working in Philadelphia. Among the deficiencies, however, was a strong indication that business and industry needed to be more engaged in shaping the educational landscape. It was also evident that with a bit of restructuring of various committees, both at the city and school district levels (where CTE programs are delivered), great gains could be made in the city’s educational goals.

Restructuring the Advisory Committees

As mentioned previously, the Knight Report showed that the city’s various CTE advisory committees needed restructuring. In designing an advisory structure that would meet the Pennsylvania State Department of Education’s requirements for CTE and maintain the context of Philadelphia’s workforce development programs, three organizations—the Philadelphia Youth Network, the School District of Philadelphia and Philadelphia Academies, Inc.—came together to create

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a three-tiered advisory structure that retains the elements required by CTE regulation, but also creates new relationships and opportunities in support of systemic change in how students learn and the way teachers teach.

Tier one is the school-based advisory body known as the Occupational Advisory Committee (OAC), which advises teachers in terms of local content for a particular CTE program. A new second or middle tier consists of middle management and above who are organized at the career cluster level (Industry Advisory Committee), and provides broader oversight and advice regarding emerging industry trends, current workplace requirements and industry-preferred credentials. The top-tiered advisory committee is composed of the PCCCS and the Local Advisory Committee (The LAC advises an institution’s administrative personnel in delivering CTE, and it is also a Perkins requirement.). This top tier is intended to connect the work involving CTE into the broader context of regional economic development.

This new advisory model has been monumental in establishing an effective and dynamic relationship between industry and educators. In the “old” model, district employees were viewed as the subject matter experts. With the new organizational structure, the focus is on an equal partnership—working together to achieve shared goals without any pretense of a hierarchal relationship.

The focus of the work has also changed. The work now centers on regional workforce and economic development with CTE viewed as a valuable partner in achieving that goal. CTE is no longer just an imperative to education in Philadelphia; it has become an imperative to everyone.

Lessons Learned

The changes that occurred in Philadelphia’s education system can be used as an instructional tool for other institutions delivering CTE, especially those in large urban centers.

Six key lessons were summarized from

the work in Philadelphia, and they underscore some of the quality components of an effective CTE program, particularly a program that wants to engage the larger community in substantive change.

Lesson 1: Help local leadership (education, government and workforce) understand the unifying nature of CTE programs and how these programs can benefit a local community.

Lesson 2: Secure quality volunteers for advisory committees (at all three advisory levels in Philadelphia’s case) and give these leaders a voice and a seat at the table so their knowledge can be shared.

Lesson 3: Focus CTE improvement on the big picture—an educated and flexible workforce. Make sure all parties understand their role in maintaining a quality CTE program.

Lesson 4: Find multiple, meaningful and sustainable ways to maintain engagement of all volunteers. Relying on meetings to serve as a primary means of engagement is not enough. Provide an annual schedule, develop a new meeting format, use electronic participatory tools and remain supportive. Don’t allow the different levels of advisory committee volunteers to work independently from each other. Again, focus on the big picture.

Lesson 5: Work with advisory committees to develop new tools for providing guidance and accountability, and assist the committees in establishing milestones and in identifying progress along the way. Philadelphia has been reviewing NOCTI longitudinal data in an effort to analyze the growth in student competency in particular industry clusters. They have also begun reviewing NOCTI student performance test data by industry-driven categories (safety, blueprint reading, etc.) to help identify programs that are able to successfully teach these categories.

Lesson 6: Celebrate successes with constituents at all levels. Doing so ensures ownership of the work, and it can also ensure impactful and lasting change.

Pathways to Progress

Philadelphia’s efforts to organize the business community and connect them

with other stakeholders who also share an abiding interest in improving education are impressive. Graduation rates are up and much of the credit goes to collaborative CTE planning and programming. In fact, a 2014 article in *The Notebook* sums up the efforts of one Philadelphia high school like with the following headline: “As a Kensington High School Shifts Course, Graduation Rate Jumps.”⁵

Because the three-tiered advisory structure is now in place, stakeholders better understand the role they play in workforce development, which will give all students the opportunities and support needed to be ready for careers and post-secondary education. Additionally, other innovative strategies are being considered, such as the use of digital badges tied to the manufacturing industry through the use of NOCTI’s badging engine.

Thanks to the collaboration of a broad array of stakeholders and some forward-thinking leaders who were willing to work toward a solution, Philadelphia is seeing more high school graduates capable of

succeeding in this economy, ones who are able to take their rightful place in society—a goal of all CTE programs. Hopefully, Philadelphia’s experience will help the CTE community work more effectively toward that goal. **Tech**

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ENDNOTES

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EXPLORE MORE


If your school is interested in learning more about industry organizing in support of CTE advisory needs, please contact Philadelphia Academies, Inc. at bcip@academiesinc.org.

To learn more about using technical competence data to improve instruction, or if you are interested in using digital badging to increase student engagement, contact NOCTI at nocti@nocti.org

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