

High schools targeting industries

Struggling institutions aim for emerging technologies

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

BUFFALO - Students entering Buffalo's redesigned South Park High School this fall may not have to look far for a job upon graduation — 1 mile to be precise, at a massive solar panel factory being built up the road.

The school is among five struggling high schools the district is redesigning with emerging local industries in mind. Along with regular classes, each will offer specialty programming around in-demand skills such as solar panel manufacturing, life sciences, homeland security and gaming.

The idea addresses both the district's challenge to motivate students to show up and graduate, as well as employers' concerns about a "skills gap" that threatens to leave them short-handed. It also follows a broader educational trend toward "career pathways" as alternatives to a four-year college degree.

"Our young people will take their places not just in the mail room but in the board room," said Buffalo Superintendent Kriner Cash, who sees in his 34,000-student district "a human-capital pipeline" for skilled jobs being created amid a surge of economic development in the city.

About 12,000 new jobs are anticipated in the next few years, many of them concentrated within a 120-acre hospital and research corridor and a clean energy manufacturing complex anchored by SolarCity.

"This is part of a reboot, a redesign of education in the Buffalo public schools," Mayor Byron Brown said while cutting the ribbon on the new Bennett High School, which had been targeted by the state Education Department for closure because of consistently low academic results.

The new Computer Academy of Technological Sciences at Bennett will offer college credits and industry certification with a focus on animation, gaming, coding, mobile application design and computer hardware.

Incoming freshman Nicole Baker, 13, and her father, Marvin Baker, were sold on the school during an open house that included a demonstration of 3-D printing technology that produced a replica frog. Nicole was the first student accepted.

"I pushed for her. She's very smart at computers, she's really quick with them," said Marvin Baker, who hopes the school will nurture his daughter's knack for technology.

The Solar Pathways Program at South Park High School is a partnership with Erie Community College and SolarCity, which expects to employ 1,400 people when the facility starts production next year. Mentored by SolarCity employees, students will earn a high school diploma and an associate degree in six years at no cost to them and be first in line for jobs when they graduate. The program is funded by a seven-year, \$2.4 million state grant. Such school-business relationships are becoming more common, said Sean Lynch of the National Association for Career and Technical Education.

"That's driven a lot by the skills gap and concerns about finding qualified employees to fill positions that are available today," Lynch said.

Funded by a four-year, \$7 million federal grant, the Buffalo schools' new Bioinformatics and Life Sciences Research Lab is geared toward careers on the city's medical campus. Students will have access to nine college credits and medical and other industry licenses and certifications with mentors and partners from the University at Buffalo, Buffalo State College and Empire Genomics Co.

East Community High School, meanwhile, will offer a law and public safety pathway with an eye toward careers in corrections of homeland security. Lafayette International High School will serve English language learners from other countries with internships and mentoring in fields including education and business.



Nicole Baker, 13, and her father, Marvin Baker, are flanked by Buffalo school and city leaders as they cut the ribbon at the Computing Academy of Technological Sciences at Bennett High School in Buffalo.

CAROLYN THOMPSON/ AP



Students work at computers inside Bennett High School in Buffalo. The school is one of five troubled high schools being redesigned with a focus on specialty programming, such as computer science or solar energy.

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BYRON BROWN

BUFFALO MAYOR

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