

RCS D plans to reboot, expand career and technical education

A CLOSER LOOK

Justin Murphy and Adria R. Walker

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

USA TODAY NETWORK

Martha Beltran, a 12th-grader, has always been interested in nursing, so the medical laboratory and health sciences pathway at East High School's Career and Technical Education Center seemed like a good fit.

Little did she know how far it would take her: an afterschool job as a nurse technician at Strong Memorial Hospital and a phlebotomy rotation, where she drew blood from more than 100 patients as part of her coursework. It all resulted in a full scholarship to Niagara University this fall.

Working in a medical setting with real patients 'was scary,' she said, 'but it was amazing how everything we'd studied came together, and how I was actually drawing blood on people.'

The Rochester City School District is looking to give more students opportunities like Beltran's by greatly expanding the reach of its career and technical education (CTE) program. Over the next several years, the district intends to install programs in every secondary school and encourage every single student to graduate with a CTE credential.

The ambitious initiative would also create dozens more internship and work-based learning connections with companies across the region, and tailor academic pathways toward the skills and positions those companies are seeking.

'We're trying to expand CTE options to make the city school district more attractive to the community,' CTE Director Sheldon Cox said.

Luanys Rivera took the same pathway as Beltran and works as a nurse technician while still in high school. She said she appreciated how quickly her classroom training translated into a potential career.

'We're just high school students, so we didn't think we'd pick it up this quick,' she said. 'But they ended up offering us jobs.'

Getting more students interested

The district's plan, as described at a Feb. 28 board meeting, has three main components.

The first is to expand CTE far beyond its current footprint at Edison Tech and East. By 2027-28, every high school would have at least two state-certified CTE pathways. They include public safety and health sciences at Franklin; athletic training and bilingual teaching and learning at Monroe; and barbering and cosmetology at School Without Walls.

The second is for more students — ideally, all of them — to obtain a CTE credential upon graduation. The third, and a key to the other two, is getting more children interested, even if they don't fit the traditional mold for CTE. It was for that reason that a small group of girls stayed after school at Edison Tech one day earlier this month, their eyes glued to their computer screens.

The girls are all part of RCSD's Girls Who Game, a district-wide afterschool club. Girls Who Game itself is an international club, hosted by Dell, Intel, Microsoft and ALP, that aims 'to inspire young female minds into careers in science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics,' according to the

club's website.

This season's theme is an inclusive and sustainable Rochester. The girls met up, brainstormed the various issues Rochester is facing and then figured out how they would solve each of those issues using Minecraft, the video game platform. Instead of trying to improve a broken system or world, they're starting from scratch — building the city brick by brick.

Jaziyah Fry, a 10th-grader, was painstakingly building a memorial to slavery and the country's history recently.

'We learn about Black history and we're learning about Black accomplishments, (and) think that's a really good thing,' she said. 'But I also think we have to acknowledge that history in this country is really terrible before we can move on from it.'

Next to Fry, 12th-grader Anjelica Navarro was building a shelter for unhoused people. Using jungle wood, a building material, she meticulously created the perimeter of the building. As with Fry, the decision to make the shelter was Navarro's own.

'I feel a personal kinship to creating a safe environment for people to live, especially in the cold Rochester winters,' she said. 'My goodness. I cannot imagine being out here, so yeah, I'm building it. That's the plan.'

Past stumbles

Attention to career and technical education in RCSD has been inconstant over the years. Neither of the two recent state-appointed education overseers, Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino or Monitor Shelley Jallow, focused on it in their reports.

That lack of focus has led repeatedly to

breakdowns in community relations and program integrity. Local business owners have long complained that the district fails to follow through on plans for internships or job placement, in particular for students at Edison Tech.

A blunt report from the state Education Department in 2014 portrayed a program in total disarray, with many of the CTE pathways lacking accreditation, and asked the district to consider placing Edison under the supervision of BOCES.

Many of the students enrolled in CTE programs have significant disabilities and are trying to develop skills that will allow them to earn work and live independently as adults. The programs they rely upon often have lacked rigor or even basic alignment with the stated purpose. A consultant in 2017 observed that students purportedly learning culinary skills were instead making table decorations and practicing using a nutcracker.

Rochester's new CTE plan includes a major push for a graduation pathway that has been controversial in the past. The year before the pandemic, 40% of district graduates received a diploma that relied upon the Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) credential, which was originally developed for students with significant disabilities. That rate was far higher than any other district in the state; the advocacy group Education Trust New York warned of 'historically underserved groups of students' being shepherded onto a pathway seen as less rigorous than a Regent's diploma.

The district pushed back against that interpretation, saying it undervalued students' achievements and failed to recognize the importance of different pathways to graduation. Since COVID, the percentage of CDOS diplomas has fallen sharply, representing just 4% of

RCSD graduates in 2022.

That would change under Cox's plan. He foresees 100% of CTE students graduating with a CTE diploma rather than — or at least alongside — a traditional Regents diploma, either by amassing work-based learning hours or passing a course in career and financial management.

'Having a CDOS credential doesn't mean you can't go to college,' he said. 'But you'll eventually need to fill out a job resume and go on an interview and other things, and we want to make sure you have those skills before you graduate.'

Part of the concern around CDOS diplomas was whether students were in fact getting the 216 hours of qualified CTE coursework necessary, including 54 work-based learning hours. Cox is looking to add work-based learning coordinators at all secondary schools to ensure that programs are rigorous.

'It feels more professional'

One great benefit of work-based learning is that it appeals to students who don't enjoy traditional academic coursework.

As a student in East's vision care program, Yovani Cartagena helped manufacture eyeglasses for children in the city — but not before dissecting a cow's eyeball.

'The learning process was kind of boring, to be honest,' she said. 'But actually doing it and helping kids is pretty awesome.'

Xavier Hall spent last summer at RCSD central office working in the information technology department, swapping out hard drives and performing repairs. He hopes to do so again this coming summer before enrolling at Monroe

Community College and then Rochester
Institute of Technology.

'It's not that our other classes aren't fun,
but this is something I really want to do,'
he said. 'It's not just some kind of school
work. It feels more professional.'

[Copyright © 2023 Democrat and Chronicle 3/26/2023](#)

[Powered by TECNAVIA](#)

Sunday, 03/26/2023 Page .A06

Copyright © 2023 Democrat and Chronicle 3/26/2023