

Already At the Top: CTE Programs Show Positive Impact on Student Achievement

Focus: Urban school (three part series)

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Global competition, demographics, and changes in the labor market require that we expeditiously increase the pace in which we build systems that ensure that every student in the United States is prepared for success. At the federal level, the Obama administration recognized this urgency and incentivized sweeping changes in four priority areas through its Race to the Top Fund. While the funding dedicated to these priorities through Race to the Top is unprecedented, these priorities are not new. Career technical education programs (CTE) across the United States have made significant gains to improve student achievement and success.

This issue brief highlights a high school in an urban setting and its work to transform a CTE program into a rigorous college and career readiness program with positive outcomes and impact on student achievement. The success of the program aligns to at least one of the Race to the Top priority areas. Once stereotyped as a dumping ground for those less academically-inclined, CTE has been transforming itself to a system that offers rigorous, relevant, real-world instruction with positive outcomes and impact on student achievement.

Race to the Top four priority areas:

- **Adopting standards and assessments** that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
- **Building data systems** that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- **Cultivating effective teachers and principals**, especially where they are needed most; and
- **Turning around struggling schools.**

CTE in an Urban Setting: Newark Tech High School, New Jersey

A comprehensive approach to educational reform is being credited for success at Newark Tech High School, which is part of the Essex County Vocational Technical Schools (ECVTS) district. Essex County, New Jersey is situated in the New York Metropolitan Area and is the second most populous and second most densely populated county in the state.

The school provides college-preparatory and career technical education to a diverse population of more than 700 high school students in a district where more than 85 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and over 93 percent are from school districts formerly known as Abbott districts.ⁱ Only 63 percent of students at Newark Tech speak English as a first language at home.ⁱⁱ

Turning Around Struggling Schools

From 2003 to 2009, Newark Tech's passing rate for mathematics on the statewide High School Proficiency Assessment, skyrocketed from a dismal 39.7 percent in to 88 percent. During that same time, Language Arts scores climbed from 73 percent in 2003 to 97.6 percent. The graduation rate of the class of 2009 was 98.8 percent, and 86 percent of students reported going on to two year or four year colleges after graduation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Students at Newark Tech are evaluated through a competency-based education approach. Demonstration of specified skill competencies and the use of project task sheets enable the students to attain not only a high school diploma, but also a certificate listing areas of mastery.

To complement the mix of technical courses in areas such as health, music production and computer-aided drafting, students are required to take four years of mathematics, a minimum of two years of science, four years of English and physical education and three years of social studies. The Academy and Tech Prep Programs include a total of four years of science and four years of mathematics, culminating with physics, pre-calculus, calculus and Spanish. The course sequence aims to set students on a student to pursue a baccalaureate or associate degree.

Like other schools in the ECVTS district, Newark Tech has partnerships with public and private entities to collaborate in developing relevant and rigorous curriculum and experiences for students. Partners include Essex County College, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Public Service Electric & Gas, Covanta Energy, and the state of New Jersey.

Cultivating Effective Teachers and Principals

In 2009, Principal Baruti Kafele received the Milken Educator Award, a teacher recognition award that recognizes the outstanding work of highly effective educators. Kafele was recognized for transforming Newark Tech from a poorly performing school into one of the best in the nation in only four years. As a result of his work, Newark Tech has been recognized for the past three years by *U.S. News and World Report Magazine* as one of America's best high schools. Kafele, a nationally-renowned speaker, exercises his principles in school leadership, classroom teaching, parental engagement, and student motivation/empowerment in his school improvement strategies.

Just a few years ago, Newark Tech was a severely underachieving school labeled a School in Needed of Assistance, but Kafele turned the school into one that outperforms schools with similar demographics by significant margins due to his dedication, hands-on approach and high expectations for all students and staff. Students are expected to, as a school, set specific expectations. For instance, Kafele established a goal in which 80 percent of students in all grade levels earn academic distinction -- achieving Principal's Honor Roll, Honor Roll or Honorable Mention.

CTE at the Top

Newark Tech is an example of the tremendous results that great leadership and a concerted effort to turn around a failing school can produce. Just a few short years ago, students were struggling to pass state assessments, and now their rates are some of the best in the state. Between 2003 and

2009, student scores on state assessments rose dramatically – by 48 percentage points in mathematics and 25 percentage points in Language Arts. Newark Tech demonstrates that CTE is a leader in meeting the Race to the Top priority areas.

ⁱ Abbott Districts are public school districts in New Jersey covered by a 1985 New Jersey Supreme Court ruling in *Abbott v. Burke* that found that the education provided to urban school children in poor districts was inadequate and unconstitutional. The State was ordered to assure that these students receive an adequate education through programs and reforms such as standards-based education, parity funding, supplemental programs, preschool education, and school facilities improvements.

ⁱⁱ <http://education.state.nj.us/rc/rc09/dataselect.php?c=13;d=1390;s=070;lt=W;st=V&datasection=all>

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