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U.S. News: New York Teams Up With IBM to Reboot a High School

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This fall, New York City will open P-Tech, a unique six-year high school where students can earn a diploma and an associate's degree in a computer-science-related field and then first crack at a job with IBM.

Located in Brooklyn's Crown Heights section at the former Paul Robeson High School, which was phased out after years of failing performance, the new school was in large part created by the IBM International Foundation. The foundation helped develop the curriculum, select the principal and promises graduating students a shot at a job at the International Business Machine Corp.

The technology titan's close involvement in the planning and creation of the high-tech high school represents a trend in public-private partnerships in education: As U.S. students fall further behind global counterparts, and as companies seek skilled workers, big businesses like Microsoft Corp., J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. and IBM are taking an active, strategic role in education. For them, the benefit is a better-trained work force. Skills that IBM finds lacking in job applicants include writing, problem solving and working collaboratively.

"Companies are starting to see the urgency of the situation and asking, 'What can we give besides cash to really move the needle?'" said Margaret Coady, executive director of the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy, an international nonprofit association of CEOs.

For decades, corporations have ponied up millions for schools. The Foundation Center, which tracks philanthropic spending, reports that nearly 200 of the nation's top corporate foundations donated about \$514 million to education in 2009, the largest percentage given to any one funding category. Still, the money is a fraction of the \$600 billion in government spending on K-12 education.

Historically, the largesse has gone toward such endeavors as scholarships, computers and textbooks, and a phalanx of mentors and tutors.

But 30% of American teenagers don't graduate from high school on time, and they lag behind other industrialized countries on math and science exams.

Frederick Hess, education-policy director at the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank that pushes for market-oriented solutions, said corporate philanthropy has been focused on "being a good citizen." But "if you're looking to dramatically improve K-12 education, they've had a hugely ineffective strategy," said Mr. Hess, who has studied corporate giving.

President Barack Obama has prodded business leaders to develop a more strategic and coordinated approach to education investing.

Mary Cullinane, Microsoft's Worldwide Senior Director of Innovation and Strategic Initiatives, said the company has been on an investment "journey" from simply giving schools discounted software to a recent \$15 million effort to explore ways to use videogame technology as a tool in the classroom.

"It's important that companies like ours bring new thinking and great rigor to education, instead of just dumping some technology in schools and hoping for the best," she said.

IBM has adopted a similar strategy. At one time, the company simply wrote checks to schools and donated computers. But Stanley Litow, president of IBM International Foundation, said the company has given up "checkbook philanthropy."

"We are looking for scalable strategies that can be game changers," said Mr. Litow, who previously served as Deputy Chancellor of Schools for New York City. "

IBM donated 50,000 computers designed to help young children learn to read, and created a program to help retiring employees earn math and science teaching certificates to work in public schools.

But P-Tech -- a joint venture with the school district and the City University of New York -- is its biggest gamble. The school opens in September with 130 ninth graders, about 80% from low-income homes, and will add a grade each year for five years.

IBM is more involved in the creation and academics of P-Tech, spending \$500,000 to help develop the school's website, provide software support at the school, and pay for a project manager to help create the curriculum and coordinate mentoring and internships.

Rashid Davis, the newly hired principal, said the school has the "power to change generations," because it will graduate students who "have serious job skills and will be first in line for job opportunities."

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