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These Schools Mean Business

Corporations are helping educators train kids. It could save the middle class

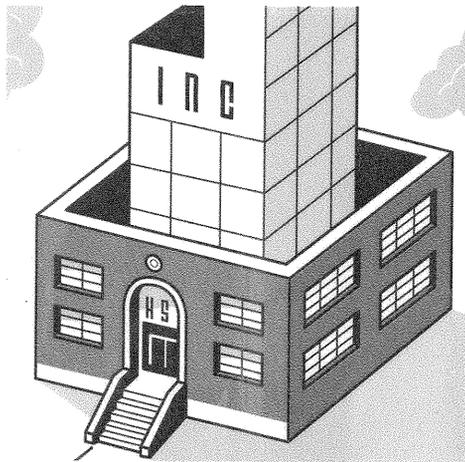
NATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS IS THE topic of the moment, but so much of the debate about it is conducted at 35,000 feet, the policy level. In late March I visited a place in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where change is happening on the ground. Down the street from public-housing blocks is a new open-admission public school called P-Tech, or Pathways in Technology Early College High School. Launched last September, it's a partnership of the New York City department of education, the New York City College of Technology, the City University of New York and IBM, whose head of corporate social responsibility, Stanley Litow, used to be the city's deputy schools chancellor. The goal is to create a science- and tech-heavy curriculum that prepares kids—some of whom would be the first in their families to graduate from high school, let alone college—for entry- and midlevel jobs at top tech-oriented companies. Each student gets an IBM mentor from Day One. There's a small but serious core curriculum focused on the basics: English, math, science and technology.

There's also a class called Workplace

Learning where students pick up the more subtle but crucial skills that will help them navigate a corporate setting: how to debate, how to persuade, how to work in teams, how to exude the confidence and attitude that kids whose parents work for FORTUNE 500 companies get as a birthright. (P-Tech grads will be first in line for IBM jobs.) The idea is to create a replicable model that can succeed anywhere with any type of kid. "Everyone who comes here to work with me has to believe that every single student here can make it," says the charismatic principal, Rashid Davis, a Columbia teachers'-college grad who grew up shuttling between the poorest

counties in New York and South Carolina and credits education with saving his life.

The most important thing is that P-Tech students will graduate with not only a high school diploma but an associate's degree too. That's crucial, since 63% of American jobs will require postsecondary training by 2018. The U.S. economy will create more than 14 million new jobs over the next 10 years but only for people with at least a community-college degree.



Those jobs—positions like dental hygienist, medical-laboratory technician, electrician, aircraft mechanic and entry-level software engineer—will allow millions entry to the middle class. Many of them will require serious technology skills.

The problem is that a startlingly low percentage of U.S. college students—30% at four-year colleges and only about 25% at two-year colleges—finish their degrees. Some of that underachievement is money-related, but some of it is due to the fact that the U.S., unlike high-growth countries like Germany, doesn't do much to connect educators with corporations doing the hiring. That's evident in the

double-digit unemployment rates among new college grads. Many have no marketable skills, just large debts and a degree in, say, sports marketing and communication or some other faux major.

Harvard Business School professor

Rosabeth Moss Kanter notes that as much as a third of the increase in unemployment in the Great Recession can be attributed to this mismatch between skills and jobs. The gap is greatest in positions that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree. That's where linking educators to the folks who do the hiring can have a really powerful impact. Michigan's No Worker Left Behind program, for example, guaranteed

two years of paid tuition toward an associate's degree or occupational certificate. Educators worked with local employers to develop the right curriculum. Lots of companies—including Caterpillar and Siemens, which President Obama mentioned in his State of the Union speech—have started miniversions of this sort of program, often out of desperation since local schools simply aren't turning out grads with the skill sets they need.

That was certainly an impetus for IBM, which has hundreds of unfilled slots for middle-level workers. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel is using the P-Tech playbook to set up five new STEM schools—the acronym stands

for science, tech, engineering and math—in partnership with IBM, Microsoft, Verizon, Cisco and other companies.

Meanwhile, the kids in Crown Heights are exceeding expectations. P-Tech's hallways are posterized with pictures of the dozens of ninth- and 10th-graders who've already met the City College admission requirements and are likely to complete the associate's program in four years rather than six. "These kids have already gone past a \$15-an-hour lifetime," says Litow. "They are reinventing what high school—and their future—is all about." They may also be reinventing national competitiveness. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY CAMPBELL FOR TIME