



PATHWAY TO THE FUTURE

A new education initiative promises to help prepare high school students for their futures in the workplace and society.
By TyLisa C. Johnson

At the end of February, Paul Spradley stepped through the doors of the Consortium for Public Education eager to begin his new role as project co-manager for one of the consortium's latest endeavors.

He had been asked to collaborate with Christy Kuehn, consortium project director for an upcoming — and by some measures groundbreaking — pilot program funded by partner The Heinz Endowments to help students cultivate the skills, attitudes and values needed for both promising careers and contributing to the well-being of their communities.

The Endowments had announced on Feb. 5 an initial \$700,000 investment to launch the Pittsburgh Readiness Institute and its first program, the Pittsburgh Readiness Lab, with the goal of helping local youth meet the burgeoning demands of a competitive and changing workforce and society. The investment would cover various resources and program costs, including any leased space, technology for student projects, stipends, and transportation to site visits, along with salaries for teachers and facilitators, and an evaluation of the pilot lab project.

Dr. Kuehn and Dr. Spradley were initially planning for a six-week program for about 45 students starting in late June. The students were going to work in groups at the Energy Innovation Center in Pittsburgh's Hill District with

the help of industry professionals, community partners and teachers to develop creative solutions to real community-wide issues.

The co-leaders of the program sought partners and began building out a project-based learning curriculum, with a “learner-centered” approach. Students were expected to be nominated to the program by their schools or one of the many rural, urban or suburban education program partners across Allegheny County.

The two were “really trying to build a meaningful experience for the students,” said Dr. Spradley, who recently left the consortium to become assistant vice president of Diversity, Inclusion and Equity at Dollar Bank.

But all this was weeks before the COVID-19 outbreak dramatically altered the lives of millions of Americans, changing their sense of normalcy for the foreseeable future. Because of the statewide shutdown of nonessential businesses in the spring and the push for social distancing, Dr. Kuehn and Dr. Spradley had to re-evaluate how to create an interactive student experience while keeping them healthy and safe.

As it stands, plans call for hosting a Future Ready Kickoff event with participating districts when local schools reconvene in the fall. After that, the program will include project-based learning during the school day, user-friendly design activities, school–industry exchanges, and face-to-face and virtual internships either bi-weekly or monthly throughout the academic year.

When the Endowments announced the program in February, it was described as possibly the first of its kind because it would be unique in offering an out-of-school-time training program focused on developing students’ skills, attitudes and values to become what organizers call “community- and future-ready.” Many other programs address just one or two of these objectives.

The Pittsburgh Readiness Institute also is designed to respond to various needs of the community, industry and education, said Stan Thompson, the Endowments’ senior program director for Education and the institute’s executive director.

While schools and out-of-school learning programs are struggling to prepare students for an unknown future, research shows employers are facing shortages as they search for qualified employees to meet emerging needs, Dr. Thompson said. The institute’s approach was based on research, including the 2016 report “Inflection Point” commissioned by the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, that predicted an 80,000-worker shortage in the 10-county southwestern

Pennsylvania region by 2025, he explained. The pilot program is a direct response to these challenges.

Students leaving high school have choices for the direction of their future, but “when you have limited exposures, you make limited plans,” said Consortium for Public Education Executive Director Mary Kay Babyak.

Dr. Spradley and Dr. Kuehn spent many days thinking about this as they developed a program and envisioned a learning environment that would address the Readiness Lab’s larger mission: engaging Allegheny County youth to help them to become self-assured, civically engaged citizens of

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tomorrow, ready to join the workforce and find solutions to problems their world faces.

“We want this to be an experience that is transformative for them,” Dr. Kuehn said.

The program is designed to assist students of diverse backgrounds in learning to make plans for their lives by exposing them to new environments, people and industries; showing them how to find the resources needed to take them where they want to go; and teaching them to be civically engaged as they do it.

On another level, “this is an opportunity for students to really get to know themselves in a much larger context,” Dr. Thompson said. “Students will be able to use the program to address deeper questions about themselves, such as: Who am I? Who do I want to become? How do I get there? What do I need to do to keep growing? How do I give back to my community?”

In addition to being thrust into new environments and learning new skills, students in the program will be taught how to work with people completely different from themselves. They will work on things such as creating a digital portfolio of their major projects and building a network of industry and community mentors and leaders. The goal is for the students to experience both internal and external growth.

Ultimately, Dr. Thompson said, the program hopes to give “the learner—the student—the opportunity to really thrive in their respective communities and in the roles that they hope to play in society.” **h**