Pathways to Prosperity: Central Ohio Phase One

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Abstract

Central Ohio school districts are collaborating in an unprecedented manner, under a Straight A Grant, to implement demonstration sites for four industry-focused Pathways to Prosperity (PtoP). The postsecondary partner is Columbus State Community College (CSCC), who is providing the college level content and assisting with updated curriculum and course progression. PtoP is an example of the many initiatives underway nationwide to provide college credit opportunities to high school students in a structured program. The consortium of schools, also working with Jobs for the Future, Battelle for Kids, and Paul Werth Associates, are collaborating to share resources and information for the benefit of the region and in support of Columbus 202 and the Central Ohio Compact. The initial phase of the project provided me with an opportunity to observe and participate in steering committee meetings, issue discussion, and coordination efforts. This paper provides an overview of the pathways concept, Ohio Straight A Grant objectives, and personal observations (as of week nine in an 18-week involvement) of the initial phase of this initiative across Central Ohio public school districts.

Keywords: Pathways to Prosperity, Dual Credit, Accelerated College, Central Ohio Compact, Straight A Fund
Central Ohio school districts are collaborating under a Straight A grant to implement demonstration sites for four industry-focused Pathways to Prosperity (PtoP). PtoP is an example of the many initiatives underway nationwide to provide college credit opportunities to high school students in a structured program. The concepts behind the PtoP initiative expand on many of the characteristics of Career and Technical Education (CET)/Perkin’s Tech-Prep programs that have historically provided avenues for students to earn technically oriented college credits while still in high school and, through articulation agreements, transfer them to postsecondary institutions, generally community colleges. Programs are supported by agreements between high schools and colleges or universities that define the specific coursework included and the steps needed to articulate credits. This paper provides an overview of the pathways concept, Ohio Straight A Grant objectives, and personal observations (as of week nine in an 18-week involvement) of the initial phase of this initiative across the Central Ohio public school districts.

**Dual Credit Programs**

Dual credit programs are gaining traction across the United States. Many factors are driving this expansion. First and foremost is the stated objective of the Obama administration to significantly increase the number of postsecondary graduates by 2020. This movement is further reflected in new requirements in the Higher Education Act that incentivize accelerated college completion. According to the Middle College National Consortium (MCNC), almost 30% of high school seniors have earned college credits (Kim, 2010) and that number is growing. Other non-governmental agencies, such as the Lumina Foundation or Complete College America, are also pressing for secondary and postsecondary innovation that provides college level
opportunities to middle-achieving underserved student populations such as minorities, low income, and first generation, as a means of meeting the growing skills demands of an expanding and technically oriented economy.

Dual credit programs are manifested in a number of different models. This includes the traditional advanced placement (AP), career and technical education (CTE), and early college high school (ECHS). This dual credit landscape encompasses programs that range from those heavily weighted toward academics to those primarily technical in nature; they also include a variety of postsecondary partners and encompass two-year and four-year institutions (see Figure A1 for a pictorial representation of dual credit programs).

**Pathways to Prosperity**

One avenue through which students can survey various career opportunities and attain college credits is through a technical pathway that links high school, a community college, and local business. Recommendations from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (GSE) are the result of the Pathways to Prosperity Project. The white paper highlights significant concerns related to America’s ability to remain competitive globally, meet the increasing demand for a technically skilled workforce, and addresses the ever widening economic and opportunity gap between those with versus those without a postsecondary education. In order to address these concerns, and support the Obama administration’s call for increased postsecondary graduates, it is not necessary to put all students on a college-bound, baccalaureate degree path. In fact, only about one third of projected jobs will require a Bachelors of Art degree (BA) (Harvard GSE, 2011).

For the remaining estimated needs, Harvard GSE recommends creating tighter linkage between educational experiences and tangible job opportunities for high school students that lead to associate degrees or other industry recognized certificates. Harvard GSE (2011) cites
internationally successful programs that have strong technical educational pathways as models to adapt and implement across the United States. These recommendations build on traditional career and technical education but expand it to encompass a greater commitment from regional businesses in guiding coursework development. Additionally, the programs are more highly structured and businesses supplement classroom experiences with apprenticeships, internships, and job shadowing (Harvard GSE, 2011).

Ohio’s Agenda

States are individually assessing and implementing programs that support dual credit attainment. Ohio has a number of initiatives underway that provide funding for ECHS, CTE, or other college credit opportunities. Legislative proposals underway within the state include several specifically targeted at moving students to college completion faster and that include access to college-level coursework while in high school.

Legislative Direction

Ohio House Bill 59 (HB 59), the 2014-2015 Budget, includes funding and legislative direction aimed at increasing the number of Ohioans with postsecondary credentials and providing opportunities for high school students to matriculate on an accelerated path that supports economic growth across the State. HB 59 enclosed the following four statutes, which reflected a common theme:

- The 3-Year Degree program, established in Ohio Revised Code, chapter 3333.43, includes support for advanced placement (AP), early college high school (ECHS), and career-technical credit transfers into four-year institutions.
- College Credit Plus, defined in section 363.590 of HB 59, establishes clear goals for an effective state dual credit system.
Complete College Ohio is the result of a statewide task force, with guidance from Complete College America, to create policies that incentivize reduced time to degree completion.

One-Year Option, as set out in HB 59, requires that the Ohio Board of Regents (OBR) Chancellor establish a technical program credit articulation system that allows students to transfer industry-approved credentials in order to accelerate college completion.

These four statutes echo a common theme in Ohio’s legislative agenda - accelerated college completion. The Straight A Fund is another mechanism targeted at the K-12 level that is being utilized to provide funding to school districts undertaking new programs, including those with a dual credit focus.

Economic Development

Columbus 2020 is an economic plan with specifically outlined targets to increase the number of jobs and capital investment across the 11 counties participating (Columbus 2020, n.d). “The Central Ohio Compact: A Regional Strategy for College Completion and Career Success” is an initiative led by Columbus State Community College (CSCC) that supports Columbus 2020 with specific educational goals (CSCC, 2012). The objectives of this effort, guided by policy from the Lumina Foundation, are to significantly increase postsecondary credentials across Central Ohio. There is a particular emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) skills needed by Ohio industry. The Compact establishes the education framework to meet the state’s economic development plans. Reynoldsburg City School District (RCSD) was the first district in Central Ohio to commit to the compact.

Straight A Fund

In 2013, Governor John Kasich created a $250 million fund designed to reduce the cost of education and create innovative programs that improve educational outcomes at all levels, are
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sustainable, and can be replicated across the state (Ohio Department of Education (ODE)). Ohio is specifically looking to increase postsecondary graduates that can meet growing skill requirements for high-tech industry across the State. Additionally, course delivery modernization, such as the use of digital technology, is a key consideration in the awarding of the Grant (ODE).

In the first round of Grant applications, 24 school districts were awarded funding for inventive projects. Dual credit and accelerated college endeavors were emphasized, including funding for expansion of two early college high schools, adding to the 16 currently operating within Ohio. Additionally, recipients included Reynoldsburg, leading central Ohio districts in the implementation of the Pathways to Prosperity demonstration sites. This grant award of $14.4 million involves all central Ohio school districts as well as several other supporting partners, including Columbus State Community College (CSCC), Battelle for Kids, and Jobs for the Future (JFF) (Candisky, 2013).

Central Ohio PtoP Straight A Award

Reynoldsburg City School District constructed the Round 1 Straight A application on behalf of the 15 participating central Ohio schools. The objective of the project is to initiate a PtoP network within Ohio that forms the basis for statewide adoption of these policies and programs. Five primary outcomes for the pathway programs are listed in the awarded RCSD application.

1. Increased high school completion
2. Reduced college remediation rates
3. Accelerated postsecondary credential attainment
4. Productive work-based learning experiences for students and employers
5. Program sustainability

Beyond meeting the legislative priorities outlined by the Kasich administration above, these objectives also support state economic goals outlined in Columbus 2020 and the Central Ohio Compact educational objectives. Additionally, the PtoP objectives reflect the broader national agenda to improve graduation and matriculation rates coupled with strong workforce development initiatives.

**PtoP Demonstration**

The PtoP Central Ohio demonstration project is the initial phase of establishing these programs across the consortium districts. For this demonstration endeavor, four industries were selected based on regionally projected economic need and student interest. The newly developed pathways will include coursework at the high school and college level coordinated to provide opportunities in advanced manufacturing, information technology (IT), logistics, and healthcare.

Many of the participating districts are leveraging existing dual credit programs, business offerings, or CTE agreements. Some are participating in limited efforts for the demonstration phase; others are aggressively implementing multiple projects and are targeting large student populations, some reaching into middle school (See Table A1 for a matrix of projects by participating district).

**Timeline**

The project was launched in December 2013 with the development of a fiscal plan and governance model. The timeline to complete Round 1 demonstration objectives is aggressive. Implementation is targeted for completion by June 30, 2014. However, it is not intended that the program will be running with students enrolled until the 2014-2015 school year, and the specific level of achievement differs by both district and project.
Governance

An executive steering committee, the Kitchen Table, was established that includes representatives from the districts leading the six projects defined under the four industries. It also includes liaisons from CSCC and consultants from JFF and Paul Werth, the marketing company retained to assist with communication, business outreach, and messaging. Additionally, a full steering committee, with representation from all participating districts, the Educational Services Center (ESC) of Central Ohio, CSCC, JFF, Paul Werth, and Battelle for Kids convenes regularly.

Individual project meetings occur as needed to work across districts or with Werth and CSCC on specific requirements for communication and course progressions. These project teams are coordinating procurement of equipment in order to obtain favorable pricing and drive greater effectiveness in purchasing transactions. District budgets are compared and assessed to ensure consistency within and between projects on estimated costs, delivery and implementation schedules, and equipment specifications.

Field Experience Participation

My participation with the project resulted from a contact made during an Early College High School conference hosted by JFF, KnowledgeWorks (an Ohio based non-profit and Gates Foundation affiliate), and North Carolina Schools in October 2013. A breakout session highlighted the work in Ohio between JFF and several ECHS. I requested an opportunity to learn more about the PtoP effort, which was just being initiated, and to observe or participate, if possible.

Following a discussion with the Director of the JFF National PtoP Network, Amy Loyd, and Senior Program Manager, Adelina Garcia, we agreed that I would participate with them in weekly Kitchen Table and cross-district Steering Committee meetings. Additionally, where
feasible, I assist with project planning and administrative preparation. I attend individual project progress assessment and communication workshops. I have provided support for a dashboard providing a stoplight snapshot of each district’s progress on critical milestones and an executive project plan. I began attending meetings the week of February 24, 2014 and am scheduled to cease participation June 30, 2014 with the completion of the first round objectives.

**Observations**

The central Ohio school districts have established a new and unique operating model for a project crossing district lines. The PtoP project requires a level of collaboration and communication on multiple levels never before executed in Ohio, nor, according to Amy Loyd, in other states. Generally, projects of this nature are defined and implemented within a single school or district. Collaborating, sharing resources, co-planning professional development and procurement are new activities for these district leaders to undertake together. The governance model and the leadership team, under the primary guidance of Reynoldsburg, have established a spirit of cooperation and support that is minimizing adversity and competition for resources.

Individual project leaders are driving cooperation on coursework development, facilities planning, teacher professional development, and budgeting. The ESC is assisting with significant resources to merge and assess financial information, assist with personnel shortage, provide planning space, and meet the Grant’s reporting requirements. JFF is the link to the national PtoP network, delivering a series of templates and best practices that guide documentation and planning. They create connections between the central Ohio team to individuals or project teams in other states in order to provide avenues to lessons learned and best practices. The JFF consultants facilitate meetings, develop agendas, and provide overall project management assistance.
Many of the central Ohio school districts are leveraging existing programs. Reynoldsburg and Westerville, for example, are extending existing science, business, and workforce development initiatives to encompass the new pathways. Further, most, but not all, districts have CTE articulation agreements already in place with CSCC; these, and the associated state funding tied to these programs, is further supporting the development of the pathways across these four selected industries. In conjunction with the Central Ohio Compact and the desire to create greater availability to postsecondary course material, CSCC is digitizing some CTE course content. This will allow joint high school-CSCC course delivery, including delivery via distance-learning lab. All schools participating in the Straight A Grant for this project will be implementing or strengthening the information technology infrastructure needed for remote classrooms and digital delivery.

Phase one of the project includes the key steps to establish the initial course progression, assess certification requirements, and install the technical infrastructure needed for these industry pathways. For example, the advanced manufacturing initiative requires procurement of a heavy pickup truck and a mobile-lab trailer, installed with welding simulators, 3-D printers, lathes, and other high tech equipment. These mobile “FabLabs” will meet requirements established by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and will be mobile so that they can provide opportunities at multiple high school and middle school locations, some of which are shared across district lines.

**Issues and Challenges**

One of the key challenges associated with this Grant implementation has been the broad scope and very aggressive timeline. The Round 1 awards were announced in December 2013. Project initiation began in January 2014 and the demonstration site project must meet key
deliverables by June 30, 2014. In less than six months, schools have had to not only grasp the novel education construct embodied in PtoP, but also to address critical logistical and operational challenges. This includes procurement and installation of equipment, identification of instructors, scheduling professional development required, communicating with targeted students to get classes enrolled, and framing business commitments.

The academic calendar for most districts has created other complications. Just as initial fiscal and implementation planning was solidifying in early March, Spring break ensued. School calendars were not aligned and vacations occurred over a period of a few weeks. This disrupted coordinated planning, identification and preparation of counselors and teachers, student recruitment and scheduling, and steering committee meetings. These gaps and delays have an impact on the orientation of schools counselors and the recruitment of students. Counselors and teachers are, for the most part, unfamiliar with PtoP or related endeavors. However, they must be able to articulate the goals and benefits of the program to both parents and prospective students, as well as to appropriately schedule students into these classes for the 2014-2015 school year. This scheduling is underway and most districts seek to complete their master schedule before early May.

Generally, formal communication plans have been disjointed and disconnected from the needs of the various districts. The Paul Werth agency has been intermittent at engaging with the appropriate stakeholders, ensuring appropriate communication materials are available to and for the schools, and preparing the Steering Committee for marketing or announcement events with the business community. The complexity of the project and the broad number of roles needing PtoP information has made communication difficult. The communication gaps continue to create apprehension, uncertainty, and frustration across the district leaders. However, the Werth team is working to smooth out messaging and provide support to the district leaders in efforts to
provide appropriate information to key constituencies. Ultimately, the delays and confusion associated with a novel program may create a negative impact on the ability of the program to recruit students into some programs or establish appropriate business relationships so critical to the success of the PtoP philosophy.

Logistically, the districts are grappling with multiple issues as well. Each district maintains its own union that negotiates specifics for their teacher contracts. These individual contract parameters create a potential obstacle to working across district lines. For example, if the teachers’ contact precludes a teacher from working in another district or delivering courses to students from outside the district, each of these situations must be identified and addressed individually, either through specialized contracting or changes to planned program delivery.

Further, each school board has members with specific objectives driving a desired image for that district. Some districts, such as RCSD already have cross-district agreements to share educational resources, such as teachers or equipment; other district boards specifically prevent cross-district sharing. In these cases, again, individual contacts or memorandums of understanding (MOU) must be legally prepared to allow a teacher or equipment to cross outside of the home district. If these are not feasible, again, course sequence and delivery for the affected pathway must be altered to accommodate district restrictions. This can severely limit collaboration and may impact the overall success of the regional initiative. It is too early to assess the impact of these two potential risks. Other legal issues include liability associated with mobile, heavy high-tech equipment and the transportation of students, both within and outside of the home district. At this point each district is assessing these risks and developing an action plan.

Finally, the program success relies on connection to the central Ohio business community. Some schools have existing relationships but most of these are not robust enough to
support the level of business commitment needed for the PtoP model. Werth has distributed information to the Columbus Chamber of Commerce and is looking to host an announcement event at an upcoming Columbus Compact annual meeting. However, connections to the business community, to this point, have been weak or non-existent and without clear information on the goals for this new educational initiative.

**Status and Success**

The issues described above have the potential to impact the long-term success of the program. The five primary goals documented in the original application will not be measurable by June 30. If the pathways are successfully implemented with the targeted students enrolled, then those objectives are feasible.

Graduating more high school students, reducing remediation requirements, and accelerating postsecondary matriculation are outcomes highly correlated with key student success factors. The American Institutes of Research (2006) summarized three key characteristics for all ECHS organizations: “rigorous instruction, relevant curriculum, and supportive relationships” (p.v). Academic rigor at the high school level is a critical performance indicator. Completion of higher-level math courses in secondary school, in particular, is highly correlated with college success (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Relevant classroom experiences heighten the potential for success by engaging students in a meaningful way. The American Institute of Research has defined three requirements for a relevant course of study:

- Relevant instruction requires students to 1) address questions or problems with real-world applications; (2) make choices about what they will study and how
they will study it; and (3) take on plausible writing roles and submit their work to real audiences (American Institutes of Research, 2006, p. 49).

The pathways method is philosophically built on providing relevant, real-life experiences and offering all students an opportunity to see and solve current, real problems. The structured approach also assists students by providing clarity on requirements and minimizing the potential for unnecessary coursework that does not advance to certification or degree.

However, in the short run, the program will not have progressed far enough to allow assessment of success against these elements. Will, therefore, the Round 1 Straight A Grant demonstration have been successful? Allowing for the caveat on meeting sustainability, the answer is most likely yes. Although at midway through the project and heading into many of the most critical activities, this is highly conditional. However, the parameters established for success were highly leveraged on establishing the infrastructure. Obtaining the equipment, preparing the buildings, identifying teachers, and establishing criteria for student selection is, for the most part, on a track to meet the deadlines. There will be gaps and misses at both the project and individual district level, but given the successful collaboration and coordination across district lines, an amazing amount has been accomplished. Other school districts from around Ohio that have heard about these efforts have been reaching out and looking for an opportunity to learn or participate.

A plan for assessment is in place. Battelle for Kids has been retained to develop the benchmarks and metrics that will be used as the program moves out of the development site phase. Eight outcomes were identified in the Grant application. These range from assessment of student college readiness to the percentage of students earning college credit before high school graduation. Measurements are tied specifically to the goals of the Central Ohio Compact. Battelle for Kids has not yet provided the metrics framework, annual targets, data collection
process, or reporting recommendations to the steering committee. These are targeted for delivery prior to the June 30 deadline.

In the short-term, John Hopkins is performing a program evaluation. They are currently engaged with the project teams gathering information for this assessment. Their report is targeted for September 2014. Also occurring during this demonstration site phase, the Ohio Department of Education is conducting periodic audit of the use of funding and progress against the Grant’s objectives. Additionally, John Hopkins will use the benchmarks developed by Battelle for Kids over a five-year period to assess the success of the program and its implementation.

An application for the second round of the Straight A Grant is currently in development by these districts. It will seek to build and expand on the infrastructure, with a focus on creating communication and “feeder classes” at the middle school level. Additionally, it will create additional support for these districts in maturing the work completed and ensuring the first full school year of implementation is successful.

**Implications for Future Research, Policy, or Action**

This demonstration project, with each district developing an individualized approach, would lend itself to a case study examination of the factors specifically addressed by a selected school district. Assessment of the ability to appropriately select and credential teachers, recruit students, and complete a successful course of study would be beneficial in assisting the State in developing guidelines and policy for these or other comparable initiatives.

Longitudinal studies comparing the various dual credit and workforce development endeavors underway in the State would also inform policy. Although Ohio has taken steps through HB59 to consolidate dual credit programs under a more holistic umbrella with the College Credit Plus directive, this is not yet implemented. Developing and safeguarding
meaningful win-win partnerships between K-12 and postsecondary institutions through College Credit Plus is a critical measure of success for that directive. Ensuring a solid understanding of the specific elements that make a PtoP or an ECHS successful will be relevant to the development of a firmer dual credit structure across the State.

**Conclusion**

Given the economic and business realities of Ohio and the nation at large, it can be anticipated that dual credit and accelerated college programs will continue to gain traction. The PtoP project provided an interesting view into how multiple school districts mobilize to take advantage of an influx of funding that would have otherwise not been available to them and into how districts can rapidly established an operating model that fosters collaboration across district lines with primary support from the postsecondary partner, in this case, Columbus State Community College. Through my participation in this effort, I have expanded my knowledge of Ohio policy, business initiatives, and public school offerings. I believe the districts will be successful in the short-term completion of the Round 1 infrastructure development. There will be major challenges in creating the business commitments and student engagement to sustain these programs, and some districts may opt out and, at least in the short run, return to a more traditional delivery model.
Appendix

Dual Credit Landscape

4 Year Institute of Higher Education

2 Year Institute of Higher Education

High School

Tech-Prep/Career & Technical Education

Early College

Middle College

Career Pathways

Single Course

Advanced Placement

International Baccalaureate

Technically Focused Program

Academically Focused Program

* Based on student testing, not institutional articulation/agreement
Table 1: *Central Ohio Pathways to Prosperity: Demonstration Site Project and Budget Matrix*  
*(as of March 5, 2014)*

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<th>School District</th>
<th>Budget/Participation</th>
<th>District Total</th>
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X: deferred
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