

IBM eyes bringing job training program to La.

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IBM is looking at introducing to Louisiana a program that prepares high school students for careers in technology by allowing them to earn college credits and have paid internships while they work on earning a diploma.

Stan Litlow, president of the IBM International Foundation and a vice president of corporate affairs, met with a group of education and community leaders Thursday and discussed P-TECH, a six-year program that mixes academics with workforce development. Litlow followed that up with a meeting Friday with Gov. John Bel Edwards, who expressed interest in P-TECH. Additional meetings are planned with Monty Sullivan, president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System.

Litlow, a former deputy chancellor of schools in New York City who started working for IBM nearly 25 years ago, said P-TECH was introduced in 2010 after former Mayor Michael Bloomberg said he was concerned that there were very few programs in the public school system that connected students with jobs and economic development.

"There were a large number of students who weren't college ready," he said. The plan was formulated to develop a program that helped students transition from high school to college to a career, especially young men and women who came from disadvantaged areas.

IBM came up with an idea for a six-year school that had open enrollment, featuring a strong academic program combined with training for the job categories where businesses had a need for entry-level employees.

To reinforce the workforce component, students were paired with mentors and had the opportunity to get paid internships with a business.

The first P-TECH school was set up in New York six years ago. So far, 55 percent of the students that started the program have earned a high school diploma and an associate's degree in computer science. The majority of those students earned their diploma and degree in 31/2 years or less. Another 12 percent of students have earned 36 hours or more of community college credit, putting them on the track to earn an associate's degree. Litlow said that's well above the national average for community college students and disadvantaged students.

The success of P-TECH has led the program to expand to five other states: Illinois, Maryland, Colorado, Rhode Island and Connecticut. Similar programs have been set up in Australia and there's interest in starting P-TECH schools in Canada, South Africa and India. Former President Barack Obama publicly praised the program, and there's been speculation that President Donald Trump will use P-TECH as a model for his workforce development program.

John Daniel, executive director of Boys Hope Girls Hope of Baton Rouge, said he became aware of P-TECH when he was in Washington, D.C. in October. Daniel is the founder of the Southern States Scholars Collective Impact Group, a Baton Rouge-organization that seeks to prepare students for college.

Daniel said an official with the U.S. Department of Education told him about P-TECH. While Southern States was working with several high schools to prepare teens for college, he said the organization was "missing the boat" on the jobs pipeline.

George Bell, president of the Capital Area United Way, said the P-TECH program recognizes the challenges that public schools have and provides the structure to give students valuable job skills. "That's the secret sauce to make it successful," he said. "They have a viable model with the right support."

The next step is for IBM officials to meet with state education leaders and line up business partners who could serve as mentors and play a role in developing a P-TECH curriculum, Daniel said.