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Northwell opens high school to tackle NY's health care worker shortage

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The Northwell School of Health Sciences in Woodside welcomed its first class of 230 ninth-graders in early September.

New York hospitals face clinical shortages as low pay and burnout drive recruitment challenges. One mega system is taking matters into its own hands by bringing scrubs and stethoscopes into the classroom.

Hospital giant Northwell Health opened a new high school in Woodside earlier this month that will funnel students directly into the health care industry. The Northwell School of Health Sciences, a partnership with the city's public school system that's backed by a nearly \$25 million grant from philanthropist and former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, seeks to arm students with a high school diploma and medical licensure credentials, with the hope that those students will join its ranks after graduation. Students will choose one of four career pathways that Northwell has identified as an area of need: licensed practical nursing, medical assisting, behavioral health care or health care administration.

"Everyone complains about workforce shortages in the future," said Michael Dowling, CEO of Northwell Health. "You won't have that problem if you start working with kids now."

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State officials have long warned that New York is facing a dearth of health care workers in the next few years. The state is projected to face a shortage of 40,000 nurses by 2030, according to an estimate from the state Department of Health, and a shortage of 2,700 physicians by 2028 – one of the most acute and immediate gaps nationwide, according to a 2024 report from the consulting firm Mercer.

"The shortages are everywhere," said Dr. Robert Martiniano, senior program manager at the University of Albany's Center for Health Workforce Studies. That includes deficits of low-wage workers like home health aides as well as nurse practitioner and doctor jobs that require years of training, he said, demanding a multitude of workforce initiatives to help officials fill the gaps.

A growing number of high schools are popping up citywide to foster the next generation of health care workers, with more than 30 offering pathways for students to become nurses, EMTs or dental assistants. But Northwell's high school marks a rare instance of a hospital system getting into the mix. Health systems, including Mount Sinai, New York City Health + Hospitals and NYU Langone, offer internships and afterschool programs for high school students interested in medical careers, and state officials have invested in career education programs in high schools statewide. But the school is a direct and unique partnership between a major health system and a public school – an affiliation that can help academia anticipate workforce needs and train students accordingly, Martiano said. "Without that linkage, they are kind of left dead in the water."

The Northwell School of Health Sciences is part of a \$250 million initiative led by Bloomberg Philanthropies to open 10 health care-focused high schools throughout the U.S. Other big players such as Mass General Brigham in Boston, HCA Healthcare in Nashville and Baylor Scott & White in Dallas have also received grants to open schools.

Students at Northwell's new high school still have to take core classes like English, math and social studies. But all of their coursework is grounded in medical education; in social studies, for example, they might learn about health care systems in other countries, while in math class they may learn statistical methods used in medical research, according to Erika Hurtado-Valentino, principal of the Northwell School of Health Sciences. By 10th grade, students are expected to choose a career pathway, which will determine their specialized course schedule and internship requirements at one of Northwell's facilities, she added.



Buck Ennis

Principal Erika Hurtado-Valentino of the Northwell School of Health Sciences demonstrates how to use virtual dissection tables made by Anatomage, which allow students to examine digital cadavers.

The goal is for students to be equipped to take licensing exams by the time they graduate; students interested in becoming nurses, for example, are expected to complete 200 clinical hours and have learned the course material to pass the NCLEX, a standardized test that licensed practical nurses have to take before they can get a license.

Once they graduate, students can either go on to higher education or start working in medicine right away. The school just started training its first class of 230 ninth graders this year, and the hope is that Northwell will be able to hire those students to staff one of its 28 hospitals and 900 outpatient clinics once they get their licenses.

"It's hard for me to see a possibility where we would not be able to hire everybody," Dowling said. "That's the goal."

Northwell's high school marks the first time the health system has opened an academic institution of its own, but it has previously launched scholarship and internship programs for students. The hospital system has offered students internships through a city program known as FutureReadyNYC, and launched a \$5 million scholarship program in 2022 to help students on Long Island fund their college education.

Northwell School of Health Sciences provides a broader set of resources to prepare students for medical careers. Clinicians provide mentorship to students throughout their four years, and Northwell made recommendations for clinical and training technology investments that are similar to what it uses in its own facilities. The school has four virtual dissection tables made by the company Anatomage, which allow students to learn human anatomy by analyzing digital cadavers where they can zoom in on certain blood vessels or muscles, Hurtado-Valentino said. It also has virtual reality tools that simulate medical offices or emergency rooms, and high-fidelity mannequins that let students practice working with patients.

The approach has proved popular with students: Northwell's high school received more than 2,000 applications to fill its 230 first-year spots, the most applications of any new public high school in the last two decades, according to the Department of Education. The city is planning to create additional high schools to meet the demand for health care workers, opening a science-focused high school as a part of the upcoming Science and Research Park Campus in Kips Bay.

Hurtado-Valentino said that career education programs capitalize on students' early interests and help them get the resources they need to pursue medical careers.

"We have been asking, since we learned how to speak to children, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'" Hurtado-Valentino said. "Our job as the adults here is to cultivate that passion, to nurture students and teach them what opportunities exist."

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