50 NFA students get high-tech head start in Newburgh

They begin IBM-sponsored technology program

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CITY OF NEWBURGH — The future arrived on Monday.

Newburgh's Excelsior Academy officially opened its doors in the west wing of the Newburgh Free Academy main campus.

It's the region's first P-TECH. That's short for Pathways in Technology Early College High School.

The kids quickly learned that the future had some bugs to work out, like when a bus carrying nearly one-third of their classmates turned up more than half an hour late.

Once the 50 incoming freshmen assembled, high school was officially underway.

House Principal Kevin Rothman told the group that the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) program wasn't going to be easy.

"Some of you will struggle," said Rothman. "No matter how many times you fall, you need to get up one more time. We're going to be here to support you," he added.

The academy is only the third P-TECH in the nation sponsored by IBM, which will provide each student with a mentor. The tech giant will open a fourth school this fall, in Connecticut, said IBM program liaison Cliff Archey.

Newburgh students have their choice of two majors: cybersecurity or networking.

If all works out, they will graduate in about six years with not only a high school diploma but also an associate's degree.

Straight out of school, they'll have first dibs on some high-paying tech jobs.

Roberto Padilla, the district's new superintendent, called on students to develop a buddy system to help see one another through.

"You're cohort one; you're the 50 trailblazers, and I expect all of you to graduate," Padilla said.

Jayden Joseph, 13, said that at first, he wasn't sure whether to feel excited about being there. He'd failed his math and English Language Arts finals and had been waiting to see if they'd let him stay in the program.

Much to his relief, he was told he could stay.

"I'm very grateful that they're willing to back him, but he has to do his part," said Joseph's mother Tricia.
Harvey, when contacted by phone.

According to Rothman, the purpose of opening the school now, with a summer "bridge" program, was not only to get things like bus schedules worked out before the fall semester, but also to allow students a chance to build relationships.

The academy is funded by state grants and is the result of more than a year of planning between IBM, the district and SUNY Orange. Part of the funding includes a $2.8 million state grant over seven years.

"I'm very touched, because I never thought it would happen this quickly," said Matthew Doddo, NFA executive principal.

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