By Denise Spence

A Certified Success

Find out how Dunbar High School administrators and staff turned their struggling school around by offering students the opportunity to train in a professional learning environment and earn industry-level IT credentials.

A transformation is going on at Dunbar High School. Administrators, parents, teachers, students, and community partners are excited about the new opportunities offered to students enrolled in our award-winning technology programs. But this was not the case more than a decade ago.

In the fall of 2000, Dunbar High School in Fort Myers, Florida, USA, opened its doors with a diverse student population under the direction of Principal Carl Burnside. By 2004, enrollment had significantly declined, and the school had one of the highest percentages of low-performing and low-socioeconomic students in the district. Advanced-level students and their parents were asking, "Why should I select Dunbar in a school-choice district?" And we needed a great answer.

What We Did

Our principal knew that something needed to be done to revitalize Dunbar, or our school would be in deeper trouble. Burnside reached out to a grant writer, Jana Hambruch, who had a simple but revolutionary vision: offer high school students the opportunity to train in a professional learning environment while giving them the chance to earn industry-level IT credentials. We won a grant from the Magnet Schools of America to design a program to help students develop the digital age skills they would need to participate in a technology-savvy workforce. By offering industry-certified credentials, we were able to structure the content in a way that would prepare students for college and career.

Our first program, the Academy for Technology Excellence, offered 9th–12th grade students hands-on IT experience taught by IT-certified instructors. Students had the opportunity to earn more than 18 Microsoft, CompTIA, and Cisco certifications by the time they graduated from high school (see "Academy for Technology Excellence" on page 22). The program earned the distinction of being the first Microsoft Certified High School in the world.

Soon the academy program began attracting not only technology enthusiasts, but also students looking for IT training on the creative side of the genre—digital media and arts. We realized we needed to broaden the range of skills offered through the program to satisfy our arts-oriented students. In 2009, we created the Academy for Digital Excellence, which also offered courses taught by IT-certified instructors and industry certifications.

With the initial model already in place, we easily incorporated the Academy for Digital Excellence into the Career and Technical Education (CTE) model. The Academy for Digital Excellence students were a good fit for courses we already offered, such as web development, digital design, and TV production. The core program requirements were to train students in the digital-arts skills needed for a career or college education. These students had the chance to earn entry-level IT certifications in Photoshop, Dreamweaver, Flash, and Premiere Pro (see "Academy for Digital Excellence" on page 22).

Courses Helped Students Succeed

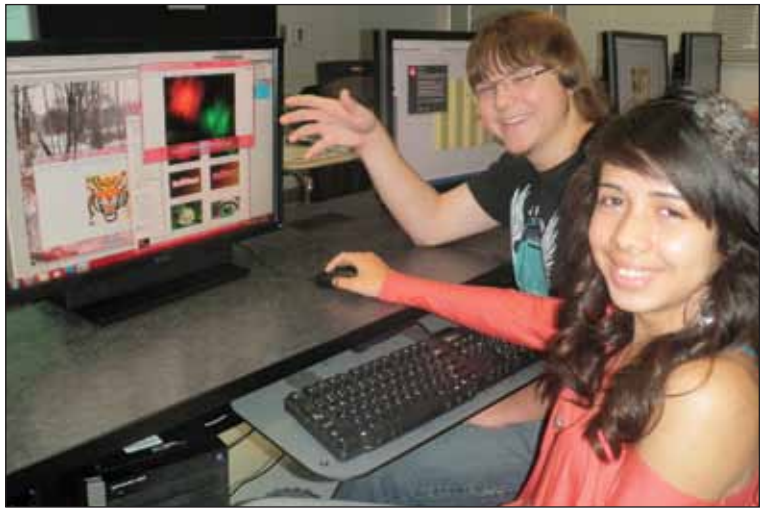
Students of all abilities, drawn by the open-ended structure of the curriculum, flock to these courses. They love that they are getting real-life experiences, such as creating websites, brochures, and presentations. One of our students designed a public service announcement for the Florida Department of Education. Dunbar's TV production studio leads students through all the facets of creating a live broadcast. And in the summer, our technology students organize the local YMCA's Tech Quest digital design camp for middle school students.

Even traditionally low-performing students from other academic areas excelled in these classes. And the more students gained confidence and success in academy classes, the better they did in standard academic courses and on standardized tests.

It seemed that earning industry certification amplified their feelings of success and motivated them to work harder on other tests. Students enrolled in the academies have consistently scored above the district and state averages on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Many Played Important Roles

From the beginning, our academy programs have relied on several key people, including the district CTE program director, district IT director, principal, assistant principal for curriculum, and local technology support technician. Each played a valuable part to ensure that the program received up-to-date resources, technology upgrades, support, and the proper training tools. Having industry-certified instructors for the program ensures that the teachers are competent, and it lends credibility to the program. Finally, having a dedicated lead teacher to directly manage the content and structure, coordinate testing, collect and report



Academy for Technology Excellence

Tier/Year/Age	Certification Focus	Career Connection
Tier 1 Freshman Ages 13—14	Microsoft Office Specialist CompTIA A+	Administrative assistant Enterprise technician PC Support Technician
Tier 2 Sophomore Ages 14—15	CompTIA Network+ Cisco Certified Network Associate	Network administrator Network technician
Tier 3 Junior Ages 15—16	Microsoft Certified Desktop Support Technician Microsoft Certified Systems Administrator CompTIA Security+	Customer support technician System manager
Tier 4 Junior Ages 16—17	Microsoft Certified IT Professional Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist CompTIA Server+	System administrator

Academy for Digital Excellence

Course	Certification Focus	Career Connection
Web Development	Adobe Certified Associate: Photoshop, Dreamweaver, Flash	Web design and development Marketing Graphic designer Multimedia designer/developer Animator
Digital Design	Adobe Certified Associate: Photoshop	Visual and print design Marketing Graphic designer
	Adobe Certified Expert: Illustrator	Illustrator Desktop publishing
TV Production	Adobe Certified Associate: Premiere Pro	Multimedia production assistant Marketing Multimedia designer/developer

Academy programs have not only enabled each student to experience real-world achievement, but also have given students real passion and commitment for learning.

data, and serve as the community liaison is a must. This person facilitates the collaboration between school personnel and business partners.

Another important feature of our program is our Business Advisory Committee (BAC), which is made up of people from local businesses as well as representatives from area colleges and universities. The BAC advises us on local business needs, so we can make sure our students are learning relevant skills. They are our experts in the field as well as guest speakers. They share insight and information about new technologies and help students understand how their learning applies in the business world.

Our partner universities and colleges also play a vital role. We have established articulation agreements allowing our students to earn college credits for coursework and certifications. Nearly every college and university in our area is a member of our BAC, so we know the curriculum and sequencing align with what colleges and universities expect.

How We Paid for It

Initially, we started with a Magnet School of America federal assistance grant that enabled us to retrofit a modern IT infrastructure into our aging building. Once the grant ran out, we looked for help from the Florida Department of Education's Career Academies initiative, which was charged with commissioning the state's high schools to develop small personalized learning environments that focused on career-related coursework and industry certification. Any high school that meets the standards of a Career Academy is eligible to receive a grant. Each student who receives a certificate earns funding for the school.

In addition to the grant, we also receive funding from our business partnerships. Many other sources of funding are out there as well. The Adobe website lists information about how a district can pursue government funding (see Resources).

Positive Outcome

The academy programs at Dunbar High School have become the unifying agent that bonds our students and faculty together. Students in these programs learn to work with each other on collaborative projects. The evolving environment has produced significant changes in how students in the academy programs perceive themselves. Now, for the first time, they experience success beyond the classroom. Cody, a graduate, wrote:

> Because of the program and certification, my idea of school has improved and going to school is something that I love to do. The chance to certify is invaluable and I hope that I will be able to continue to receive certifications later in life. This program has truly changed my life and nothing will ever be the same for me. I already feel like I succeeded.

Through our relationships with our local and global partners, students have learned that they can be valued citizens of our global IT economy because of the knowledge base they've gained in our programs. Academy programs have not only enabled each student to experience real-world achievement, but have also given students real passion and commitment for learning.

Resources

Adobe list of government funding sources: www.adobe.com/education/resources/k12/funding/stimulus

Dunbar High School: http://dhs.leeschools.net

Florida Department of Education Career Academies: www.fldoe.org/workforce/careeracademies/ca_home.asp

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