Lamont Hammers Open Hamden High STEM Program

by **SAM GURWITT** | Sep 4, 2019 2:36 pm

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SAM GURWITT PHOTO

Karen Kaplan, Ned Lamont, Jack Gaffney, and the hole Gaffney just smashed.

Gov. Ned Lamont held a yellow sledgehammer Wednesday morning at Hamden High, but he did not swing it. Rather, as governors do, he delegated that job to one of the 35 Hamden High students who aim to graduate high school with an associate's degree in the new Hamden Engineering Careers Academy (HECA).

Ninth grader Jack Gaffney, who swung the hammer into a cardboard wall to symbolize breaking ground on the new facility, will have an intense four years of high school. He will need to complete 31 high school credits (the average Hamden High student graduates with 23 – 25), and 68

college credits from Gateway Community College. If he stays in the program, he will earn an associate of science degree in manufacturing and engineering from Gateway, as well as a Hamden High diploma.

HECA is a collaboration among Hamden Public Schools, Gateway, and the New Haven Manufacturing Association. It is the first step in what district officials hope will become a larger STEM academy at the high school.

“What this is all about today is making sure we have a workforce that’s ready for the 21st century,” Lamont told 100-odd onlookers. “You are learning the 21st century skills… Coding is the language of the 21st century.” It will not only open doors to well-paying jobs after graduation, he added. It is also important for the state’s future as expertise in tech becomes increasingly important.

Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, Superintendent Jody Goeler, and Assistant Superintendent Chris Melillo.

Manufacturers all over the state, said Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, have told her and Lamont that over the next few years there will be thousands of openings for jobs in manufacturing.

“What’s the problem? No smart, trained people to fill them,” she said. “Those great-paying jobs are available right now, we just need the right trained people to do it.”

Five Years In The Making

HECA's students.

Planning for HECA began five years ago when State Rep. Mike D'Agostino went to the Hamden Board of Education to ask what the district needs from the state. Superintendent Jody Goeler and Director of Innovation, Technology, and Communications Karen Kaplan told him that they were interested in a program dedicated to students interested in STEM. D'Agostino then helped the district secure $500,000 from the state for the program.

Kaplan said that she had been interested in the P-TECH programs that take place at certain schools throughout the country. P-TECH schools collaborate with IBM to provide high school students with training in a technical field and an associate's degree upon graduation.

Kaplan and HPS Coordinator of Counseling and Career Pathways Dan Cocchiola visited one P-TECH program in Norwalk: the Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA). Though P-TECH it-self would not work in Hamden, said Kaplan, she and other administrators wanted to start a similar program.

Originally the district did not know what the focus of the program would be. Kaplan said that she originally thought it might be medical. Yet the she and other administrators started to talk with Jamie Scott, Executive Director of the New Haven Manufacturing Association, who said he wanted to help, prompting the district to focus the program on manufacturing.

Four Hard Years

Dan Cocchiola.

Students in HECA will graduate high school with skills in high-paying, much-needed jobs, but it will require an intense four years of courses. They will have to take eight courses most semesters, and will complete some coursework over the summer.

“Do I anticipate every student of the 35 getting here?” said Cocchiola, pointing at the number of credits students will need to graduate. He shook his head. Still, he said, even if students have to drop out of the program, they will graduate high school with a few college credits under their belts. Students will also have the option of completing the program in five years if they need to.

Despite the heavy course-load, the program attracted 63 applicants, of which only 35 were accepted through a weighted lottery.

“We want to be representative of our community,” said Cocchiola. He wants the students in the program “to look like our town and our community.”

In her speech, Bysiewicz said that she and Lamont have made it a priority to bring more girls and women into STEM fields.

Ideally, Cocchiola told the Independent, half the program's students would be girls. This year, nine of the 35 students are female.

"I like helping people. and I like building things," Jessica Aloeyne said, explaining why she applied for the program. She could wed those two passions, she said, by building prosthetics.

Students Brianna White and Jessica Aloeyne.

Students graduating from the program will have completed the coursework of two years of college. Even if they decide not to continue their education afterwards, they will be able to start jobs at $40,000 or $50,000 right out of high school, said Robyn Porter, who represents parts of Hamden and New Haven in the Connecticut General Assembly.

She said she wants to bring the HECA model to other parts of the state, namely the other city in her district: New Haven.

"There's a lack of resources and a lack of opportunities" in Connecticut's urban areas, she said. HECA could serve as a model for bringing economic opportunities to underserved areas in the state.

Though the school year and the first HECA classes have already begun, the room on the northern side of the building dedicated to the program still needs to be renovated. Kaplan said the district aims to complete the renovation by Jan. 20, when second semester starts.