

# Citywide School Reform in Action:

A CASE STUDY IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the Hartford Public School District faced major challenges.

Despite being in the second wealthiest state in the United States, Hartford was the second poorest city per capita in the nation. In fact, Connecticut experienced the greatest achievement gap of all 50 states. Ninety three percent of students in Hartford's low-performing schools lived in poverty.

The situation was unacceptable and unjust – and it could be changed.

This case study offers a close look at how NAF, business and community leaders in Hartford, and a motivated school superintendent used the NAF career academy model to launch citywide school reform and high school redesign.

Just two years into the process, Hartford Public Schools have begun to close the achievement gap among students from widely disparate income levels and family backgrounds. The success of all stakeholders – schools, business and community leaders, and students – is strategic, measurable and, above all, sustainable.

This model for change can be replicated in cities and towns across the country.

NAF offers “Citywide School Reform in Action: A Case Study of Hartford, Connecticut” as incentive to all who seek to transform our nation’s most beleaguered public high schools and struggling school districts.

Lessons learned in Hartford represent the best of what can be achieved when the NAF model is in place and NAF is at the table guiding the process of collaboration and partnership.

Research and observations show that outcomes go beyond educational reform to include deep and lasting social change, as well as economic growth.

Please share this report – and thank you for your interest and support of NAF.

— JD Hove  
President, National Academy Foundation



## HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 2006, the baseline year for its reform, Hartford was the lowest performing district in Connecticut in all areas of state assessment. Two-thirds of students were dropping out, usually at the end of 9th grade. These young people faced dismal prospects: working poverty at best and a 60 percent chance of incarceration.

By 2008, the Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools, Steven J. Adamowski, shared a vision and strategy for reforming Hartford schools district-wide. His plan was to create high-performing, distinctive schools of choice, made up of smaller learning communities within career-themed high schools. Each would prioritize rigorous academic standards, along with college and career readiness.

Adamowski had already considered and rejected other common approaches to reform:

1. Invest a lot of money into the school system (get what you pay for).
2. Manage limited resources more efficiently (run a school like a business).

Both promised only small, incremental improvements, and neither addressed the social and economic forces that tracked some young people toward poverty and destitution, and gave privileged others the necessary components for a successful start in life.

Hartford public schools would not fulfill its obligation to young people by flooding its schools with funding (as if such a thing is easily done) or by more expertly managing its constricted budget.

A fundamental change was in order and the district needed partners. The National Academy Foundation was an obvious fit.

Part of the change involved closing the five career academies that had been started in Hartford – none adhered to the NAF model and all failed to produce the positive outcomes that communities are right to expect from a NAF academy.

Students did not learn together in a cohort, did not share the same teachers, and did not attend the same classes. The schools did not implement the NAF curriculum fully, and other components of the NAF model, such as advisory boards and internships, were not as strong as they must be to create and sustain student academic gains. Given the opportunity to fully implement the NAF model and strengthen the components that support it, NAF could surely do better by this district – and would.

The five existing academies would be closed to make way for those that would fulfill their promise to enrich students' educational experience, provide work-based learning opportunities, and prepare young people to thrive in high school, college and viable careers.

From the blog by **STEVEN J. ADAMOWSKI**,  
Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools:

*FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2008*

*"...I have said many times before, this is not rocket science. It is methodical, hard work, but it can be done, and it has been done by dozens of similar school districts across the country. It will require focus, perseverance and a willingness to change on the part of staff, and steadfast political determination on the part of our board members to get the job done.*

*I have met many wonderful teachers, administrators, parents, corporate executives and community leaders who are eager for change and want to help us succeed. I am more optimistic than ever that we can get the job done.*

*We are encouraged by the City of Hartford's motto: Post nubila, Phoebus, which means, After the clouds, the sun.*

*Together, we can do this."*



Cover photo - Pathways to Technology students; inside cover - student in class at High School, Inc.; pictured on this page is a student at the Academy of Engineering and Green Technology.

## NATIONAL ACADEMY FOUNDATION

*“Every superintendent faces enormous pressure to show results. Any major investment in reform, in terms of the demands on everybody involved, have to be justified by positive, lasting outcomes. The beauty of the NAF model is the structure is there to guide successful implementation. Once you plug it in, you are well on your way to positive reform with results.”*

—STEPHEN CASA  
NAF Network Services Director, Northeast

NAF offered the city of Hartford a structure, research base and road map for successful district-wide reorganization and redesign.

The first step was to align the mission and vision for reform – shared by Adamowski and other concerned business, community, and government leaders in Hartford – around the NAF academy development process, which effectively answers the question: What do we do now?

The answer: Assemble the key players and stakeholders to create an Academy Design Team and begin the NAF Year of Planning: through which NAF guides the team’s one-year process of planning, strategy, implementation, assuring sustainability.

With NAF at the table, the Academy Design Team gained access to:

- systems of quality assurance and support,
- guidelines to set expectations,
- benchmarks to assess progress and encourage innovation, and
- established rapport with corporate partners who have national and local reach.

The Academy Design Team would also be urged to draw on NAF and its national network of combined expertise as they:

- motivated principals, school staff and other district leaders,
- engaged strategic business and civic partners, and
- cultivated school Advisory Boards that would assure worthwhile, professional opportunities for students.

NAF supported the Academy Design Team in putting the components of the model into place: academy development, NAF industry-vetted curriculum, advisory boards, and work-based learning experiences.

Student in her Ethics in Business class at High School, Inc. The Ethics in Business course is one of several included NAF’s curriculum for the Academy of Finance.



## COMMUNITY LEADERS

The Connecticut Business & Industry Association (CBIA), through its Education Foundation, has bridged connections from students to viable careers for 26 years. As the state's largest business association with over 10,000 member companies, CBIA fosters a positive business climate in Connecticut where people want to relocate their businesses and lead successful careers. It is the authority on areas of growth in the Connecticut professional workforce.

Dayl Walker, who serves as Program Manager for CBIA's Educational Foundation, has long been one of Hartford's champion educational reformers. She brings a core commitment to school reform that propels social and economic justice, and her relationship with Connecticut businesses and Hartford educators would be crucial to the success of any new NAF academies in Hartford.

Adamowski approached Walker to invite CBIA's participation on the Academy Design Team, and Walker began assembling business partners that should be involved. Among them was United Technologies, a company whose products include heating and air conditioning systems, aerospace systems, aircraft engines, elevators and escalators, helicopters and much more. United Technologies agreed to offer significant funding provided the school was not just a career academy but a NAF academy. Walker and Adamowski agreed the NAF model was the structure they were looking for as well.

With United Technologies invested – morally and financially – in the reform effort, the Academy Design Team began creating a NAF academy focused on engineering and green technology. Walker agreed to serve on the school's Advisory Board.

## BUSINESS PARTNERS

The Travelers Companies, Inc. is among the largest property and casualty insurance providers in the United States, with more than 30,000 employees and 13,000 independent agents. Its 22 product lines encompass personal, business, financial and international insurance segments. Jay Fishman, Chairman and CEO of Travelers, served on the Board of Directors for NAF.

Company literature emphasizes Travelers' commitment to growth and opportunities in the communities where it does business, and the company's actions speak this truth even louder. As a corporate partner to NAF and NAF academies, Travelers deftly combines its interest in supporting nonprofit organizations that pursue social, economic and environmental justice, with its business interest in attracting a diverse, highly skilled workforce.

With a base of operations in Hartford, Travelers was an ideal partner and stakeholder for a new NAF academy in that city. Marlene Ibsen, President and CEO of Travelers Foundation, knew of NAF's track record and saw the level of support NAF would provide to the engaged stakeholders. Thanks to clear communication and leadership from NAF staff, Ibsen also understood her company's role as a corporate partner that would do more than write checks.

Travelers would have both the opportunity and the responsibility to influence curriculum design and implementation, and offer workplace learning opportunities, such as job shadowing, mentoring, and internships for NAF academy students.

With the enthusiastic support and encouragement of Fishman, Ibsen committed her company's best resources – time, money and staff – to the district's improvement plans. She joined the Academy Design Team and agreed to serve on the Advisory Board of a NAF academy focused on finance and insurance.

Among the first decisions made by the Academy Design Team was to engage all the insurance companies in and around Hartford. This approach would further strengthen two important components of the NAF model – advisory boards and internships – and offer schools and students the broadest possible access to a business community aligned for the purpose of ensuring their success.

*“The Connecticut Business & Industry Association's mission is to help make Connecticut a good place to do business. Businesses need a skilled workforce to be competitive. The NAF model is designed to ensure that students graduate from high school prepared for careers and higher education.”*

— DAYL WALKER

Program Manager, CBIA Education Foundation  
Advisory Board Member, NAF Academy of  
Engineering and Green Technology

*“Hartford is our major basis of operations and largest campus in the country. It also topped the infamous list of cities with the biggest achievement gap problem. Travelers made the strategic decision to get involved with public schools and met with NAF to discuss how we could contribute as a corporate citizen. We recognized a good plan, backed by great leadership, and left that meeting thinking: We have great potential here.”*

— MARLENE IBSEN

President and CEO, Travelers Foundation

## SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AS PARTNERS

*“The principals of the three NAF academies in Hartford work together. Our cooperation provides us with additional resources and allows us to get some economy of scale. I’m sure there are schools that want to do it all by themselves but they are crazy. We get the people who coordinate internships together too, so that we’re utilizing all three Advisory Boards to generate internships. That way, we can go to companies as one mighty beast.”*

— **STEVEN DELLINGER-PATE**  
Principal, Pathways to Technology  
Magnet High School & Academy of  
Information Technology

NAF worked closely with Superintendent Adamowski and his cabinet for several years to ensure the launch in 2009 and sustainability of three NAF academies in Hartford:

- NAF Academy of Engineering and Green Technology – Academy of Engineering
- Pathways to Technology Magnet High School – Academy of Information Technology
- High School, Inc. – Academy of Finance

Of the three, Pathways to Technology is the only school with no lead corporate partner. It was also the closest to an actual NAF academy before the reform effort began. As the city faced the closures of two underperforming information technology academies to make way for one that would fully adhere to the NAF model, Pathways’ principal, Steven Dellinger-Pate, was asked to carry the Academy of Information Technology designation going forward.

As an established magnet school for information technology, Pathways already had an advisory board and industry-themed curriculum. However, the focus was geared toward low-skilled occupations such as computer technicians and customer service representatives, rather than toward college and professional careers in IT. The school had not been able to offer internships and was interested in the support it would receive from NAF to develop its college-ready components and professional internship program.

Principal Dellinger-Pate agreed to go through a modified NAF Year of Planning to become a NAF Academy of Information Technology. The process focused on developing and strengthening all components of the NAF model—Academy Development, Advisory Board, Curriculum, and Internships.

Today, he and the other principals of the NAF academies work together on an executive board, the leadership group that sets policy and brings the strategies down to the practical level of implementation. The Hartford Academies Executive Board includes all three principals, academy site coordinators, Advisory Board Chairs, and Superintendent Adamowski’s team—Christina Kishimoto, Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Schools, and Mary Giuliano, Academy Director, plus NAF’s Northeast Network Services Director. All are accountable to each other and to the central goal of district-wide school reform in Hartford.

Yet another distinguishing feature of the NAF model, the influence of an executive board helps ensure that principals retain their leadership role within their schools, particularly in terms of personnel, budget allocation, and program implementation.

“Autonomy is critical to the structure of a NAF academy,” says NAF Network Services Director Stephen Casa. “Schools and districts are required to give up some control to the business partners who contribute to decision-making. But when principals align with the core strategic goals of the Executive Board, they still get to do it their own way.”

This dynamic collaboration affords greater access for the schools to the shared resources of each other’s Advisory Boards and business and community contacts, as well as the abundant expertise of the other stakeholders at the table. With the structural support of the Executive Board – and shared authority, commitment, purpose, and strategic focus – all are positioned to fulfill their own professional and civic responsibilities while they deliver students an education that is rigorous, relevant, and based on meaningful relationships.

Rather than battle over resources or struggle in isolation – as public schools in beleaguered districts often do – these principals engage in a friendly competition over who showed the highest increase in Connecticut Aptitude Performance Test scores and graduation rates.

## SMALL SCHOOLS OF CHOICE OUTCOMES

NAF career-themed academies in Hartford now reach 1,200 students in the district, with the significant resources and leadership investment of NAF and its ability to draw additional support from corporate partners. Student outcomes show NAF academies in Hartford at the front of the pack and offer a blueprint for future efforts at district-wide school reform in cities all over the country.

Specifically, Hartford has seen the greatest gains of any city in the state on the Connecticut Aptitude Performance Test (CAPT) for the past two years. The district is prepared to repeat that feat again at the end of the 2011 school year. By the end of 2009, every single grade level saw a rise in reading proficiency and 13 schools raised their overall school achievement index by more than 3 percent. Here are a few more highlights from 2009 and 2010:

Academy of Engineering and Green Technology:

- CAPT scores rose 7.1 percent;
- Eighteen students completed internships;
- In 2009, 84 percent of seniors completed college applications, compared to approximately 20 percent the year before;
- In 2010, 83 percent of seniors graduated, and 100 percent of these were accepted to a 2- or 4-year college or university.

Pathways to Technology Magnet High School:

- In 2009, 93 percent of students graduated and 50 students completed internships;
- CAPT scores reached a new height of 57 percent “Proficient”;
- In 2009, the *U.S. News & World Report* ranks Pathways to Technology among America’s best high schools – specifically for its success in motivating better than average performance among the least advantaged students in the state.

High School, Inc. Academy of Finance and Insurance:

- CAPT scores showed 37 percent “Proficient” the first year;
- Ten students, while only sophomores, completed internships;
- Franklin Trust Federal Credit Union opened a branch connected to the school;
- All 200 students received netbooks.

## SUSTAINING ACADEMIES AND REACHING DISTINGUISHED STATUS

In 2010, two years after he began his reform effort in partnership with NAF, Superintendent Adamowski announced his retirement. His departure will not disrupt the activities of Hartford Academies Executive Board or the three NAF academy Advisory Boards—all well established and poised to grow. Collaboration among the three principals and site coordinators will continue, along with the trusted and steadfast partnership of NAF.

These stakeholders made an investment in a structure that is, by design and by definition, sustainable. There is no specific person or entity whose exit will mean the reform effort’s unraveling. There is no source of funds set to expire at a future date. With firm grounding in the four components of the NAF model, gains can be built on and further secured.

Though capital was a key factor in the success of this reform effort, this was not a capital campaign. Travelers, United Technologies, and the dozens of medium- and small-sized companies throughout Hartford who currently contribute to the success of these three NAF academies made a long-term commitment with the goal of seeing long-term returns and rewards for their companies.

Their need for an educated and skilled workforce is not going away. The permanency these companies seek, in terms of viability and continued growth for their businesses, is achieved only through the partnership they have established with NAF, with their fellow Advisory Board members, and with the schools and students who now thrive because of their involvement.

Each of the NAF academies in Hartford has set its sights on achieving “Distinguished Academy” status within NAF’s network nationwide. Each academy will achieve this by taking advantage of every opportunity for professional development that NAF offers as they work to fortify the components of the NAF model that ensure their success.

*“The biggest challenge is in changing educational culture from one of low expectations to one of high standards. Another challenge is to resist the popular tendency to slow down, change less, and go slower in very difficult economic times. We must make tough budget choices and establish priorities that institutionalize our reform agenda and sustain the gains we’ve made in student achievement.”*

— Excerpt from an Interview of  
**STEVEN ADAMOWSKI**,  
Superintendent, Hartford Public Schools,  
by Douglas Crets, published online at  
EdReformer, May 14, 2010.

*“One of the most important benefits of being a NAF school is the continuity that the NAF model provides. Superintendents and principals change on a regular basis in most school systems, and schools often suffer when a new administration comes in and changes direction. Because The Academy of Engineering and Green Technology is a NAF academy, even when the superintendent retires, the integrity of our school – a business-led advisory board, rigorous curriculum and paid student internships – will remain intact, regardless of who leads the school system.”*

— DAYL WALKER



Principal Jill Carey, with students from the Academy of Engineering and Green Technology.

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### MISSION

The National Academy Foundation is dedicated to preparing young people for college and career success using its proven educational model.

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### VISION

The National Academy Foundation envisions a world in which all young people have the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to thrive.

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### ABOUT

The National Academy Foundation (NAF) is an acclaimed network of career-themed academies that open doors for underserved high school students to viable careers. For nearly 30 years, NAF has refined a proven model that provides young people access to industry-specific curricula, work-based learning experiences, and relationships with business professionals.

NAF academies focus on one of four career themes: finance, hospitality & tourism, information technology, and engineering. Employees of more than 2,500 companies volunteer in classrooms, act as mentors, engage NAF students in paid internships, and serve on local Advisory Boards.



218 W 40th Street, Fifth Floor, New York, NY 10018  
T: (212) 635-2400  
F: (212) 635-2409

[www.naf.org](http://www.naf.org)



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