

Sarah Yaw speaks



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Sarah Yaw (right), director of K–12 Partnerships and Academic Pathways at Cayuga Community College and consultant for the Iroquois Healthcare Association, speaks at a Feb. 25 meeting about the potential for an Early College Health Sciences pathway to address health care workforce needs in the North Country.

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SARANAC LAKE — Education and health care leaders from across the North Country

gathered Feb. 25 at the Adirondack Medical Center to explore the development of an Early College Health Sciences pathway tailored to the Adirondack region.

The discussion built on a recently announced regional initiative led by the Iroquois Healthcare Association Healthcare Educational Consortium and supported through renewed funding from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation for the 2026 grant cycle. Through this grant, IHA is operating pilot Early College Health Sciences programs in select regions of Upstate New York, with the goal of strengthening health care workforce pipelines, improving long-term talent retention and supporting local economic stability.

The Mother Cabrini Health Foundation grant provides funding to coordinate partnerships among hospitals, colleges and school districts, develop aligned health care career pathways and reduce barriers for students pursuing high-demand health care careers. The Early College model allows students to earn college credit while still in high school, gain hands-on clinical experience with local health care providers and build direct connections to regional employers while remaining in their home communities.

Under the proposed structure, the majority of student coursework would take place within a students' home school districts and be taught by their home teachers. Throughout the program, students would also have opportunities to receive instruction from college professors on campus at designated points, creating a blended experience that maintains strong local connections while introducing students to the college environment.

While pilot programs are currently underway in other counties, North Country leaders are now evaluating what a similar model could look like for the Adirondack region.

Representatives in attendance included local high school principals and guidance counselors, leaders from North Country Community College, Franklin-Essex-Hamilton BOCES administrators, Adirondack Health partners, consultants and members of the IHA. Conversations focused on how an Early College model could complement existing programs while addressing persistent regional health care workforce shortages.

Saranac Lake High School Principal Josh Dann raised questions about how the proposed pathway might intersect with established health care programs, including New Visions Health and Health Occupations offered through Franklin-Essex-Hamilton BOCES.

Marq Brown, consultant with the IHA, addressed those considerations.

“In other regions where this model has been implemented, we have not seen any decline in enrollment in existing New Visions or Career and Technical Education programs,” Brown said at the meeting. “Instead, the Early College model functions as a complementary

option, almost a hybrid of the two, providing students with an additional pathway rather than replacing what already exists.”

Sarah Yaw, director of K-12 Partnerships and Academic Pathways at Cayuga Community College and consultant for the IHA, emphasized the importance of regional alignment in shaping any future program.

“Stakeholders need to come together and agree upon a model that works best for the Adirondack community,” Yaw said. “It’s about asking important questions, such as whether the program should begin in ninth grade, and carefully considering what that pathway would look like for students.

“This program is designed to support students who are genuinely interested in health care careers and to provide them with early, meaningful opportunities to explore and prepare for that path.”

Lori Tourville, deputy superintendent for Franklin-Essex-Hamilton BOCES, added that collaboration across institutions would be central to the program’s success, if developed.

“These opportunities could extend across home high school campuses, BOCES locations, Adirondack Medical Center and North Country Community College,” Tourville said. “It would truly be a community-wide partnership. Students would gain hands-on experience, mentorship and direct exposure to local health care industries, building both skills and connections that encourage them to remain and work in their home communities.”

Health care workforce shortages continue to impact rural communities across Upstate New York. Local leaders agreed thoughtful planning and cross-sector collaboration will be critical in determining whether an Early College Health Sciences pathway can serve as part of a long-term regional solution.

As discussions continue, stakeholders remain focused on ensuring the future programing reflects the region’s workforce needs, strengthens existing educational pathways and creates meaningful opportunities for North Country students.