National High School Center
betterhighschools.org
August 2008
Linking Research and Resources for Better High Schools

Snapshot: Career Academies

Striking the Balance: Career Academies Combine Academic Rigor and Workplace Relevance

Prepared by: Thomas J. Smith, MDRC

For more than a century, educators in the United States have debated how to make public education relevant to the world of work while ensuring that all students are exposed to a curriculum of high quality and rigor. From the educational reforms undertaken by Horace Mann in the 19th century, through numerous iterations of publicly funded vocational education, and to the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994—and the opportunities that career and technical education provides to earn valuable work experience and college credit while still in high school—national and local educational institutions have explored various avenues to meet the demands of the workplace while retaining the core elements of a liberal arts education.[1]

That challenge is even greater in today's complex and fast-moving economy. Fifty years ago young people could enter the labor market with far more limited skills—and limited academic credentials—and still succeed in finding remunerative, lifelong careers. Those options are vanishing, and the traditional divide between college and the workplace is blurring, as more and more careers demand postsecondary education, whether in technical schools, community colleges, or other settings. The successful transition from high school is therefore more challenging, complex, and critical for students today than ever before.

One strategy for promoting that success, which has been widely adopted in the United States, is the Career Academy model. For more than 35 years, Career Academies have aimed to blend academic rigor, a curriculum spanning college-readiness and workplace knowledge, and engaging and relevant experience in the workplace. This brief describes the Career Academy model and focuses on one Career Academy in Oakland, California, to illustrate how the model works.

Career Academy Basics

Career Academies are small learning communities established at the high school level that use career strands as an organizing framework for learning and instruction, as well as for engaging the interest and energies of students. First established 35 years ago and geared toward restructuring large high schools into small learning communities and creating pathways between high school, further education, and the workplace, the approach of the Career Academy has expanded to an estimated 2,500 high schools across the country.[2] The career strands defined by Career Academies are typically broad—health care, technology, hospitality, finance—within which more specific career tracks can be explored.

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[1] School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994. Retrieved from http://www.fessler.com/SBE/act.htm
[2] MDRC. (2008). *Career Academies Policy Framework*. Retrieved from http://www.mdrc.org/project_29_1.html

Although minor variations can be found, several standards are common to a well-designed Career Academy:

- Having a central goal of fully preparing students for higher education and solid careers in the workplace, and emphasizing academic instruction to deliver a challenging, standards-based college preparatory curriculum in the context of a broad occupational or career strand;
- Basing voluntary recruitment and enrollment of students on their interest in a career theme;
- Establishing a multi-grade curriculum in which Academy sequences span at least 2 (and sometimes up to 4) years of the high school experience;
- Using cohort scheduling—a hallmark of small learning communities—to keep groups of students together over several years and ideally assign teachers to stay with those students over that period; and
- Involving private sector partners extensively, who may provide input into curriculum and standards, teach and interact with students, and provide opportunities for internships and jobs.

The National Career Academy Coalition estimates that more than 1,500 high schools across the United States operate Academy programs, although the Coalition cautions that not all Academies meet the standards listed above. Although most Academies operate as part of large, comprehensive high schools, the example described below is a small school in which all students participate in the Academy.[3]

How One Works: The LIFE Academy

The LIFE Academy of Health and Bioscience is a 4-year high school in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). Established in 2001 as part of OUSD's push to establish smaller schools, LIFE Academy began as a "transplant" of an existing health academy that was previously housed in a large comprehensive high school. Many of the teachers in that program moved to the newly established school. LIFE Academy is indeed small: just 16 dedicated teachers and 250 students. More than 90% of the students have minority backgrounds, and 75% of the student body is classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Oakland Unified School District 2005–2006

- 41,000 students
- 40% African American
- 33% Hispanic
- 16% Asian

The student population enters with varying skill levels and capacities: More than one third are English language learners, and on average, students read at a fifth-grade level.

LIFE Academy offers three distinct Career Academy programs, which are referred to as "strands": the biotechnology strand, the medical strand, and the mental health strand. Students follow a traditional (yet science heavy) curriculum for their first 2 years, with two

[3] For more information, please see the National Career Academy Coalition (http://www.ncacinc.comsp).

biology courses and a health and biotechnology course, and select the strand they're most drawn to at the end of 10th grade.

Specialized courses are offered for each strand in 11th and 12th grades, and all students take chemistry in 11th grade. "It's a basic for any of these careers," as the assistant principal pointed out.

Biotechnology students take two additional, more intensive biotechnology courses; students in the mental health strand take psychology in 11th grade and counseling techniques in 12th grade.

A separate advisory group associated with each strand provides continuing input into curriculum content and avenues to real-work experience through internships, paid and unpaid. In the biotechnology strand, for example, a nonprofit biotechnology company provides summer internships within the firm. "We work directly with the scientists," a 12th-grade biotechnology student commented. The firm also commits to hiring graduates after they have completed a biotechnology certificate program at a local community college.

In the mental health strand, a consortium of social service agencies offers internships through which students can work directly with children, adults with developmental disabilities, and seniors. The medical strand has a continuing relationship with Children's Hospital of Oakland, which can provide a variety of internships in response to student interest.

The school's small size enhances the Academy's functioning. All the teachers know all the students in the school, and all the students know each other. Also, older students are assigned to mentor incoming ninth-grade students. Class sizes are relatively small, and the staff works to maintain an informal, supportive environment. "We have our teachers' home phone numbers and e-mails," said a student. Given the small numbers, a teacher noted, "We can keep a lot of eyes on the students, and know quickly if someone is floundering."

Heading for College

Aside from the sophisticated thrust of its programs, LIFE Academy takes other steps to prepare students for postsecondary education. One resource, which is unusual for a particularly small school with limited staff, is a Career and College Information Center (CCIC) that is open and staffed for much of the school day. Funded in part by a local educational consortium and staffed by students from area colleges, the CCIC provides a full range of support for students: SAT coaching and classes, advice on finding the right school, and help with filling out applications and identifying and getting financial aid.

The CCIC is one element of a broader strategy at LIFE Academy: to foster a college-going culture throughout the school. Ninth-grade students tour nearby colleges, and CCIC staff visit classes regularly to talk about college. School staff consistently encourages students—many of them first-generation college-goers with predictable doubts and reservations—that they can, in fact, succeed. LIFE graduates who have made it to college visit the school to

serve as role models and cheerleaders. Counselors and teachers track individual students (seniors especially) to help keep them focused on longer term college and career goals.

The strategy appears to be paying dividends. Eighty-five percent of the 2006 graduates went on to 2- or 4-year colleges. These results are particularly impressive because LIFE Academy's graduation rate is high, averaging more than 85% over the past 3 years. The school has also consistently made Adequate Yearly Progress in a district where about half of all schools fail to do so.

Challenges

Many of the challenges that LIFE Academy faces are endemic to Career Academies: finding internships that will engage and challenge students; dealing with scheduling issues (e.g., when students are unable to take summer internships in a strand in which slots are available only in the summer); and providing diverse course offerings while maintaining the prescribed Academy sequence.

For LIFE, some of the challenges emerge from it being a small school—despite the many advantages that it affords. Course diversity is limited within the Academy. Furthermore, school-themed extracurricular activities are few. "We don't have a big school trip or a big school dance," one student complained. Varsity-level sports are not offered, and as a result, one student said, "There's no [traditional] school spirit here." The intensely demanding environment of a small school taxes faculty and staff: Teacher burnout is an ongoing risk.

LIFE Academy also faces two larger challenges. The most critical is that OUSD has changed the rules for how students choose their high schools. A new lottery system and open choice means that LIFE has less say over which students choose to attend. The preferred (and traditional approach) in the Academy model is intentional selection of the school by students based on their interests in the content. "Many students come here [now] because the school is safe or because it's near to home, not because it's a health-oriented school," the assistant principal commented.

A year down the road these same students may become dissatisfied with the curriculum, resulting in greater challenges to teaching and a decreased sense of school community. Most students who elect to leave the school, one administrator reported, are those who come for the wrong reasons.

A second challenge is curriculum balance. Despite not having a standardized curriculum, OUSD is increasingly pressing schools to align their curricula to a set of common standards. The new district policy will mean changes at LIFE, where hitherto faculty members have had considerable autonomy in deciding what they teach.

The key task will be to craft a curriculum that reinforces the health themes at the school while also meeting external standards and accountability guidelines. The risk, the principal noted, is that efforts to achieve both goals risk "curricular chaos"—a patchwork of standards and health theme-related content that fails to deliver on either count. School leadership

expects to devote substantial time and effort over the next year to finding creative solutions to this complex, evolving challenge.

Summary

LIFE Academy is a vibrant, focused Career Academy that serves a highly disadvantaged population in Oakland. It blends the hallmarks of the Academy model with the strengths of a small school. It works as a learning community. “Kids think of this school as a hard school, but where you learn,” a student noted. LIFE has established a creditable record of academic performance, and it is succeeding to an impressive degree in graduating students and sending them on to college.

Career Academies provides successful school-to-work transitions without compromising academic goals and preparation for college. Evidence also suggests that investments in career-related experiences during high school can produce substantial and sustained improvements in the employment prospects of students during their postsecondary years.[4] The LIFE Academy highlights these elements of the Career Academies model.

[4] Kemple, J., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2004, March). *Career Academies: Impact on Labor Market Outcomes and Educational Attainment*. Retrieved from http://www.mdrc.org/publications/366/overview.html