

# Career Academies

## A Summary of:

**“Career Academies: Impacts on Students’ Engagement and Performance in High School”** (March 2000) Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. By James J. Kemple and Jason C. Snipes.

### Focus

- Early Childhood
- Primary School
- Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

## Overview

Career Academies are small schools, usually located within larger high schools, organized around a broad career theme.<sup>1</sup> They offer a college-preparatory curriculum, provide extensive and sustained personalized contact between teachers and students and career-related offsite learning experiences. As one of the oldest kinds of high school reform in the nation, Career Academies have existed for 30 years and have been implemented in more than 1,500 high schools. Many high schools have just one career academy, but more and more have multiple academies and some are completely divided into career academies. Career Academies were listed in the School-to-Work Act of 1994 as one of the means by which schools might provide an effective

## POPULATION

Career Academies serve a broad cross-section of students. The evaluation focused on a sample of 1,764 students, of whom 56.2% were Latino, 30.2% were African American, 7.2% were Asian or Native American and 6.4% were Caucasian. Evaluators found that 24.2% of the students in the sample were from families receiving welfare or food stamps. In terms of grades, they showed 36.2% had grade point averages (GPAs) of 3.1 or higher 38% had GPAs of 2.1-3.0, and 25.7% had GPAs of 2.0 or lower.

transition from school to employment. They are also identified as an effective school reform model in the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program of 1997.

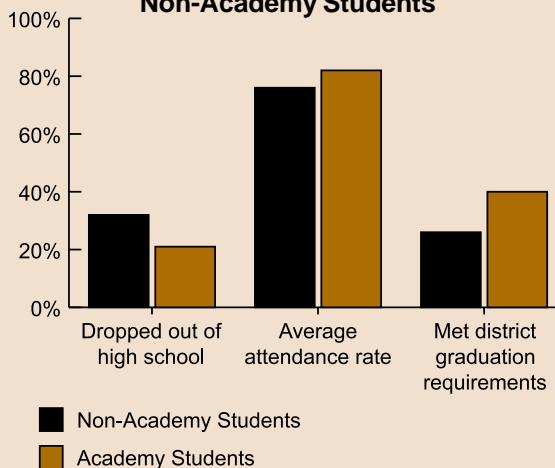
## Key Findings

The evaluation focuses on impacts of Career Academies on students while they are still in high school.

Outcomes were broken out along the lines of students considered “high risk,” “medium risk” or “low risk” of school failure (see Study Methodology for how these categories were calculated). Overall, 93.6% of the evaluated group were minority, and this demographic did not change significantly among the risk levels. The most pronounced positive effect was for students at high risk of school failure. High risk Academy students compared to high risk non-Academy students:

- ◆ Had a lower drop out rate (21% vs. 32%).

**Outcomes for Students Considered “High Risk:” Academy Students Versus Non-Academy Students**



- ♦ Had a higher average attendance rate (82% vs. 76%).
  - ♦ Were more likely to earn enough credits to meet district graduation requirements (40% vs. 26%).
- For medium and low risk groups, Career Academies saw similar—but less pronounced—positive effects.

## Program Components

Career Academies have three important characteristics in common:<sup>1</sup>

A Career Academy is a school-within-a-school or small learning community, in which groups of students share several classes every day and have some or all of the same teachers from year to year for at least two years of high school. The number of students is relatively small—usually 150 to 300—and the teachers work as a team and share in decision making.

The curriculum combines and integrates academic and career-related subjects. Academic courses meet high school graduation and college entrance

requirements; career-related courses center on a broadly defined career theme such as health, business and finance, electronics or travel. Career Academies may cover culinary arts and food science, computer science and technology, the performing arts and a myriad of other career tracks.

Local employers are involved as partners and serve on an advisory board with teachers and school district staff. A coordinator typically serves as liaison among employers, the academy, and the school district. Employer representatives serve as speakers and mentors, provide internships, give advice on curriculum and contribute financial or other in-kind support.

## Contributing Factors

### *Small Learning Community*

The school-within-a-school structure of Career Academies, with a small group of students interacting with a core group of teachers over time, provides many benefits for students including building relationships with caring adults and receiving personalized attention. Adults also get to know the strengths and weaknesses of students within their academy and work in a team to assist each student. Evaluators found that at Career Academies that had a high impact on student success, teachers also worked together on creating lesson plans in small groups.

### *Personalized Attention*

The Career Academy structure naturally allows for more personal student-teacher contact because teachers work with a contained group of students over several years. Evaluators said that the most effective Academies had a higher-than-average degree of interpersonal support for students from

*“The Career Academies substantially improved high school outcomes among students at high risk of dropping out.”*

— James J. Kemple and Jason C. Snipes,  
Manpower Demonstration  
Research Corporation

both their teachers and their peers. Academy students also receive personal attention from work-site mentors during their internships.

### *Alternative Learning Strategies*

Career Academies provide several alternative learning strategies through their focus on a career theme. Academic and career-focused instruction are integrated. Applied hands-on lessons suggest themselves from the career theme – for example, students in a Finance Academy might participate in a Virtual Enterprise competition with other high schools as a means of learning about finance and

honing their math and history skills. Additionally, Career Academies allow for work-based learning in internships with partnering employers, usually in the summer between their junior and senior years. They may also participate in field trips to job sites, job shadowing and presentations given by employers at the school site.

### ***Innovative Structure***

Many Career Academies also use block scheduling in which classes last for about 90 minutes instead of the usual 45. Four classes may be offered each semester, rather than eight classes offered over the course of a year. This structure allows for longer class periods for in-depth learning and also provides teachers with structured time to plan

lessons with other Academy teachers usually once a week. Career Academies are offered over three or four years within a high school. During this time, students stay with the same group of teachers.

### ***Employer Involvement***

Employers serving on the board of advisors for each Academy help keep the curriculum up-to-date and interesting. They also ensure that students are prepared for careers that exist in their communities and that they have access to high quality, motivating, work-based learning positions. Additionally, employers provide young people with additional adult role models through work-site mentoring and school visits.

## **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

Evaluators analyzed 10 Career Academies that had fully implemented the model. Researchers compared Academy students with a demographically similar control group of non-Academy students. The Career Academies examined received twice as many applications as they could accept. Half – or 952 – of the students were randomly selected into Career Academies (the study group), while the other half was not selected (the control group). Students were categorized into subgroups based on whether they were at “high risk,” “medium risk” or “low risk” of dropping out of school. Factors determining the degree of risk were: previous school attendance rate, credits earned in ninth grade, GPA, the rate of school mobility, whether a student was overage for his or her grade level, and whether he or she had a sibling who dropped out of high school.

## **EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING**

The evaluation was funded by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), and 16 foundations.

Career Academies across the nation are funded by a combination of state and local monies, with small amounts of federal funding.

## **GEOGRAPHIC AREAS**

The locations of the Academies studied were not provided. More than 1,500 high schools nationwide have one or more Career Academies.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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For Further Information on Career Academies, please contact:

The Career Academy Support Network (CASN)  
Web site: <http://casn.berkeley.edu>.

The National Academy Foundation.  
Web site: [www.naf.org](http://www.naf.org).

*1. Descriptions of Career Academies are taken from Stern, David, Charles Dayton and Marilyn Raby. Career Academies and High School Reform December 1998. Career Academy Support Network. University of California Berkeley.*