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# Reforming High Schools: The Role for Career Academies

Career Academy Support Network  
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*The concerns about America's high schools are escalating as a number of recent reports reveal that large numbers of our nation's youth are not being prepared for college and careers, or are dropping out altogether. This paper explores how career academies can be used as a strategy for transforming the traditional, comprehensive high school in ways that support all students' learning to high standards.*

## Background

While education reform has remained a "hot" issue for policymakers since the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, much of the attention has been focused on elementary grades and improving basic reading and math skills for younger students. The No Child Left Behind Act is heavily slanted towards reforms in the early grades, although it does hold high schools and school districts accountable for high school graduation rates as well as student performance on high school assessments. Federal education funding is also slanted toward elementary and middle schools, with only the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technology Education Act playing any significant role in providing resources to high schools.

But after years of largely being ignored, high school reform is headed into the policy spotlight. A groundswell of recent reports has drawn attention to the problems of many American high schools, particularly those in large urban and high poverty areas. Others have focused on the lack of student engagement in learning, as many of us are all too familiar with one of high schoolers' recurring complaints: "Class is boring – why do I have to learn this stuff?"

One recent report, *Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts? Where are They Located? Who Attends Them?* (Balfanz and Legters, 2004), states there are currently

between 900 and 1,000 high schools in the country in which graduating is at best a 50/50 proposition. In 2,000 high schools, a typical freshman class shrinks by 40 percent or more by the time the students reach their senior year, which represents nearly one in five regular or vocational high schools in the U.S. that enroll 300 or more students.

Another report, *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001* (Swanson, 2004) provides a similar assessment:

The national graduation rate is 68 percent, with nearly one-third of all public high school students failing to graduate. Other statistics show that students from historically disadvantaged minority groups (American Indian, Hispanic, and Black) have little more than a 50-50 chance of finishing high school with a diploma. By comparison, graduation rates for Whites and Asians are 75 and 77 percent nationally. Males graduate from high school at a rate 8 percent lower than female students. Graduation rates for students who attend school in high poverty, racially segregated, and urban school districts lag from 15 to 18 percent behind their peers.

*Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States* (Greene and Forster, 2004) continues the same lament:

Only 70 percent of all students in public high schools graduate, and only 32 percent of all students leave high school qualified to attend four-year colleges. Only 51 percent of all black students and 52 percent of all Hispanic students graduate, and only 20 percent of all black students and 16 percent of all Hispanic students leave high school college-ready. The portion of all college freshmen that is black (11 percent) or Hispanic (7 percent) is very similar to their shares of the college-ready population (9 percent for both). This suggests that the main reason these groups are underrepresented in college admissions is that these students are not acquiring college-ready skills in the K-12 system, rather than inadequate financial aid or affirmative action policies.

Other studies have looked at the problems that high school students have when they enter postsecondary education. In their 2003 report, *Betraying The College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education System Undermine Student Aspirations*, Venezia et. al. finds that "current K-12 and postsecondary education systems are fractured, create unnecessary barriers between high school and college, and send mixed messages about academic preparation. This particularly impacts low-income students and students of color, but it also contributes to poor student preparation for college generally, higher rates of remediation, and low college completion rates."

The National Research Council of the National Academies entered the discussion with a different take on the problem in *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn* (2003). It explores how adolescents learn and what motivates them to learn. "The fundamental challenge is to create a set of circumstances in which students take pleasure in learning and come to believe that the information and skills they are being asked to learn are important or meaningful for them and worth their efforts, and that they can reasonably expect to be able to learn the material." Too often, the student perspective is ignored, but this report makes an eloquent plea for making learning meaningful for young people.

Dozens of other reports have dealt with various aspects of high school reform over the years, from block scheduling, to team teaching, to applied and contextual learning, to small learning communities. The combined bulk of all of these reports seems to have finally pushed policymakers into paying serious attention to high schools. Both Presidential candidates had platform components focused on high schools. The U.S. Department of Education will hold its Second Annual National High School Leadership Summit in December 2004; the 2004-2005 Chairman's Initiative for the National Governors' Association is Redesigning the American High School; several states have recently passed comprehensive high school reform programs or will release high school commission reports (RI, IN, OH); and California just held the first ever State Superintendent's High School Summit.

At the local level, high school reform is much farther advanced. Cities like Boston, Chicago, San Diego, and New York City are deeply involved in creating more rigorous and engaging learning opportunities for young people. At the school level, there are many fine examples of redesigned, reformed, reengineered, refashioned high schools. Not only have local leaders (primarily superintendents and principals) been supporting changes to the design and look of high schools, a number of organizations have also created new models or strategies to improve student learning. It is especially helpful as we enter into a broader and higher level debate on high school reform to have this experience and knowledge to guide us.

Groups like the High Schools That Work Initiative of the Southern Regional Education Board, Tech Prep Network, Talent Development Career Academy model, First Things First, National Academy Foundation, National Career Academy Coalition, and the Career Academy Support Network are just a few of the organizations that have developed school models or promoted change strategies. Today, our focus is on the career academy movement.

One of the earliest books on high school reform, *Career Academies: Partnerships for Reconstructing American High Schools* (Stern, Raby, and Dayton, 1992) laid the groundwork for significant change to the traditional high school. The book espoused three central elements for reforming high schools into career academies: (1) creating small learning communities; (2) providing a college preparatory curriculum with a career theme; and (3) building partnerships with employers, community and higher education. Despite the fact that many career academies have been created over the past decade, the movement has remained to some extent on the edge of school reform efforts. National education leaders and policymakers have generally been focused on reform in the earlier grades or viewed anything to do with "career education" (including career academies, career clusters, school-to-work, tech-prep, and career and technical education) as tangential to the improvement process. It seems, however, the discussion is changing.

## Common Vision for Reform

A recent report by the National High School Alliance, *Crisis or Possibility? Conversations About the American High School* (Harvey and Housman, 2004), makes the case that “powerful voices are backing the proposition that the time has come to re-think and reinvent the American high school. Expert agreement emerged around several key variables related to effecting institutional change.” The report goes on to list several “levers” for high school change, such as building a K-16 educational pipeline, addressing the dropout problem, focusing on literacy and teacher competence, and making schools small.

Another framework for reform, espoused by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, promotes schools founded on Three R’s: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships.<sup>1</sup> These ideas are aligned with many of the levers for change described in *Crisis or Possibility*. While one could perhaps characterize the Three R’s as a sound bite, the three words carry with them descriptive images that translate readily to policymakers. For that purpose, I will use the Three R’s as the framework for the common vision of reformed high schools in this paper.

First, let’s be clear on what rigor, relevance and relationships really mean for high schools and their students. Rigor is shorthand for ensuring that students have access to and take what is commonly known as a college-preparatory curriculum. All students, regardless of their abilities or performance level, take four years of English, and at least three of mathematics, science, and social studies, and a foreign language. If all students are to take these courses and pass them, it means that schools and the adults in them must commit to finding ways to help all students master these new basics – which usually means spending more time helping lower-performing students. Rigor means that all students will be prepared for postsecondary education, without the need for remediation, and that there is an alignment between high school exit exams and postsecondary entrance requirements. It also means that expectations for all students are heightened and no students are relegated to low-level general track classes or shipped off to outdated vocational shop. It also means teachers must be fully qualified and competent in their discipline.

Relevance shifts the focus to students and what motivates them to learn. Students in schools in which learning is relevant don’t ask the question, “Why do I have to learn this?” Curricula is set in context so students can see how knowledge builds on what they already know, and it is applied so they can see how it is used in the real world. Studies are connected to students’ goals, and teachers and counselors help students plan their course taking to meet their interests and career and college goals. Most importantly, students become engaged in their learning because they understand that what they are learning has meaning for them and will impact their futures.

But relevance also needs to be closely tied to rigor. Efforts must be made to develop student skills (analytical, communication, organizational and social), broader content knowledge (in the arts, economics, and current and historical events), and values that are particularly relevant to success in academic, workplace and civic settings. While relevance in curriculum is important to help students make connections, a broader definition of relevance is important – one that helps students find where they fit in the world and develop the broader knowledge and skills necessary to be a competent and engaged adult.

Now to relationships. Young people who have relationships with caring and competent adults have better life chances than those that do not.<sup>2</sup> Strong, respectful relationships between students and adults in the building are the bedrock of any successful school. There must be a culture of respect and a desire on the part of adults to not only help young people academically, but socially and developmentally as well. Schools should encourage and support opportunities for adults to serve as mentors, coaches, advocates, and advisors, both formally and informally. Smaller learning environments provide a structure that allows more personalized relationships between teachers and students to develop and grow. Adults in the wider community are also an important resource, as many young people form bonds with adults through service projects, extra-curricular activities, or during work-based internships or job shadowing experiences.

Creating schools that have rigorous and relevant curriculum and that support positive relationships takes time and hard work. And there is a lot that needs to be done “behind the scenes” (scheduling, common planning time, breaking up large high schools, aligning resources and professional development, using assessments wisely, to name a few) to support schools based on the Three R’s. Fortunately groups like the National Career Academy Coalition, the National Academy Foundation, and the Career Academy Support Network have been engaged in this process, and through their efforts and hard work, we now have vibrant examples of how career academies contribute to student achievement and positive student outcomes.

## Career Academies’ Contribution to the Three R’s

By design, the three central elements of a career academy lead to a school that is rigorous, relevant, and relational. As such, career academies are an excellent example of a reform model for policymakers and practitioners to consider as they reform high schools. In addition to the central elements that define a career academy, career academy leaders have been working on the development of Career Academy National Standards of Practice, which are very closely aligned with the Three R’s and designed to support ongoing improvement of the model. Some detail follows.

Career academies are small, personalized learning communities within a high school that select a subset of students and teachers for a two-, three-, or four-year span. Students enter the academy through a voluntary process; they must apply and be accepted, with parental knowledge and support. While academies vary in size, they usually have from one to three sections of students at each grade level, or 100-300 students in all. Academy classes are usually on a block schedule, and students attend classes as a cohort.

A career academy involves teachers from different subjects working together as a team. Teams usually participate in professional development, particularly in implementing the key features of the model and gaining exposure to the career field and also share daily common planning time. Students are grouped together for several periods every day with a core group of teachers, which promotes a family-like atmosphere, nurturing close student-teacher ties.

Students in a career academy have a mix of career (one or two) and academic (three or four) classes at a time. These classes meet entrance requirements for four-year colleges and universities and are linked to academic and industry standards and encourage high achievement. They show students how their subjects

<sup>1</sup> Various reports have used these words prior to the Gates report, *High Schools for the New Millennium, Imagine the Possibilities*. For instance, the American Youth Policy Forum released a report entitled *Rigor and Relevance: A New Vision for Career and Technical Education in 2003*. The Stern book (1992) provides a description of career academies that embraces the Three R’s and uses the words rigorous and relevant throughout.

<sup>2</sup> *Some Things DO Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices*. 1997. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; *More Things That DO Make A Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices, vol. II*. 1999. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; Jurich, Sonia & Steve Estes. 2000. *Raising Academic Achievement*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; James, Donna Walker, Sonia Jurich and Steve Estes. 2001. *Raising Minority Academic Achievement: A Compendium of Education Programs and Practices*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

relate to each other and the career field. Special projects require students to bring together academic skills across several disciplines and apply these to community and work settings outside the school. During the junior or senior year, students participate in work experience: a paid or unpaid work internship or a community service assignment. During the senior year, students are provided with college and career counseling and form a post-graduate plan, based on their interests and goals.

The academy theme is selected locally, based on labor market needs and employer interest. Employers participate as speakers at school, informing students of the industry and career options; as field trip and job shadow hosts at their companies; as individual mentors or career-related “big brothers and sisters;” as work internship supervisors; and as community service coordinators. Postsecondary institutions are often included as well, providing course articulation and dual enrollment options.

The Career Academy National Standards of Practice add to and augment the design and structure of career academies and provide a path for continued improvement. The National Standards of Practice, which are voluntary, address the need to continue to focus on rigor. The standards state that curriculum and instruction within an academy should meet or exceed external standards and college entrance requirements, raise student aspirations, and increase student achievement. Relevance is emphasized by ensuring that curriculum is integrated among the academic classes and between academic and career classes and that learning illustrates applications of academic subjects and includes authentic project-based learning. Opportunities for the community to help guide the academy’s curriculum and provide speakers, field trip sites, mentors, student internships, college tours and teacher externships are also examples of how career academies are making learning relevant.

Lastly, the National Standards of Practice state that academies need to have a well-defined structure within the high school that reflects its status as a small learning community and that the academy maintains personalization through limited size, teacher teamwork and a supportive atmosphere. Other National Standards of Practice provide much greater specificity on other aspects of rigor, relevance and relationships.

## A Model That’s Working

On paper, the career academy model seems to fit perfectly with accepted ideas of reformed high schools and small learning communities. But how does it work in practice? Certainly we know of many anecdotes about successful career academies, with students who finally see the connection between what they are learning and their future plans or who become so excited about a career field they want to learn as much as possible in order to advance.

We also have access to research that indicates positive outcomes for many students who participate in career academies. Clearly, the academy model is working, and career academy students are evidencing more success in postsecondary education and careers. But research also cautions that if the career academy model is not fully and effectively implemented, with a strong academic component, students will do no better.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and rigorous research is the MDRC study (2004) that has followed students who participated in career academies over a 10-year period. The biggest gains, according to MDRC, accrued to young men, a group that has faced declining employment and earnings prospects over the last 20 years. Total earnings of male career academy students were more than \$10,000 (18 percent) higher over the study’s four-year follow-up period than those of a randomly selected control group. And, although the MDRC study

found that career academies had no effect, positive or negative, on helping students gain access to education opportunities beyond high school, over 80 percent of the academy students enrolled in some type of postsecondary education program, and over half had either completed a degree or were still working on one after four years.

Maxwell and Rubin, in their 2000 book, *High School Career Academies: A Pathway to Educational Reform in Urban School Districts?*, found that career academies can be effective in facilitating postsecondary education success for their students. Previous research they conducted (1997) also showed that compared to California high school students from general and vocational tracks, career academy graduates in California were more likely to graduate high school, more likely to attend a postsecondary institution, and more likely to attend a four-year college.

High school reform has to be centered in the community and responsive to its needs and the needs of its students. To help meet these needs, communities and school districts should offer a wide range of learning options for adolescents that are located both in the high school and in the wider community. Career academies are one of several models or initiatives that communities and school districts can make available to high school students. By bridging school and the world of work in a way that leads to academic achievement and that draws on the excitement of solving real work and real world problems in a sensible context, career academies have been successful in engaging many students who would otherwise be indifferent to or possibly lost from school.

Career academies should also be acknowledged and supported for their contribution to high school reform. They have blazed many trails in breaking up large high schools into smaller ones, creating personalized learning for young people, making learning relevant by using careers as a context for learning, and helping adolescents learn about future career opportunities and connect in meaningful ways with adults who want to see them succeed. As a reform initiative, career academies have proven their value. With ongoing improvement suggested by the National Standards of Practice, and widely known best practices, career academies are well positioned to lead and influence high school reform efforts and policy debates. Educators and policymakers should rely on the central elements of a career academy and now the National Standards of Practice as a guide to help develop effective high school reforms with positive outcomes for students.