

Can High Schools Prepare Students for Careers and College?

In urban high schools, too many students who manage to graduate are unprepared for postsecondary education or the world of work. And these students — especially young men — often enter a labor market that offers them few opportunities for good jobs. Yet most high school reform efforts today focus solely on boosting academics. Recent findings from a long-term study of Career Academies — a popular high school reform that combines academic offerings with career development opportunities — shows that choosing between academics and career preparation is a false dichotomy. Career Academies produce sustained employment and earnings gains, without sacrificing academics. In particular, Career Academies appear to offer young men a boost — comparable to the earnings premium of a year or two of postsecondary education — that puts them on a better earnings trajectory.

What's Special About This Study?

These results come from one of the first random assignment studies — the gold standard of program evaluation — ever conducted in a high school setting. MDRC has followed students in nine high schools around the country from when they entered ninth grade until eight years after their scheduled graduation. More than 80 percent of students in the sample are black or Hispanic.

What Are the Most Important Findings?

* Career Academies produced sustained earnings gains that averaged 11 percent (or \$2,088) more per year for program participants than for individuals in the control group — a \$16,704 boost in total earnings over the eight years of follow-up.

* These impacts on earnings are concentrated among young men and students at risk of academic failure. Young men saw an annual earnings gain of 17 percent (or \$3,731) — or nearly \$30,000 over eight years.

* This study shows that career development in high schools does not have to come at the expense of academic preparation. More than 90 percent of the students graduated from high school or received a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and half earned a postsecondary degree or credential.

* Participants in Career Academies were more likely to be living independently with children and a spouse or a partner. Young men were more likely to be married.

What Do Career Academies Look Like?

Typically serving 150-200 students in grades 9 or 10 through grade 12, Career Academies have three distinguishing features: (1) they are organized as small

learning communities to create a supportive, personalized learning environment, (2) they combine academic and career and technical curricula around a career theme (such as business, computers, or health care), and (3) they establish partnerships with local employers to provide career awareness and work-based learning opportunities for students. First established more than 40 years ago, Career Academies operate today in more than 2,500 high schools across the country.

What's Next?

The Career Academy field is using these findings to build better supports for schools to implement the career development components of the model, while bolstering the academic offerings to meet today's demand for even better postsecondary education outcomes.