Citation

Kemple, J., & Roch, J. (1996). Career Academies: Early implementation lessons from a 10-site evaluation. New York: MDRC.

Highlights

- The study's objective was to determine the implementation of Career Academies, specifically how they work and how they shape students' education and career preparation. The study was part of a larger randomized control trial (see CLEAR's profile of Kemple & Willner [2008][1] for final evaluation results).

- The study drew on data from a baseline student questionnaire, site visits, information gathering during site selection and monitoring for the broader evaluation, a teacher survey, and school administrative data on study participants.

- The study focused on implementation of the Career Academies model in the sites that were purposively selected to participate in the broader evaluation. The authors noted that all 10 study sites adopted and maintained the key elements of the Career Academy approach in a variety of contexts. Study sites attracted high application rates from students with diverse demographic and educational characteristics, and the program was attractive to both at-risk students and students performing well in school. Most (84 percent) students accepted in the Academies enrolled and three-quarters of enrollees were still engaged with the program two years later. Compared with non-Academy teachers, Career Academy teachers were more likely to report having opportunities to partner with their colleagues, to view their workplace as a learning community, and to develop individualized relationships with students.

- The study's insights on fidelity to the program model and the ability of the program to be adapted to diverse contexts and types of students should be extrapolated with caution because these were the very criteria used to select sites for participation in the evaluation.

Features of Career Academies

Career Academies were first established some 45 years ago and have become a widely used high school reform initiative. They are designed to keep students engaged in school and improve their employment and educational outcomes. Students apply for admission into Career Academies during 8th or 9th grades (depending on the rules of the program to which they are applying).

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[1] Kemple, J., & Willner, C. (2008). Career Academies: Long-term impacts on labor market outcomes, educational attainment, and transitions to adulthood. New York: MDRC.

Career Academies have three distinguishing features, and the study authors pointed out that a true Career Academy must exhibit all three:

1. They are organized as small learning communities, or schools within schools. They typically serve 150 to 200 students from grades 9 or 10 through grade 12. This smaller size fosters a more personalized learning environment.

2. The curriculum is organized around one career, occupation, or industry and combines academic and technical aspects relevant to the career.

3. The academies offer work-based learning experiences, often through partnerships with local employers. These can include summer employment, internships, and mentoring.

Features of the Study

The study examined the implementation of Career Academies in 10 sites that were purposively selected to be part of a randomized controlled trial. The study selected sites that (1) were mature and incorporated the three key elements of the Career Academy model; (2) operated in diverse contexts reflecting the range of circumstances in which Career Academies have been established; (3) served students at risk of failure, in addition to high-performing ones; (4) had a clear contrast with the regular school offerings and other programs available within the high school; and (5) were willing to abide by the requirements of the randomized evaluation. The selected sites were located in nine school districts in six states; most were in large school districts with high proportions of low-income and minority students. These districts had higher-than-average dropout and unemployment rates.

The study examined the degree to which sites adhered to the Career Academy model in the early stages of the evaluation; described the study's recruitment of the sites, the student recruitment and selection process, and the baseline characteristics of the study sample, on aggregate and by site; and compared the characteristics and experiences of teachers in Career Academies with those of non-Academy teachers. The study drew on data from (1) a baseline questionnaire administered to program applicants in the study sites; (2) site visits that included interviews with teachers, students, district and school administrators, and employers, as well as observations of classes, student recruitment, and other program activities; (3) information gathered during the site selection process and during monitoring visits to study sites; (4) a teacher survey; and (5) school administrative data on study participants.

Study Sites

- Academy for Aerospace Technology, Cocoa, Florida

- Academy of Finance, Baltimore, Maryland

- Academy of Travel and Tourism, Miami Beach, Florida

- Business and Finance Academy, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

- Electronics Academy, Independence High School, San Jose, California

- Electronics Academy, Silver Creek High School, San Jose, California

- Global Business Academy, Santa Ana, California

- Health Professions Academy, Socorro, Texas

- Public Service Academy, Washington, D.C.

- Watsonville Video Academy, Watsonville, California

Findings

All study sites adopted and maintained the key structural elements required for being a Career Academy: a school-within-a-school format, a curriculum integrating academic and occupational courses directed toward a career theme, and partnerships with local employers. Factors that affected implementation of Career Academies included availability of resources, the Academy directors' leadership ability, support from the school and school district, allocation of staff time to collaborate with one another and organize employers' engagement and work placements, the extent of employers' participation, and the articulation of a vision that connected program design with local employment needs.

Study sites attracted high application rates, thanks in part to new outreach and recruitment initiatives included as part of the study, from students with diverse demographic and educational characteristics. The program was attractive to both at-risk students and students performing well in school. Most (84 percent) of the students who were accepted into the Career Academies enrolled in them, and 75 percent were participating two years later. These participation rates were high given the high transfer rates among similar students who were not in the Academy. Academy teachers reported student attendance rates that were 3 percent higher than those reported by non-Academy teachers.

Compared with non-Academy teachers, Career Academy teachers were more likely to report having opportunities to partner with their colleagues, view their workplace as a learning community, and develop individualized relationships with students. They also appeared to receive greater resources: they reported lower course loads, providing time to work on curriculum development and student interactions. They also tended to have fewer students per class (on average 3 students fewer per class and 22 fewer students across all classes). Academy and non-Academy teachers worked similar hours outside of school on school-related work (14 to 15 hours per week).

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study effectively used descriptive statistics to provide insights on the baseline characteristics of students and teachers and the experiences of teachers. The study did not include a thorough description of qualitative data collection, data analysis, data quality control, and triangulation methods. Although vignettes of study sites offered a good illustration of key findings, the lack of information on the prevalence of the findings across study sites makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the findings based on site visits and interviews reflect the typical program experience. The study's insights on fidelity to the program model and the ability of the program to be adapted to diverse contexts and types of students should be extrapolated with caution because these were the very criteria used to select sites for participation in the evaluation.