Executive Summary

Programs of Study as a State Policy Mandate: A Longitudinal Study of the South Carolina Personal Pathways to Success Initiative

Introduction

This executive summary outlines key findings from the final technical report of a five-year study of South Carolina's Personal Pathways to Success Initiative, which was authorized by the state's Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) in 2005. The Personal Pathways initiative is a K-16, career-focused school reform model intended to improve student achievement and preparedness for postsecondary education and high-skill, high-wage, and high-demand jobs. EEDA was designed to achieve these results through a focus on career awareness and exploration at all school levels and through the creation of locally relevant career pathways and programs of study (POS). The goals of EEDA are closely aligned with those of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, otherwise known as Perkins IV, which allowed us to conduct an examination of the effects of the Perkins Act in the context of a highly supportive state policy. The study's goals were to measure specific impacts related to the state policy and the development of POS; the study examined the policy in its early implementation years and in the context of high school.

Perkins IV is the fourth iteration of earlier federal Perkins laws focused on improving the quality of career and technical education (CTE) in the United States. Perkins IV includes, among other elements, new requirements for POS that link academic and technical content across secondary and postsecondary education.

Although EEDA preceded Perkins IV, it required South Carolina schools to implement reforms that incorporate nearly all of the core and supporting components considered necessary for the successful development of Perkins IV-funded POS, as well as additional

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elements that could support and sustain the implementation of POS. For example, EEDA components include the organization of high school curricula around career clusters, an enhanced role for school counselors, and extra assistance for high-risk students. Further, the law mandates evidence-based high school reform, regional education centers charged with facilitating business-education partnerships, and greater articulation between secondary and postsecondary education.

Study Design

This five-year study investigated the extent to which a statewide reform mandate like the EEDA facilitates the creation of career pathways and POS (as defined in Perkins IV) in various high school contexts and whether these POS lead to improved student high school and postgraduation preparation and planning. This study also explored the influence of the availability of school and community resources and future employment opportunities—whether substantial or limited—on the development of POS and the outcomes of students enrolled in them.

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a mixed-methods, triangulated approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002) and followed two student cohorts from a sample of eight high schools from economically and culturally diverse regions of South Carolina.

The school sample was carefully drawn through a four-stage sampling process and selected to vary on critical study factors: (a) employment opportunities and industrial mix, (b) local school and community economic conditions, and (c) initial levels of EEDA implementation. Data were collected from two cohorts of students selected because of their varying levels of exposure to the reforms mandated by EEDA. These two cohorts included those who graduated in 2009 (who had little to no exposure to EEDA) and those who graduated in 2011 (with exposure to EEDA from the eighth to twelfth grades).

Research Questions

The study was structured around three research questions:

1. *To what extent does South Carolina's EEDA facilitate the development of POS?*

2. *What impact does the level of local economic resources have on the implementation of EEDA and the development and implementation of POS?*

3. *What impact does the implementation of EEDA and the POS required by Perkins IV have on student high school outcomes and postgraduation preparation and plans?*

Data Collection

To create a broad understanding of EEDA's influence on schools, teachers, students, and the creation of POS, a variety of quantitative and qualitative data were collected and

analyzed. Quantitative data included student outcome and survey data from the Classes of 2009 and 2011 and survey data from guidance personnel. From the South Carolina Department of Education (SDE) statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS), we collected student and school-level longitudinal demographic, attendance, and discipline data; eighth-grade standardized test scores; course histories; and Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) data (including declaration of majors, intentions to complete majors, and postsecondary plans). From the SDE Office of Career and Technical Education (CATE), we collected school-level data on state-recognized CTE programs and enrollment in these programs over the study period.

The student survey was developed in collaboration with researchers from the NRCCTE's two other longitudinal POS studies. This *Student Engagement/POS Experiences Survey* covered a range of topics, including career clusters, career planning and development, the development of IGPs, majors, coursework, school engagement, and demographic characteristics. The Class of 2009 was surveyed once, just prior to high school graduation, and the Class of 2011 was surveyed twice, once following tenth grade and again just prior to graduation.

Guidance personnel were surveyed about their involvement in career-focused education and the development of student IGPs and about changes in their assigned duties since the implementation of the main elements of EEDA related to high school guidance responsibilities. The duties included those related to curriculum development and counseling and classroom guidance for students in the areas of career, academic, and social development; consulting with other school staff or parents; coordinating activities related to special events and professional development; and such "inappropriate" duties (based on EEDA guidelines) as administering standardized tests and developing the master class schedule. Surveys were administered to guidance personnel in the Fall of 2009 and the Spring of 2012.

Qualitative data included perspectives gleaned from interviews and focus groups conducted with school principals, counselors, teachers, and students, as well as community college administrators. Content from course catalogs and other career-related materials was also analyzed. Three site visits to each school were conducted during the study period. The first was an initial visit to potential sample schools, in Spring 2009, focused on the primary goal of understanding the level of ongoing EEDA activities at the school, and included interviews with school principals and guidance directors and focus groups with assistant principals, guidance personnel, and diverse groups of ninth- and tenth-grade teachers. The second round of site visits, in Fall 2009, were geared toward collecting data on the development and implementation of POS and associations between POS and the state policy. During these visits, individual and focus group interviews were conducted with guidance personnel, curriculum coordinators, CTE coordinators and faculty, partner career center staff (where relevant), and partner college administrators and faculty. In-depth follow-up phone interviews were conducted with school counselors in the Spring of 2010 to further explore policy and POS implementation and the impact of these on their duties. A third site visit was conducted at each

school in Spring 2011 to conduct focus group interviews with the Class of 2011 as seniors. Additional phone interviews were conducted with school counselors in Spring 2012.

In order to analyze these varied data sources and address our research questions, we constructed a number of contextual and analysis variables. We developed a scheme to score the level of policy implementation at each school that included the collection and analysis of relevant quantitative and qualitative data on the six most salient facets of EEDA related to high schools. A community poverty four-factor index for school-level analysis was developed so that we could score each school based upon its level of community resources. Varied measures of POS were also constructed, based on quantitative data or a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data.

In the process of developing POS variables, we encountered a major challenge: At the time of our site visit interviews, many schools and districts were in the early stages of developing clusters and career majors, leading to little consistency in majors and POS that would allow us to make comparisons across schools. As a result, data from various sources could not be linked on common program names and definitions. Also, EEDA encompasses more than just CTE courses and programs and requires the development of POS across the curriculum in all subject areas. We therefore needed to devise a method to select only those majors/programs that were strictly CTE because that was the focus of our study. In addition, once we identified majors/programs to review, we found that the elements of Perkins IV POS—as outlined in the Perkins law and supplementary implementation materials developed by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE)—were not sufficiently well-defined to allow for easy translation into direct measures for each element. This required us to operationalize the four core elements of Perkins IV-funded POS for our analyses.

Findings Across Sample Schools

Overall, we found that EEDA was having some positive impacts on schools, school administrators, guidance personnel, teachers, and students. Career-focused activities had increased at all schools and guidance personnel were playing major roles in implementing policy. But the evidence on associations between the policy and POS development was mixed or contradictory. However, there was evidence that the policy was helping to facilitate some of the foundational elements for POS development.

One surprising finding was that at schools with more challenging economic situations, POS were more likely to be embraced and more fully developed than at other schools in more prosperous communities. This appeared to be related to a perception at these schools that given the poor economic circumstances in their communities, their students could benefit from clearer avenues toward careers and employment.

Similar mixed or contradictory results were found on associations between policy implementation and POS development and student outcomes. Students were found to be benefitting from these policies and POS, but the types of benefits and the degree of benefit

varied across schools and subgroups of students.

From our observations over the five-year period and analyses of these varied data sources, 12 overarching themes emerged. These themes are described at length in the full technical report.

Emergent Themes

1. **Career-focused activities at all sample schools increased over the period of EEDA policy implementation.** Observations and data collected from schools indicate that the policy increased the amount and variety of career-focused activities and guidance at sample high schools, with school counselors playing key roles in providing these activities. The nature of the events and the types of career experiences they provided for students varied across schools.

2. **Initial increased funding and the addition of staff for the enhanced guidance model at schools helped launch implementation of the EEDA reform policy.** Subsequent cuts in funding were reported to have slowed the program's progress and caused schools to make difficult choices relative to setting priorities for allocating scarce resources. Initial site visits to schools provided data on myriad new activities being implemented and information being disseminated related to the EEDA policy and its potential to benefit students, industry, the community, and beyond. But the recession brought challenges to schools seeking to keep up with the implementation of policy initiatives. In spite of these challenges, however, some

sample schools remained committed enough to career-focused education to sustain policy implementation at their schools.

3. **A broad range of resources is required for successful implementation of such a comprehensive reform policy.** Full implementation of such an ambitious and high-cost reform as the EEDA requires a commitment to the provision of sufficient financial support for schools and a consideration of economic realities. Not surprisingly, policy implementation was facilitated at schools that had access to a wide variety of resources, such as having staff with prior knowledge of and experience with related policies or being located in a community with diverse local businesses willing to provide resources and educational opportunities for students. Most schools, however, were struggling to meet all of the new mandates.

4. **Exposure to the EEDA policy benefitted students across our sample schools, even at schools with lower levels of policy implementation.** Students in all schools were benefitting in a variety of ways from implementation of the EEDA policy, but particularly from the IGP process. The IGP process helped students get started with career planning, think about and develop future career goals, and then connect their coursework to those goals. For a majority of the students surveyed and interviewed across sample schools, this type of planning helped them to feel more engaged in school, less likely to want to drop out, and more motivated to make better grades.

5. The EEDA policy increased awareness and knowledge of CTE at sample schools. In large part due to the IGP process, EEDA increased awareness and knowledge of CTE courses and programs and their importance to POS for school personnel and students. This increase in CTE awareness and the IGP process also facilitated the more appropriate placement of students in courses based on interest and ability levels and helped to reduce the stigma associated with taking CTE courses at a number of sample schools.

6. Components of the EEDA policy were helping to build some of the foundational elements and framework for the development and successful implementation of Perkins IV-defined POS. Although we did not find many POS at sample schools that met all of the study-defined criteria for the Perkins IV core elements, our qualitative data revealed that components of EEDA were helping to build some of the foundational elements and framework considered necessary for the development and successful implementation of Perkins IV POS. Various foundational elements were being put into place across our sample schools leading to the potential for the development of more POS in schools over time.

7. The expanded Perkins IV model of POS is relevant across the curriculum, not just for CTE programs. CTE program elements and the expanded Perkins IV model can direct career-focused education for all students, regardless of the subject area. Linking secondary and postsecondary programs, providing contextual learning, building business and community partnerships to build POS and provide students with work-based learning experiences, and emphasizing integration of rigorous academic and technical content are critical to all subject areas. In addition, CTE and non-CTE students and students at all performance levels need the benefits of career guidance and goal setting in order to be able to connect what happens in school to life after high school graduation.

8. Building on existing programs and whole-school reform efforts helped to facilitate the development and implementation of POS. Having the ability to build on existing programs seemed to be particularly important to successful early policy implementation in sample schools and in the development of POS. This included building on existing CTE programs or other initiatives that shared complementary goals and/or established the structure and culture for success, such as the High Schools That Work (HSTW) and Smaller Learning Communities school reform models.

9. Structured guidance for career planning and academic advisement was a critical underlying element for policy implementation and student participation in career planning and POS. Fundamental to policy implementation was a strong emphasis on combining both career-focused guidance and academic advisement in EEDA and the requirements of the IGP process. This career-focused guidance approach increased the depth and breadth of information that students received about their educational and career opportunities in CTE-related

fields and was an essential channel for disseminating information to students about available POS. It also helped to promote CTE programs to students and engage parents in their children's course and career planning.

10. The Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) development process emerged as an essential component of policy implementation and the promotion of POS. The development and maintenance of students' four-year IGPs emerged as an essential component of EEDA policy implementation and the promotion of POS in general. Guidance personnel, teachers, and students all pointed to IGP development as a valuable tool for career counseling and planning and said that it had facilitated increased counselor interactions with students on career- and course-related issues, taught students ways of thinking about career planning, and helped make it more likely that courses were related to students' interests and courses of study.

11. The buy-in of school administration and staff was key to successful policy and POS implementation. There was substantial variance in reports of initial school response to the EEDA career pathways model. Some schools immediately embraced the career pathways model, whereas others seemed overwhelmed by EEDA's policy demands. Although not the single most important factor, having buy-in from administrators and staff helped to facilitate policy implementation as well as POS development. At the two schools found to have POS meeting study-defined

criteria for the Perkins IV core elements, there was strong buy-in to the state policy from school administrators and staff.

12. Quality, long-term partnerships and collaboration were keys to policy and POS implementation. Partnerships appeared to be necessary to the development of POS, but key was the nature and strength of those partnerships. The level of policy implementation at sample schools that were located in communities with diverse local businesses that were willing to partner with the school and provide a variety of resources, such as guest speakers, internships, and work-based learning experiences, was often higher than at schools without access to such partners. Strong relationships between high school career centers and local community colleges were also critical to POS development and instrumental in creating strong course alignment and smooth pathways into postsecondary training and education.

The full technical report and two technical appendices may be downloaded from our website at **http://www.nrccte.org.**

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