

By Joel Blomenkamp

# Career Academies as Instruments of School Reform and Change

SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL REFORM HAS BEEN PLACED ON THE FOREFRONT OF EDUCATIONAL AGENDAS AS EDUCATORS, ADMINISTRATORS, THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY AND POLITICIANS SEEK TO RECTIFY ALARMING DROPOUT RATES AND A PERCEIVED LACK OF ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL COMPETENCE.



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Joel Blomenkamp, Ed.D.,

is a high school history teacher at Weber Institute-Stockton Unified School District in Stockton, California, and is an adjunct instructor at the Teacher's College of San Joaquin. He can be contacted at [jblomenkamp@stockton.k12.ca.us](mailto:jblomenkamp@stockton.k12.ca.us).

## **A** S MICHAEL STEELE WALKED IN THE ROOM

with his long jet-black hair, the judges quickly shuffled their scoring sheets preparing themselves for the next presentation. Without warning or hesitation, he burst out with an electrifying rendition of *Iron Man* by Black Sabbath. As his colorful electric guitar shimmered from the fluorescent classroom lights, the judges stood silent and stunned by what they had just heard and seen. Was this an audition? No! Steele's performance was part of his senior portfolio which served as a capstone of his experience in a career academy.

Steele's presentation was not based on his musical talent, but on the skills and abilities that he acquired as a student at Weber Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology, a career academy located in Stockton, California. Designed by Steele, the guitar he played served as his project. An animated Web page using a synthesis of computer applications like Flash, Adobe Photoshop, and Adobe InDesign was used as the medium for communicating his educational skills and his mastery of technology.

Though his guitar performance may have been electrifying, his past school experiences were anything but. Frustrated by his lack of educational progress and motivation at a traditional high school, Steele's exasperated parents decided to try the career academy approach. When Steele was exposed to learning in a career academy setting, he finally understood the relevance of his education and it began to result in an improvement in his performance: a phenomenal increase in his GPA and attendance rate.

## The Industrial Age School System

In recent years, secondary school reform has been placed on the forefront of educational agendas as educators, administrators, the business community and politicians seek to rectify alarming dropout rates and a perceived lack of academic and vocational competence. These reform initiatives sought to incorporate strategies into a high school system that has been criticized as being archaic, antiquated and unable to meet the needs of students.

Peter Senge *et al.* (2000), in his classic work *A Fifth Discipline Resource: Schools That Learn*, unabashedly described the American school system as a trapped institution caught in "extraordinary crosscurrents of change." For Senge, American schools resemble and reflect an industrial-age heritage that closely resembles an assembly line. This heritage has produced a system trapped by age-old business practices. Currently, schools are caught in a perpetual state of performing to standards or as educational researchers Marzano and Kendall observe: "Awash in a sea of standards," with too many standards to implement effectively (Marzano and Kendall, 1998).

There is a lack of innovation about learning and school environments. This view of education is not only espoused by Senge, but by other educational researchers who view contemporary American high schools as static institutions that are disengaging and archaic. According to career academy researchers Maxwell and Rubin (2000), these high schools "were designed in and for another age. In fact, the structure of today's high school was set in the latter part of the 19th century,

when high school graduation was not a prerequisite for admission to college and the economy was moving rapidly from an agricultural to an industrial base.”

As Senge *et al.* pointed out, five basic assumptions exist in industrial-age learning. These assumptions about learning include:

- Children are deficient and schools need to fix them.
- Learning takes place in the head, not in the body as a whole.
- Everyone learns, or should learn, in the same way.
- Learning takes place in the classroom, not in the world.
- There are smart kids and there are dumb kids.

Researches note that innovation *can* occur in today’s educational system, but that this change must address the assumptions mentioned above. In order for true reform to occur, these assumptions must be changed to meet the needs of students.

### The Industrial Age School System vs. Career Academies

Career academies provide choices for students who may feel inadequate about their learning capabilities and are unmotivated by the cookie cutter one-size-fits-all model. Career academies remedy many of the issues associated with the notion that learning takes place in the head, not in the body as a whole. For example, a kinesthetically gifted student is capable of expanding his or her learning by engaging in a career academy that centers upon, say, a career in transportation. (Kinesthetic learning takes place by the student actually carrying out a physical activity.)

The experiential and kinesthetic learning opportunities afforded to an individual in a transportation career academy provides the student with a venue to explore his or her native intelligence. This



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“THE STRUCTURE OF TODAY’S HIGH SCHOOL WAS SET IN THE LATTER PART OF THE 19TH CENTURY, WHEN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION WAS NOT A PREREQUISITE FOR ADMISSION TO COLLEGE AND THE ECONOMY WAS MOVING RAPIDLY FROM AN AGRICULTURAL TO AN INDUSTRIAL BASE.”

experiential knowledge can be integrated with core academic subjects like English, math and social science to provide a well-rounded education focused on a specific career pathway. In a comprehensive high school setting, a student may have the opportunity to engage in an automotive class, but the instruction will be isolated and completely distinct from other academic classes.

As America’s school population becomes increasingly diverse, so too are the divergent learning styles that many students possess. Many will prosper in education environments that foster experiential learning as opposed to the traditional industrial age school model. In a career academy environment, for instance, academies act as conduits for real-world experiences that are rarely found in a traditional comprehensive high school. Often, students are matched with mentors from the business world. Students who may not feel engaged in a large classroom

setting may feel at ease working with an adult mentor on a one-on-one basis.

Among the challenges facing America’s educational school system is the fact that students must now compete globally with countries like China and India. A dynamic approach to education in a career academy setting may sometimes result in the actual removal of the four walls in which team-teaching, academy-wide assemblies, field trips, and such replace the traditional classroom in which students work in isolation. In direct contrast to the industrial era model of education, career academies seek to forge partnerships and alliances with businesses. By offering internships and job-shadowing experiences, career academies offer what many educational researchers are calling relevant learning experiences—valuable for young workers as they enter an ever-changing and dynamic workforce.

In comparison to the industrial age school model, career academies are based

on the premise that all students are capable of developing a skill that would enable them to be productive members of a society. Career academies seek to provide a rigorous curriculum in which students are engaged in an integrated curriculum that combines career and technical education (CTE) coursework with core academic subjects (Kemple and Snipes, 2000).

## Look Ahead

Unlike the common perception that CTE programs are a "dumping ground" for the educationally unmotivated, the curriculum of career academies is meant to satisfy college entrance requirements and the rigorous requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In recent years, The National Standards of Practice for career academies have addressed the need to focus on rigor (Brand, 2004). Career

academies have also been identified as an effective strategy for reforming CTE (Stern and Wing, 2004).

As America strives to compete globally, can we afford to have an educational system that is both antiquated and lacks relevance in an ever-changing workforce and global economy? Can we afford to have an educational system in which six out of 10 students don't particularly like school and aren't motivated to succeed? More than 88 percent of students stated in a recent study that they would enroll in a career-oriented school if they had the chance (Landsberg, 2006). Yet because of the stereotype that CTE is a dumping ground for those who cannot excel, many students don't get the chance to benefit from CTE programming, such as the career academy model.

Imagine the possibility of thousands of

students, like Steele, who are able to read, write and do complex math problems because they are being educated in a system that accommodates their learning styles and abilities. If wholesale education reform does not address the dynamic challenges facing students today, many of them run the risk of not reaching their full potential and being left behind. ■

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