

Developing POS via a Statewide

CAREER-FOCUSED

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Career-focused education offered through programs of study (POS), career pathways and career and technical education (CTE) can provide students with opportunities to engage in career exploration and development, to establish career goals, to increase academic knowledge and skills, to test career preferences in applied settings, and to make links between coursework and postsecondary careers and education (Kalchick and Oertle, 2010; Stipanic, Lewis, and Stringfield, *in press*). Given the potential of these types of education reforms, federal and state legislation has

been enacted to foster their development.

In 2005, South Carolina (SC) initiated a particularly innovative approach to career-focused education through the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA). This legislative mandate, developed with the backing of the state's business community, aims to improve student achievement and preparedness for postsecondary education and high-skill, -wage and -demand jobs. It does so through a focus on career awareness and exploration and the creation of locally relevant career pathways and POS.

EEDA is one of the most comprehensive career-focused school-reform

mandates in the country. The state policy mandates that all schools and students participate in career-focused education, and it incorporates almost all of the components of the recently published Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) CTE design framework (OVAE, 2010), which includes the four core requirements for POS plus 10 components considered to be supportive to the development of POS.

We are studying components of EEDA implementation most relevant to high schools, and investigating the influence of these components on students and POS development over a five-year period in a

REFORM POLICY



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sample of eight SC high schools. These high schools were carefully selected for diversity in the degree of initial levels of policy implementation, local economic conditions and levels of school and community resources, as well as in size, location and student demographic characteristics (Sharp et al., 2011). We are in the fifth year of collecting data from three cohorts of students who, because of their progression in school, have different levels of exposure to the EEDA reforms.

Data gathered during the project's first four years indicate that the comprehensive career-focused school reform efforts of EEDA appear to be helping to build

some of the foundation and framework necessary for the development and successful implementation of career pathways and Perkins IV-defined POS. Although data gathering and analysis are ongoing, in this article we provide early insights into how several key elements of the SC policy are helping our sample schools lay a foundation for POS and POS-like educational components for all students.

Career Guidance Is a Central Component of the POS Framework

We have found that enhanced career guidance and counseling services are critical to the EEDA reform policy. Providing

students and parents with information and support to explore diverse career options plays a key role in students' career development and career planning. Under EEDA, students must be exposed to career development in elementary and middle school through the exploration of career pathways and career interests. In eighth grade, each student, along with parents or guardians, is to work with a counselor to develop an Individual Graduation Plan (IGP), which includes courses required for graduation and appropriate electives that align with the student's career interests, postsecondary plans and professional goals. In high school, EEDA states that



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students are to meet with counselors and parents on an annual basis to review and revise their IGPs. School counselors or others with career development facilitator certification must provide students with career awareness and career exploration activities and opportunities for work-based learning experiences.

Evidence from our study indicates that EEDA has increased the amount and variety of career planning activities and guidance that students are receiving, and has changed the roles of many guidance counselors in these schools. The policy has increased the depth and breadth of information that students receive about educational and career opportunities, with school counselors playing a key role in providing these activities and information.

Counselors report spending more time engaged in one-on-one career counseling with students, and making a greater effort to engage parents in the course and career planning of their children. Students most frequently identified school guidance counselors as the most helpful in IGP development. The EEDA approach appears to be providing a more systematic process for students' career planning, and highlights the key role of guidance and guidance counseling in the successful implementation of the statewide mandate.

IGPs Help to Establish a Career-focused Planning Process

A key to much ongoing change in sample schools is the development and maintenance of students' four-year IGPs. The IGP process was designed to be the core

organizing tool that prepares students to focus their planning efforts and make their journey through and beyond high school. At our sample schools, IGPs have helped students gain access to career skill assessments, set career goals, and select and plan for specific career pathways in order to work toward graduation and beyond.

The process helps to identify the types of courses and programs needed to achieve these goals, including CTE, academic and dual credit course options. School personnel consistently described the IGP as a valuable new tool for career counseling and planning for all students. Many students reported during focus groups that they benefitted from this process because it gave them an opportunity to select a career pathway that reflected their goals, skills and interests; helped them organize their high school coursework; and often added meaning to their high school experiences. Without such a process, many students would not have access to the tools and information needed to establish realistic career goals and to select career pathways or POS.

One of the benefits of career exploration through this process is that students can not only identify and explore areas that interest them as a post-high school career, but they can also identify areas that do not appeal to them as career choices. During student focus groups, we noted that, regardless of whether students had identified a specific career goal, many students seemed at least to have learned through the IGP process new ways of

thinking about and planning for the future, including establishing and tracking personal career goals.

Career-focused Reform Can Help to Facilitate CTE-Academic Interactions

Career pathways and POS are designed to include a mix of academic and CTE courses. EEDA aims to bring career-focused education and career pathways to all students, whether or not they are formally enrolled in CTE programs, and the state policy encourages collaboration among traditional academic and traditional CTE spheres.

Our data suggest that EEDA, and particularly the IGP process, has increased the knowledge and awareness of guidance personnel of the CTE programs and courses available to students at their schools. There is also preliminary evidence of changes in CTE participation as a result of EEDA implementation. CTE teachers at a number of schools reported not only more students being directed into their courses, but also more appropriate placement of students in CTE courses and programs. At several schools, CTE teachers and school counselors reported that any stigma associated with taking CTE courses or attending a career center has been reduced post-EEDA.

As in other change efforts, levels of early implementation have varied. In some schools we found that the policy is not yet having its intended effect on the mixing of CTE and non-CTE courses, or promoting collaboration between CTE and non-CTE teachers. Also, counselors and some

students reported challenges with CTE course-taking and scheduling—such as facing tradeoffs between taking CTE and academic core courses, Advanced Placement courses and non-CTE dual credit courses. For example, taking CTE courses instead of AP courses could cause grade point averages to suffer or make meeting core curriculum requirements difficult. Where not adequately addressed, these challenges are hampering efforts to integrate CTE and academic programs into seamless POS pathways.

Conclusions

Early observations from our study exploring the influence of South Carolina's EEDA on student outcomes and the development of career pathways and POS contain some lessons for those planning to implement similar reforms. First, components of the reform are helping to build some of the foundations and framework considered necessary for the development and successful implementation of Perkins IV-defined POS and other career pathways.

Added school guidance personnel have been essential to the early implementation of this comprehensive school reform effort and in establishing several of the components for the foundation for POS. Through their efforts, and the efforts of other school personnel, EEDA has increased career exploration and planning opportunities for students in all of our eight sample high schools, with the mandated IGP process playing a key role. The IGP process has allowed students to learn how to establish and track career goals, and to select and plan coursework for a career pathway or POS; helped reduce any historically present stigma associated with CTE; often facilitated academic-CTE discussions and interactions; and has helped to initiate discussion about how to integrate courses into seamless career/POS pathways.

In addition to these positive factors, we found challenges to implementation

across schools. These challenges often related to the amount of buy-in of the school and district to the reform policy and the level of resources for implementation—both of which varied across sample schools. Implementation of such a comprehensive reform requires resources and commitment at the classroom, school, district and state levels. Local availability of jobs and job-shadowing opportunities in the specific communities, resources available within the school districts, declining state funding for EEDA and other educational services, and increased demands placed on school personnel all impacted implementation levels. Several of the sampled schools lack some of the basic resources necessary to design and implement an array of POS, and in some high poverty rural areas we found little potential for this situation to improve in the near future. **T**

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