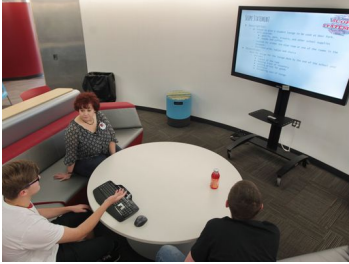


Can career academies fill the skills gap?



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Autumn Moninger, a 15 year-old student at Deer Park High School, never thought of a career in construction, law enforcement, or banking before she took a course in project management at the school's career academy.

The sophomore said she still doesn't know what she wants to be when she is finished with school, "but the class exposes us to the careers out there, so we have a better idea of what is out there after graduation."

The Deer Park Career Academy, which recently underwent a \$3.5 million construction, is one of dozens of programs that have popped up over the past few years in the region, aimed at getting kids interested in their careers earlier on in life.

"Our aim is to give kids the opportunity to explore different career avenues," said Superintendent Jay Phillips, who joined the Deer Park School District in 2013.



Education and industry experts see career academies and programs that raise college-and-career-readiness in high school and middle school, as a way to fill the skills gap that has long ravaged the manufacturing, construction and healthcare sectors here. There are more than 7,000 career academies in the nation, according to the National Career Academy Coalition, a D.C. lobbying group.

Similar to programs in Europe and other countries, where students are urged to choose a career earlier in life, the regional option exposes kids to "the things they like, and more importantly, careers they don't like," said Phillips.



Academies and training programs for students in high school also provide job options right out of school for kids who don't anticipate going to college, which is especially important when more than half of new jobs in Greater Cincinnati in 2020 will require less than a bachelor's degree, said Janice Urbanik, executive director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

Not to mention employers are desperate for skilled talent now. Nationally, nearly all of the 2.6 million new, livable wage jobs expected to be added by 2017 will require some form of post-secondary education, but not necessarily a bachelor's degree according to a USA TODAY analysis of jobs data in the 125 largest metros.

While overwhelmingly seen as a potential solution to the skills gap problem, some say low-income and minority students have limited access to such programs.

Popularity of career programs increasing

In May, Boone County Public Schools announced that it would offer a traditional construction vocational trades training program between the school system, the Home Builders Association of Northern Kentucky and Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

Immediately after its launch, the 48 open spots were filled, said Jerry Gels, director of innovative programs at Boone County Schools.

"There is a big industry need and lot of kids who have never touched a hammer or nails," Gels said. "This is a way to expose them to that."



In the program, the 48 sophomores and juniors from the Boone County district will be taught by industry professionals in a state-approved curriculum that will expose the students to a wide reach introduction to construction trades focused on licensure attainment and long term employment.

After the first year, students will participate in a co-op work program with the employer members of the builders' association. After graduation, the students are encouraged to attend the Enzweiler Building Institute to work towards their journeyman's certificate and in specific trades attain licensure.

Gels said the training program is so successful that Boone County Schools plan on opening up an automation course of study next year.

Bruce Weinberg, a labor professor at Ohio State University, said the resurgence of these academies can provide a boon for an economy that is in need of skilled labor.

"Some other countries, most notably, Germany have structures in place to provide people with the equivalent of a U.S. high school education access to highly skilled and well-paying jobs," said Weinberg.

"The goal of these efforts is to provide something equivalent for the U.S.," he said. "It is certainly a laudable goal to develop skills for people who are not inclined to go to college the skills to be highly productive."

Employers starting to get on the bandwagon

Kevin Holt, section chief of the Cincinnati office of OhioMeansJobs, said his organization is seeing a big increase in the number of employers attempting to connect with younger potential workers through career-oriented programs.

"The goal is to get kids interested in jobs that provide a living wage," he said. For example, UC Health's West Chester Hospital is actively working with middle and high schoolers to teach them through internships and shadow programs about working in the healthcare field, said Tom Daskalakis, the hospital's interim chief information officer.

"The program is definitely effective," Daskalakis said. "This is a way to ensure students are familiar with the different career paths available in health care" he said.

Partners' Urbanik said there are plenty of plusses to getting kids interested in career academies and training as

early as elementary school: it exposes kids to careers they would otherwise never be exposed to, helps cut down on the rampant problem of student loan debt and breaks down stereotypes about certain careers.

"There are some programs now that are relatively new, and there are some that have been around for quite some time," she said.



"And for many years the paradigm has been college or nothing, but to get a good job you don't necessarily need a four-year degree. That's where career academies help."

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