MDRC's Career and Technical Education Projects

The past decade has seen a resurgence of interest in career and technical education (CTE) as a way to engage students, help people build the skills necessary to succeed in a technologically advanced economy, and meet employer demand for workers. MDRC — which has a two-decade history of developing and evaluating CTE programs, including our landmark study of Career Academies — is partnering with over a dozen CTE programs to build evidence and inform policy and practice. MDRC's Center for Effective CTE seeks to synthesize lessons learned from CTE projects (with middle and high schools, community colleges, and workforce organizations) and illuminate big-picture issues including those related to equity in access and outcomes, employer engagement, advising, and choices and decision-making. It also examines how the future of work will shape the evolution of CTE.

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

CareerWise Colorado is a Swiss-inspired youth apprenticeship program that aims to meet employers' needs for skilled workers and to improve labor market outcomes for young people. The program responds to local businesses and industry intermediaries representing high-growth, high-wage sectors in Colorado, such as information technology (IT), finance, and advanced manufacturing. MDRC is conducting an implementation study of the planning and pilot phase of the program.

Career Technical Education Innovation: New York City as a Laboratory for Learning is studying the impact of CTE programs on a variety of student outcomes: social competencies, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment and completion, employment, and earnings. The study is also looking at variation in the more than 200 CTE programs across New York City to determine what program components contribute to improved student outcomes. The study is being conducted in partnership with the Research Alliance for New York City Schools and the University of Connecticut.

High School Design — Real World Learning Initiative is designed to strengthen connections between school districts in the Kansas City metropolitan area and the labor market, and to develop and expand programs that provide high school students real-world learning experiences and prepare them to enter the workforce. MDRC is providing technical assistance on data collection and performance measurement, advice based on interim observations, and a summative evaluation.

Next Generation California Partnership Academies is a replication of MDRC's study of career academies — small learning communities within larger high schools that combine academic and technical curricula related to a career theme and provide students with work-based learning experiences. MDRC's original study found long-term impacts on earnings for students who participated in career academies. This new study, centered on career academies that receive enhanced technical assistance from the California Department of Education, will follow students for 12 years and measure impacts on educational attainment, employment, and earnings.

P-TECH 9-14 is a six-year high school model that was created by IBM, the New York City Department of Education, and the City University of New York (CUNY). Students participate in work-based learning experiences and graduate with both a high school diploma and a free associate's degree from CUNY. There are now seven P-TECH schools in New York City, each with a different industry partner, and the model has proliferated across New York State and the nation. MDRC is conducting implementation, impact, and cost studies of New York City's P-TECH 9-14 schools.

Software-Based Advising and CTE Decision-Making seeks to build knowledge about how middle and high schools are using the many software-based advising tools currently on the market. Many schools and districts are using these tools to supplement guidance counseling so that students can understand their career

options and make informed CTE choices. MDRC is conducting a qualitative scan of schools and districts that use three different software-based tools.

YouthForce NOLA is an initiative designed to connect New Orleans high school students to career pathways in high-wage, high-demand industries such as health sciences, digital media, IT, and skilled crafts. The program provides technical support to schools to develop CTE programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials and collaborates with employers to offer a robust paid internship program. MDRC is providing advice on program design, conducting an implementation study, and assessing the feasibility of an impact study.

COLLEGE STUDENTS

New World of Work (NWoW) is designed to help students learn the twenty-first-century skills (also called "soft skills") that are important for success in the workplace. The program, which is currently being pilot tested at community colleges in California, incorporates a twenty-first-century skills curriculum for the classroom, work-based learning experiences, and credentials designed to demonstrate mastery in these skills. MDRC is working with the developers of NWoW to adapt it for use in CTE programs and assess its promise for improving students' educational outcomes.

The MDRC Scan of Community College CTE Programs is investigating whether community college CTE programs can expand elements of successful — but typically nonprofit-led — sectoral training programs, such as sector-tailored recruitment and screening, career-advancement coaching, and postplacement support for retention and advancement. MDRC is working to understand the extent to which community college CTE programs are already incorporating these elements, and the extent to which they could offer these elements in the future. The final product, available in early 2020, will be an issue brief that will summarize insights and recommendations based on this work.

The California Adult Basic Education Scan reviewed promising adult basic skills programs in the state of California that integrated college- and career-readiness support and training with academic adult basic skills courses. The scan describes the California adult education context and identifies 10 promising programs in adult basic education, nonprofit, and workforce-development settings that provide lessons on how these programs can be developed and supported.

The Great Lakes Career Ready Internship program aims to help students persist in and complete college and improve their prospects in the workforce. The program offers career-focused, paid internships to several thousand low-income students. Participating colleges match students with employers on the basis of their professional interests. MDRC is exploring which features of the program help students stay in school and how colleges develop relationships with local employers.

AT-RISK YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS

Cascades Job Corps College and Career Academy (CCCA) in Washington State seeks to improve outcomes for young people (16 to 21 years old) who participate in Jobs Corps — a long-standing program for disadvantaged young people. CCCA uses a career pathways model and offers academic learning, CTE training, work-based learning, and noncognitive skills training in a residential setting. CCCA aims to better serve young people who have left school by helping them pursue and obtain industry-recognized credentials. The study is being conducted in partnership with Abt Associates.

GED Bridge is testing whether a career-focused GED program at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College can help more students pass the high school equivalency exam and go on to college and careers. The program includes a curriculum that integrates material from the fields of health care and business and helps students identify the courses of study that are right for them. GED Bridge builds on the lessons of LaGuardia

Community College's Bridge to College and Careers program, which was found to increase high school equivalency exam pass rates and improve college enrollment and persistence.

Generation Work is an initiative launched in five cities to significantly improve job opportunities for low-income young adults by improving two aspects of the workforce-development system: the nature of the training programs themselves and the transitions into and out of these programs (from other systems serving young people into the programs and from the programs into the next career step). Generation Work is also designed to better connect the workforce-development field with strategies that address structural and systemic inequities. MDRC is conducting an implementation study of the initiative in all five cities, and a more detailed study of three workforce training organizations in particular.

LOW-WAGE WORKERS

The Families Forward Demonstration (FFD) is testing new approaches to improve the earnings and financial knowledge of noncustodial parents who owe child support but are unable to fully pay because of low earnings. FFD builds on previous research on employment programs for noncustodial parents and recent evidence on sectoral partnerships to develop ways to help parents obtain higher-paying jobs in their local labor markets.

The TechHire and Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) grant programs emphasize short-term, accelerated, demand-driven training aimed at preparing young adults and parents for middle-skill jobs in high-growth industries. The 53 grantees are pilot testing a variety of approaches to training in technical skills. In addition, SWFI programs aim to make it easier for parents to participate in and complete training by helping them obtain child care. The evaluation is led by Westat in partnership with MDRC.

WorkAdvance is a sector-focused advancement program that offers training and industry-recognized certifications in local high-growth sectors such as IT, advanced manufacturing, and health care. The program has several components: screening, preemployment services, skills training, job placement, and postemployment advancement services. MDRC's evaluation found that WorkAdvance increased average earnings by nearly $2,000 two years after program entry, increased employment in the targeted sector, and improved job quality. The most successful WorkAdvance provider (Per Scholas in New York City) increased earnings by $3,700.