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An Innovative Approach to Preparing Students for College and Careers

YOUTHFORCE NOLA

Career pathways models are an increasingly popular approach to engaging high school students and equipping them with the academic, technical, and “soft” skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education and careers. When linked with local labor market needs, career pathways models can also create a talent pipeline for local employers. At the high school level, these programs typically combine core academic courses with a sequence of career and technical education (CTE) courses in a particular industry and incorporate a variety of work-based learning experiences.

Despite the proliferation of career pathways models over the past decade, little rigorous evidence exists on their effectiveness for high school students.¹ One exception is the evidence for career academies, which are small learning communities within larger high schools that combine academic and technical curricula around a career theme and incorporate work-based learning. MDRC’s random assignment evaluation in the mid-1990s found that the program led to large and sustained increases in earnings, particularly for young men.²

An example of a promising career pathways initiative that incorporates elements of career academies is YouthForce NOLA. The initiative aims to prepare New Orleans public high school students for postsecondary education opportunities and careers in three industry clusters with strong local employer demand and family-supporting wages — health sciences, creative media and technology, and skilled crafts, such as advanced manufacturing and construction. In 2016, MDRC began conducting a process and implementation study of YouthForce NOLA. The main goals of the study are to assess the initiative’s progress in putting key components in place and to document the experiences and perceptions of program stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and employer partners.

OVERVIEW OF YOUTHFORCE NOLA

Recognizing the dual need to better prepare New Orleans students for academic and economic success while meeting employer demand for skilled workers, a group of education, business, and community leaders launched YouthForce NOLA in 2015. The organization’s three main goals are to increase the number of students who (1) earn credentials recognized by regional high-wage, high-demand industries; (2) complete YouthForce internships; and (3) graduate from high school with career-ready soft skills (for example, meeting employers’ expectations and working cooperatively with others). The longer-term goal is to increase students’ educational attainment, employment, and earnings and ultimately to strengthen the local economy. To achieve these goals, YouthForce NOLA works to do the following:

Provide support to local high schools to implement career pathways programs. Participating high schools receive funding and technical assistance from YouthForce NOLA to implement career pathways programs of study in target industries. Eventually, each program will include these components:

- Core academic courses that are aligned with the programs of study
- A sequence of CTE courses that lead to industry-recognized credentials

¹Mary G. Visher and David Stern, *New Pathways to Careers and College: Examples, Evidence, and Prospects* (New York: MDRC, 2015).

²James J. Kemple, *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Work, Education, and Transitions to Adulthood* (New York: MDRC, 2008).

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- Work-based learning experiences such as career expos, job shadowing, and internships
- Soft-skills reinforcement
- Integrated student support services, including career counseling

Partner with local employers to provide work-based learning experiences and to inform school programming. A hallmark of the initiative is the high-quality paid internship program; YouthForce NOLA aims to triple its size over the next three years (see Box 1). Local employers also share what skills they are looking for and what credentials they value, helping the initiative adapt its offerings.

Work with occupational skills training providers (such as community colleges and nonprofit training organizations) to expand the number of CTE courses students can choose from. High schools often do not have the equipment, space, or staff expertise to provide a range of quality CTE courses, so YouthForce NOLA facilitates partnerships with third-party providers and encourages schools to increase dual enrollment opportunities for students in partnership with local community colleges.

Engage families and the community at large in the development and implementation of career pathways. YouthForce NOLA aids schools' efforts to increase awareness of and support for CTE among families. The organization created a [family engagement toolkit](#) and is working with schools to develop and implement family engagement plans.

EARLY LESSONS FROM YOUTHFORCE NOLA

MDRC's interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders — as well as program data collected by YouthForce NOLA — provide an early sense of how the program is being put into action and the progress it is making. Overall, the initiative is being implemented as intended, with teachers, school administrators, students, and employers reporting positive experiences. YouthForce NOLA has successfully implemented many of the important features of successful pathways programs:

- **An intermediary to manage the initiative.** YouthForce NOLA plays a strong central coordinating role, which participating schools find to be extremely helpful. For the internship program, the organization recruits employers, helps schools conduct outreach to students, and facilitates the intern selection and placement process. This helps overcome communication barriers between schools and employers and reduces the burden on employers, many of whom may not have the time or capacity to recruit, vet, and support young interns. YouthForce NOLA has also been successful at creating a community of practice in which schools can learn from one another. In a decentralized school system such as New Orleans', the role of a strong intermediary partner may be particularly important.

Box 1. What Is a YouthForce Internship?

A key feature of YouthForce NOLA is its placement of high school seniors in paid internships with local employers. Almost 100 students in the graduating class of 2017 completed YouthForce internships, and the program aims to expand rapidly to serve 300 students (10 percent of public high school seniors) in the class of 2020. The internships include many recognized best practices:

- 60 hours of paid "soft skills" and business etiquette training before work begins
- 90 hours of paid work in one of three target industries: technology, health sciences, or skilled crafts
- Coaches who provide support and guidance to students throughout the internship
- Transit passes to help cover students' cost of getting to and from the job
- An end-of-program assessment of interns' work skills by employers (using a tool called the [MHA Labs Hirability Assessment](#))

- **High-quality CTE instruction delivered by qualified staff members.** Nationwide, there is a shortage of CTE teachers, with many school districts struggling to identify and recruit qualified individuals. This has been a challenge in New Orleans as well. YouthForce NOLA has identified industry professionals for schools to hire, helped teachers earn certifications in the program’s target industries, and provided professional development to teachers.
- **Partnerships with community colleges and other occupational skills training providers.** Partnerships with local community colleges have helped expand students’ course options; however, some instructors have limited experience working with high school students, and scheduling can be difficult. In response, YouthForce NOLA is launching a training provider community of practice and plans to develop a dual enrollment “playbook” to improve the effectiveness of these partnerships. YouthForce NOLA has also expanded offerings through other third-party providers, such as Operation Spark, a New Orleans organization that teaches students computer programming and allows them to earn an industry-based certification.
- **Employer partnerships to provide a continuum of work-based learning experiences, culminating in an internship.** The YouthForce NOLA Internship program is one of the most developed components of the initiative and receives high ratings from students and employers. The organization has been able to successfully recruit students and employers and is on track to meet its scale-up targets, which is often a challenge for internship programs.
- **Community and parent engagement and support.** Some research indicates that students, teachers, parents, and others are either unaware of CTE or view it as a track for lower-performing students who are not “college-bound.”³ But focus groups conducted by the Urban League of Louisiana suggest that New Orleans parents generally support CTE as a way to prepare students for their careers. YouthForce NOLA’s family engagement objective involves working with schools to craft a message for parents and the community at large that emphasizes how the program prepares students for both college *and* a career.
- **School flexibility and student choice.** Career pathways programs differ in the extent to which they are prescriptive or allow for flexibility in program design. YouthForce NOLA has deliberately allowed partner schools to customize the program to fit their own contexts and students’ needs. For example, schools can choose which pathways to implement from one of the initiative’s three target industry clusters. Partner schools vary in how many programs of study they offer and the extent to which they give students the opportunity to try out various options, but most schools offer at least two programs of study.

LOOKING FORWARD

MDRC’s implementation study of YouthForce NOLA will run through the 2017-2018 academic year. In the future, MDRC hopes to evaluate the program’s effect on student outcomes while continuing to understand and analyze how it is perceived by those involved. As career pathways and CTE-related models keep expanding across the country, lessons learned from such programs, as well as evidence of their effectiveness, can inform both policy and practice concerning how to equip young people with the skills to obtain jobs with family-supporting wages.

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³Advance CTE, *The Value and Promise of Career and Technical Education: Results from a National Survey of Parents and Students* (Silver Spring, MD: Advance CTE, 2017).