

Getting Ready for the Future NOW



New London's career academies are giving students an in-depth look at real-world careers

ANNE DAVIS

When this year's freshmen at New London High School graduate in 2015, they will walk through the doors with more than a diploma.

Whether bound for college, technical school or a job, they will leave with a clear vision of where they fit into the workplace and what it takes to be successful in their chosen career.

"This is why we exist," said Bill Fitzpatrick, the New London School District administrator. "Our job is not only to get kids to graduate from high school. Our job is to make sure they're equipped to be successful after high school."

This fall, New London launched an ambitious new project to do just that. This year's ninth graders are the initial members of what will eventually become a schoolwide transformation of curriculum and instruction that groups students into a series of small schools within a school called career academies.

Each of the three academies will focus on a general career emphasis. Teachers will offer instruction in core content areas – math, English, science and social studies – but will tailor their lessons to reflect skills and knowledge specific to the career emphasis of the individual academy.

Students can also have specialized training in specific careers, either at the high school or with other educational partners. Instruction will be project-based and there will be multiple opportunities for students to get hands-on experience at local businesses.

The career academies, which will be fully launched during the 2012-13 school year include: Health and Human Services; Communica-

tions, Arts and Business (CAB); and Science, Technology, Engineering, Agriculture and Math (STEAM).

There is also a Freshmen Academy that helps prepare students for the new approach as well as for choosing which academy they want to join. That academy launched last fall with all 200 incoming freshmen participating. In addition to their regular coursework, students are learning about 16 career clusters of occupations that share common skills and knowledge, the specific jobs available in each cluster, and what type of education and experience is needed to obtain those jobs.

The freshmen will soon be asked to select which of the three career academies they wish to join for their next three years of high school.

"We're trying to introduce them to the process of choosing a career," said New London High School principal Joe Pomrenning.

Exploring Careers

School officials expect that students' first choices of a possible career may not be their final choices. Learning more about a field to which they are initially attracted may help students decide that field is not for them. It's better to make that discovery in high school rather than in college or even after college, Fitzpatrick said.

"We can give kids the experience of not only what they'd like to do but also what they might rule out as well," he added.

Community business leaders are being recruited to work with each of the academies to help provide hands-on experiences for students and to serve as mentors. During their sophomore year, students will be required

to do a job shadow and a sit down interview with a business representative. The connections will continue and culminate with a senior project linked to a potential career that will be presented to a panel of school and business officials.

The senior project will be similar to New London's current graduation requirement of a senior portfolio. Each April, all seniors present their portfolios to a panel of business representatives.

"Once portfolios have been assembled you can see students make connections between the classroom and the real world. They become very proud of their accomplishments," said Kathy Gwidt, New London's Director of Teaching and Learning. "Their efforts are amazing."

Getting students truly engaged with their education is one of the issues that drove New London offi-

cials to begin exploring different ways of structuring the high school experience.

"I think public education has a real issue of engaging kids in a different way. We're perfectly set up for a factory model but not for today," Fitzpatrick said.

Next Generation Learning

The academy approach is an example of the way schools need to change in order to become viable and relevant now and in the future, agreed Dan Hanrahan, executive director of the Technology Solutions Center at Cooperative Educational Service Agency or CESA 6 in Oshkosh.

Last year, officials at CESA 6 launched a new initiative to reshape public education in response to pressures from a series of "wicked problems." The initiative is called the Next Generation of Public Education.



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Specifically, New London's career academies model the Next Generation's call for new learning experiences for students and new educational structures, according to Hanrahan.

"It moves us closer to the vision of Next Generation education," he said.

A key element is the academies' student-centered classrooms, which are "more engaging and personalized" than traditional classrooms, he added. This helps address one of the wicked problems identified by CESA – the way traditional education alienates a significant number of students.

The concept of career academies is not new. According to the National Career Academy Coalition, the first career academy was established in 1968 in Philadelphia in response to concerns about the lack

of opportunities for inner city students. In conjunction with major area employers, the goal was to create meaningful career training opportunities for students in Philadelphia's public schools at a time when dropout rates were rising and many employers were having trouble finding entry-level workers with adequate training and education.

The movement spread to California and other states. Today the Coalition estimates that there are 1,500 career academies nationwide.

Academy Learning in New London

To help them prepare to launch their career academies, teams of New London teachers and administrators visited existing programs in Austin, Texas and Joliet, Illinois. A total of 45 teachers joined the four academy

teams with 10-12 teachers from different academic disciplines assigned to each academy.

Because New London is a much smaller district than the ones they visited, officials had to adapt the career academy approach to fit its demographics. Larger districts with more staff are able to keep students completely physically contained in their academies.

At New London, although the students and teachers in each academy are housed in several "pods" or groups of rooms grouped around a computer center, students must travel elsewhere in the high school building to take elective courses like art, music and physical education.

Having teachers work together in an interdisciplinary collaboration has proven to be an unusual but exciting experience. The teachers are learning



Career Academies

Connecting Learning with the Real-World

For most students sitting in a geometry, biology, or language art class, it can be often hard to see the connection between lessons learned in the classroom and their real-world application.

One method that helps bridge learning in the classroom with careers and jobs is career academy model. Schools across the country have established career academies to give high school students an opportunity to receive education and training in a specific career cluster.

According to the National Career Academy Coalition, "Career academies differ from traditional academic and vocational education because they prepare high school students for both college and careers. Academics provide broad information about a field such as health care, finance, engineering, media, or natural resources."

Kathy Schlieve, workforce and economic development business partner with Moraine Park Technical College,

is also a school board member with the Waupun School District. Between her duties at Moraine Park Technical College and her work serving on a school board, she has a unique perspective on the importance of preparing students for life after high school.

"I think our students need to have a better understanding of how their learning applies to different careers," Schlieve said. "In a career academy model, they develop a better understanding of how math applies to engineering or writing applies to communications."

Most importantly, career academies can help schools serve all students.

According to the Center on Education and the Workforce, today's job market is evenly split between jobs that require a bachelor's degree or higher, jobs that require an associate's degree, and jobs that require a high school education or GED. Career academies cover all of these bases as they can prepare students for post-secondary education or a career. □



FOR MORE INFORMATION on career academies, visit the National Career Academy Coalition at ncacinc.com

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— Pam Steiger, Dean of Students, New London School District



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to focus on the overall process of educating students rather than on their own subject areas, Fitzpatrick said. As they figure out what shape and structure the academies and their curriculum and programs should be, they are modeling the experience New London officials hope their students will have.

“They are doing what we hope our kids will do,” said Fitzpatrick, who has been pleased with the enthusiastic response from the teachers. “It tells you that when you have something engaging, they will gravitate towards it.”

“As a principal, I’m seeing a lot more interaction among the teachers,” agreed Pomrenning, who called the connections “very powerful.”

“You just see so much enthusiasm and passion,” added Gwidt.

New Opportunities

Lisa Breaker, who teaches technology education, is coordinator of the STEAM academy. She was impressed by the opportunities that the new approach offers teachers after going to Appleton this summer and visiting staff involved with that district’s career academy.

“I just saw the enthusiasm from the teachers right off the bat,” said Breaker.

She helped to introduce New London’s Project Lead the Way program, a national project-based program designed to encourage and engage students in math, science and engineering. The program will be incorporated into the STEAM academy and Breaker is excited about the chances for even more

collaboration with teachers from other subject areas.

Jenny Doran, who teaches science at New London, is coordinator for the Health and Human Services academy. She helped start a biomedical sciences program at New London that is a partnership between the district and Milwaukee School of Engineering. It will be incorporated into the new academy and students will have the opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school.

She thinks the new academy approach will offer the chance for more partnerships with community businesses as well as make everyday instruction more meaningful for students.

“I think it’s going to make things more relevant to them,” she added.

A Believer

Todd Koeller, a veteran math teacher at New London, took a little longer to warm up to the idea of the career academies. At first, he openly dismissed the idea as yet another educational fad without real substance.

“Most of the things you do in education are a retread,” Koeller said. “I thought there’s no reason to get too jazzed up about it because it’s the same thing we’ve done before.”

A trip to Joliet’s career academy changed his mind. As a math teacher, he was interested in statistics and the drastic improvement at Joliet in every measure of school achievement — graduation rate, retention, test scores — after the launch of the career academy made him rethink his skepticism.

Joliet and New London are different districts in many ways but there were enough similarities between the two communities, especially the largely blue-collar nature of the workforces that Koeller thought the academy approach might be worth a try.

“I thought if it worked there, it could surely work here,” he said. “The numbers don’t lie.”

In fact, Koeller became so committed to the academy idea that he agreed to serve as coordinator of the Communications, Arts and Business academy.

“I’m on board 100 percent now,” he said.

He particularly likes the way the academy approach creates closer connections between teachers and individual students. Before he might see a student once a day in a single class: under the academy approach, he can see the same student dozens of times during the day.

Building these relationships will help fewer students fall through the cracks, says Pam Steiger, New London’s Dean of Students and coordinator of the Freshmen Academy.

“It’s a more personalized approach,” Steiger added. “That really gives you a lot of opportunities to talk to each other.”

She is optimistic that the career approach will help students take ownership of their education and their future, “If nothing else, I think the lesson will be — you’ve got to keep learning.” ■

Davis, a freelance writer, has covered education for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.