
Thematic Learning Academies

National High School Center

The transition to high school presents numerous academic and social challenges for some students, particularly ninth graders and those who are underprepared for a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006) or have difficulty acclimating to the larger, more bureaucratic environment of the typical American high school (Lee & Smith, 2001). With fewer opportunities for individualized attention, students can easily get lost in the crowd, fall behind, lose interest in school, and eventually drop out. To help address this concern, schools across the nation are implementing thematic learning academies, which tend to be smaller, focused programs within a larger high school. Popular approaches to learning academies—which include personalization as a critical element for success—are theme-based academies (e.g., leadership, arts, technology), ninth grade (or freshman) academies, and career academies. These academies focus on students' individual needs and provide them with a balanced mix of core academic preparation and opportunities to develop practical, work-based skills. The academy models are helping high schools successfully engage students and keep them on track for graduation.

Theme-based academies. Some learning academies are designed to provide a learning environment centered on a particular theme. While some of these themes can be related to a specific career field (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), other themes can be more general (e.g. leadership). Specific designs for thematic learning academies can vary. For example, these academies can be limited to students in a particular grade, or can be offered as multi-grade arrangements.

Ninth grade academies. Referred to as the “ninth grade bulge,” students in ninth grade comprise the largest percentage of the overall high school population because they are much more likely to fall behind during this critical year and not be promoted to tenth grade (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Ninth grade academies provide specialized attention during this transitional year by helping underprepared students catch up academically, offering a more personalized learning environment, and giving teachers the opportunity to collaborate. Some ninth grade academies include a seminar on study skills, and some use a block scheduling structure that allows time for intensive development of the critical skills that students need to succeed in high school (Smith, 2007).

Other aspects of ninth grade academies may include: an advisory component that facilitates meaningful interaction between teachers and students and can help identify and respond to students' needs early on; and teacher teams that are responsible for addressing students' learning needs and responding to discipline and attendance problems in proactive ways (e.g., eliminating in-school suspension). Upper grade academies, or “houses,” provide similar supports for students beyond ninth grade.

Career academies. Designed to expose students to a rigorous core curriculum, career academies simultaneously teach college- and career-ready skills in specific fields, such as arts, business, health sciences, hospitality, and engineering. Close partnerships with the employers in the local community provide career awareness, internships, and other work-based learning opportunities for students.

Like the other academy models, an emphasis is placed on personalized learning (Smith, 2008), and career academies often involve a mentoring or advisory component. Research suggests that career academies can have a positive impact on attendance, credit accrual, graduation rates, and college attendance rates, as well as postsecondary employment prospects for young men (Kemple & Willner, 2008).

Action Principles

For District

1. Monitor student and school data to ensure that students who are falling behind and/or are at risk for dropping out receive additional supports through placement in thematic learning academies.
2. Provide support for schools developing thematic learning academies through professional development and coaching.

3. Foster collaboration between feeder middle schools and high schools to promote placement of students, including students with disabilities and English language learners, in ninth grade and other learning academies to ensure that students in need of additional support have their needs met from the first day of high school.
4. Encourage school leaders to develop and nurture partnerships with local businesses and organizations that are linked with the school's thematic academies.

For School

1. Determine and implement a structure to personalize the learning environment best suited to the school's context.
2. Provide parents with information about the purpose and outcomes of thematic learning academies.
3. Develop partnerships with local business, organizations, and government agencies and leverage these partnerships to give students hands-on learning opportunities, such as internships and job shadowing.
4. Provide professional development for all staff to help prepare them for the new school structure and to support new roles.

References and Resources

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