From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet: A Case Study of a Low-Income African American Academy's Vision of Promoting College and Career Readiness in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to examine the ways in which stakeholders at a low-income, predominantly African American STEAM academy implement initiatives that support the college and career readiness of their students. We found that a shift in leadership efforts to ensure that academy students were prepared to be both college and career ready provided equity and access to a quality and individualized curriculum through the implementation of career academies. As a result, stakeholders believed that students were more included, valued, and engaged in the school.

Keywords: African American education, career academy, career readiness, college readiness, urban education

Introduction

The struggles of urban schools to ensure students become college and career ready in the midst of challenging conditions have been well documented (Green & Gooden, 2014; Milner, 2013). It is also widely understood that inadequate college and career readiness often prevents youth from seamless transitions into postsecondary education and the workforce (Loera et al., 2013). To be sure, it is quite difficult for schools to deliver curricula that meet the needs of diverse student bodies to promote their success. However, it is critical that all students be ready for the transition from high school to postsecondary education and/or the workforce.

In response to the challenges in preparing students to be college and career ready, career academies have emerged as promising programs after decades of implementation and documented positive outcomes (Stern et al., 2010). There is extensive evidence documenting the impact of participation in career academies regarding reduced dropout rates, improved attendance, increased academic course-taking and interpersonal skills, and positive labor market outcomes (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Kemple, 2008; Stern et al., 2010). The key components of the academy approach involve integrated and contextualized academic and career-related curricula, work-based learning experiences, and partnerships with business and industry (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stern et al., 2010). The career academy model is a high school reform initiative that involves integrating career and

technical education (CTE) curricula into middle and high schools. The focus of career academies is to prepare students to be college and career ready with the implementation of small learning communities, work-based learning experiences, advisory boards, and college preparatory curricular courses and activities.

Despite the documented benefits of student participation in career academies, the general public is still reticent to embrace related programs given the lingering negative views regarding career and technical education (CTE). Some of the stigma stems from tracking students into differentiated curricular programs based on ethnic and racial backgrounds and socioeconomic status (Akos et al., 2007; Alvarez & Mehan, 2007; Fletcher & Zirkle, 2009; Gamoran, 1989; Lewis, 2007). Many parents still view CTE from the vantage point of their own K-12 schooling experiences, associating CTE programs with non-college bound students and preparation for entry level, low-wage jobs. Further contributing to this misconception is that the current "college for all" mindset has taught administrators, educators, school counselors, parents, and students that a four-year baccalaureate degree is the only pathway to prosperity (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stringfield & Stone, 2017). Another issue preventing implementation is that career academies often demand greater resources in terms of equipment and software, and require access to worksites and employer support in the community to

provide work-based learning opportunities to students (Sanders, 2005; Stringfield & Stone, 2017).

Under these conditions, what can urban schools operating in economically disadvantaged settings do to promote student college and career readiness? Research has demonstrated the critical role that community engagement plays in reforming urban schools for initiating more sustainable change (Green, 2017). Community engagement in schools refers to relationships between schools and businesses, individuals, formal and informal organizations, and postsecondary institutions (Sanders, 2005). Research has not addressed how ethnically and racially diverse, low-income, urban school stakeholders perceive and approach the implementation of the career academy model. Additionally, there is limited research describing how these schools partner with employers, postsecondary, and community members to promote students' college and career readiness. We also know little about how urban schools are able to acquire resources needed for student success. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which stakeholders at a low-income, predominantly African American STEAM academy implement initiatives that support the college and career readiness of their students. The research question under investigation in this research study was: how can career academies help students become college AND career ready? Prior research on exemplary, high quality secondary programs has suggested that one

of the factors of success is an organizational understanding of purpose (Newmann & Whelage, 1995). Thus, schools with a clear and shared understanding of college and career readiness would be more likely to emphasize rigorous and relevant curricula promoting academic, technical, and employability skills.

Review of Literature

In general, research has shown positive outcomes when schools and communities develop close ties in terms of more effective school functioning, additional fiscal and human resources, higher student academic achievement and well-being, greater parental participation, and better community health and development (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 2005). Further, engagement from the community is mutually beneficial with schools often receiving donations and raising capital (e.g., small grants, equipment) as well as supports in a variety of ways, such as guest speaking, mentorship, and internships (Badgett, 2016, Engeln, 2003; Turnbull, 2015). To be clear, the facilitation of partnerships between schools and their communities require a great deal of coordination and effort on both parties involved, but the rewards for the school, students, and community can be quite worthwhile (Hands, 2010). In this context, principals have tended to lead school-community relationship efforts (Khalifa, 2012; Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). However, to sustain school-community partnerships, the engagement of an entire team of stakeholders is often more successful than relying on one individual from a school (Sanders, 2005).

One form of community engagement is school-business partnerships. The emergence of school and business partnerships is predicated partly by chronic budget restraints and the shrinking fiscal environment of U.S. schools, particularly those in low-income, ethnically and racially diverse, urban environments (Molnar, 2005). In addition, the level of school and business partnerships across schools are uneven in that urban schools usually suffer from a lack of resources because they are typically situated within poor communities, thereby further exacerbating inequalities (Warren, 2005). Critics contend that these school-business partnerships often result in corporate exploitation and a mismatch of interests. That is, while schools focus on the needs of educating students for democratic and civic functions, corporations sometimes treat "students as consumers to be manipulated" (Molnar, 2005, p. viii) and to be obedient and uncritically minded (Hewitt, 2005). Challenging the negative views of school-business partnerships is an issue community stakeholders have to resolve in their quest to establish mutually beneficial relations.

College and Career Readiness
Schools need a clear and shared understanding of purpose to focus their efforts on meeting the needs of students

regarding college, career, and future readiness. In response to the recent push for promoting "college and career readiness," the term is now widely used across the country, but it is often interpreted in a variety of ways or defined with a narrow emphasis on college preparation (Stone & Alfeld, 2006). Although, it has been documented that the labor market is demanding workers with additional education beyond high school—but not necessarily a college degree, policy reports continue to equate career ready with being college ready only (Achieve, 2016; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004). An alternative view of college and career readiness should take into account the reality of the labor market needs, suggesting that a college degree is not necessarily equivalent to being career ready (Barton, 2006; Cappelli, 2008; Symonds et al., 2011). A more nuanced definition of college and career readiness should involve an appropriate set of academic skills in addition to generalizable and specific occupational skills required in broad industry clusters (e.g., IT).

According to Stone and Lewis (2012), college and career readiness should refer to the extent of high school graduates' academic knowledge along with employability and technical skills. Students should have mastery of core academics to ensure readiness for postsecondary education, without the need for remediation. As such, one indicator of readiness is enrollment in rigorous academic coursework that aligns with lower level

postsecondary curriculum. However, academic preparation is not enough for a successful transition into the workforce (Stone & Lewis, 2012). Students also need employability and technical skills to be successful in their chosen careers (Achieve, 2016). Employability skills include critical thinking skills, personal responsibility skills, and technological skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011; Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991; Stone & Lewis, 2012). In turn, technical skills refer to the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed in specific fields. For example, students who obtain industry certifications demonstrate certain levels of technical skill attainment in specific occupational areas.

With this frame of reference, it is clear that the enactment of school-business partnerships is critical to promote college and career readiness for students through engagement in relevant academic content and career development opportunities through work-based learning activities (Cahill, 2016; Papadimitriou, 2014). Work-based learning experiences enable students to apply what they know in real-world settings, while building exposure to, preparation for, and experience in their interested career paths (Papadimitriou, 2014). Work-based learning experiences can include apprenticeships, guest speakers, job shadowing, mock interviews, paid or unpaid internships, and student-run enterprises (Cahill, 2016). In this regard, work-based learning experiences help students acquire both the employability and

technical skills needed to be college and career ready (Stone & Lewis, 2012). Implementing work-based learning experiences require coordinated efforts that are often complex and difficult to arrange, thereby, leading to ineffective programs for many schools. Nonetheless, work-based learning experiences are mutually beneficial as the student gains employability and technical skills needed for the careers they seek, while employers build a talent pipeline of potential employees (Griffin & Annulis, 2013; Papadimitriou, 2014).

Method

In this study, we employed a qualitative, case study design to explore the experiences and perspectives of school personnel and community partners (stakeholders) regarding the nature of organizational and implementation elements (mission, curriculum and instruction, and internal and external supports) of the academy (Stake, 2006). We use pseudonyms throughout the manuscript in place of names of individuals and settings.

Research Design

The case study approach allowed us to document thick and rich descriptive information about the setting in which the high school STEAM Academy operated, and factors and detractors (i.e., interpersonal and inter-organizational features) for implementing the curricular goals for students. According to Stake (2006),

"qualitative case researchers focus on relationships connecting ordinary practice in natural habitats to a few factors and concerns of the academic disciplines" (p. 10). Thus, in this project the STEAM academy (the case) operates within unique contexts (e.g., community, predominately low-income African American/Black student body, all African American/Black leadership team, and predominately white teaching faculty).

The Case: Johnson Academy

Johnson Academy is a STEAM themed high school that focuses on promoting the college and career readiness of students through college visits, university lab research experiences, and work-based learning activities (job shadowing and internships). The academy also has extensive university and corporate partnerships as well as a high level of funding (over $2 million) from local and national corporate sponsors. Johnson Academy is located in an urban area within a Midwestern state. The academy has a small student population comprised of approximately 700 learners, and the school district has a student population of approximately 2,600 individuals. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of students at the Academy are 98% African American/Black. The socioeconomic status of the student population is 100% low-income. The gender makeup is 48% female. Johnson Academy had a 95% graduation rate (within four years) for the 2017 to 2018 academic year and a 100% college and/or career placement rate. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of the entire school leadership team were African

From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet

American/Black females led by an African American/Black male superintendent whom was raised within the city of Johnson. Johnson Academy shifted from being solely a one-size-fits-all college preparatory school to one that tries to meet the needs of all students with a variety of options and career pathways, in addition to the college preparatory path.

Based on their 100% low-income student status, the qualified as a "trauma-informed school" and receives funding from a state grant. The school mission is to make the students' "whole" by meeting their basic needs to prepare them for learning in the classroom. Thereby, Johnson Academy attempts to meet students' emotional, physical, and mental needs. As a result, the school provides free wraparound services to their students and families, including: a health-based clinic with a pediatrician, mental health counselors, and social workers to provide a host of services to students with behavioral, mental health, and truancy issues as well as birth control, immunizations, and physicals; two homeless shelters and food pantries within the community; two Hope Houses for students with housing needs; breakfast, lunch, and dinner for six days of the week; uniforms for students that are unable to afford them; and laundry facilities.

Curriculum. Students at Johnson Academy have a plethora of curricular programs to participate, including: a college preparatory curriculum, dual credit opportunities, music,

sports, Project Lead the Way (PLTW), Junior Reserves Officer Training Corps (JROTC), Fine Arts, and career and technical education (e.g., animation, business and finance, construction, education, engineering, health sciences, hospitality and tourism, information technology). Students have the ability to select their courses and career pathways.

Context of the City of Johnson. The school is located in the city of Johnson (home to a population of approximately 15,000 people) that borders a large metropolitan city. It is a public school where student enrollment is based on where they are located (zoned). Johnson School District was established in 1871. The ethnic and racial composition of the city of Johnson is 90% African American/ Black, 6% White, 2% Latinx, and 2% Multi-racial. The median income is approximately $32,000, and 25% of the community members live below the poverty line. A neighboring city next to Johnson captured national news as police killed an unarmed African American teenager. The police officer was not indicted based on the judgements of a grand jury. The law enforcement and government officials in the majority African American/Black community are majority white. The aftermath of the incident was severe and garnered massive violent and non-violent protests, demonstrations, and social unrest. It shook the community, and has arguably intensified negative racial relations between the African American/Black and the white communities as well as between the African American/ Black community and law enforcement. These tensions were sparked by concern for the

insensitive and militarized tactics by law enforcement during the protests.

The site visit. We collected data through a five-day site visit. The academy principal and superintendent agreed to provide access to the school and assist with the coordination of interviews with district and school administrators, school board members, STEAM and core academic teachers, students, school counselors, parents, staff, as well as postsecondary, business and industry, and community partners. We gained IRB approval to conduct this study.

Participant Selection and Data Sources

To inform the iterative process, we conducted classroom observations and semi-structured interviews (and focus group interviews with teachers) with administrators, faculty, staff, and school partners (See Appendix A on page 33 for an example interview protocol). We used a purposive sampling procedure to identify key stakeholders who supported the academy and students within it (Stake, 2006). More specifically, we relied on the knowledge of two insider informants—the principal and superintendent—to provide us with a list of participants to interview during our five-day site visit. The stakeholders (participants) served in a variety of capacities within the school, and we selected them based on their contributions according to our insider informants. All participants received $25 gift cards as an incentive for participation. It is important to note that this study was a component of a larger grant research project.

During the first year of the project, we focused on the perspectives of key stakeholders and their contributions to the implementation of the career academy. During the second year of the project, we focused on students' engagement and experiences. The focus of this manuscript was on the perspectives of key stakeholders. During the site visit, we engaged in six classroom observations to understand the instructional environments, teaching and learning processes, and types and levels of assessments administered in the academy (See Table 1 on page 18 for data collection efforts). We used a protocol to document our observations. These school and classroom observations were revealing as we noticed that the school was full of student artwork throughout the hallways depicting positive of African American/Black students and positive messages to encourage a productive learning environment in the school. We learned from the Art teachers that the principal enabled the school "to be a canvas" to showcase the talent of students in the school. Further, the Art teacher and local business partner taught students how to transform their artwork into animation—hence, the "A" within the STEAM theme. It was noticeable how invested the students were in the school simply by walking the hallways.

In addition, we conducted five off-site visits (tours and individual interviews) with business and industry partners and conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with 33 stakeholders. The interviews were with

district (n = 2) and school administrators (n = 4), school board members (n = 2), STEAM and core academic teachers (n = 9), a school counselor (n = 1), parents (n = 4), staff (n = 1), university partners (n = 2), business and industry partners (n = 7), as well as community partners (n = 1). Individual interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes in duration. Questions from the individual interviews related to the academy mission, school culture, curriculum and instruction, internal supports, and external supports. In addition, we conducted two 120-minute focus group interviews with STEAM and core academic teachers (n = 3 in each group).

Further, we conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with 15 African American/Black male students and 15 other African American/Black male alumni participated in semi-structured, focus group interviews. Thirty African American/Black males were included in the study. Further, the individual, semi-structured interviews were approximately 30 minutes, and the semi-structured, focus group interviews were between 60 and 120 minutes.

Data Analyses

We audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim all interviews. We then analyzed all data (curricular documents, classroom observations, and individual and focus group interviews) using thematic content analysis to capture contextual factors underlying program implementation (Boyatzis, 1998). We identified recurring themes by: (a) reading the

Table 1.
Data Collection Methods

Data Source	Participants
Classroom observations	6 academy classes
Stakeholder interviews	33 stakeholders (administrators, teachers, staff, school partners)
2 Teacher focus groups	6 teachers (academy and non-academy)
Student interviews	15 African American/Black students
2 Alumni focus groups	15 African American/Black alumni
Off site visits	5 business and university partners

transcripts in their entirety to seize a sense of the whole in terms of how participants talked about the academy; (b) re-reading the transcribed interviews and demarcating transitions in meaning in the content of the text utilizing a lens focusing on the implementation and curricular practices of the academy; (c) reflecting on the meaning of revelatory research content gained within each transcript as well as across participants' experiences; and (d) synthesizing the themes into statements which accurately represent the perspectives of the interview participants (Wertz, 2005).

Researcher Positionalities

It is helpful to acknowledge our own inherent biases, perspectives, and frames of reference as researchers, which most likely influenced and shaped research encounters, processes, and findings. All authors are faculty (two African American men and one African American woman). We have professional

backgrounds in the field of career and technical/workforce education, special education (with an emphasis in gifted education), counselor education, and educational psychology. All three of us have studied issues related to the impact of student participation in high school STEM-themed career academies as well as inequities in access to academically rigorous programs in schools, particularly for ethnically and racially diverse as well as students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Data Interpretations

Transition of Leadership Visions: Addressing Equity Issues

Johnson Academy was initially a failing high school lacking accreditation. When Dr. Sheila Thompson was appointed as superintendent, she had a new vision for the high school. Her vision focused on increasing academic achievement, providing wraparound services for students, families and the community, developing a college preparatory academy, and earning school accreditation. Dr. Thompson achieved all of those goals, and when she resigned to pursue another career opportunity, Dr. Ray Henderson (current superintendent) continued with the initial vision. Upon getting started, Dr. Henderson also added career academies to address the needs of all students at Johnson Academy. According to Dr. Henderson,

...here, the philosophy that she [Dr. Thompson] had was to establish a college prep academy, which she did start...Our philosophy was unified on the college prep academy, but there was nothing for everyone else...Our philosophies were totally aligned as to how that [college preparation] should go, and also totally aligned as it relates to the wraparound services needed to focus on learning and doing more—100 percent alignment there; however, there was this void for everyone that was not in the College Prep Academy.

Johnson Academy's use of wraparound services for their students is particularly noteworthy. Related supports are critically important as the majority of schools that serve predominately low-income, African American students do not have adequate resources to address families with needed services to help students persist and finish school (Fries et al., 2012). In urban settings with large concentrations of ethnically and racially diverse and low-income families, school staff generally face a daunting task helping students succeed amidst personal and family challenges (Levin et al., 2007). Thus, Johnson Academy's vision to provide support services to their students and families is quite impressive.

Related to the development and implementation of career academies to complement the college preparatory focus, Johnson Academy stakeholders consistently stated that the previous focus on college preparation seemed to only be serving about

From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet

30% of their student population in regard to students' aspirations of pursuing a baccalaureate degree within a four-year university. Thus, according to stakeholders, the sole emphasis on college preparation created a sense of "the haves and the have nots" for students in the school, which presented an equity issue for students who did not plan on pursuing a four-year college/university path. Ms. Kay Williams, an English teacher, explained the difference in mindset and culture of the school indicative of the transition in vision from Drs. Thompson to Henderson. She stated:

Yes. Before, we had an emphasis on the college prep program. Something that I really love about Dr. [Henderson] is…I really kind of had this weird taste in my mouth that there was these haves and have-nots. I was so excited when Dr. [Henderson] said, "We wanna' [sic] start an Academy for All," and I thought, "Wow, that's what our kids need," especially when I mentioned students who are labeled, maybe, "I've never been good at math. I've never been good at reading," and so, showing them, "Well, that's okay, but we've got this academy and all these avenues that you can pursue so that you can be successful in the future."

Similar to Ms. Kay's concern, many of the stakeholders we interviewed perceived the divide between the college prep students and the remainder of the student population as the "have and have nots." On this matter, the Johnson Academy stakeholders agreed that non-college prep students disengaged from

the schooling experience, given the previous lack of alternative pathways within the school. However, the newly implemented curriculum under Dr. Henderson provided opportunities for all students regardless of whether they planned to pursue further education upon completion of high school or enter the workforce directly. Taneisha, a senior at Johnson Academy, told us that the school had a positive shift from its lingering negative reputation. She stated:

Honestly, maybe, it was the superintendent that we had. I know when they added in the whole college prep academy thing when we had Dr. Henderson, and I know there was a way to try to change things and better things. Honestly, I know he tried to make other programs added on to the college prep, so it wouldn't just be college prep and then traditional.

Kaitlin, a senior at Johnson Academy, agreed with Taneisha. She explained:

They don't make it strict like you have to go to college. You can go wherever you wanna' go and do whatever you wanna' do. You can go to a technology school or anything that you want to. You don't have to strictly go to a four-year university, which is good.

Hence, the singular curricular focus on college preparation was transformed by providing various career pathways, including animation and digital design, business and finance, construction trades, health sciences, information technology, and STEM clubs and competitions.

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From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet

From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet. Teachers at Johnson Academy spoke of the expanded curricular options for students as a "buffet." They explained that students, under the leadership of Dr. Thompson (prior superintendent), were provided a "bag lunch." From the teachers' perspectives, the bag lunch approach was a one-size fits all type of option for students as there was only one curricular option for students to choose—the college preparatory route. Those students who were not interested in pursuing a baccalaureate degree upon completion of high school, were left behind. Mr. Jones, a teacher, described the analogy of a bag lunch and buffet during one of the teacher focus groups. He shared with us:

If you wanna' [sic] use an analogy, you could say we went from a bag lunch to a buffet. With the bag lunch it was take it or leave it, one size fits all which it didn't serve the general population of our students. A lot of them just didn't benefit from it or weren't interested in it. Now, with our buffet style approach to educating our young people, there's something for everybody. If you're not that kid that is a strong academic, but maybe there's some technical things you can do. If you're one of those kids who are more hands-on, then we've got the construction program. There's a little bit of something for everybody...I think they feel more included now and more valued cuz' [sic] of that.

The "college for all" mantra has been reported as ubiquitous in K-12 schools with school counselors, parents, teachers, and administrators strongly encouraging students to enter four-year colleges and universities at the exclusion of preparing students for the workforce or to pursue two-year colleges (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Cohen & Besharov, 2002; Symonds et al., 2011). The shift to various career pathways for students is aligned with the federal government's (U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services) strategic objectives for economic and workforce development (Castellano et al., 2016). Career pathways enable students to navigate between secondary and postsecondary education as well as the workforce with curricula that is in tune with labor market needs. Thus, the new curriculum is more closely aligned with the new vision of preparing K-12 students to be both college and career ready (Fletcher et al., 2018; Symonds et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, we are concerned by the divisive views of many stakeholders, some believing there should be a focus on those students with aspirations for college and others focusing on those with a desire to enter the workforce directly upon completion of high school. In this regard, it did not appear that the stakeholders viewed career academies as a viable venue for students who aspired to pursue a two-year or four-year degree. This is problematic as the current objectives for career academies and CTE programs are to prepare students for both college and careers (Stern et al., 2010). As such, we did not find that the stakeholders we interviewed fully realized that a student in a career academy interested in pursuing a four-year degree

could benefit from exploring and engaging in content related to their intended major (career) in college.

Results of the Change in Vision

Career Focused Programs Leading to Engagement. The new philosophy, vision, and expanded curricular foci under the leadership of Dr. Henderson were to enable all students to succeed based on their individualized interests and aspirations. According to Ms. Sandra Lee, a School Counselor at Johnson Academy, the new vision enabled school counselors to customize curricula and the learning experiences of students based on their own pathways of choice. Ms. Lee articulated:

We still carry that piece [college prep]. I think that Dr. [Henderson] added onto it more, I remember with Dr. [Thompson], saying to her, "Dr. [Thompson]," it really was a struggle that first year with her, "Every student is not going to college and we have to be realistic. The first thing, you're wasting money for them and you're setting them up for failure." I said, every student, they got to have some type of training when they leave high school, but not every student wants to go to a four-year college. Her first year… every student had to take ACT. Every student is not—I mean, they're gonna' [sic] skip it. They're just not gonna' [sic] come on that Saturday. Some students are, you know, they'll go and just put anything down. We have to find what is the best fit for them.

The Assistant Principal of Johnson Academy, Dr. Karen Banks, concurred with Ms. Lee in terms of the customized curricula based on students' interests. Dr. Banks shared:

I would say my Principal, Dr. [Jenkins], I feel like her overall vision is she wants kids to have some choices about their lives. If you want to go to college, here are some ways for you to get there. If you're thinking you wanna' [sic] learn a trade, you could learn that here, and graduate. That's what I'm getting from her, like if there's something you wanna' [sic] do, we can find it. We can figure it out and make that happen for you. That's what I'm seeing…kids wanna' [sic] learn, so let's figure out how to get here.

Our interviews with teachers, school counselors, administrators, and parents all were positive when discussing the newly revised curricular emphases conceptualized and implemented based on Dr. Henderson's vision. In their view, the newly formed curricula provide opportunities for all students in the school and help enhance their engagement in school, particularly as it relates to work-based learning experiences (e.g., job shadowing and paid internships) and research learning experiences (e.g., opportunities for students to work at a university during the summer within a research lab with faculty and doctoral students). In one of the teacher focus groups, Mrs. Gibson shared her perspectives on the change in curricular foci of Johnson Academy. She stated:

From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet

I think part of it is that the opportunities in the programs in the school has changed. We didn't have a college prep program five years ago, for example. We didn't have some of the hands-on courses like robotics and STEM. It was a pretty narrow focus of math, science, English and social studies and that was basically it. There was not a lot of choices and opportunities for kids to do things that were more expressible of their personalities. We have a different curriculum. We have different staff, different programs. There are opportunities for the kids. They see value in what we're doin' [sic]. They've got a lot of buy-in so they can take apprenticeships and get jobs through the school. That makes a big difference. The opportunities are spread out for the general population of students. For a little while, we had programs just for college prep. All of the resources were available to them and you had the haves and the have-nots, which caused some resentment among the traditional population. In the last couple of years, we've implemented things that availed themselves to students who are not in the academy, the college prep academy. You've got other academies and other opportunities and they see that they're being valued and they're getting the same attention as the students who are deemed a better lot.

Parents too shared the same sentiments in terms of the better opportunities provided for their kids. They articulated the positive changes in maturity and insights related to career development their children had because of the expanded college and career

options in the school. For example, Ms. Kathy Montane (a parent), shared with us that:

…the leadership, starting with Dr. [Henderson], is just awesome. He loves his students. This school just seems—this school district seems like it has a lot to offer in middle school and high school as far as options and letting them really experience what they may be into. She's [Ms. Montane's daughter] really found a lot of things that she's into. She was one of those children that you ask her, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" She's just like, "I don't know." Now she's just like, "Oh, I think I'll go into computers. Oh, I think I'll do this." She's got so many options, and she's good at all of them. That's all come from the experience that she's had since she's been in this district.

In this context, Johnson Academy stakeholders expressed issues of inequity when the college prep curriculum was the only opportunity for students. Stakeholders noted that every student now has the opportunity to choose their own pathway, especially students who were at risk of dropping out of high school. Students and their parents also valued the opportunities for career awareness as means to understand which career pathways they were interested in exploring further. In this regard, prior research has demonstrated that students who participate in career academies benefit from increased student engagement and achievement as well as the ability to successfully transition from high school to postsecondary education, especially for

students deemed at-risk (Castellano et al., 2016; Hemelt et al., 2019).

Urban School Leaders' Role in Preparing Students

A Focus on Creating Partnerships and Raising Capital. Johnson Academy was home to an entire student population (100%) eligible for free and reduced lunch. Thus, in his role as Superintendent, Dr. Henderson also emphasized creating and developing partnerships with local and national corporations, universities, and community organizations (e.g., non-profit agencies). He particularly believed these efforts were necessary to help students succeed in school. The partnerships were fruitful as they provided a funding source for school initiatives as for enabling students to participate in a host of work-based learning and university research experiences. To that end, students from Johnson Academy participated in a plethora of activities and events provided by the school both locally and nationally. These activities included college and university trips—both in-state and out-of-state, college tours of ivy league institutions, research lab experiences at local colleges and universities with the assistance of doctoral students and faculty, and job shadowing opportunities with national companies. Students were exposed to opportunities to move beyond their zip code and network with community members, business and industry representatives, and college/university faculty. These

opportunities represented transformative learning experiences for students at Johnson Academy, particularly given their life circumstances living in a low-income neighborhood.

Dr. Henderson spoke of his abilities to create partnerships and raise capital as well as the necessity to do so in a school district with limited resources. He commented about the acumen needed to successfully partner with local stakeholders as well. Dr. Henderson acknowledged:

I had touches with corporate leaders, which then made it a little bit easier to just utilize that leverage to get partnerships for kids and internships and programs. Advice would be: it's all about relationship and results. If you have results that you can point to and you can articulate the need and the need aligns to their corporate responsibility mission, and then you have the relationship prior to an ask, then you will have some success in getting them to partner. That's the formula. Results, alignment to their corporate responsibility, crisp message about the need, and relationship time spent together. As a personal goal of mine for the past, since being superintendent since 2010, I've always had a personal goal to raise one million dollars' worth of private money every year. It's not a board directive. It's not been a requirement in any of my evaluations or anywhere. Not in any superintendent in the country, to be honest. When I teach superintendent courses, I let them know that that's more of a college leadership model of capital campaigning than

From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet

it is superintendent model. Superintendents raise taxes. College presidents raise capital. If you're in an urban poor district or a rural poor district, it should be a no brainer. Raise private money, so that you could do private things, so that you could pay light bills, pay food, start shelters, pantries. It stretches further and engages the full community. My advice would be reach out and know those corporations that are there so that you can really help them in their R&D [research and development] by giving some of your time, student talent pipeline to them, and then they give you in return some of their pipeline of experts, and some of their treasure. That would be my advice to superintendents.

Dr. Henderson's efforts underscored the importance of raising capital to implement college and career readiness activities and supporting the college and career readiness of students. Dr. Henderson further discussed the synergy that is created when school personnel and the community collaboratively share ideas on how to mutually benefit each stakeholder's organization based on leveraging resources to meet real needs of the community. He also highlighted the importance of having an entrepreneurial and positive disposition toward creating possibilities and envisioning success. Dr. Henderson credited his school team in supporting ideas and initiatives as well as moving them forward to enhance the student experience. Mrs. Daniel, corporate partner of a national IT company, confirmed the synergistic outlook:

[Johnson Academy], they have been so grateful, but they've also taken what we've done and gone beyond that. It's not just thank you, and they move on. They really reach out to us and talk about, what else can we do? How can we enhance the experience for the students? How can we further that connection with our employees? It's a really great relationship. They seem to be very on top of exactly what they want their students to be able to achieve, which is great for us as well because we have our key areas of focus, STEM being one of them because this is our operations technology headquarters.

The school partners that we interviewed added insight into the student experience when students participate in job shadowing and paid internships with Johnson Academy. They noted the goals of the work-based learning and university research-lab experiences are for students to gain career awareness and exploration into possible careers that students are interested in pursuing. Mrs. Daniel talked about what it is like for the student to enter a national IT company's headquarters during a job shadowing event. She said:

—they're like, "Oh, I'm in a new space." Most of the time, everyone is such in awe of the idea of being able to come to a place like this and to be able to experience and see. As [David – colleague we interviewed in the same firm] was mentioning, anytime we have a STEM day, two big things that we do is we take them on a tour around the office. It's really great for them to see what an office environment looks like now. It's not

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necessarily something that students will ever be exposed to until they walk in for the first time. A lot of what we try to do is bring it to life for them so that it's not just words on a paper or just us talking to them, but they can actually see it and feel it. That's, I think, helpful just to translate it to, what could this mean if I wanted to make a career out of this.

We also asked Mrs. Daniel why her company chooses to spend time and resources in working with Johnson Academy and other K-12 schools. She noted:

part of our corporate mantra is "doing well by doing good." Making sure that we balance those two things and making sure that we are continuing to give back to the community. It's definitely part of who we are as an organization, for sure.

The literature on school-business partnerships acknowledges the mutually beneficial ways that partnerships with the community unfold. Similar to Dr. Henderson's discussions, these benefits include curricular support, financial and equipment/supply donations, guest speaking in the classroom, mentoring opportunities, and work-based learning activities (e.g., internships, job shadowing, mock interviews (Fletcher & Tyson, 2017; Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2017; Badgett, 2016; Turnbull, 2015). Within that context, the school-business partnerships that Dr. Henderson created represent an important component of the strategy to prepare students to be college and career ready as students apply their academic content to a real-world

problems and learn valuable employability skills (Alfeld et al., 2013; Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2017; Badgett, 2016). Further, Dr. Henderson shared how Johnson Academy's partners were committed, sustained, and had a shared understanding of purpose, which are all needed for an effective and productive partnership (Council for Corporate and School Partnership, 2002). Thus, while research has demonstrated the difficulties and challenges of American urban schools (particularly those in low-income communities) to provide students with work-based learning opportunities through school-business partnerships, including the issue of convincing employers of its value (Hoffman, 2011; Molnar, 2005; Warren, 2005), Dr. Henderson managed to forge relationships with the local community to offer such opportunities to Johnson Academy students. While the new direction of Johnson Academy is quite promising, we wondered about the sustainability of Dr. Henderson's efforts when the time comes for leadership turnover. As is often the case with school reform initiatives led by entrepreneurial and highly-focused leaders, we realize that Dr. Henderson was a charismatic and highly motivated school leader, and the basis of some of his success was because of his own personal characteristics and traits as a leader. Thus, what happens when the school district hires a new leader to lead the school district? Are the efforts and initiatives that Dr. Henderson developed at jeopardy?

From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet

Discussion

A sole emphasis on preparing students for entry into a four-year college/university, the "college for all" phenomenon in schools, is all too familiar and widespread in schools across the country (Benson, 1997; Cohen & Besharov, 2002; Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stringfield & Stone, 2017; Symonds et al., 2011). Nonetheless, efforts to ensure that Johnson Academy students are prepared to be both college AND career ready represent a pivotal and critical transition that has addressed issues related to equity and access to a quality and individualized curriculum; and aligned with the call to prepare students for a new knowledge based economy (Alfeld et al., 2013; Fletcher et al., 2018; Castellano et al., 2016; Symonds et al., 2011). In this community, stakeholders believed students felt more included, valued, and engaged by the shift from a "lunch bag" to "lunch buffet" of having both college and career preparatory curricula by way of academies. These views support the notion that college and career readiness should ensure that students have the necessary academic, technical, and employability skills needed to compete in a contemporary workforce (Stone & Lewis, 2012).

Despite prior research pointing out the

challenges of low-income, ethnically and racially diverse, urban schools in ensuring their students are college and career ready (Green & Gooden, 2014; Milner, 2013), Johnson Academy provided students with integrated and contextualized academic and career-related curricula, work-based learning and research lab experiences at local universities, and engagement with the community through partnerships with business and industry. These are all

> **"Johnson Academy provided students with integrated and contextualized academic and career-related curricula, work-based learning and research lab experiences at local universities, and engagement with the community through partnerships with business and industry."**

quintessential elements of the academy model (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stern et al., 2010; Stone, 2017). With the development of career academies at Johnson Academy, students are likely to benefit from increased engagement in school, particularly for students that may be at-risk for dropping out of high school (Hemelt et al., 2019).

Also, while research has pointed to difficulties of schools engaging business partners and convincing them to invest in K-12 students (Hoffman, 2011), Dr. Henderson's work of creating partnerships and raising capital in a low-income urban school district with limited resources was an effective avenue for supporting student engagement. Dr. Henderson's collaborative partnerships with an extended network of support enabled the academy to leverage resources and carry out the mission of preparing students to be college and career

ready. Furthermore, the school-community partnerships enabled Johnson Academy to fully engage the community and provide wraparound services (e.g., academic, medical, and mental services) for students and their families. As stated previously, these initiatives are typically challenging for urban schools that serve large concentrations of ethnically and racially diverse and low-income student populations (Fries et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2007; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Sather & Bruns, 2016). Thus, it is likely that Johnson Academy will benefit from the development of close relationships in terms of more effective school operations, additional fiscal and human resources, higher student academic achievement and well-being, greater parental participation, and better community health and development (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 2005).

Dr. Henderson's abilities to engage stakeholders were derivative of his personality characteristics and traits, commitment and motivation to build relationships, and communication to onboard new partners. Further, he was able to articulate the needs as well as mutual benefits of sustained partnerships. In this case, Dr. Henderson's work with the external community met the guidelines for effective and sustainable partnerships based on the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships (2002). That is, Dr. Henderson successfully communicated a shared understanding of purpose for collaborating, had specific goals to achieve, and created an

action plan with defined outcomes. Similarly, Hernandez-Gantes et al. (2017) acknowledged the role of a "lynchpin" to maintain relationships with network partners, continue the development and growth of partnerships, and maintain active engagement of all stakeholders. Hence, Dr. Henderson certainly plays the role of a lynchpin in the context of school-community partnership development for Johnson Academy. His role and responsibilities entailed connecting the school with external stakeholders to provide supports for the academy and students. Dr. Henderson further provided opportunities for Johnson Academy students to move in spaces beyond their zip code, including traveling out-of-state to college visits, touring ivy league institutions, participating in research labs at local colleges and universities, and engaging in job shadowing activities with national companies. Nevertheless, we find the influence of one individual to be problematic in terms of sustaining such efforts. Instead, school-community literature calls for the work of multiple stakeholders in an organization to carry out such work (Sanders, 2005). Therefore, we recommend schools form a coalition of both internal and external stakeholders to provide school and student supports. This should represent an important strategy when the time for a new leadership transition comes to play.

During our interviews with stakeholders at Johnson Academy, we also noticed an issue with narrow perspectives on participation in various career academies established within

the school. We heard many stories about career academies serving the needs of students that were interested in entering the workforce directly upon graduating from high school which is likely a contributing factor for the current lingering negative stigma of CTE programs. Instead, we believe it is necessary for administrators, teachers, and school counselors to embrace and acknowledge the dual emphasis of CTE programs (such as career academies), in preparing students to be both college and career ready. To that end, participation in career academies could be an opportunity for students to explore their interests in careers that they could envision themselves pursuing in college as a possible major.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on our findings in this case study, we recommend that school administrators and teachers customize curricula based on students' interests and enable students to decide whether they desire to participate in college preparatory activities as well as work-based learning experiences. We believe that all students should be prepared to be college and career ready, given the need for them to transition into postsecondary education (e.g., two- or four-year colleges and universities) as well as into the workforce. We believe that students should have the options to select which curricular pathways they desire to pursue as well as which co-curricular and extracurricular events (e.g., university research lab, work-based learning) to participate in. Thus, we disagree with the

practice of tracking students based on prior achievement and behavioral measures. Instead, students should be allowed to select which curricular pathway they enter and have opportunities to change as they see fit. Thus, we believe that all students should be encouraged to participate in rigorous and college preparatory curricula and activities.

Limitations

It is important to note some of the limitations of this study. This study focuses on one small school using a career academy model as well as a variety of college and career preparatory activities for students. Thus, analytic generalizations rest with identifying similar school contexts and curricular programs. JCA

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Appendix A.

District/School Administrator Interviews

Date: _____   Location: _____

Interviewee: _____   Role/Title: _____

Time: _____   Interview Team (Initials): _____

Debriefing and Assurances
Summarize the purpose of the research and visit
Summarize purpose of the interview
Provide assurances of anonymity and voluntary participation
Secure permission to record the interview

Personal Background: Describe your role in the academy and/or district.

Development Factors: Describe the development of the academy in terms of the initial conception and strategic planning.

When was the academy first conceptualized?
How long has the academy has been in existence?
What led to the decision to start an academy?
What was the rationale for selecting Engineering/IT as the occupational theme for the academy?
What challenges did you face during the conceptualization and developmental phase?

Design Process and Vision: Describe what you were looking to establish an academy in terms of key components and learning experiences.

What type of learning experiences were you hoping to provide for students?

Student Supports: Describe the conceptualization and development process used to identify student supports. Discuss any unique supports for African American/Black male students in the academy that were part of the conceptualization and development process.

How and to what extent were any stakeholder groups (e.g., parents, community, business partners) involved in the conceptualization and development process?
What differences, if any, have you observed related to the engagement of African American/Black male students compared to non-Black and females in the academy?
How does the academy promote and support the interests and successes of African American/Black male students?

Closing Statement/Question. Thank you for your insights. Is there anything else you would like to add on the conceptualization and development process of the academy?