

## Career and Professional Education: Preparing Florida's Students for the Knowledge Economy



Council for Education Policy,  
Research and Improvement

### The Goal

In the course of developing a Master Plan for K-20 Education, the Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement (CEPRI) has identified **career and professional education** as a primary area where increased focus, resources and new approaches will produce very significant improvement in the quality and effectiveness of Florida's education system. Career and professional education encompasses those activities in high school that prepare students for the challenges of the workplace and for entry into postsecondary education. It also includes the coordination of the K-12 and postsecondary sectors in providing students with high quality experiences that ensure success in the workplace.

Achieving this significant improvement requires a clear and specific goal and taking the steps necessary to achieve the goal. The following goal will ensure students acquire the academic and personal skills needed to be successful as they leave their K-12 educational experience:

**All students will graduate from high school fully capable of choosing, entering and being successful in either the workplace, further career education, or postsecondary degree programs.**

Realizing this goal will have a profound impact on the lives of young people and Florida's economy. Doing so will require :

- High quality early childhood learning and transition through the middle grades – with effective counseling and guidance throughout the process; and
- Programs in high school which build on and reinforce the interests and potential career choices of individual students.

<http://www.cepri.state.fl.us>

The Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement (CEPRI) was created as an independent office under the Office of Legislative Services by the 2001 Legislature (Section 1008.51, Florida Statutes). The Council serves as a citizen board for independent policy research and analysis and is composed of five members appointed by the Governor and two members appointed by Speaker of the House and two members appointed by the President of the Senate.

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#### *The Council's full report:*

*The full report* contains "Implementation Strategies" which provide greater specificity and support to the policy recommendations outlined here.

## The Challenges

While Florida has improved its student performance in the elementary and middle grades through the implementation of the A+ Plan, significant challenges remain at the high school level and beyond. It is important to “stay the course” and continue the achievements made at the early grades, but additional reforms are necessary to ensure every student graduates high school with the essential skills for success. A significant percentage of Florida’s students currently leave high school without adequate preparation to enter a career or continue into postsecondary education:

- Out of every ten ninth graders, three do not earn a high school diploma – and drop out of the K-12 system without having attained a basic set of skills necessary to be successful in today’s economy.
- Of the seven who do earn a diploma, only four immediately pursue further postsecondary education – leaving three without the skills and training required for high skill, high wage employment today.

Thus, more than half of ninth grade students are not being adequately prepared to **be successful on a personal basis** and **meet the needs of Florida’s economy**. This deficiency in basic skills is a critical barrier to enhancing the economic potential of Florida, given that the vast majority of projected jobs in Florida will require postsecondary education, but not necessarily a bachelor’s degree. To overcome this deficiency, three specific issues need to be dealt with – **readiness**, **meaningful career guidance**, and **an optimal learning environment**.

### Readiness in Fundamental Skills

- While the state has made great strides in improving the reading, mathematics, and writing skills of its K-12 population, there remains considerable room for improvement.
- Of particular concern to the Council is the relative lack of improvement seen in the performance of high school students on the 10th grade FCAT.
  - The performance of 10th graders on the reading assessment has declined from 62 percent scoring below grade level in 2001 to 66 percent scoring below grade level in 2004.
- A large segment of Florida’s adult population experience literacy and basic skills deficiencies, with about 20 percent of Florida residents age 25 and older without a high school diploma.
  - Of the more than 25,000 high school students that drop out each year, most will never return for a high school diploma or a postsecondary credential
  - Based on data on the 1990-91 high school dropouts, 68 percent of those dropouts had achieved no educational credential ten years later and less than ten percent had any postsecondary credential.

### Readiness for Postsecondary Education

- Many of Florida's high school graduates do not master the college preparatory curriculum prior to graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education.
  - Currently, only about half of Florida's high school graduates take the preparatory—a curriculum that assures readiness—for admission to a Florida state university.
- The research clearly shows students who have taken an academic college preparatory curriculum are much more likely to enroll in and to succeed in postsecondary education.
  - As CEPRI analysis shows, the seven year bachelor's degree graduation rate for students who had taken a college preparatory curriculum was significantly higher (49 percent) than for those who had not (19 percent).

### Meaningful Career Guidance

- While aspirations for postsecondary education are high, many students are not prepared to enter postsecondary education based on the curricular choices they have made in high school.
- Meaningful career and academic advice is probably not available to students in ways that make a difference.
  - The statewide high school counselor to student ratio is 364 to 1.

### Optimal Learning Environment: Small Learning Communities

- Currently, Florida leads the nation in average school size across all levels.
  - Florida high schools are over twice the size of the national average of 753 students.
  - In 2003-04, 96 percent of high school students attended schools with a student enrollment exceeding the national average.
- National research has found smaller schools have been associated with the following benefits:
  - Higher average achievement
  - Lower dropout rates and more students going to college
  - Fewer behavioral problems

## Overcoming the Challenges

To overcome these challenges and meet the goal of graduating all students with adequate skills, a new approach to high school education should be pursued. Florida must focus its efforts on creating a learning environment for high school students centered on the following elements:

- **A small learning community**
- **High standards for all students — “All Means All”**
- **A rigorous and relevant curriculum**
- **Effective and extensive career guidance and counseling**

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# Policy Recommendations

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## Building a Foundation for Success

1. *Schools and school districts should be responsible for establishing intensive acceleration programs to get students to grade-level reading, writing, and mathematics benchmarks in 5th, 8th, and 12th grade, modeling best practices nationally and internationally.*

In order for this new approach to high school education to be successful, **a strong foundation in elementary and middle school education is a necessity.** Though the state has seen great advances in student achievement, aggressive strategies to accelerate student learning and improve basic skills must still be pursued by the state. Industrialized countries that have undertaken large scale education reform provide a vision for how to achieve high standards for all students. In countries that have advanced students to higher standards, the following characteristics are an important part of the reform:

- Core teachers stay with students for two or more years,
- Common planning time is allowed for all core teachers,
- Tutoring is provided on a daily or weekly basis by the same teachers,
- Longer school calendars for students (190 – 210 days) are mandated with similar hours per day.

## Effective and Extensive Career Guidance

2. *Every Student in Florida should be made aware of career options by the start of high school and provided with extensive guidance in order to plan their coursework in accordance with their career aspirations.*

The historically negative perception about the quality of career programs in high schools needs to change. These programs are not second-tier traditional “vo-tech” programs. Today’s career education programs provide students with the skills and training necessary to pursue careers in high-wage, high-demand fields, as well as a college education, if desired. **Re-branding and marketing** requires a better awareness of careers on the part of parents and students, provided through a state-sponsored, school-to-career preparation advertising campaign.

Unfortunately, many graduates exit high school without adequate knowledge of their education and employment opportunities.

- A nationwide survey of high school juniors and seniors found only 10 percent of students identified school personnel as playing the primary influence in career guidance.
- Fifty-one percent of respondents did not perceive any real high school-based career guidance.

Meaningful one-on-one school advising is certainly limited in Florida where the average student to counselor ratio is 364 to 1. One advantage of the smaller learning community, as provided by CAP Academies or other similar school-within-a-school models, is the direct interaction of a team of instructors and a smaller group of students.

## Career and Professional Academies

- 3. Every high school in Florida should develop a research-based Career and Professional (CAP) Academy with the following features: 1) small learning community, 2) strong academics in a career context (with standards-based career-technical coursework), and 3) partnerships with the local business community.*

### What are Career and Professional (CAP) Academies?

- CAP Academies are research, standards-based career academies.
- This school-within-a-school model creates a structure in which student learning is linked with potential career outcomes, but provides the base knowledge to ensure the success of its students in any number of fields—**preparing students for both college and career**.
- A CAP Academy should be a real reform effort in which structure, curriculum, and student expectations are transformed into a true integration of academic and career education. Although some current programs call themselves academies, a CAP Academy is a very specific, research-based model from the principles described by the Career Academy Support Network (CASN).

### What are the benefits of the CAP Academy model?

- Studies have found students in similar career academies perform better in high school and are more likely to continue into postsecondary education, compared to similar students in the same schools.

## High Standards for All Students — “All Means All”

- 4. Every student in a Florida high school should graduate with college preparatory curriculum and an area of concentration (e.g., math/science, career/technical, humanities). Each concentration should have the same high academic founding in reading, mathematics, and writing.*

Fundamental reform requires higher standards, better support for students, and a restructuring of curriculum. **The standards for students should be the same regardless of whether a student is on a college-bound or work-bound path.** In the old paradigm, students were guided in their curricular choices by assumptions about their level of ability. The new paradigm assumes all students have the ability to meet higher standards and their efforts will determine their success.

## Better Educated and Highly Skilled Workers

- 5. High Schools should be evaluated and rewarded for improvement on measures relating to the successful transition of students from high school into career and postsecondary education through the use of outcomes like graduation from high school and continuation rate into district, college or university education programs.*

The most important catalyst for change is a high-stakes accountability process that provides incentives to high schools for improvement in the transition of their students to careers or postsecondary education. Currently, the application of school grades based on the FCAT has created a culture of accountability that has produced significant improvements in student achievement.

Unless high schools are held accountable for completion and postsecondary continuation outcomes, their primary focus will remain on assuring students meet the minimum standards on the 10<sup>th</sup> grade FCAT examinations. However, the minimum FCAT required for graduation does not align with the competencies necessary to enter a postsecondary institution without the need for remediation.

## The Transition to College and Careers

**6. *Florida should place a greater priority on ensuring adequate resources are provided to postsecondary adult and career education programs to meet the current and projected demand for skilled workers.***

Without adequate funding, the state will not have the skilled workforce necessary to be competitive in the global marketplace. In recent years, the current funding structure has not provided adequate support for the development of programs that recruit and train high school students and graduates in high demand fields

**7. *All career and technical education programs should ensure their program completers exit with skills and credentials endorsed by local and/or state industry sectors.***

No one benefits more from an excellent workforce development system than Florida's business community. Local stakeholders have vested interests in producing a qualified workforce for local employers. The communication among these education and business leaders is vital to the success of local efforts to coordinate education and training with the skills required by employers.

**8. *Community colleges and area technical centers should jointly develop, within their local service areas, a strategic plan for career and technical training in partnership with local industry sectors.***

The dual system of delivery for career, technical, and adult education has raised several issues over time, focusing mainly on duplication and access. The system should require local educational institutions work together in producing a credentialed workforce rather than competing for students to enroll in their programs. Duplication of services within a local service area should not be encouraged, but adequate access to training programs is essential, especially for Florida's most disadvantaged citizens.

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## Conclusion

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Creating effective high school learning communities that provide rigor and relevance to students are critical to developing a highly skilled Florida workforce. As Florida looks for ways to improve the social and economic welfare of its citizens, this report recommends establishing more effective high schools and better connections between the K-12 and postsecondary sectors. By overcoming several critical barriers to success – readiness in fundamental skills, readiness for postsecondary education, the lack of meaningful career guidance, and the size of the learning community – the Council seeks to improve the fundamental skills and career/postsecondary readiness of its K-12 population, providing students with the tools to make a choice to pursue a college credential or immediate employment following high school graduation.

**Please visit our website at <http://www.cepri.state.fl.us> for the full report**