



Legislature Overhauled Florida's System of Career and Professional Academies

at a glance

The 2007 Legislature initiated a comprehensive reform of Florida's career and professional academies, which addresses the program inconsistencies identified by our 2006 report. The Florida Career and Professional Education Act of 2007 established statewide expectations and processes for key aspects of career academies operations and programs. The Department of Education has taken additional steps to address program inconsistencies by improving data collection processes for career academies and identifying and disseminating best practices.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of the actions taken in regard to a 2006 OPPAGA report providing information on high school programs identified as career academies in Florida.¹

Background

Career academies are a commonly used high school reform model designed to link student learning with potential career outcomes. Career academies differ from traditional academic and

vocational programs in that they prepare students for both college and the workforce. The programs provide students with qualifications they can use to either pursue a college education or enter directly into the workforce upon graduation, whichever is most appropriate for the individual student. Nationwide there are an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 career academies operating in high schools covering career fields such as business, engineering, finance, health science, hospitality, information technology, and law.

Our 2006 review examined the number and types of career academies operating in Florida, whether these academies were implementing nationally recognized core program elements, and what mechanisms were available to career academies to obtain industry certification. We concluded there were substantial inconsistencies in the operations and structure of Florida's career academies.

Current Status

The 2007 Legislature initiated a comprehensive reform of Florida's career and professional academies, which addresses the program inconsistencies identified by our 2006 report. The Florida Career and Professional Education Act of 2007 established statewide expectations and processes for key aspects of career academy operations and programs.² The

¹ *More Than Half of the State's School Districts Have Career Academies, Most Operating in 2004-05 Incorporated Nationally Recognized Core Elements*, OPPAGA [Report No. 06-55](#), July 2006.

² Chapter 2007-216, *Laws of Florida*.

Department of Education has taken additional steps to address program inconsistencies by improving data collection processes for career academies and identifying and disseminating best practices.

The Legislature initiated a comprehensive reform of Florida's career academies

Our 2006 report concluded that there had been little state-level guidance and assistance to support career academy development, curriculum alignment, certification, and the sharing of best practices. Prior to the 2006 legislative session, there had been no state-level definition outlining when a program can legitimately call itself a career academy. As a result, Florida's career academies varied substantially in their use of nationally recognized core elements, pursuit of certifications, and partnerships with businesses and postsecondary institutions. These differences likely affected a career academy's success in preparing students for future careers and in helping to meet Florida's workforce needs.

The Legislature has taken steps to improve the overall quality of Florida's career academies and to address the program inconsistencies identified in our 2006 report. Specifically, the 2007 Legislature passed the Florida Career and Professional Education Act, which established statewide expectations and processes for career academies in areas such as program availability across school districts, curriculum design and alignment, local partnerships with businesses and postsecondary institutions, data collection, program funding and accountability, and identification of industry certification standards.³ The act requires the Department of Education and the Agency for Workforce Innovation to work together in implementing key components of the legislation. In addition, the law designates the Okaloosa County School District CHOICE Institutes to serve in an advisory and technical assistance role. Components of the legislation related to specific issues identified in our 2006 report are discussed below.

Every school district must have a career academy. Our 2006 report found that only one-half of Florida's school districts had a career academy, which limited high school students' ability to access these programs in their home county. The 2007 act remedied this issue by requiring that every school district have at least one career and professional academy in operation no later than the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year.

To support districts in meeting this requirement, the department developed a web-based tool that school districts can use to officially register their career and professional academies. While only 38 districts had career academies during the 2007-08 school year, 66 districts had registered at least one career academy as of September 30, 2008.

Steps have been taken to ensure that core high school courses are both academically rigorous and provide relevant workforce skills. It is important that career academies' curriculum are rigorous enough to educate students in both academic and vocational subjects to achieve the dual goal of preparing students to enter either a postsecondary institution or directly into the workforce upon graduation. Our 2006 report found that Florida's career academies did not adequately integrate both academic and career themes into all of their courses.

Consistent with our finding, the 2007 act required the State Board of Education to establish an electronic process to determine whether proposed core secondary courses (1) are aligned to state curriculum standards and (2) provide relevant workforce skills. The 2007 law also requires the department to establish a curriculum review committee to approve these courses.

As required by law, the State Board of Education and the department have taken steps to revise the secondary course approval process. The curriculum review committee has been established, and the department has revised its process for submitting and reviewing new secondary core courses.

³ Section 1003.491, *F.S.*

The committee has also developed a worksheet that school districts can use prior to submitting a new course to help them determine if the course is likely to be approved.

Steps have been taken to strengthen processes for identifying industry certification standards. While industry certification is an important measure of career academy program success, our 2006 report found half of the career academies programs in operation were not industry certified or did not lead to industry certification for students completing the programs. This problem was primarily due to a reported lack of identified standards for specific programs. The 2007 act required that all career academy courses lead to industry certification or college credit linked directly to the career theme of the course. In addition, consistent with our recommendation, the act requires the Agency for Workforce Innovation and Workforce Florida, Inc., to identify appropriate industry certifications based on the highest national standards available. The act required the Agency for Workforce Innovation to annually publish an updated list of industry certifications to be used within the career academies. Finally, the act provided bonus funding for students in career and professional academies who receive industry certifications (see s. 1011.62(1)(p), *Florida Statutes*, for statutory requirements).

As required by law, the State Board of Education approved a new administrative rule in August 2008 to govern the industry certification process. The rule provides that Workforce Florida, Inc., will annually approve a Comprehensive Industry Certification List, which will provided an inventory of industry certifications that are important to employment in Florida's high wage, high skill and high demand occupations. The Department of Education will maintain a database of all approved industry certifications as well as an Industry Certification Funding List, which is a sub-set of the comprehensive list and includes only certifications that meet minimum training requirements and are available to students in high school programs.

In addition, as we recommended, the department has taken steps to help career academies align their curricula with industry certification requirements. Specifically, the department is implementing a three-year curriculum review and revision process for secondary and postsecondary career education curriculum frameworks, including those programs delivered through career academies. This process will include an examination of industry certifications and ensure that the curriculum coursework is properly aligned with industry needs.

The Department of Education has taken additional steps to address inconsistencies in career academies

The Department of Education has taken additional actions to address program inconsistencies in career academies. Specifically, as we recommended, the department has improved data collection processes and identified and disseminated best practices for career academies.

The department has taken steps to collect and disseminate more complete and comprehensive data about Florida's career academies. Our 2006 report concluded that the Department of Education's statewide data on career academy students was incomplete and could not be used to accurately identify all of the students who were enrolled in a career academy. For those career academy students who could be identified, the department did not collect information about the type of program/career track in which the student enrolled. This limited the Legislature's ability to make career academy funding and policy decisions.

As we recommended, the department has taken steps to improve its processes for collecting, verifying, and reporting data on career academies. These improvements include those described below.

- **Specific information about schools with career academies is now being collected.** Beginning in 2006-2007, the department added two new required data elements to

the Master School Identification File to identify and provide information about schools with career academies. The first data element indicates the number of career academies at a school, and the second data element indicates the type of structure (school within a school or wall-to-wall/school wide) used for the career academy at the school.

- **Information about students participating in career academies has been expanded and improved.** Beginning in 2007-2008, the department required school districts to report career academy student information using a new data element that identifies students' career cluster designation. The data element also identifies students participating in career academies as defined in the Career and Professional Education Act.

The department has added data elements to identify career academy students who took an industry certification assessment, and whether they passed the assessment. The department has worked with the Department of Health and the Department of Business and Professional Regulation to develop a mechanism to continually report professional license certifications which can be linked to career academy students. However, this mechanism does not address industries that are not licensed or certified by a state agency (for example information technology certifications such as an Oracle or Microsoft certification).

- **Data verification processes have been implemented.** The department has assigned staff to review the new student level information that school districts are required to report three times a school year. In addition, for an end of the year report, these staff members contact each school district to verify their reported data and give the district an opportunity to correct it.

The department has assisted school districts in sharing career academy best practices. Our 2006 report found that school districts lacked a venue to share information about lessons learned and best practices for their career academies. Consistent with our recommendation, the department has taken steps to assist school districts in identifying career academy best practices. Specifically, the department conducted a telephone survey of 10 school districts with career academies in 2006-2007 to collect information about their structures and operations. The department used these results to create a District Career Academy Profiles Report, which was posted on the department's website and disseminated to district administrators responsible for career and technical education.

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