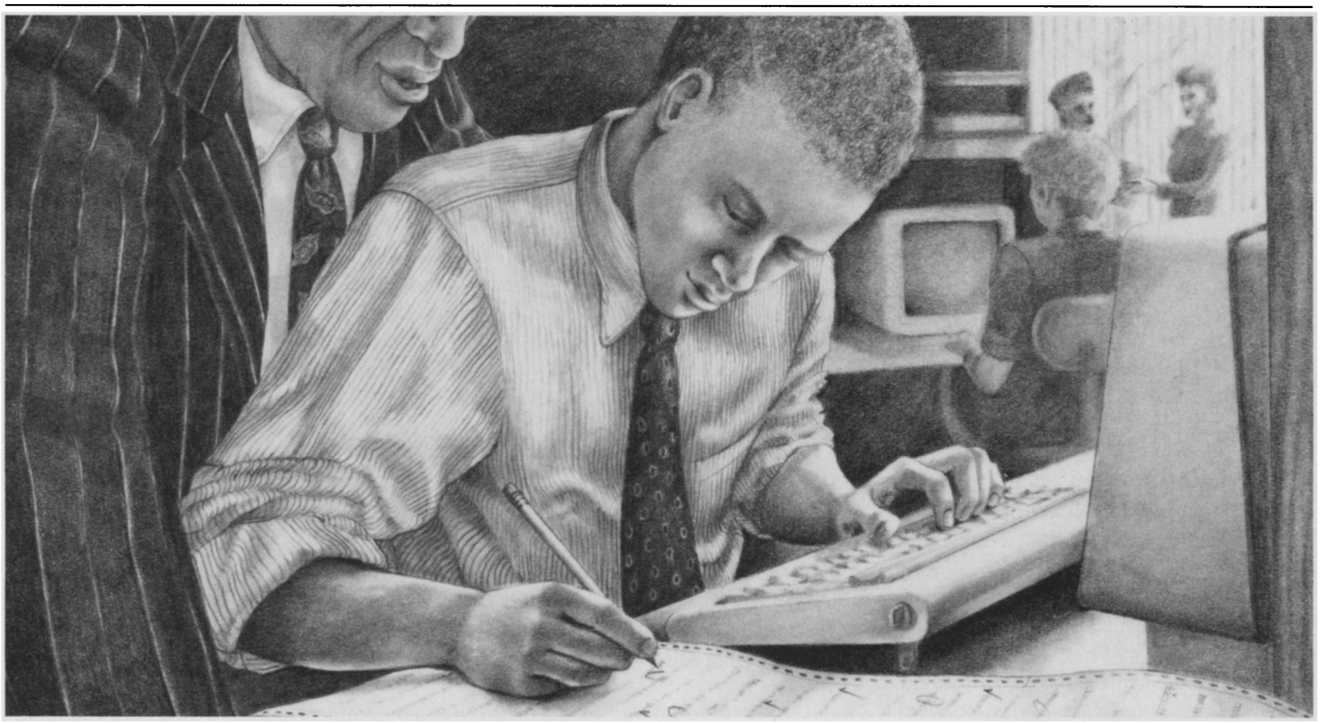
The California Partnership Academies: Remembering the 'Forgotten Half'



A high school program that has been in place for 10 years in California gives new opportunities to at-risk students and establishes productive relationships between schools and the business community.

By Charles Dayton, Marilyn Raby, David Stern, and Alan Weisberg

In recent years we have repeatedly been forced to confront a troubling picture of declining knowledge and skills among America's young people, particularly those who do not attend college. These youths, who come increasingly from the poor and minority populations, were christened the "forgotten half" in the 1988 report released by the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship. The commission characterized the forgotten half as "the young people who build our homes, drive our buses, repair our automobiles, fix our televisions, maintain and serve our offices, schools, and hospitals, and keep the production lines of our mills and factories moving. To a great extent, they determine how well the American family, economy, and democracy function."[1]

In most American schools these are the students who are placed in general or remedial tracks or enrolled in vocational courses. The public is increasingly critical of the education they receive. They are not taught good communication, thinking, numerical, technical, or workplace skills and are leaving school unprepared to meet the demands of the marketplace.

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Illustration by Susan Hunsberger

The National Center on Education and the Economy recently analyzed these problems in a report titled *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*.[2] The report argues convincingly that we must develop the higher-level skills of our high school students and reform our businesses to make use of these skills, or we will continue to lose ground to our international competitors. In particular we must try to reclaim our high school youths who are currently dropping out or graduating with limited skills and no plans for further education, or we will all be condemned to a lower standard of living.

Many factors are cited as contributing to the poor performance of our non-college-bound students. Some fall into the category of societal changes, including: 1) the growing proportion of our young people who are from minority or immigrant populations or both and who too often do not value education or even speak English, 2) a breakdown of the social institutions that have traditionally supported young people and their families, and 3) the changing nature of the labor market, with declines in manufacturing jobs and those requiring unskilled workers and increases in jobs requiring training beyond high school.

Other observers fault the present education system, citing such problems as 1) grouping students by "ability," thereby reinforcing and exacerbating social and class stereotyping; 2) the increasing size and impersonality of high schools, which result in student alienation; 3) teachers' low academic and career expectations for non-college-bound students; 4) uninspiring curricula that lack academic rigor and fail to provide the skills young people need after high school; 5) narrow vocational training for jobs with little future; and 6) lack of contact between high schools and the business communities they serve. Although this is by no means a complete list of the problems facing these students, it touches most of the major themes.

A program to address these concerns has been developing in California for the past 10 years and has been adopted by more than 50 high schools throughout the state. Known as the California Partnership Academies, it existed in embryonic form before many of these problems became acute, and it has evolved into an approach that meets a surprising number of today's challenges. The academies have met with consistent enthusiasm among the high schools and districts that have implemented them, and they have received strong support at the state level. Careful evaluations of the program support this enthusiasm. A description of the program model and a summary of these evaluations follow.

The California Partnership Academies have evolved into an approach that meets many of today's challenges.

THE CALIFORNIA PARTNERSHIP ACADEMIES

Structured as schools-within-schools, the California Partnership Academies are three-year high school programs that begin in grade 10. They incorporate the following features:

- courses focused on an occupational theme, coordinated with academic courses that teach essential academic skills with rigor;
- block scheduling of students in these (usually four) classes;
- a student selection process that identifies ninth-graders who are low achievers but have the potential for improvement;
- a small group of teachers who work together to plan and implement the program; and
- a rich variety of motivational activities, including parental support, a well-developed reward structure, speakers, field trips, a mentor program, paid work experience, and constant monitoring of progress with feedback to students.

The "partnership" component of each academy is a relationship between schools and businesses. Representatives of businesses have very clear avenues for their participation, and they take on a number of roles and responsibilities:

- along with teachers and administrators, they serve on an academy steering committee that oversees the program;
- they help to develop the technical curriculum and ensure its currency and relevance to their field;
- they speak to academy classes and host field trips to give students a perspective on the workplace;
- they act as mentors – in effect big brothers and sisters – who are both career-related role models and personal contacts in the field of training; and
- they provide summer jobs and part-time jobs during the school year for academy students and full-time jobs for academy graduates.

The academies program began in Philadelphia in the late 1960s. In 1981 two education leaders, Hattie Harlow, who was director of the Stanford Urban Coalition, and Harry Reynolds, who was superintendent of the Sequoia Union High School District (located on the San Francisco peninsula just north of Silicon Valley) were concerned about high dropout rates. They founded the first two California academies, the "Peninsula Academies."

From its inception, the program had strong support from business leaders in the area, who were concerned about the availability of skilled workers. To meet the high-technology needs of Silicon Valley, school district personnel altered the Philadelphia curriculum to include a strong academic component. Although the academies struggled initially, during a three-year period they became established as successful programs, as measured by rigorous and convincing evaluations.

THE ACADEMY MODEL

School-within-a-school structure. Academy students are enrolled in a core academic program consisting of key disciplines – usually English, mathematics, and either science or social studies – along with a vocational/technical "laboratory" course. The curriculum of these academic and technical courses is integrated by the academy teachers so that students become aware of the relationship

between academics and the workplace.

Teachers request to participate in the program and must be willing to work with underachieving students. They are given a reduction in class load (typically from five to four classes per day) and in student load (from an average of 30-35 per class to 20-25). The teachers use their extra period to plan the program activities and curriculum, to coordinate activities with business representatives, to meet with parents, and to devise strategies for dealing with problem students.

One experienced academy teacher was asked how she felt about working in the program. She replied, "It's the reason I'm still in teaching. The program lets the people who have to do all the work make the decisions. . . . It lets us work together as a team. It lets us take some risks, try some new things. It lets us see kids develop over three years, not just one period for one year. . . . It's far more work, but there is far more ownership."

Academy students are grouped together for part of the day, usually in the morning. This arrangement allows various activities, such as guest lectures and field trips, to be scheduled for the entire group. For the remainder of the day, participants attend other required or elective courses with the rest of the student body. The academy curriculum follows the state frameworks, meets all California requirements for high school graduation and community college entrance, and offers electives necessary for admission to four-year colleges.

Selection process. Several criteria are used to determine student eligibility: low grade-point averages, insufficient credits, poor attendance, and a lack of interest in the regular academic program. Students are told about the program toward the end of ninth grade, and contacts are made with their families. Prospective students and their families meet with the academy staff members, who explain the program and emphasize the importance of family support.

Participation in the program is voluntary: students must apply, be interviewed, and be selected on the basis of need and interest. From 40 to 50 students – enough to make up two sections of a sophomore class – are selected to begin the program each year. With attrition, there are usually 100-120 participants in all three classes of the program at one time. Although the program requires a three-year commitment, exceptions are made to admit students at the start of the second semester of the sophomore year or occasionally at the beginning of the junior year, if there is available space and the staff feels that the student can succeed without going through the earlier phases of the program.

Curriculum. As Table 1 shows, academic courses remain at the center of an academy student's schedule. The courses are not watered down, but they do take on a somewhat applied flavor. For example, students in mathematics might be asked to calculate the start-up costs of a new business; those in English, to write a paper on the technical field they are being trained in; and those in social studies, to secure applications for business licenses from local government agencies.

The specific technical focus of an academy is determined by an analysis of the local labor market, with an eye toward fields that are growing and healthy, that offer jobs with career ladders, and that have companies willing to support the program. While most of the programs focus on computer skills in business, the emphases range from business technology to health, electronics, the media, agribusiness, and the building trades. The technical education is kept fairly broad, focusing on fields and occupational clusters rather than on specific jobs. The use of computers is an important feature of all the academies.

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The academy curriculum has an "employability" component that covers such generic skills as proper language and dress, career planning, and job search skills – for example, researching a company, preparing a résumé, and interviewing. An increasing number of academies are establishing connections with local colleges and universities. Follow-up surveys of academy graduates have shown

TABLE 1.
The Three-Year Academy Program

Grade 10	Grade 11	Summer	Grade 12
English, math, science or social studies, technical classes	English, math, science or social studies, technical classes	Summer school if needed	Technical classes, perhaps English and/or economics; mainstreamed in other classes
Elective classes	Elective classes	Students who are performing well are hired for summer jobs in a local company	Preparation for either college or work
Speakers and field trips	Speakers and field trips	Close supervision	Possible part-time evening work
Motivational activities	Motivational activities	End-of-summer rating	
Parental support	Mentor program		

that about two-thirds opt for some type of postsecondary training. Counselors from nearby community colleges are invited to make presentations concerning the technical training their schools offer.

Motivational activities. Perhaps the defining characteristic of entering academy students is a lack of motivation. They simply don't care about high school or how well they do. Therefore, the academy curriculum is reinforced by enrichment activities, many of them stemming from the partnership with business: guest lectures by businesspeople who relate their own success stories, tours of participating companies and local community colleges, and contact with mentors.

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Other forms of support exist as well. Ceremonies to reward student achievement are a frequent feature and are often attended by parents and mentors. These events offer a way to build self-esteem. In many instances they represent the first positive recognition these students have received in school. At the same time teachers give students constant feedback on their performance in class, including monthly written evaluations modeled on those used by employers, so that students realistically understand their strengths and weaknesses and what is needed to succeed. All these efforts take significant time and commitment on the part of the teachers.

If a student begins to miss school or to get behind on homework, teachers call the parent. If the parent's reaction doesn't fix the problem, teachers arrange a meeting with the student *and* the parent. They discuss the problem in detail and usually draw up a contract that the student must honor to stay in the program. While extensive efforts are made to keep every participant, a few are inevitably lost.

Much of the program boils down to simple caring. One student began the academy from a low point, with many C's and D's, few credits, and little motivation. He gradually improved while in the program, and by his junior year his teachers were calling him "the miracle kid" because of his near-perfect attendance and grades of all A's and B's. Then his older sister became an unwed mother. His father left home. Under the pressure, his mother also left; he was abandoned. He came to school one day and reported that the landlord was trying to evict him and his sister and that they had nowhere to live. His computer teacher called the landlord, vouched for the student, and offered to pay the rent if it was unpaid; his job supervisor did the same. The student took over the apartment, held on, and graduated. Today he is continuing to work at the same company while attending community college part time.

The mentor program. In the 11th grade, each academy student is matched with a mentor. The mentors are employees of participating businesses who volunteer to act as career-related big brothers or sisters, spending a minimum of two hours per month with the student. Mentors help students develop work skills and sometimes provide tutoring. They also serve as role models and illustrate the relationship between education and getting a good job. Typical mentor/student activities include:

- visits by the student to the mentor's workplace to "shadow" the mentor for a day and visits by the mentor to the school;
- discussions of potential careers and their requisite postsecondary education or training;
- discussions and demonstrations of basic work habits, job performance, and various jobs in the field;
- assembling a résumé and preparing the student for a job interview; and
- attending trade shows, job fairs, and sports and cultural events.

Mentors have proved to be a particularly effective and inexpensive means of introducing these young people to job sites, career fields, and work values. Many of the participants have no employed role model in the home – or at least none to emulate – and mentors tend to open young eyes quickly. They also give the experience a very personal quality, and many of the relationships between students and mentors prove to be significant on both sides. An additional benefit is that mentors, once they become concerned about a particular young person, become strong advocates for the program with their colleagues.

Work experience. The prospect of a good job serves as a strong incentive for students to take their academic work seriously. After the junior year, those students performing well enough to be on track for graduation (typically about three-fourths of the class) are placed in summer jobs. By this time, they have undergone two years of preparation and understand the need to perform.

Students apply for these jobs just as they would in the open market: they prepare résumés, complete job application forms, and have interviews. Mentors acquaint their students with the process and frequently accompany them to job interviews. Students are guaranteed only interviews, not jobs. The companies make the final hiring decisions.

The work is real and introduces students to the expectations of the workplace concerning dress, language, and behavior. Academy students must be responsible, dependable, and punctual. They must work well with others. They are made to understand that they represent their schools, their communities, and their fellow academy students. They are told, "If you like your job and the good pay you are earning, thank the seniors; they paved the way for you."

Academy students' desire to land a summer job, especially in a larger firm, is often intense. Many have never before set foot in the glossy surroundings of successful businesses. The change that takes place in the students over the summer is often dramatic. Having tested their skills in a real-world setting, they return for their senior year with far more confidence.

The jobs have far-reaching implications for students. One boy who liked his summer job and did well planned nevertheless to drop out of school before his senior year because his girlfriend became pregnant and he felt he should support her. On learning this, his supervisor of-

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fered to keep him employed during the school year if the school could arrange his class schedule to allow him to work afternoons. The school was glad to cooperate. As a result, the boy finished school and graduated. Furthermore, during his senior year he obtained a full scholarship to a technical school. His comment: "Now I can really be somebody."

Teachers also profit from the extensive exposure to business that comes from arranging these jobs. As they monitor their students in the workplace, they learn first-hand about current practices. They also come to understand what types of jobs are best suited to various students.

THE STATE ROLE

The Partnership Academies have become a statewide phenomenon because of the increasingly active involvement of the state. The California legislature has passed two bills to fund replications of the program, the governor has increased funding for the academies in the face of other cuts in education, and the state superintendent of education sees the program as an important component in improving California's high schools.

The state role began in 1984, when the first replication bill was passed, and was expanded in 1987. State support has been driven largely by businesses. Led by the electronics industry in Silicon Valley, business executives helped shape the replication legislation, supported it in the legislature, and convinced the governor to fund it. Each academy grant from the state must be matched by both the receiving district and the supporting business community. In addition, the grant is based on performance. Districts receive funds at the end of each school year, rather than in advance, and the amount is based on the number of students from the program who meet specified standards for attendance and credits.

During the 1991-92 school year there are 47 state-supported academies in California, several others that are providing their own funding, and plans for considerable expansion of the program in 1992-93. During 1991-92 California plans to spend approximately $2.5 million on its Partnership Academies. Because of the matching requirements for both districts and supporting businesses, total support for these programs (some of which is in-kind) will exceed $7 million.

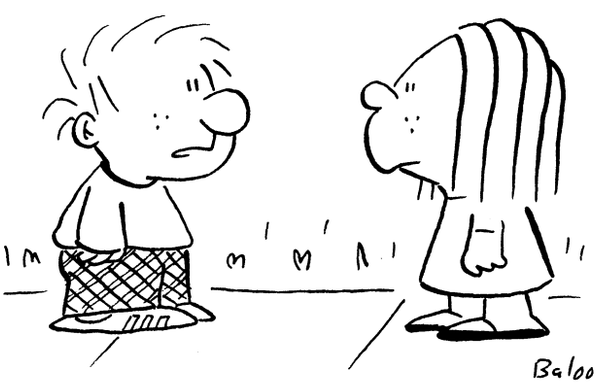
In addition to awarding grants to districts for ongoing programs, the state conducts an open competition each year for new academies. The winning districts receive planning grants that give them time (six to eight months) and funding ($15,000) to organize academies. Staff members from the new sites are brought together to receive training and materials.

The state also contributes technical assistance to new sites. A state-supported group of veteran academy teachers and administrators has developed a 25-page handbook for the program, an extensive resource guide, and several sets of curriculum materials.[3] Members of this group visit sites when difficulties arise, offering their experience to solve problems in getting a new academy off the ground. The state also sponsors a conference each spring for academy staff, district staff, and business partners.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

From the fall of 1985 through the spring of 1988 the Edna McConnell Clark and William and Flora Hewlett Foundations sponsored an evaluation of the first 10 academy replications. The evaluation was conducted by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), an independent research center at Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley.[4]

For purposes of comparison, data were collected on the academy students and matched groups of similar nonacademy students. Matches were made on the basis of descriptive indicators (age, grade level, gender, ethnicity) and past performance (attendance, credits, courses failed, grade-point average, and standardized test scores in reading and mathematics). Tests were conducted each of the three years, by site and grade level, to determine differences between the two



"Don't ask me *– all I know is what I see in the* Weekly Reader."

The teachers in the program have the satisfaction of seeing the positive results of their efforts.

groups on five outcome measures: retention in school, attendance, credits earned, courses failed, and grade-point average.

Of 212 such tests, 61 were statistically significant in favor of academy students and 11 in favor of comparison groups. The differences were spread about equally across four variables: attendance, credits earned, courses failed, and grade-point average. The dropout rate among the first academy class, across the three years, was exactly half that of the comparison group. The transfer rate to other high schools was also lower.

Questionnaires administered to parents and employers were another important source of information about the academies. Parents strongly endorsed the teaching staff, the small classes, and the individual attention students received. They felt that their children's needs for special help were being met more effectively than in the past. Most mentors responding to the questionnaires felt that the mentor program was very worthwhile. Many also reported positive changes in their personal attitudes about the public schools as a result of their association with the program.

Perhaps the most telling results came from student testimony. Most students liked the academy better than the regular school program, liked school better after being in an academy, and saw a clear connection between their academy studies and postgraduate plans. At an academy graduation ceremony, one senior told the audience: "I'm 18, and I've had three jobs – all of them at major companies. I've never tossed a fry or slapped a burger, and thanks to the academies I won't have to. I've been handed my future on a silver platter, and I intend to take it!"

Academy students have also fared well in their postsecondary efforts. A recent survey of academy graduates found that 94% were working, going to school, or doing both.[5] Academy graduates were usually working in fields related to their high school training. Sixty-four percent were continuing their education at community colleges. These figures represent compelling evidence that when the academy model is well implemented, it decreases the dropout rate, increases academic achievement, and leads to postgraduate employment in the fields in which students are trained.

The last year of the evaluation included a cost-benefit analysis of the academies.[6] "Benefits" by their nature must be estimated, and the formula used to make such calculations is somewhat complex. However, using relatively conservative estimates and methods, the cost-benefit ratio arrived at for the first group of students in the replicated academies was approximately one to two. This ratio involves combining state, district, and business spending over three years (approximately $1.2 million); estimating how many fewer students dropped out as a result of the program; and estimating the increase in lifetime earnings of these "saved dropouts" as a result of completing high school (approximately $2.5 million).

A SOLUTION FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

The 50% of students in our high schools who are not college-bound face serious problems. They come increasingly from minority and poor populations, and many have limited proficiency in English. They are in either the "vocational" or "general" curricular tracks, as opposed to the college-preparatory track. They have few successes in school, usually lack career goals, and have little motivation to do well. Consequently, school is boring and irrelevant to them, and many drop out or graduate with inadequate skills. Many receive little support at home or elsewhere in their lives.

The California Partnership Academies model addresses these problems. It focuses on at-risk students and offers them a program with clear rewards and motivational reinforcements. It prepares them for entry-level jobs in their local labor market, while at the same time opening up enhanced career and education possibilities. As a result, students develop clearer goals and stronger academic and work-related skills. The majority continue in some form of postsecondary education and seek jobs in growing fields that offer a future. While academies can't fix families, they do bring pressure to bear on the parents to help create a pattern of reinforcement for responsible student behavior. In addition, the academies provide positive role models in the form of mentors and committed teachers.

The Partnership Academies model also addresses problems with the education delivery system: tracking, substandard curriculum, the increasing size and impersonality of schools, poor teacher motivation, the lack of local decision making, and inadequate articulation between schools and the broader community. It brings decision making not only down to the school level, but to the level of the teachers running the program. Rather than place students in a vocational or general track, it integrates academic and technical instruction. The curriculum has a strong academic flavor, which is given more meaning by demonstrating the applicability of academic skills in the workplace. While academies don't change the size of high schools, they do create a friendly, family-like environment within them through the school-within-a-school structure.

The teachers in the program benefit from smaller class sizes and reduced teaching loads, the necessarily close working relationship with colleagues, and the satisfaction of seeing the positive results of their efforts. Academy staff members learn about local businesses and community college programs, which makes their teaching more focused and relevant. Most teachers like teaching in an academy and respond with renewed energy and enthusiasm. At the same time, nonacademy teachers benefit from not having to cope with as many troublesome, unmotivated students, and most are supportive of the program.

Finally, academies build contacts between the high school and the surround-

ing business community. Businesspeople come into the schools as speakers and mentors, and students are exposed to the workplace through field trips and work experience. Businesses generally take more interest in the schools once they become partners in the program.

There are some important cautions in this rosy assessment, however. Academies are not easy programs to implement. The academy model is a complex one, with many specific components requiring a three-year articulated sequence. The program demands flexibility from the high school and strong support from both the district office and surrounding businesses. The PACE evaluation showed wide variation in the quality of implementation from site to site – and, consequently, wide variation in the degree of success with students.

Moreover, to date the academies serve only a small proportion of the non-college-bound population in any given high school. In California only about 3,000 students are enrolled in academies during the 1991-92 school year. In addition, the program is not cheap; it costs approximately $1,000 per year per student, over and above regular high school costs. However, this is not a prohibitive price, especially if we consider the social costs of the alternatives.

The California Partnership Academies have received a great deal of attention and recognition for their accomplishments over the past several years. A study of school/business partnerships called the academies "the best single model in the country for business involvement in the schools."[7] The Academy for Educational Development put out a 50-page booklet describing the structure and success of the approach.[8] The program has been designated a model by the California State Department of Education and has received commendations from several national groups, including the National Alliance of Business, the National Academy for Vocational Education, and the President's Private Sector Initiative. California's academies have been featured in San Francisco newspapers and television specials, in the *New York Times*, and in television documentaries.

In 1989 two new academies were begun in the Sequoia school district through funding from the U.S. Department of Education under the Cooperative Demonstration and Dropout Prevention component of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act. These new demonstration-site academies focus on business technology, are fully equipped with state-of-the-art computer equipment (much of it donated by IBM), and are intended to serve as models for national dissemination.

The academies have proved to be a powerful solution to the problem of underachieving students in high school.

For Further Information

Marilyn Raby, Director of Curriculum Services, Sequoia Union High School District, played an instrumental role in establishing the original Peninsula Academies and received a federal grant in 1989 to begin two additional academies and run a national dissemination center. The district office is located at 480 James Ave., Redwood City, CA 94062.

Charles Dayton helped evaluate the original Peninsula Academies, directed the PACE evaluations of the first round of replications, and has coordinated the group of veteran academy teachers and administrators who provide technical assistance to the academies. He can be reached at Foothill Associates, 230 Main St., Nevada City, CA 95959.

James Allison, former director of vocational education for the state of California, is state administrator for the Partnership Academies. He can be contacted at the Career/Vocational Education Division of the Curriculum Instructional Leadership Branch, 1919 21st St., Sacramento, CA 95814.

The California Partnership Academies have proved to be a powerful solution to the problem of underachieving students in high school. They keep at-risk students in school, provide them with academic and technical skills, and motivate them to succeed. They also add to the productivity of our work force by increasing the number of students who emerge from high school with workplace skills and who obtain a good job or add to their skills through postsecondary education.

This welcome development in our high schools addresses the legitimate concerns of business and of the nation. It demonstrates that we can respond to an important problem in education. We feel it is a model that deserves wider attention and use.

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