

**Written Testimony of Karen Webber-N'Dour**  
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**Before the U.S. Senate HELP Committee**  
**Reauthorization of ESEA: Improving America's Secondary Schools**  
**Tuesday, May 4, 2010**

Good afternoon Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the Committee. I am Karen Webber-Ndour, principal of National Academy Foundation High School, a public high school in Baltimore City, Maryland. I am proud to be here today on behalf of my school, the National Academy Foundation, and the career academy movement.

I am heartened by the increasing dialogue around the pressing need for American high schools to achieve college and career readiness for every student. I deeply understand this need, both as a high school principal and from my previous work life. I am not a career educator; I am a lawyer by training. After ten years focusing on civil rights, it was clear to me that a quality education could be the key to the betterment of the disenfranchised populations with whom I was working. I decided to switch tracks to create opportunities for people who otherwise may not have them, and I have found the career academy model an ideal vehicle to do that.

I also have a very personal connection to this movement; I am a career academy graduate. I embarked on my professional path at the Academy of Law, Politics, and Community Affairs at Tilden High School in Brooklyn, New York.

Career academies are one of the most established, prevalent, and well-researched high school reform approaches. This model is time-tested -- the career academy movement began 40 years ago in Philadelphia and the National Academy Foundation has been refining its model for nearly 30 years. Today, there are estimated to be between 2,500 and 4,000 career academies across the country, serving approximately 1 million public high school students. Five hundred of these academies are part of the National Academy Foundation's network and they will reach 53,000 students this school year.

Career academies' impacts have been demonstrated by rigorous research, including a longitudinal, random assignment evaluation by MDRC. The MDRC study meets high standards set out in the Office of Budget Management's PART test for evaluating program effectiveness.

Career academies are one of the best examples of how educational interventions can apply research findings to improve practice. The wide range in the estimated number of career academies is due to the fact that many schools or programs with a career theme label themselves as career academies without fully applying the model. To address this and promote full implementation, in 2004 a coalition of career academy organizations developed the "Career Academy National Standards of Practice." Based on both the experience of the organizations involved and on the MDRC findings, the national standards identify ten elements of successful implementation of the career academy model.

## **The Career Academy Model**

Among local, state and national career academy organizations, it is widely agreed that the career academy model contains three essential components: that the academy is structured as a small learning community; that the academy uses college-preparatory curriculum that applies a career-context to learning; and that through business, college, and community partners, students access a range of work-based learning experiences such as internships and job shadowing. The National Academy Foundation model adds one additional component, requiring that each Academy has an advisory board to formalize the relationships between local businesses, higher education, community groups and the school.

### **Academy Structure**

Career academies are organized as small learning communities so that students get the benefit of a supportive and personalized learning environment. The National Academy Foundation academy structure also emphasizes recruitment that is open to any young person who expresses interest in the career theme and attracts both high- and low-performing students. It also requires a scheduling and school structure that allows teachers to collaborate across subject areas.

This can take hold in a variety of forms. The high school I lead is what we call “wall-to-wall academies.” It is a small high school serving 400 students in five career-themed academies. Four out of the five are affiliated with the National Academy Foundation. The Academies focus on Finance, Hospitality & Tourism, Information Technology, Engineering, and Law. National Academy Foundation academies are also successfully implemented as a school-within-a-school in a larger comprehensive high school or as small schools that may have only one academy theme.

### **Curriculum**

Career academies are at the forefront of the college and career movement because they combine academic learning with a contemporary approach to Career and Technical Education. This results in young people who are prepared to enter college and succeed there, and who have the critical skills necessary to excel in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century workplace.

The National Academy Foundation has developed curriculum for its themes that is driven by proven, research-based methods that emphasizes literacy and project-based learning. In this highly-effective teaching approach, students are called upon to use teamwork, creativity, decision-making, communication and other core skills to perform tasks and achieve outcomes, mimicking the world of work. Professional development, technical assistance, and ongoing evaluation are offered by the National Academy Foundation to help teachers and academies succeed.

At the National Academy Foundation High School we strive to create a living classroom for each Academy, and we take the opportunity to create relevance to the extreme. We have a branch of the MECU credit union in our school that is operated by our Finance students. Our Hospitality & Tourism students cater and run all of our special events and are hired to do so for many local government and business events. Our latest project is to create an entirely student-run cafeteria. Our Hospitality students can create better tasting food than available at any other cafeteria, our Finance students can handle the money and business side, and our IT and Engineering students can create systems and processes to track the inventory. These aren't projects for projects' sake.

They are real life applications for students' knowledge and skills that also allow them to create benefits for their own school.

### **Work-based Learning and Internships**

Career academies integrate a range of work-based learning experiences that include mentoring from business professionals, career fairs, job shadowing, classroom speakers and culminate in an internship.

High school internships, particularly those that are paid, are an essential component of workforce preparation and an important motivator and context setter for young people. Internships introduce youth to the habits and value of work, while making connections between academic learning, the real-world application of knowledge, and the role of business in the community. Indeed, these partnerships between academies and the local business community are the cornerstone of the career academy model, connecting youth with hands-on experiences under the guidance of practiced professionals.

At the National Academy Foundation High School, we are able to provide a wide-range of opportunities for students to get a window into the world of work and apply the knowledge they have gained from their living classrooms. After students participate in job shadowing or internships, they are filled with the most incredible sense of pride and confidence. Once young people have had these experiences, there is a perceptible shift in the way they carry themselves. This even transfers over to the expectations that they have of their fellow students' behavior, all of which changes a school's culture indelibly.

### **Advisory Boards**

One of the most distinctive elements of National Academy Foundation academies is their relationship with their local communities. Teachers and academy directors rely on Advisory Boards, made up of local business, higher education, and community leaders. Employees of more than 2,500 companies serve as Advisory Board members for National Academy Foundation academies. They create access to expertise in the subject areas the academies are built upon, and connect students and their growing skills to a wide world of career paths. These highly-engaged Board members provide students with paid internships and opportunities for job shadowing and mentoring; act as role models; and help to enhance career-themed curriculum through their own knowledge of the industry. Their constant involvement provides a stable base of support that allows academies to endure and flourish even when leadership at the school- or district-level changes.

At the National Academy Foundation High School, we have the most incredible collection of professionals who are an integral part of our school. They help us to make the subject matter real, and they hold us accountable. We only have 15-20 board members but each one of them comes with a network that grows our reach exponentially. We have over 750 business people at our annual awards benefit who are deeply connected to our school.

Through this group come the most amazing opportunities. For example, when Hilton Hotels earned a contract to take over the hotel at the Baltimore Convention Center, connections made through our board made it so they created a \$3 million fund for college scholarships for Baltimore

high school students who pursue hotel management and hospitality careers, with National Academy Foundation students receiving first priority.

### **Career Academy Evidence**

Thanks to their longevity and the outcomes demonstrated at individual schools, career academies are one of the most well-researched high school interventions. Attached to my written testimony is a summary of the research, *Career Academies: A Proven Strategy to Prepare High School Students for College and Careers*, compiled and recently updated by David Stern, Charles Dayton, and Marilyn Raby, and a recent paper commissioned by the National Career Academy Coalition and written by Betsy Brand of the American Youth Policy Forum, *High School Career Academies: A Forty-Year Proven Model for Improving College and Career Readiness*.

Most significant among this research is a twelve- year longitudinal, random-assignment study conducted by MDRC and released in June 2008. The full report is also attached to my written testimony.

Key findings of the MDRC study include:

- Career academy graduates earned 11% more in total earnings over the eight years following high school than their non-academy peers.
- Young men from career academies experienced increased earnings over eight years totaling 17% more per than their non-academy peers.
- An increased percentage of career academy graduates live independently with their children and spouse or partner. Young men, specifically, reported positive effects on marriage and parenting.
- While there were neither positive nor negative impacts on high school graduation rates or post-secondary attainment, for the subset of students most at risk of dropping out, career academy participants showed increased school retention through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, improved attendance, and earned more credits.

Especially noteworthy are the magnitude and persistence of this earning effect over eight years; it is roughly the equivalent earning power of an associate's degree.

The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, an independent, nonpartisan organization, has identified career academies as meeting a “top tier” evidence standard of effectiveness, based on MDRC’s long-term evaluation. The career academies model joins only three other interventions that the Coalition has identified that meet the “top tier” criteria. MDRC is now conducting follow-up analyses to examine how the programs produced these effects and which features were likely to have contributed most to the impacts.

### **National Academy Foundation High School Outcomes**

Students at the National Academy Foundation High School experience unprecedented success. We are currently ranked as the sixth best high school in Baltimore and admission is open to all students. For the past four years, we have achieved a 100% graduation rate and 100% of our

students have been admitted to college. For the past three years, our attendance rate has averaged over 90%.

Our high academic standards have also led to impressive gains in our state achievement tests and we have closed the “achievement gap” among our increasingly diverse student body. Last year our twelfth graders scored almost twenty percentage points higher than the city average on both the English and Algebra 2 assessments.

All of this has brought us to the attention of many of the city’s outstanding students. As attractive as the school is, our superintendent and our school leadership are determined to ensure that it remains an option for those who could benefit most. Next year, we become a 6-12 school, absorbing a failing middle school and its struggling student body. It will be a challenge, but I am confident that with the career academy model, four-plus years from now, those students will be on their way to post-secondary and career success with the unmistakable professionalism that marks a National Academy Foundation High School graduate.

### **Opportunities in the Reauthorization of ESEA**

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides many opportunities to increase the prevalence of the career academy model and apply to key lessons learned over the forty-year refinement of the model to improve the high school experience for all American young people.

#### **Funding for Career Academies**

While career academies are a widely used high school reform strategy, they are estimated to reach only 5% of public high school students. Increased funding is critical to increasing their scale and can also help to ensure quality among all the schools that seek to use the model. Since the National Standards of Practice were created in 2004, both the National Career Academy Coalition and the National Academy Foundation have developed detailed academy assessments to increase effective implementation in order to reap the most benefits for students, schools and communities.

#### **Integrated Curriculum, Assessments and Credentials**

The skills and knowledge that prepare students to be successful college applicants and goers are many of the same ones that lead to success in the workplace. We need standards that allow academic and career-themed courses to be integrated to expand the relevance of coursework and at same time deepen students understanding and ability to apply core concepts. Alongside promoting these instructional methods must be assessments that measure students’ skills in addition to the knowledge they have gained. These assessments must also be aligned with credentialing opportunities in which students can earn industry certifications or college credits.

The National Academy Foundation is working to develop a certification and assessment system for its academy students. This system will center around a combination of course tests, a student portfolio demonstrating proficiency in industry authentic projects, and an evaluation of the internship, that will provide a portable credential that will assist students in their applications to college. This certification and assessment system will also enable the National Academy

Foundation to gauge student learning and will form the basis for articulation agreements with prestigious universities to engender student access and portability to high quality post-secondary opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.