Career change

To put students on the path to good jobs, CPS has retooled its career education programs. Workplace credentials, internships and college-going are part of the mix, but hurdles still stand in the way of the plan’s success.
From the Editor

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workplace landscape is barren of good-
12th grade is a must: The 21st Century
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fewer than 20 percent of credentials lead
directly to jobs, and a relative handful put
students directly on a pipeline to the best
jobs in higher-paying fields.

W hen Mayor Rahm Emanuel
and former CEO Jean-Claude
Brizard announced in 2012
that the district would open
10 International Baccalaureate programs
in high schools across the city, a small
but telling detail didn’t make the news:
The IB’s then-new Career Certificate
program, designed to give students a
rigorous IB-style education while tailoring
coursework to their career interests,
would be a cornerstone of the “wall-to-
wall” programs.

Given the widely recognized success
and academic value of the IB Diploma
Programme, it makes a lot of sense to
adopt the IBCC (now offered by 63 schools
around the world, including 36 in the
U.S.) as part of Chicago’s expanding IB
portfolio. IB programs require significant
professional development for teachers
and a rigorous curriculum, reducing the
odds that a career track ends up as a sec-
ond-tier, lower-quality option.

The IBCC is one indicator of the
district’s vision for upgrading career and
technical education. As Associate Editor
Rebecca Harris reports in this issue of
Catalyst In Depth, the end game now isn’t
a job as a mechanic, a hairdresser, a data
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job placement (see story on page 14). “You
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James Zeckhauser, Youth Guidance

A grand vision for career prep

By Lorraine Forte
Editor-in-Chief

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James Zeckhauser, Youth Guidance

THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES
warns that any intervention in a complex
system tends to create unanticipated and
sometimes undesirable outcomes. In Chi-
cago Public Schools, the law applies in
several ways with career education.

One consequence, tied to the district’s
ongoing push to open new schools, has
hurt already-struggling neighborhood
high schools: Career prep programs in
these schools have had a difficult time at-
tracting students.

With fewer students, schools have
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students directly on a pipeline to the best
jobs in higher-paying fields.

At Gage Park High School, teacher
Krystian Weglarz points out one challenge
to increasing students’ success at earning
valuable credentials in high-tech manu-
facturing: “The same struggles we have
in a core class are the same difficulties we
face with any other certification, any oth-
er course, whether it’s low reading ability
[or] low math ability.”

Providing workplace experience has
also been a challenge. Selective career
programs are the only ones in which all
students complete an internship. Sum-
mer internships are only part-time and
thus less attractive to students who need
full-time work. Fewer high schools are
now participating in “work-related study”
because these internships knock out class
periods that many students use to take ex-
tra courses or make-up classes.
The mission of Catalyst Chicago is to improve the education of all children through authoritative journalism and leadership of a constructive dialogue among students, parents, educators, community leaders and policy makers.

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During class time at Gage Park High School’s Equipment and Technology Institute program, Open Books mentor Dan Meehan works with junior Uzziel Fernandez. The program still includes more technical lessons, but a push to prepare all students for college has led to an increasing focus on academic skills and social-emotional development. [Photo by Marc Monaghan]

College and careers

A

n overhaul of the district’s career education programs seeks to make classes more challenging and put career-track students on the path to higher ed, but many schools have lost programs, and fewer students are participating overall. COVER STORY: PAGE 4

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Many students are interested in internships and career credentials, but making it to the finish line is a struggle.

14 Navigating the work world
In Chicago, the Workforce Investment Act Youth program helps students get a leg up on the job hunt.

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- Few students earn credentials in highest-paying fields
- Barriers to getting on-the-job experience

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- Expanding the WIA Youth program would have a hefty price tag

ON THE COVER: Youth Guidance program manager and staffing specialist James Zeckhauser interviews Kelvyn Park High School Junior Nicki Morris, who is in the process of joining the Workforce Investment Act Youth program. The program provides intensive support to help high school students stay on track toward graduation, employment and college or career training. [Photo by Marc Monaghan]

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A new end game

Career education is no longer just about preparing students to enter the workforce. In line with a national trend of ‘college for all’ and the reality that most good-paying jobs require education beyond high school, CPS has overhauled its career education programs to make college the ultimate goal.

By Rebecca Harris

On a November morning, the first agenda item in Krystian Weglarz’ class is to have students review the process of obtaining copies of their grade transcripts and ACT scores in preparation for completing college applications.

Next, Weglarz takes a tally to see how many students have improved their ACT scores. “If it went down, you don’t have to submit that one,” he says. “You just keep the higher one.”

Weglarz then hands out permission slips for a field trip to the Illinois Institute of Technology, and reminds students that a speaker from DeVry University is slated for a visit. “You want to be here,” he says.

Students give their weekly update on career and college news. One young woman got into Miles College in Alabama with a $12,000 scholarship. Another got into Lewis University in Romeoville, Ill. Another received a full-tuition scholarship from Wilberforce University in Ohio.

A leaderboard on the wall shows how many acceptance letters and scholarship offers each student has earned. The same students, Weglarz notices, have good news week after week.

“What is it that you’re doing?” he pries. “We just turned in our stuff early,” one student says.

Another student sighs, noting the hard work involved. “I’ve been looking for these schools since my sophomore year.”
Gage Park High School senior Harriet Agymang stands in front of a leaderboard in the Equipment and Technology Institute classroom that tracks students’ college applications and acceptances.

[Photo by Marc Monaghan]
“Everyone should have those success stories,” Weglarz tells the class. Students who are lagging behind in their college search should get advice from those who are doing well.

Next, students work in teams on a postsecondary research project. Finally, Weglarz offers a reminder: “Where are you at with the Common Application process? Or similar? Next thing you know, it is tomorrow; it is January.”

The agenda might not seem surprising for a class of seniors, except for one detail: Weglarz teaches at Gage Park High School’s Equipment and Technology Institute. Students learn about advanced manufacturing and automotive technology, how to follow technical instructions and get the chance to earn certification through the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council.

But there’s also a strong post-secondary education component, something that the district has made the centerpiece of its overhaul of career program curricula. Fueled partly by the college-for-all movement and partly by the new, more rigorous Common Core Standards, education policymakers around the country as well as in Chicago are trying to bridge the gap between college-prep and career-prep education.

At the same time, here in CPS, the number of career programs has fallen over the past five years, to 182 this year from 240 in 2008-09. “As the district has raised standards, schools have decided to shut down programs on their own,” says CPS spokeswoman Lauren Huffman. “Another contributing factor is decreasing enrollment. Schools facing low enrollment have had to close programs.”

Though admission standards remain generally the same, CPS students are entering career programs with better academic preparation: This year, 33 programs had average EXPLORE scores of 14 or higher for incoming 9th-graders, a dramatic increase from just seven such programs in 2011-12. (A score of 14 on the EXPLORE is considered the threshold for reaching college-readiness on the ACT.)

The new approach has benefits. Students who aren’t on a solid college-prep track get an extra
push toward post-secondary education—something that is virtually essential for the good jobs of the future. For lower-income students in particular, getting into college or earning a specific credential for a job in an in-demand field could be a ticket out of poverty.

Yet the district has a long way to go to make its career education overhaul a success.

College enrollment rates for students who finish a career education course sequence are only slightly higher than for CPS as a whole: 60 percent compared to 56 percent. Among students in the Gage Park program, 70 percent of those who graduated in spring 2011 (the most recent year available) enrolled in college.

Fewer students are completing career education course sequences, with the number falling dramatically to 2,173 in 2011-12 from 3,108 in 2007-08. At Gage Park, for example, two classes of sophomores enter the Equipment and Technology Institute each year. By senior year, just one class is left.

Many career education programs have a hard time attracting students because they are in struggling neighborhood high schools. At more than one-third of the programs, 10 or more students were offered seats for each student who eventually attended. On average, nearly seven offers were made to fill each seat.

Chicago is part of a national trend on the career education front. Stephen DeWitt, deputy executive director of the National Association for Career and Technical Education, says districts around the country have sought to link college and career education in recent years. “The focus on that is important,” DeWitt says. “It is helping students to realize that college is a potential option for them.”

Recent research predicts that the number of jobs requiring two-year degrees will grow, and that some industry-recognized career credentials may lead to increased earning potential.

DeWitt says other districts are raising academic expectations, too.

“With the Common Core State Standards, it is going to become more important,” DeWitt says. Adding more challenging coursework, he adds, may help keep potential dropouts engaged in school.
KARINA ROMANO AND GIOVANNI FERNANDEZ

are classmates in Gage Park’s Equipment and Technology Institute. Their goals differ, but both say they have benefitted from the program’s approach.

Romano, a 17-year-old senior, plans to study creative writing in college. She doesn’t see a contradiction between that goal and the three years of study in Gage Park’s program.

“It still helps me research [colleges],” she says. “It’s helped me to keep going, not to give up [and] reach goals that are realistic to me.”

Romano’s older sister tipped her off that the program would help her make it into college. Her sister is now studying anthropology at Hamline University in Minnesota.

“I just wanted to be in a class where people care about your education,” Romano notes. “She told me Mr. Weglarz was a big help. They helped me prepare for the ACT. They helped me write my personal statement.”

The Gage Park program has closer ties to colleges—like Illinois Institute of Technology, Ranken Technical College in St. Louis, the University of Dayton, Universal Technical Institute and DeVry University—than to businesses.

Still, Weglarz admits that there are limits to what the focus on college can accomplish. “No matter how much we help them get ready, with the financial obstacles, with travel, with family responsibilities, students may go first semester” but then drop out, he says.

Fernandez, also 17, wants to further his education too. But his goal is tied to what he’s learned in the Technology Institute: He wants to study automotive technology at Ranken Technical College.

Fernandez had planned to go to work right out of high school. But then his father, who works at Graphic Packaging as a machine operator, gave him some advice. “He told me, ‘You don’t want to be like me. I get home tired, I go to sleep and I go back the next day. Do something you love to do,’” Fernandez says.

The Gage Park program caught his attention. Now, Fernandez has learned skills that will be useful in automotive technology, such as following technical instructions. The workplace safety certification he earned in his junior year should be helpful in the job hunt, too.

In all, about a half-dozen students in the class are aiming for a career related to manufacturing.

“It is more important to expose them to a variety of technology [fields], to postsecondary options, and to give them the soft skills they need to succeed in any job,” Weglarz says. Soft skills are the personal qualities that are important for any career field, such as the ability to communicate, a strong work ethic, problem-solving skills and a positive attitude.

To get students in a goal-oriented frame of mind, Weglarz has them write letters to their future selves, which he mails to them five years after they graduate from high school. On a Facebook page for the program, Weglarz stays in touch with alumni and often invites them back to speak to current students.

XIAN BARRETT, A FORMER TEACHER AT GAGE PARK

and at Julian High School who is now national program director at New Voice Strategies (the parent organization of the advocacy group VIVA Teachers) says that students who face the most obstacles to staying in school have been hurt the most by the shift in career education.

Julian, for instance, closed programs in fashion design, cosmetology, carpentry and culinary arts. Teachers in those programs, Barrett recalls, tried to use the lure of those disciplines to recruit students who were gang-affiliated or had had trouble in elementary school. The programs became “kind of a gateway to academics,” he says.

“This idea that kids in the highest-need situations need to continually roll the dice on whether the program they are depending on, in some cases to a life-and-death level, is going to survive—I think there’s an element of injustice to that,” Barrett says.

Decisions on whether to drop or add programs are typically made, he adds, “without any understanding of community context or input from communities, especially the students themselves.”

At Julian, five career tracks remain: business, allied health, broadcast technology, game programming, and digital media.

Kimberly Saunders, who has taught broadcast technology for over two decades, says that students learn to operate the latest equipment, practice their writing skills—“In order to do a production you have to do a proposal, a script, a video shot sheet and a storyboard,” Saunders points out—and create videos that are broadcast by Channel One News, a national high school news service.

CPS data show that over the past several years, half or more of her students have gone on to college.

On a recent morning, the class practiced talk show production, with some students taking on the role of hosts, some running light and sound boards and others portraying actors being interviewed.

“Above all, they are learning how to work with other people,” Saunders says.

Julian’s broadcast program has had success in sending students on to college. But Barrett takes issue with the “college for all” concept.

“Students have come to me directly and said, ‘This constant push that to be a good person you have to go to college, it seems like they’re saying my parents are bad people,’ ” he observes. “I see this direction of setting high bars and demand-
ing that kids clear them to get opportunities as [a strategy of] disengagement.”

**JULIAN AND OTHER CAREER ACADEMIES** are struggling to become the citywide draws that the district envisioned when planners began working to better distribute career education programs among different areas of the city.

But career academies also struggle to attract students who live closer in. According to CPS data, more than two-thirds of students who live in the attendance boundaries for career academies—more than 29,000 high school students—choose to attend elsewhere.

Counselor Krystal Kay, who was previously Julian’s career and technical education coordinator, says Julian is losing out to charter schools and to other schools with career education programs. Even though students come from 96 elementary schools, the school’s total enrollment is just 1,057 students, down 9 percent from last year.

“It is important for families to know they can get a quality education in a neighborhood school in a [career and technical] program,” she says.

Yet many students come into high school clueless about what they want to do, so career education becomes a tougher sell. “They do not want to be in a three-year program just to get exposure,” Kay says. “We have to do more career awareness at the elementary level.”

Marketing is essential, notes health science instructor Judy Granger. “A lot of times people say, ‘I didn’t know you had that program.’ I would
IB program tackles career ed

A career-related certificate administered by the International Baccalaureate Organization—more widely known for its advanced, rigorous IB Diploma Programme—is the cornerstone of CPS’ efforts to expand its high school IB offerings in new “wall-to-wall” IB schools.

There are skeptics who say the new program is unproven—it was first offered in fall 2012, too recently to gauge its effectiveness. When the career certificate began to take off in Britain, The Guardian (of London) reported that some educators viewed it as a diluted version of the well-known Diploma Programme.

The IBO, for its part, says that it created the career certificate because “the Diploma Programme has been and continues to be the primary offering for university-bound students [but] we also realize that students in the 16-19 age range want more choice. ... We believe the IBCC bridges the gap between academic and career-related programmes, allowing highly motivated career-oriented students to also have the opportunity to take advantage of an IB education.”

The program is currently offered in 63 schools around the world, according to the International Baccalaureate’s website. Of those, 36 are in the U.S., including schools in Minneapolis, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Salt Lake City and cities in Maryland, California, Virginia, Georgia, Wisconsin, and a number of other states.

Students must take two of the same challenging IB classes that diploma students take in order to earn the certificate, plus a sequence of career-related courses and a two-year seminar on ethics and career choices that culminates in a final project about an ethical issue in their chosen field. Ethics are also an emphasis of the Diploma Programme.

The seminar, called Approaches to Learning, brings together students from different career clusters to hone in on their future directions. As part of the seminar, students also spend one class period per week developing basic conversational skills in another language. Since CPS already requires two years of a second language for students to graduate, those in the Approaches to Learning class are learning their third language.

Students complete several presentations on their career choices before planning the format and content of the final reflective project on an ethical dilemma. The project can take one of a number of formats, such as a presentation, a film or a written paper.

So far, Prosser is the only school in CPS whose IB Career Certificate program has been approved by the International Baccalaureate Organization. Lincoln Park, Morgan Park, Back of the Yards (a new magnet school), Taft, Hyde Park and Clemente high schools are all in the process of applying for approval.

Maria Rivera’s Approaches to Learning seminar at Prosser offers a glimpse of how the program uses work-related scenarios to help students unravel complex ethical issues. In the process, they gain skills in research and a more concrete understanding of their chosen fields.

One student who is studying manufacturing poses a question: How does machine-produced medical technology affect those who rely on the material? He ties the question to ethics by pointing out that workers on a crowded shop floor—a situation that is common—cannot do their job as well as those with adequate space, possibly putting patients at risk by manufacturing substandard or flawed technology.

Rivera guides the student to do more research—specifically, by talking to someone in the medical technology manufacturing sector.

Another student, who is in culinary arts, tackles the question of what the requirements should be for labeling cosmetics products as “natural.” Yet another considers the impact of negative advertising.

Rivera says that her students are up to the challenge of completing projects about sophisticated ethical dilemmas. “The biggest problem is just for them to jump in and feel confident,” she says.

—Rebecca Harris

Several students from Mikva Challenge, a civic engagement program, said they had no idea career education programs were available, and would have appreciated an opportunity to enroll.

Jordan Henderson, a 16-year-old junior at Lincoln Park High School, said that when he was selecting a high school as an 8th-grade student at Sabin Magnet, the focus was on selective schools.

In retrospect, Henderson says he would have liked to study computer programming. Next year, he hopes to take an Advanced Placement course in Java, a programming language. But in a career academy program, Henderson would have tackled the subject sooner.

Vincent Calderon, a 17-year-old senior at Hancock High School, also says he did not know career programs existed. He, too, wants to be a computer programmer. But his school has no programming classes to offer—just courses in Microsoft Office and in web design.

Crane Medical Prep High School faces similar challenges. It’s one of several academically selective, health-focused programs that CPS has opened in the last several years. In theory, 40 percent of the seats are for students who come from the neighborhood, and 60 percent are for students from the rest of the city. But everyone must have a stanine score of at least 5 in reading and 5 in math on their 7th grade ISAT to qualify for enrollment at Crane.

“We adhere to the policy primarily because we have a very robust math and science curriculum,” says the school’s principal, Fareeda Shabazz. “They say, ‘I want to be a cardiologist,’ ‘I want to be a pediatrician.’ (But) the five is already a very low bar, and students who come in any lower won’t be able to handle the rigors of the programs.”

After sophomore year, students choose a career track known as a major. They can choose nursing, allied health, or pre-med. But the school is still working to nail down whether nursing and allied health students will be able to earn credentials, and if so, which ones.

The school started this year with just 150 freshmen, but this spring is set to make 300 offers in hopes of having a larger freshman class.

“We are looking for those numbers to increase tremendously,” Shabazz says. “There are many students in the city that are prepared for a curriculum this rigorous; (but) the biggest challenge has been the reputation of Crane High School.”

She points to the contradiction between the lack of applicants for Crane’s selective program, and the district’s lack of selective program seats: “A lot of parents leave the city because there aren’t a lot of viable options for students who don’t get a perfect score on the selective enrollment exam.”

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Ticket to a job

Less than 20 percent of credentials earned in CPS lead directly to jobs, and few students can take advantage of the limited internships CPS provides

By Rebecca Harris

Part of the CPS push to improve career education is to have students gain relevant work experience through internships and earn industry-recognized credentials to help them get jobs.

But on both fronts, the district is falling short.

In 2011-12, CPS made nearly 1,500 offers to fill 682 internship slots. But more students are accepting internships now than in past years. In 2012-13, CPS made 1,011 offers to students to fill about 800 internship slots.

“CPS extends several rounds of offers in order to reach as many students as possible for work-based opportunities, and to fill as many seats as possible that our partner organizations make available to students,” CPS spokeswoman Lauren Huffman wrote in an email. “We continue to enhance our student engagement and acceptance rate with direct outreach to students, in addition to frequent engagement of school leaders and teachers.”

As part of Mather High School’s honors program in law and public safety, all seniors complete an unpaid 10-week internship during the school year. The jobs are usually with non-profit legal service agencies or in government offices; small boutique law firms are sometimes part of the mix.

The hardest part of teacher Patricia McAvoy’s job is tracking down employers who are willing to host students.

“It’s pounding the pavement. And sometimes it’s cold-calling,” she says. “[Students] can get glowing reviews, but [employers] still have to stop and say, ‘Oops, it’s time for my interns to come in, so I can’t go to that meeting until I make sure they have something to do.’ It can be an intrusion, no matter how much they contribute.”

To prepare her students, McAvoy has them inventory their career goals, read papers written by seniors describing their internship experiences, write resumes, do job interviews with each other, practice

Jeremiah Stewart operates the camera during a trial run of a television show in Julian High School’s Broadcast Technology studio. Many students in the program pursue internships in the field. And this year, a greater number are studying for a credential in video editing. [Photo by Lucio Villa]
NOT MUCH HELP
Fewer than one-fifth of the certifications earned in CPS career programs are those that directly prepare students to enter the job market in a specific field. One-third of certifications are in Microsoft Office programs and personal finance, which may boost resumes but are not geared to a specific industry.

Types of certifications that CPS students receive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credential</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Avg. Salary in Illinois</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certified Logistics Associate</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>$68,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N+ networking certification</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$66,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Medical Technician</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>$48,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive certifications</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>$38,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>$35,070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Only careers with an average salary in Illinois of more than $30,000 a year are included.

Source: Catalyst Chicago analysis of Chicago Public Schools data.

NOT KEEPING PACE
Some credentials are a direct pipeline to well-paying jobs, including high-tech manufacturing, logistics, automotive technology and computer networking. But in the highest-paying fields, only a small number of students earn credentials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credential</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Avg. Salary in Illinois</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>$35,070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


TURNING DOWN INTERNSHIPS
CPS typically offers internships to more than 1,000 students every year. But for a variety of reasons, and despite the benefits of on-the-job career experience, relatively few students accept the offers. Lack of transportation and the need for a paid job that is more than part-time—CPS can offer only 20 hours per week—keep students from accepting internships, according to teachers.

Internships offered, accepted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Offered</th>
<th>Accepted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>1,984</td>
<td>1,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>1,191</td>
<td>682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>1,011</td>
<td>802</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Chicago Public Schools

their handshakes and try out their first-day-of-work outfits at school before their internships start.

Yet the district’s selective pre-law programs, including the one at Mather, are the only ones in which all students complete an internship. Most students in career programs do not—partly because of the limited number, and partly because of barriers that are unique to students from lower-income communities, who would benefit most from exposure to the working world.

For one, the district can only afford to pay students for 20 hours a week and “some students need more hours,” notes Huffman. Teachers point out that internship offers do not come in until late in the spring, and many students have already committed to other paid summer jobs.

Students may have conflicts between internships and summer school. Or they may face a simple fear of the unknown. “Some kids don’t know what the L is, or don’t know how to use it. Sometimes, the parents are scared,” explains Youth Guidance program manager and staffing specialist James Zeckhauser.

Youth Guidance runs an annual scavenger hunt called Loop Discovery Search, which teaches students to navigate the intimidating downtown landscape by familiarizing them with city landmarks.

Students can also get internship-like experience during the school year through the district’s “work-related study” program. Though it’s an option in all career clusters, fewer and fewer high schools are participating, because the program often knocks out several class periods from a senior student’s day.

“Students typically need the opportunity senior year to remediate and/or take Advanced Placement classes,” Huffman says. “Basically, it makes more sense for students to take advantage of these preparatory options, since that next step is likely to be college.” (Among students who complete a career education program, 60 percent enroll in college, slightly higher than the district average of 56 percent.)

Each year, CPS holds a half-day smorgasbord of workshops to help career education students prepare for internships.

In early December, about 600 students, all juniors, swarmed to Central Office, hoping for first crack at an internship. They attended workshops on dressing for success, workplace communication, resume writing and elevator pitches. Each student also had two short mock interviews with randomly selected employers.

CPS officials are also trying to expand other work-based learning opportunities, such as job-shadowing and workplace visits.

ONE EXAMPLE OF HOW CPS is seeking to expand work-related opportunities for teens is its partnership with Genesys Works, a non-profit that places about 100 students a year in 20-hours-a-week jobs during the school year.

Typically, students have come from four CPS high schools with work-study programs, as well as from 21 other high schools, including charters, that partner with the organization.

But for the first time this year, the program will be open to any student in CPS, creating opportunities for more students. The number of spots available will increase to 125, with a goal of eventually reaching 300 students a year.

The application process is competitive, but the program targets mid-level “B to C-plus” students who usually have fewer opportunities than those earning straight As. Students submit essays, are trained on how to answer interview questions, and then go through interviews during spring break.

Top candidates are invited to an eight-week summer training program that covers employment skills and gives students basic training in technical support for computers, for which they earn a Cisco IT Essentials credential.

Students who succeed in the training are placed in an internship. They also participate in a weekly class that guides them through the process of applying to colleges. The message to students is that everyone needs to attend college
after graduating high school, Genesys Works Executive Director Eric Patton says.

Companies where the interns work pay Genesys Works and the nonprofit, in turn, pays the interns. (Genesys Works keeps the difference, which covers about three-quarters of its costs.) The interns start out earning $8.50 an hour but have three opportunities during the year to earn raises of up to $1 an hour, depending on their performance.

Those who go on to work in the industry could garner a starting salary of $30,000 to $40,000, or more if they study a specialized field like programming.

However, Patton notes, one of the biggest challenges the program faces is “the perception of what a high school student can do.”

“When people think of high school internships, they typically think of untrained students who can make copies, file things, and make coffee for people,” Patton says. “That’s just a different paradigm.”

**DURING THE 2011-12 SCHOOL YEAR,** students earned 4,495 credentials through career education programs. But one-third of those credentials were certifications in Microsoft Office programs or personal financial literacy—credentials that do not give students a significant chance for better job opportunities. Just one-fifth of credentials earned by career education students directly prepare them for specific jobs.

At Austin Polytech, students are more likely to earn credentials that can lead to living-wage jobs, though a Chicago Tribune investigation in late January found few students have actually gone on to work in the manufacturing sector.

Austin offers certifications from the National Institute for Metalworking Skills. So far, three classes of students (roughly 190) have graduated from the school, and 150 students have earned more than 220 credentials, which help students obtain living-wage jobs in advanced manufacturing.

To get a credential, students must make an industrial part “perfectly, maybe within three-thousandths of an inch” and then take a proctored test, says Dan Swinney, executive director of the Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council.

Swinney says that in recent years, the district’s handful of manufacturing programs have placed more of an emphasis on industry-recognized credentials. But they are demanding. “That’s what makes it a good credential,” he says.

At Gage Park High School’s Equipment and Technology Institute, another manufacturing program, about half of students who take the exams for Manufacturing Skill Standards Council credentials pass. Coordinator and teacher Krystian Weglarz says that success rate “is quite high for CPS students.”

“It’s not that they’re not prepared. The same struggles we have in a core class—whether it’s math or English or the ACT or standardized test scores—those are the same difficulties we face with any other certification, any other course, whether it’s low reading ability, low math ability or any of the things that come with it.”

Weglarz explains that his program has a broader goal. Rather than giving students a ticket to work in one specific career or even one industry, he focuses on improving their “soft skills,” such as a positive attitude and strong work ethic, through mentoring and social-emotional learning activities, and preparing them for college through workshops and school visits. Still, it’s with the knowledge that many students won’t go on to work in manufacturing.

However, even easier-to-earn credentials are not without value, says Rich Gelb, the assistant principal at Benito Juarez Community Academy.

“That’s a real thing and it’s an accomplishment for the kid, and it pushes them to move on,” he says. “It’s kind of like merit badges in Boy Scouts. It builds your resume. That’s not a bad thing.”

Outside the manufacturing field, students face similar struggles earning advanced credentials.

One example is at Julian High School. Only four students in the school’s broadcast technology program took a certification exam for Final Cut Pro video editing software in 2011-12 (the first year it was offered). Just two students passed. The credential is no guarantee of a job, but demonstrates that a student has mastered a skill that is virtually essential in the competitive broadcast industry.

This year, Julian teacher Kimberly Saunders hopes that the entire senior class in the broadcast program, 23 students, will take the exam, plus a larger number of juniors.

Like credentials that are useful but come with no guarantees, some jobs are useful for their indirect lessons.

Last summer, Gage Park High School student Karina Romano completed a manufacturing internship. She glued wood sticks to paper fans that would be handed out at parades. She made magnets. She cleaned.

Though the tasks were not demanding or exciting, Romano notes that she and other students learned valuable lessons: “How to be responsible, get there in time—and not complain about the job, because they actually paid you.”

Plus, she adds, “that we wanted to do a job we actually like.”
Navigating the work world

A federal Workforce Investment Act program gives young people intensive employment counseling, teaching them the ‘soft skills’ that make or break a job search

By Rebecca Harris

Shortly before lunch, a young man with a Super Mario backpack walks into James Zeckhauser’s office at Kelvyn Park High School.

Zeckhauser takes his paperwork and photocopies the electric bill the young man brought as proof of residency.

“Right now, what I know is you’re a man who’s brought in a lot of pieces of paper, with really cool dreadlocks. Oh, and you have a good GPA,” says Zeckhauser, a program manager and staffing specialist for Youth Guidance, a social service agency that runs federal Workforce Investment Act programs in Kelvyn Park, Harper and Wells high schools. Jumping right to business, he asks, “What are you good at, in your opinion?”

So begins Dekel Wicks’ job hunt through the Workforce Investment Act Youth program. WIA, which provides intensive help to students who have barriers to employment, such as homelessness or poverty,

In any given week, Zeckhauser juggles myriad tasks—hustling to find candidates to fill job orders, doggedly following up on applications his students have submitted, helping students practice for job interviews, and coaching them through tasks such as filling out online applications and calling prospective employers.

Though his main task is to help students find work, Zeckhauser’s ultimate goal is broader: to get students to connect with something—anything—that will put them on a path toward post-secondary education or a career.

Zeckhauser says that 14 of his are working, two had jobs but quit, and eight (five of whom have just joined the program) do not have jobs yet. Before the year ends, he’ll aim to reach a total enrollment of 20 current students, while continuing to shepherd more than a dozen program graduates, who receive a year of follow-up services.

Those results might seem impressive, but they are a drop in the bucket compared to the number of students in need. A fall 2013 report by the group Measure of America found that 5.8 million young adults nationwide—including one in three young people in South Lawndale and the Lower West Side, and one in four young African-Americans citywide—are “disconnected,” or unemployed and not attending school or job training.

Connecting students with a job or post-secondary training before they leave high school lessens the odds that they will join the ranks of the disconnected. And in an era when career-changing is common and more jobs are in the service industry, “soft” skills like attitude and punctuality—skills that WIA teaches—are increasingly important.

DAVE SIMPSON, DIRECTOR of counseling and prevention services at Youth Guidance, explains that most WIA programs target unemployed adults. Reaching out to youth is a new strategy.

“We are sort of an experiment to see if WIA can reach out into the schools and capture kids before they become chronically unemployed,” Simpson says.

Though small, the experiment has a moderate success rate so far: 69 percent of students have found a job, enrolled in college, enlisted in the military or are participating in job training by the time they exit the program.

If not for WIA, Simpson says, many students would find that soft skills—personal qualities such as being reliable and having a strong work ethic—are a big barrier to employment, even more so than the ability to do a job.

“Some of the things that have been stopping them in other places are beginning to stop them on the job too,” Simpson explains. “They’re feeling like they don’t want to go in [to work], or the boss is really unfair—all these small social-emotional crises that end up costing kids their jobs.”

Students often don’t know how the work world operates, and Zeckhauser says much of his time is spent teaching students the basics.

“The kids, for the most part, don’t know that getting a job is a competition,” he says. “They don’t know that to win, they need to articulate what their assets are.”

Zeckhauser, with his white beard and balding head, is approaching
that role. "I was surprised to learn there is a niche in the marketplace for kids," Zeckhauser says. "If you’ve got a dependable young person, there are firms that need them." Companies need workers to fill afternoon, evening and weekend shifts—times when young people are more likely to be available.

No matter the job, experience is valuable. "Some jobs are putting money in a kid’s pocket and helping them to learn how to deal with life with a job," as well as building references, Zeckhauser says. "Others are going to lead someplace."

Running interference is also important. One example: A young man was offered a security job and given an assignment but did not have the details of where he should go. When the person the student contacted didn’t respond, Zeckhauser tracked down a phone number for a higher-up in the company and helped the student get to the job site on time.

Students from middle-class families are more likely to get that kind of help from home. Zeckhauser fills that role.

**AS DEKEL WICKS’ INTERVIEW continues,** he tells Zeckhauser he’s good at "helping people, cleaning, and moving stuff around. In school, I’m good at reading, writing, and a little bit of science. I don’t write a lot, but that isn’t a problem. I like reading."

"Why do you like reading so much?" Zeckhauser asks.

"I learn a lot of new stuff when I read," Wicks replies. "It helps me learn new words."

Next, Zeckhauser asks Wicks what his friends say he’s good at. "Some say I’m good at giving advice," Wicks says. "My friend needed advice about his girl problems. He was having trouble communicating with his girl, and I told him to just be himself, like he was with me and others."

Kelvyn Park has been a good school for him, Wicks says, except that he’s gotten into two unnecessary fights—off school grounds—out of self-defense.

Zeckhauser asks if he’s had a job interview before. "I was scared," Wicks says. "That was normal. Everybody’s scared during interviews," Zeckhauser says. "As we work together, I’m not going to say your anxiety is going to go away, but I will give you tools, and if you use them, the interviews are going to be easier."

He explains more. "The reason I’m asking you about what you’re good at—that’s all some of the stuff you want to tell employers, that you like to learn, that you’re energetic.”

Zeckhauser asks Wicks if he’s ever done baby-sitting. Plenty of times, Wicks replies.

"One of the best jobs I know about, it’s not easy to get. It’s a summer job that pays about $12 an hour, as a park district camp counselor," Zeckhauser says. "That’s one we have to move on in February. Your baby-sitting experience is not just one or two kids, but herding whole groups. And my impression is they don’t have enough men candidates. Be sure to put in baby-sitting as a work experience, whether you get paid or not."

Zeckhauser asks Wicks if he is outgoing. "There are a number of jobs out there where if you are comfortable using that million-dollar smile of yours to help others feel connected, that could give you an advantage in the job market," he explains.

Wicks previously had a job at a local non-profit, where he helped clients apply for assistance with heating and electricity bills. "Did you just take [the papers you copied] or did you talk to the people?" Zeckhauser asks.

"I talked to the people," Wicks says.

Before wrapping up the interview, the two talk about Wicks’ goal of going to college. He would be the first in his immediate family to earn a bachelor’s degree.

"If you go to college, who gets hurt?" Zeckhauser asks. First-generation college students often face subtle barriers to finishing college, such as family obligations.

"Everybody would be upset if I had to go stay in a dorm," Wicks admits. "Don’t get me wrong, they’d be happy to see me go. But I think they’d probably cry. I think I would too.”

Zeckhauser ends by finding out about Wicks’ availability—"the number one thing firms want to know," he says. After school is fine, Wicks says. But weekends “depend on if my mom has plans or not. I baby-sit out south for my mom.”

Zeckhauser presses for details. Has Wicks’ family said they do not want him to work weekends, or does he “just know?”

"It’s only certain weekends when I’m needed," Wicks says.

The interview over, Zeckhauser shakes Wicks’ hand. The first lesson: “Business handshake—a slight squeeze. That’s how you give somebody a good impression.”

Zeckhauser says it’s important for him to get to know students and ask detailed questions about their families and school experiences.

**PRICE TAG FOR POSSIBILITIES**

School-based Workforce Investment Act Youth programs at three schools (Harper, Wells and Kelvyn Park) cost about $53,000 per school per year. If a WIA case manager serves 20 students, plus about 15 graduates for follow-up services, the price tag is a modest $1,500 per student per year. Expansion would raise the overall cost significantly. Providing services for all of Chicago’s 166,047 “disconnected” young people—those who are not in school or working—would cost around $249 million a year.

“The key to helping kids retain jobs is to understand what system they [live] in. It affects their ability to cope with all the struggles that come from having a job. If they have a support system, they can roll with a lot more,” he says. “What came up very late in the discussion with Dekel is the weekend babysitting commitment. If he’s not available weekends, that’s going to cut down on the options. He may, on the other hand, be a very easy sell for child-care jobs.”

**FINDING JOBS FOR TEENS** goes hand-in-hand with furthering their education, Zeckhauser says. “You help a kid get a job and they are more likely to graduate high school and go on to college,” he says.

He makes sure their jobs are compatible with school schedules. In contrast, students who find jobs on their own might end up leaving school to work.

Once students graduate, the support doesn’t end. Earlier that morning, Zeckhauser met with a graduate, 19-year-old Marbeline Molina, who is working her way through school at one of the City Colleges. Zeckhauser helped her find a job at clothing retailer T.J. Maxx earlier in 2013, and now she’s looking for a second job.

Like Wicks, she’ll be angling for a summer job as a camp counselor.

“Do you work with children?” Zeckhauser asks. She mentions babysitting. “Then we need to stick that in here.”

Zeckhauser also coaches her on how to ask her current supervisor to be a reference for a second job. “Start it with, ‘I love working here.’ Always start requests with that,” he says.

After helping Molina, Zeckhauser meets with a young man who is picking up a consent form for a shopping trip. Zeckhauser often takes young people who can’t otherwise afford it out to shop for work-appropriate clothing.

The young man’s job—his first—is working in cart return at a local supermarket.

“The biggest challenge,” Zeckhauser says, “is going to be finding polo shirts in November.”
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