

Book Review:
Maxwell, NL and V Rubin. 2000. *High School Career Academies. A Pathway to Educational Reform in Urban School Districts?* W.E. Upjohn Institute: Kalamazoo, Michigan.

This book reports on an important educational reform: giving marginal students more opportunities to gain meaningful vocational skills. Such reforms usually garner widespread support, albeit of the lip-service kind. But in *High School Career Academies* Maxwell and Rubin chart a serious and substantial effort made by one particular school district. The authors set out clearly the economic challenge, the response by their case study district, and the outcomes for the affected students over a seven-year period. In the telling, this is a balanced, sober account of the attempt to offer Career Academies as an alternative to traditional public High School education.

Maxwell and Rubin begin by stylizing the status quo in public schooling – the development of High Schools, the critiques of ‘comprehensive’ schooling, and the attempts at reform. Within the economic paradigm, they naturally lean toward schooling as a preparation for work, and toward an evaluation of education provision in terms of how it equips students with vocational skills. On these terms, there is some concern that education provision needs reform and particularly for those on the verge of entering the labor market. The first challenge is to define a reform that is effective but also has a set of distinct characteristics. Maxwell and Rubin properly begin by identifying the Career Academy as having: a school-within-a-school structure; an integrated academic and vocational curriculum; and employer and workplace involvement. At issue in the authors’ case study district is how to develop such academies, and whether they really are an improvement on current mainstream provision.

After discussion of their research method (Chapter 2), the authors describe the (lengthy and possibly arduous) development of the Career Academies in one district (Chapter 3). Of most interest to readers is likely to be the impact of such Academies (Chapter 4). The impact of Career Academies is measured through human capital effects in four ways: do such Academies increase human capital? Do they encourage students to remain in school longer? Do they enhance labor market outcomes? And do they encourage future trainability? The answers to each of these questions are based on careful economic evidence across 10,000 High School students at the margin between work or further post-secondary study. In brief, the answers prove beguiling or even paradoxical. Where the Academies do have some positive impact, it is through encouraging students to enroll for longer and endowing them with higher scholastic capabilities; it is not through enhanced work skills, employment or wages in the immediate post-school years.

Maxwell and Rubin then ask what are the specific components of a Career Academy that generate the highest impact (Chapter 5). This critical question plagues the internal and external validity of so much education research: the ‘intervention’ – be it an Academy, a voucher, or a computer – is not straightforwardly described and circumscribed. Where the intervention is multi-faceted, complex, or heavily contingent on interpersonal relations, the probability is low either that the effectiveness of the intervention has been accurately captured or that the intervention can be readily replicated in other settings. Maxwell and Rubin forthrightly acknowledge the absence of any defining characteristics that would make for a successful Career Academy. For this reform, the more obvious worry is that Academies will offer Career programs that are undercut by changes in the needs of the economy; but Maxwell and Rubin emphasise the problems of fully implementing an Academy program as well.

Throughout, the authors maintain a dispassionate tone that lends credence to their analysis: where the Career Academy outcomes are disappointing, the authors properly – and without polemic – substantiate such findings. Case studies of reform need to report the bad and the good (and the Epilogue – updating the reader on recent events – uses this reporting style

directly). Also pleasing in this case study is the salience of economic analysis within the reform process. The motivation for the reform is economic, and the evaluation of the reform maintains this focus. The only omission is a proper cost-benefit analysis, particularly unfortunate given the substantial extra resourcing that is required for such Career Academies. Notwithstanding, on the whole this book makes a worthwhile contribution to the Economics of Education reform.

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