

# Wall-to-Wall High School Academies

## Pathways Spotlight Briefs

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Joel Malin, with Collaborating Educator David Carson

### Rockford School District 205

Grade Levels: PK-12

Students: 27,249

Schools: 46, including 5 high schools

Rockford Public Schools is currently the 4<sup>th</sup> largest school district in Illinois; Rockford is the most populous Illinois city outside the Chicago metropolitan area. Its student body is racially and ethnically diverse. Approximately 11.4% of students are English Language Learners, and 78.8% of students are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch. For additional information regarding Rockford Public Schools (e.g., student and educator demographics, student achievement, revenues and expenditures), please visit the [Illinois Interactive Report Card site](#).

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### Wall-to-Wall High School Academies

In this brief, we describe the inception, rollout, and initial implementation of wall-to-wall college and career academies in Rockford's four comprehensive high schools.

### College and Career Academies of Rockford

In each of Rockford's comprehensive high schools, all students will select and enroll in one of four college and career academies. At Jefferson High School, all 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students are already doing so. At the others, ninth graders are currently participating, with full rollout to occur in 2014-15.

These Academies are part of a district strategic plan with five major initiatives, called "Readiness Rocks," currently in process at Rockford. In addition to the College and Career Readiness initiatives, other Readiness Rocks include seven periods to success, 21st century learning environments, and preschool and college for all.

Academies are intimate learning communities that provide real-world experiences to students, linking schools and the workplace. Core academic coursework is provided alongside—and, ideally, in concert with—career- and pathway-specific courses that are unique to the academy. As currently structured, students in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades begin to chart a unique "pathway" by exploring a variety of career choices, largely via a semester-long, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade seminar course and related activities (e.g., career fairs, workplace visits, internal "academy fairs"). Then, prior to entry in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, students select one of four academies that they believe are best suited to their developing skills and interests:

- Business, Arts, Modern World Languages, and Information Technology (BAMIT)
- Engineering, Manufacturing, Industrial and Trades Technology (EMITT)
- Health Sciences (HS)
- Human and Public Services (HPS)

Within each academy, numerous pathways are available to students to provide specific preparation in a particular career area, while meeting Rockford's high school graduation requirements. These pathways, in turn, are designed to provide students with a plan to connect high school coursework and related experiences to future college and career opportunities.



Rockford's academy design is supported by three pillars: 1) Small Learning Academies, 2) College and Career Prep Curriculum for All, and 3) Integration with Business/Civic/Post-Secondary/Cultural Communities. The district has benefited greatly from partnership and mentorship with the [Metro Nashville \(Tennessee\) Public Schools](#), which has successfully implemented academies for several years, and from careful study and utilization of the [Ford Next Generation Learning](#) model. Also, they have established strong partnerships with area businesses and industries, which have already generously supported and enhanced the academy design.



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**Impact on students.** Because these academies are quite new and full rollout has yet to occur, data are relatively limited. Mr. Carson noted, however, that he and his colleagues were braced for a potential “implementation dip” during early implementation, and instead were very pleased to see an immediate positive impact in the form of noticeably improved 9<sup>th</sup> grade student attendance. As well, they have received only four mini-applications from 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who wish to switch academies for next year, which suggests student contentment with their initial selection and academy experiences.

Based upon their familiarity with findings from research and practice, Rockford educators expect these academies to benefit students in multiple ways. For instance, a smaller and more intimate academy environment enables stronger relationships among students and adults. Meanwhile, each student’s programming is tailored more closely to her/his interest areas and, therefore, is conducive to goal-oriented, developmental activities. In the end, it is expected that graduating students will be better prepared for smooth and well-informed entry into college, military, or the workforce.

***“To me, this is a systems approach where all hands are on deck...counselors, teachers, administrators, community members, everyone is working together to help students develop a vision for themselves and a plan for their future.” ~ David Carson, Executive Director of College and Career Readiness***

**Key points.** Rockford educators, in the beginning, were motivated to build an academic model that would truly engage students in relevant and meaningful learning, developing students’ literacy, numeracy, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Wall-to-wall high school academies, among other approaches/initiatives, appeared quite promising. In the spring of 2012, Rockford educators and partners obtained approval from the Board of Education of an ambitious and detailed academy plan and implementation timeline. Mr. Carson and his colleagues will gladly share details with interested educators; they are most grateful to those who have assisted them and would like to give back. Significant logistical and personnel-related restructuring, including the creation of a new position, “Academy Coach,” was necessary, and cannot be comprehensively described here.

Rockford Public Schools 205 website: <http://www.rps205.com/>  
Ford Next Generation Learning Model: <https://fordngl.com/>  
Rockford Public Schools 205 – Illinois Interactive Report Card: <http://iirc.niu.edu/District.aspx?Districtid=04101205025>  
Readiness Rocks Initiative Description: [http://www2.rps205.com/Newsroom/Pages/20111201\\_Readiness-Rocks!-Initiatives.aspx](http://www2.rps205.com/Newsroom/Pages/20111201_Readiness-Rocks!-Initiatives.aspx)

**Advice from the field.** Although the wall-to-wall academies are just getting underway at Rockford’s High Schools, already some lessons have emerged that could provide guidance to others who might wish to chart a similar course. First, successful models and approaches exist and can be tailored and incorporated; as well, seeking advice and mentorship from fellow educators has made a huge difference. Mr. Carson expressed tremendous gratitude to colleagues in Nashville, Tennessee who provided their time and advice to Rockford educators. Mr. Carson largely credits his Nashville colleagues for the almost surprisingly smooth rollout that is underway. These educators gladly shared their processes and even shared some of their “hiccups” so that Rockford could aspire to avoid them. Lastly, Rockford educators and partners appear to have designed their academies and all Readiness Rocks for sustainability and continual improvement. Multiple levels of support and partnership between community organizations and the schools are evident: Academy Support Teams are aimed to connect the community with teachers and students, College and Career Readiness Councils connect the community with district administrators, and the Alignment Rockford Board connects the community with school governance.

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This publication was prepared pursuant to a contract from the Illinois State Board of Education and is funded 100% through the federal Race to the Top grant. The total amount of federal funding involved is \$192.17, which represents 100% of the cost of producing the publication.

Printed by the authority of the State of Illinois, April 2014 (400 copies, ISBE Contract Number 2012-06779).

## PATHWAYS RESOURCE CENTER

[www.pathways.illinois.edu](http://www.pathways.illinois.edu)

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