



New York City Department of Education Response to Scholars at Work Evaluation

March 2019

Scholars at Work (SAW) is a collaboration between the New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and the New York City Department of Education (DOE) aimed at improving students' preparation for middle-skill jobs. SAW seeks to prepare students by exposing them to career opportunities, providing them with real-life work experience alongside adults, and developing their workplace skills. The City began SAW¹ in the 2009-10 school year across three Career and Technical Education (CTE) high schools and with 17 CTE high school seniors. The program initially consisted of a 13-week paid internship during the spring semester. The SAW team worked closely with work-based learning coordinators to identify seniors, on track for graduation, to apply through a competitive application process. Internships were available in multiple industries, with most internships in the manufacturing and transportation industries. Students were offered internships based on employer needs, student interests, and geographical proximity.

During the 2012-2013 school year, SAW introduced a career exploration module – a classroom-based curriculum to teach workplace competencies and career-readiness skills. The career exploration module was developed as a result of feedback from staff at SBS, DOE, schools, and participating employers. Students were able to participate in either the career exploration, the internship module, or both. By 2016-17 school year, approximately 525 SAW students participated in either the career exploration module or the internship module, while a small portion participated in both.

In 2016, the NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity commissioned an external evaluation of SAW by the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research institution, to assess how well the program prepares students for employment and postsecondary education. This memo summarizes the findings of the SAW evaluation and describes the continuous improvements to the program to address some of the report's findings.

Scholars at Work Evaluation Overview

The RAND Corporation conducted implementation and outcomes studies of SAW over the course of the 2016-17 school year. These studies focused on six cohorts of SAW participants who engaged in the program between the 2010-11 school year and the 2015-16 school year.

The implementation study addressed four main questions:

1. How are program components structured?

¹ SBS supported SAW through the Workforce1 Industrial & Transportation Career Center and the DOE implemented the program through the Work-based Learning Resource Center within the Office of Postsecondary Readiness.



**Department of
Education**

2. To what extent is the program meeting its articulated goal(s)?
3. In what ways are students expected to learn the skills needed in places of employment?
4. How are the relationships working across partners?

Researchers evaluated these questions by examining program documentation, engaging in informal observations, and conducting interviews and focus groups with a variety of stakeholders, including students, participating employers, and key staff at the DOE and SBS.

The outcomes study examined four postsecondary outcomes of SAW participants:

1. Postsecondary Education Enrollment
2. Employment Status
3. Industry of Employment (among those employed)
4. Earnings (among those employed)

Since SAW is a voluntary program, it was not possible to conduct a traditional experiment where some students were randomly selected to participate and others were not. Instead, the researchers used a propensity score weighting (PSW) technique, where they compared SAW participants' postsecondary outcomes to two groups of similar students who applied to, but were not selected for, NYC's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). The two comparison SYEP groups were 1) SYEP students who attended the same schools as SAW students and 2) SYEP students who attended CTE schools where SAW was not available. These SYEP applicants served as an appropriate source for the two comparison groups because – like SAW participants – they were looking for a guided employment experience with job readiness and career exploration workshops. Data for the study were obtained from SBS, DOE, the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development, and the New York State Department of Labor.

Scholars at Work Evaluation Main Results

- 1. SAW benefited student participants, employers, and DOE staff.** SAW students expressed that the program helped them determine their level of interest in different fields/industries, enhanced their communication skills, and allowed them to receive mentoring. SAW employers reported the internships served as a training program and their businesses benefited from student contributions. In sum, SAW is bringing together educators and employers in order to support a more strategic school-to-work pipeline.
- 2. SAW participation resulted in financial benefits.** Students employed during the year after high school, regardless of which module they participated in, earned twice as much as the comparison groups in the same year. This increase in pay potentially signals improved employment prospects and outcomes for students entering the labor market – a critical goal of SAW.
- 3. SAW's internal processes for continuous program improvement led to program enhancements.** Feedback from employers, students, and school-based coordinators enabled SAW program administrators to make targeted program improvements. Three main improvements were the addition of the career exploration module, enhancements to student monthly check-in procedures, and better-aligned internship matches through the incorporation of teacher input.

- 4. SAW participants were more likely to enter into the manufacturing or transportation industry.** SAW participants who completed the internship module and entered the workforce in their first year after high school were more likely than comparison group students to secure jobs in manufacturing and transportation, SAW's focal industry areas.
- 5. SAW had no impact on postsecondary education enrollment or employment.** SAW did not improve the likelihood that students will enroll in college or secure employment after high school. Students in SAW enrolled in college and were employed at similar rates to the comparison groups.
- 6. Employers reported that student internship placements often did not result in a "good fit."** SAW employers reported the matching process for student internships could be improved. They expressed a lack of knowledge regarding student interests, goals, and skills, which led to ambiguity around expectations and what type of student experiences to facilitate. Employers suggested the placement process should better align students' interests with employers' industries.
- 7. Disconnects existed between educators and employers.** The study revealed numerous disconnects between educators and employers. One disconnect centered on how changes are implemented in businesses versus schools; businesses are able to adapt more rapidly to evolving industry trends, while school change processes are more incremental. There were also differences in the quality of internship tasks, which ranged from menial to meaningful; in employers' knowledge about how to mentor students; and in employers' understanding of CTE coursework. In addition, stakeholders lacked a unified vision of SAW goals; some emphasized student-centered goals and others emphasized employer-centered goals. Lastly, while formal mechanisms for communication existed, stakeholders reported they proved challenging and were not well used.
- 8. Improvements to internal monitoring systems are needed to better measure and track SAW goals.** SAW staff relied on pre- and post- career exploration and internship surveys to measure progress on program goals. However, the study uncovered that these surveys did not measure student decision-making processes regarding college and their careers, nor did they inquire about the career and college-going aspirations of the students or the extent to which students explored different career pathways.

Future Plans

Based on the implementation of SAW since 2009 and from the report findings, there has been a focus on making improvements in the following areas:

- **Improve and expand work-based learning opportunities:** The SAW report shows that authentic work-based learning experiences tied to classroom academic and technical content areas are a win-win strategy for all stakeholders--the students, CTE schools, and employers. Improving and scaling work-based learning opportunities, including internships, through the active engagement of a growing pool of employers working to develop local talent pipelines is a priority.



An initiative that promises to significantly scale CTE internships is the recently launched School Based Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP).² This program was launched in summer 2018, in partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). In the school-based SYEP, the DYCD providers work closely with participating schools and educators in recruiting students, providing work readiness training, determining student interest, and matching students in developmentally appropriate internship placements.

- **Adopt an intermediary approach for service delivery:** In this approach, SAW on boarded a sector-based intermediary provider to coordinate client-facing responsibilities including: developing employer placements, learning about employer needs, and matching demand to supply by working with educators to identify students with the requisite skills. The intermediary approach is now scaled to all eight CTE sectors and is presently being implemented as the CTE Industry Scholars Program. Importantly, in addition to the SAW program model, employer partners from SAW have been transitioned into CTE Industry Scholars.
- **Streamline operations and investing in data systems to source, track, and monitor student and employer engagement:** The DOE has made incremental investments in building data systems to simplify key processes and manage important internship information. A student applicant portal centralizes student information and is used to improve internship placements. Additional functionality in the portal may include a comprehensive student employability profile to capture career readiness benchmarks from grades 9 - 12.
- **Foster and deepen the connection between employers and CTE educators through industry commissions:** Historically, there were few formal mechanisms to solicit and incorporate real time feedback and expertise from industry to CTE educators. Since 2013, the DOE launched eight industry commissions related to high growth industries. Each commission, led by industry representatives, meets quarterly with CTE educators. The objective is to increase communication, knowledge, and collaboration between industry and schools, and to strengthen the quality of CTE college and career pathways.
- **Provide flexibility in state policy to support postsecondary access to middle skill careers via apprenticeships:** The original purpose of SAW was to create a strategic school-to-work pipeline. Apprenticeships can be a legitimate pathway to high growth sectors such as technology, media, healthcare, and construction. The DOE continues its State-level advocacy efforts to attain recognition of apprenticeships as a viable postsecondary exit credential, flexibility in seat time requirements, and eligibility for state and federal funding to launch and scale apprenticeships.

² The School Based Summer Youth Employment Program was launched in summer 2017. This model is distinct from the control group (applicants denied admission by the lottery system between 2011-2016) used in this study. Unlike a lottery system, in School Based SYEP, participant selection is determined by schools. School Based SYEP is jointly implemented by selected schools and a provider partner. Schools participating in School Based SYEP were determined by enrollment numbers and economic needs index.