



Rooted in Tupelo Mississippi: Growing Local Talent Through the Career Academy Model

When the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) introduced the career academy model to high schools throughout the state, many in Tupelo wondered why they should consider this approach. After all, the Tupelo School District's success was evident in its high graduation rates and consistent college enrollment. However, after carefully examining the data, district leadership realized there was room for improvement. A significant number of students were leaving high school without a future career plan. To address the uncertainty surrounding student attrition, Tupelo adopted the academy model. "We implemented the academy model to help students better understand their post-graduation options and make informed choices about their future, ensuring they leave Tupelo High School with a clear plan. The model also serves as a platform for business engagement, enabling students to access opportunities within our community," explained Evet Topp, Director of Workforce Development.

It was at that point that Tupelo Public School District (TPSD) launched the Career Academy Model that would reimagine high school education by partnering its high school (Tupelo High School) and its CTE (Career-Technical Education Center-Tupelo Career-Technical Center). Academies connect classroom knowledge with the demands of the working world and provide students with practical experiences, career discovery opportunities, and a direct path to achievement after high school. Working in partnership with MDE and the National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC), Tupelo's District Team created an Action Plan and started restructuring their school. The Freshman Academy serves as the foundation for all career pathways in Tupelo High School, introducing students to career exploration, soft skills development, and academic planning. Through engaging coursework, mentorship, and exposure to real-world opportunities, students begin building a vision for their future as early as ninth grade. It ensures that every student begins high school with a strong foundation, a clear direction, and the support needed to thrive.

"Student and parent interviews yielded positive feedback regarding the MajorClarity interest inventory. This inventory integrates personality and learning style evaluations with career exploration data to produce individualized assessments for all career paths. The ninth-grade students then present their findings to their parents. This assists parents in understanding the factors driving their child's academy preference." – NCAC Reviewer

By the end of their freshman year, students consider four broad options for 10th – 12th grade:

- CAB Academy (Communications, Arts & Business)
- 2HS Academy (Health & Human Services)
- STEM Academy (Science, Technology, Engineering & Math)
- Middle College Academy (Graduate Simultaneously with a high school diploma & associate degree)

Each academy integrates core academics with career-focused electives, industry certifications, and work-based learning opportunities. Local businesses, colleges, and community leaders partner with the district to

provide mentorships, internships, and job shadowing. Teachers, staff and administrators at both the high school and district levels, have helped to build relationships through advisory board meetings, and having an increase in social media presence to highlight student success stories, employer partnerships, and academy events. The district's relationship with local industry has become symbiotic: schools supply talent and training, and businesses supply real-world challenges, equipment, and mentorship.

In 2025, the Freshman Academy was recognized nationally as a *"Model Academy with Distinction."* This recognition positions Tupelo's Freshman Academy as a premier academy on a national scale and highlights the academy's outstanding performance in curriculum, student engagement, community collaborations, and preparation for higher education.

"The Freshman Academy's community outreach program has shown significant success. A key factor was the strategic appointment of Head Basketball Coach Robert Green, responsible for partnership development and the organization of campus visits for ninth-grade students. Coach Green, a recognized member of the community, is the designated point of contact for community involvement, which makes participation more streamlined." – NCAC Reviewer

ENROLL! EMPLOY! ENLIST! Empowering Futures, Strengthening Communities is the mission behind Tupelo Public School District's Academies. Whether students choose college, career, or military service, the Academies provide the skills, experiences, and support to help them succeed. validating the district's strategic approach to workforce development and student empowerment. Looking ahead, TPSD continues to expand its academies, with plans to introduce new pathways to becoming Model Academies with Distinction and deepen community partnerships. The district is committed to ensuring every student graduates with a plan, a purpose, and the skills to succeed.

"In the Student Interviews, one English Learner student explained how the Freshman Academy's engaging, hands-on exercises allowed him to adapt without quickly. A visit to the CTE Center's on-campus program ignited his passion for automotive technology, leading him to research the local community college's pathway. He talked about how his Freshman Academy Exploring class capstone project would help him create a detailed roadmap for high school and his future. "The academy can open doors for students and their future." – NCAC Reviewer

The Career Academy model has not just changed how students are taught — it has shifted their orientation toward the future. By connecting classroom learning to real work, TPSD is giving students the skills, the confidence, and a plan to build meaningful lives — whether they choose college, career, or military service. In doing so, TPSD is cultivating not only better outcomes but a stronger, more resilient community where opportunity is visible, attainable, and anchored in the place students call home.
