Defining Career Academies
Career Academies are small learning communities established at the high school level that use career strands as an organizing framework for learning and instruction, as well as for engaging the interest and energies of students. First established 35 years ago and geared toward restructuring large high schools into small learning communities and creating pathways between high school, further education, and the workplace, the approach of the Career Academy has expanded to an estimated 2,500 high schools across the country.

Although minor variations can be found, several standards are common to a well-designed Career Academy:

- Having a central goal of fully preparing students for higher education and solid careers in the workplace, and emphasizing academic instruction to deliver a challenging, standards-based college preparatory curriculum in the context of a broad occupational or career strand;
- Basing voluntary recruitment and enrollment of students on their interest in a career theme;
- Establishing a multi-grade curriculum in which Academy sequences span at least 2 (and sometimes up to 4) years of the high school experience;
- Using cohort scheduling—a hallmark of small learning communities—to keep groups of students together over several years and ideally assign teachers to stay with those students over that period; and
- Involving private sector partners extensively, who may provide input into curriculum and standards, teach and interact with students, and provide opportunities for internships and jobs.1

Academies at Benson
A Taskforce comprised of alumni, community members, business leaders, faculty, staff and external stakeholders identified three Career Academy themes: Business & Entrepreneurship, Health Professions, and Construction & Design. As freshman, each student will be in a cohort or small learning community. The freshman class will be divided into two cohorts, known as the Green and White Freshman Teams, to represent the school colors. As sophomores, students will have the option to enroll in one of the three academy programs. With all students involved in an academy, this is known as a Wall-to-Wall Career Academy High School – the first and only in Omaha Public Schools.

In an effort to help students make good decisions about academy participation, all freshman students are required to take a career choice class, called “Goals and Pathways for Success” (GPS). This course gives students an opportunity to explore these questions: Who am I? What do I want? How do I get it? In answering these questions, students develop skills in budgeting, decision-making, goal-setting, and career research thereby providing a solid foundation for students to select their future career academy.

Each of the career academy programs will introduce students to “Career Ladders”; opportunities for students to enter employment directly after high school, continue their postsecondary training (at a community college and/or university) or do both – work and continue with school. All students will have access to a college preparatory curriculum. Instruction will be tailored to the individual student and s/he will have access to Honors and Advanced Placement® coursework in each of the three academy programs.