How Rural Youth Prepare for their Futures

Adolescents making the transition to adulthood face a number of important decisions about postsecondary education and possible future careers. For this reason, it is important that adolescents take part in activities and services to help them learn about their interests and abilities, while learning more about possible educational and career opportunities. Although aspects of the rural context such as smaller schools and more close-knit connections between families, schools, and the broader community may provide greater opportunities for positive youth development, rural youth may also face a number of challenges, such as geographic isolation that can limit their access to college and career information. A major goal of the Rural High School Aspirations Study was to gather data on 1) where rural youth go for information about college and future careers, and 2) what types of college and career preparation services and programs are available to rural youth.

Key Findings

Our findings indicate that rural youth use multiple sources for information about their futures. Most students reported talking to a number of individuals including parents, friends, teachers, and school counselors. Students also reported the most helpful sources of information were parents and school counselors. Students in low income and remote rural schools were more likely to talk to teachers about their futures and to report that teachers were more helpful, suggesting the teachers may play a particularly important role in more isolated schools or schools with fewer economic resources. Regarding more formal school programs, most rural youth have talked to counselors about college and future careers or taken part in classroom discussions about their postsecondary plans. However, the majority of rural youth reported they had not taken part in school-to-work transition programs such as internships, mentorships, or job shadowing. This was not the case for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities were more likely to report that they had taken part in school-to-work programs than their non-disabled peers. At the school level, our findings indicate that larger schools with higher student enrollment were more likely to offer college prep programs compared to smaller schools. In addition, smaller schools and more geographically isolated schools were less likely to offer advanced placement courses.

What This Tells Us

Results of this work suggests that while rural schools may differ in the college and career services provided, rural youth seek information about their futures from sources both within and outside of the school. Within the school, most rural youth have taken part in counseling activities by talking to a counselor or receiving instruction and taking part in classroom discussions about their futures. However, few students have taken part in career exploration programs. Taken together, these results suggest that while rural youth find teachers and counselors to be helpful in making decisions about their futures, few take part in exploration activities to help them learn more about themselves and the world of work. Rural schools should encourage students to continue discussing their futures with teachers and counselors while also encouraging students to take part in school-to-work transition programs to help students consider possible future careers. Schools with limited resources should capitalize on rural social capital (e.g., parent-school-community leader partnerships) to help create opportunities for rural youth to learn more about postsecondary educational and career options.

References

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