

# Part-Time Work and Student Achievement

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**T**he National Center for Education Statistics (1997) reports that about 30 percent of U.S. adolescents work while enrolled in school. Does work have any effect on students' academic performance? Are there other side effects—either positive or negative—that educators, parents, and policymakers should know about?

## School and Work: The Effects

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (1998) studied the effects of after-school jobs on adolescents. The researchers first examined the value of the kinds of after-school jobs that most students held. Most jobs, they found, were disconnected from what students learned in school, did not systematically teach the job skills necessary for advancement, and provided little meaningful interaction with adult supervisors.

The study showed that the number of hours that 10th graders worked increased the number of absences from school, especially among those students who worked more than 30 hours a week. In addition, working more than 30 hours a week during high school was associated with lower levels of future education attainment. And the extent to which students remained in school decreased as the average weekly hours of work rose.

The report also found, however, some benefits from after-school work. For instance, students who balanced school and work by limiting their work hours gained valuable time-management skills that permitted them to work when they went to college. Interestingly, neither the type of job nor the number of hours that students worked influenced the amount of time that students

spent on homework. The report stated that because the U.S. average for homework time is low (fewer than four hours a week), employment was unlikely to diminish students' already modest investment in homework. The report found some evidence, however, that students who worked selected undemanding courses to maintain high grade point averages (GPAs).

minority students, especially those who went from not working to working more than 20 hours a week in most or all weeks of the school year. These students' averages declined about 0.20 grade points in one year. Conversely, Oettinger found that summer employment, unlike employment during the school year, has no adverse impact on students' GPAs.

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Students were likely to have lower achievement scores if they worked longer hours during the school year.

Kusum Singh (1998) found that part-time work affected both standardized test scores and grades. The number of hours that students worked had a significant negative effect on their standardized achievement levels: Students were likely to have lower achievement scores than their peers if they worked longer hours during the school year. In other words, the greater the number of hours that students worked, the greater the negative effects on standardized measures of achievement. Singh also found that the more hours that students worked, the more likely they were to get lower grades. Students' previous grades also affected their later working behaviors—students who had higher grades in elementary and middle school were less likely to work longer hours when they reached 10th grade.

Gerald Oettinger (1999) found that students of high ability were likely to hold regular jobs that required few hours each week. But school-year employment tended to compromise academic performance overall. The largest adverse effect was among

Another study (Singh & Ozturk, 2000) reported that students who worked part-time tended to modify their course selections. Part-time work intensity (or the number of hours worked) had a significant negative effect on the number of mathematics courses that these students took. The more hours that students worked, the fewer mathematics courses they completed, which, in turn, led to lower achievement in mathematics. Similarly, part-time work intensity had a negative effect on science course work; the higher the work intensity, the fewer science courses students took.

## Weighing the Options

In addition to affecting academic performance, work sometimes changes behavior: Students who worked while attending school experienced higher rates of such problem behaviors as alcohol and other drug use and minor delinquency in comparison with their nonworking peers (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1998). Another study (Mortimer, Finch,



Ryu, Shanahan, & Call, 1996) supported the finding that work-intensity variables were significant predictors of alcohol use among students.

Educators, parents, policymakers, and especially students must carefully weigh the pros and cons of part-time, after-school work. Although students may earn extra cash, they may also discover that working while attending school is not worth the cost. ■

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