

Graduation and Then What? A Case Study of One Rural Appalachian High School

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the current curriculum at a local high school in the Appalachian Region of Ohio in preparation for the transition from high school and if students believe an afterschool program is necessary. The participants in this study included fifty high school students consisting of ten students representing each grade level (9-12) and ten students identified with special needs being served with current Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The participants were asked to complete a survey examining perceived preparation for post-high school life. In addition, the survey explored interest in participation in an after school transition program. Currently, discussion of transition has increased in the local school district, but implementation of strategies is still lacking. The goal of this research was to determine if changes need to be made to the curriculum and the subsequent implementation of after school transition programs. The literature provides examples of current successful afterschool programs and the implementation of career-based classes.

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The purpose of this study was to determine whether students at an Appalachian rural high school believe afterschool transition programs and career education are needed to increase academic achievement and motivation to graduate. Additionally the study explored whether such programs and curriculum development led to greater success for students transitioning into their roles after graduation. According to other studies involving afterschool programs student achievement increases, attendance rates are higher, and graduation rate improves. This study was designed to see if students believe these same outcomes could occur at their high school and if they did what would be needed to get students to attend. With the results of the current study, the high school involved in this study could evaluate the current curriculum and further investigate the value and possibility of creating afterschool programs for students who display interest. The need for this study was based on the high number of students who appear to not be receiving the training and skills necessary to transition successfully into the “real world” after high school.

Review of the Literature

“Despite all of the attention and changes made in education recently there has been no answer to the problem of how to increase student achievement, engagement and transition into success after high school” (Hyslop, 2009, p. 33). Mohr (2008) reports that, 2,500 students drop out of high school daily thus increasing the need to align school curriculums with real world applications. Even when students complete high school, the majority enter the workforce immediately and forego post-secondary education. According to Hyslop, only fifty percent of students who decide to pursue postsecondary education will graduate from college (2009).

Many administrators and educators believe that failure for students to complete high school or fall short of their potential is due to the disinterest and boredom they feel toward the educational institution (Hyslop, 2009). Hyslop (2009) states there is strong evidence that increasing career

academics can improve overall student performance. Career academics are directed toward developing a well-educated and skilled workforce by providing students the opportunities to learn the skills of a trade (Hyslop, 2009). Bolger (2008), a career education teacher, reports that the majority of students who benefit from career education are students with special needs and are less likely to pursue postsecondary education.

Over the years, there has been a positive correlation between students with special needs or who come from low socioeconomic status and school dropout (Reducing Dropout, 2009). These groups, in particular, can benefit from Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELOs), which include afterschool and summer programs (Reducing Dropout). Services that can be offered during ELOs include academic tutoring, life skills, and job training. These extended school sessions can help to reduce the effects of poverty on students and give students with special needs the extra hand they may need to attain greater success in the classroom (Reducing Dropout). According to the National Governors Association (NGA) Best Practices report (2009), students who have participated in well-structured ELOs during nonschool hours are less likely to drop out of school and subsequently increase achievement scores.

As many students enter the workforce immediately after graduation, high school inevitably becomes the environment to which “real world” applications necessary to live independently and find employment are learned (Mohr, 2008). Hyslop (2009) states, “consistent involvement in business and industry provides many opportunities for students to learn workforce needs” The NGA (2009) states that job training programs at the high school level can teach students important skills and workforce behavior. Extended education and job training programs give students extra time and help needed to improve and increase their academic success (Reducing Dropout, 2009).

The National Academy Foundation reports that ninety percent of students enrolled in academic academies graduate and eighty percent continue on to college (Hyslop, 2009). Unfortunately, of the six

million students enrolled in after-school programs in the United States only eight percent are of high school age with the remaining ninety-two percent divided between elementary and middle school students (Jacobson, 2008). The populations in need of extra opportunities are not attending these programs missing opportunities to connect with future employees and gain life skills. Career Academies establish connections between high school and the workplace where students gain knowledge about their future (Hyslop, 2009).

Career academies are designed as a school inside a school that enrolls thirty to sixty students who all share the same classes and teachers (Hyslop, 2009). They create a partnership between the school and area businesses where students can train under business professionals to attain job skills. There are currently 2,500 career academies operating in the United States (Hyslop). Hyslop states that through career academies, local businesses can receive a continuous flow of well qualified employees. Additionally, the benefits of career academies include greater earnings among graduating seniors and advanced preparation for college (Hyslop).

Incorporating Career Skills in the Classroom

In most schools students do not spend enough time on career exploration and development (Kosine, 2008). According to surveys conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, there is no significant relationship between vocational credits students receive and the careers in which they end up working (Kosine, 2008). It is obvious there is a need to offer a broader range of occupational skills in classes in preparation for career attainment. Similar studies reveal that students are graduating without receiving the necessary experiences and information to develop career identities (Kosine, 2008). After-school programs can provide much more than career exploration or job-skills training.

There are many different ways educators and schools can incorporate career training in an academic setting. Several examples are described in the following paragraphs. The first instance is in the area of cooking. Bolger (2008) is an educator in the field of family and consumer science who teaches a commercial food class and has a Ph.D. in Occupational and Technical Studies. The commercial food class is designed to teach students skills needed in the food service industry with lessons focusing on the incorporation of math skills such as managing money and measurements. Students use ingredients and follow recipes using measuring cups. Additionally, they learn to quote costs for catered events and sell products to other students at school.

Bolger (2008) integrates other subjects to the foods class, such as social studies. Students learn how to make food from different countries around the world. Not only do students learn new cultures by preparing the food, students learn the geography and history of those countries. One of the biggest projects for the class is a dinner project. The project calls for students to fix a well balanced meal by selecting recipes, making grocery lists, comparing food prices, preparing, cooking, table setting, serving, and cleaning up the kitchen.

Another subject area that schools are incorporating career skills in is math. Some schools have resorted to using carpentry training as a means to teach math and provide the experience of learning a trade. According to Milroy, many conventional math skills are utilized in carpentry (Mohr, 2008). Incorporating a trade like carpentry during math class helps answer the question, “when will I use this kind of math?” Skilled tradesmen are difficult to find in some communities and incorporating carpentry classes with math facilitates, and trains the next generation of skilled laborers.

Along with incorporating career skills into classrooms, schools need to educate students about career clusters that will be expanding at the time of their graduation. A youth-based program called the Invention Factory is designed to increase interest in science and engineering careers for women,

students with disabilities, and other at-risk students (Speitel, 2007). The Invention Factory partners with the University of Hawaii and instructors are often graduate students and other employees from the university.

It is important that students receive career skills while participating in academic course work in preparation for entering the workforce. According to multiple studies conducted with students in the United States, both high school and college graduates lack the skills to qualify for high paying careers in science and technology fields (Bieber, 2005). To help students in the New York City school district increase their skills and awareness in the field of technology, the district has partnered with Queensborough Community College. The partnership is called the Laser Academy and focuses on teaching young women and minorities about lasers, optics, and fiber optics (Bieber).

As more importance is placed on careers in technology and science, educating students in these fields becomes increasingly critical. Bill Gates spoke to the National Governors Association (NGA) on the topic of school budgets and stated that American students are not qualified to fill the available careers offered by major hi-tech companies and those jobs are being filled by students from other countries (Flip the Education). If students from foreign countries are taking jobs once available only to Americans, the importance of after school programs such as the Invention Factory and the Laser Academy is greatly increased.

Another college and school district partnership is between the University of Hofstra and the Long Island School District (Schwartz, 2008). Hofstra provides opportunities for graduate students majoring in special education to help students struggling in math and literacy in an after-school setting. The school district provides transportation to the University and snacks while the college creates the activities and provides the instructors (Schwartz). This partnership benefits both the high schools and

the university by providing the extra instruction students need while giving graduate students experience in the field.

After School Programs and Achievement

Some studies indicate that after-school programs increase students' math and reading scores on assessments as well as non-academic functions such as social skills (Schwartz, 2008). In most after-school programs students receive more one-on-one attention which can help improve self-control and conflict resolution skills by talking with someone with whom they trust (Schwartz). After school programs also can help students develop a supportive relationship with adults as well as positive peer relationships, which can translate into a strong sense of belonging most students need to develop properly (Schwartz).

Kiker (2008) suggests that additional benefits of extended school days include much needed guidance for students and gives them a place to address life's challenges. Programs that involve building or creating projects can also give young adults a sense of achievement that can increase their desire to attend school, leading to improvements in attendance (Speitel, 2007).

According to a study completed by Hall (Jacobson, 2008) students in Chicago who enrolled in the After School Matters program achieved higher attendance than students not enrolled. After School Matters is a non-profit organization that offers Chicago high school students out-of-school activities in science, sports, technology, and the arts (After School Matters). The program operates through partnerships with the Chicago Park District, public library system and other community-based organizations around the city (After School Matters). Students are also less tardy to school and class, outcomes also attributed to the program (Afterschool, 2010). In Hawaii there is another after school program that focuses on math and science careers.

At the Invention Factory students get to build and use technology to create real engineering projects that are tested for all students to see (Speitel, 2007). According to Speitel , professor of Curriculum Research and Development at the University of Hawaii, the Invention Factory's projects get students excited about their work. With success, students become proud of their work leading to increased achievement in the classroom. Programs such as After School Matters and The Invention Factory give students experience working in subjects or on projects they may not otherwise get to do. Other than these specific programs after school programs can take other forms.

According to Afterschool Alert, some school districts in New Haven, Connecticut have partnerships with museums and colleges that allow visitation trips to learn from the museum exhibits or experience college-like activities (2009). Another program described by Afterschool Alert (2009) is Hallways to Learning, which creates clubs or classes that focus on students interests such as; cardio club, jazz music class, writing club, culture club, film club, and book club. Extended School Hours or after school programs can be an excellent outlet for students who do not want to play sports or participate in clubs. Extended school days involve art, music, and technology training as well as standard academics.

After school programs find community members to mentor students in business and other areas of need (Kiker, 2008). Community members as mentors provide positive role models for students. Attending an after school program can also lead students to career paths. Career Pathways Partnership project attempts to help schools in high-need communities by attracting students to the education field (Afterschool). The program is designed to help at-risk students become a valuable resource to future at-risk kids by becoming a successful educator coming from the same community (Afterschool). Partnership programs provide counseling opportunities for students who are in need of a confidant (Afterschool). Career Pathways Partnerships espouse wraparound services that include; job assistance, financial aid or scholarship assistance, counseling, transportation assistance, job coaching, as well as many more

services (Afterschool). According to a study completed by the Afterschool Policy Brief approximately one out of five students enrolled in a two-year program will graduate (Afterschool). In contrast, approximately fifty percent of students enrolled in a Career Pathways Partnership program enrolled for their senior year (Afterschool). It is clear there are successful examples of how after-school programs can benefit a wide range of school districts.

Successful Afterschool Programs

There are many demonstrated benefits of after-school programs or extended school days, yet these programs are often not being provided at the high school level (Barr, 2006). School districts need to ensure success of after-school programs. What is needed for afterschool programs to be successful and excite students to participate? School districts need to be willing to invest money, people, and time into the program. Creating partnerships with local businesses or universities will offset the cost of these programs (Afterschool, 2010). Partnerships with businesses can lead to apprenticeships, job training, or job coaching where students can actually learn at the jobsite. Creating a partnership with universities can provide afterschool programs with graduate students or other staff who can instruct or facilitate the development of certain skills. Schools can even create partnerships with other educational facilities such as museums.

Another partnership school districts can form is with the library services in the county (Griffin, 2010). By creating a partnership, school districts can share cost and responsibility with other professional organizations while providing an alternative setting for the program. The connection between the school, family, and community is crucial to have a strong supportive group in place for the program and students (Afterschool , 2007). Developing positive adult and peer relationships in these programs assists students in making connections within their community (Barr, 2006). One role of educators and other adult participants is to create an environment where students feel valuable and are

less likely to be absent (Little, 2005). Some out-of-school time (OST) programs have an attendance policy where students enter a contractual agreement to attend to the best of their ability.

After school programs must also be designed based on the needs of students in the community. Some programs include tutoring for students in certain subjects or alternative credit attainment for students who need to make up classes to graduate. Other programs teach young adults skills they need to live on their own or college prep services for students interested in attending college. Activities must be designed to be meaningful and serve a purpose. Most students enjoy hands-on activities and out-of-seat work in place of typical academic activities and listening to lecture. The Invention Factory program enables students to use their hands to build projects with subsequent testing to determine success (Speitel, 2007). According to Little (2005), a senior researcher for the Harvard Research Project, out-of-school time programs are great for keeping students off the streets and out of trouble.

One major barrier to after school programs is transportation to and from the alternative setting. School districts have the option of using buses or creating other partnerships to help address this issue. School districts can apply for grants to run their afterschool program such as National Leadership grants and Museums for America grants (Griffin, 2010). A successful after school program can change the outcome for both struggling and successful students.

Who Needs to be Involved?

Difficulties with some after school programs include getting the population of students to attend who most need these sessions. According to the Vocational Equity, Research, Training, and Evaluation Center (VERTEC), administrators, counselors, and teachers must help design the programs based on skills their students need in order to build a successful career path (Teaching to, 2009). A panel of counselors and teachers should be created to identify nontraditional students who would most benefit from learning career-based skills (Teaching to). Once the program is established, the setting

must be decided upon, and the design finalized. According to a national survey completed by the Afterschool Alliance that included responses from 30,000 families, parents make decisions on afterschool programs based on cost, convenience and type of activity (Little, 2005). It is clear that selling the program not only to students, but to the parents is critical.

The creation of an inviting, clean, and safe environment for the after school program is important, however if the program takes place off school property it is even more important (Teaching to, 2009). Relationships should be established with middle school teachers in order to facilitate exposure to the program for younger students and spread interest upon reaching the high school level (Teaching to). Encouraging students who attend the sessions to invite their friends on days where fun activities are occurring is a good way to spotlight and share positive experiences offered by the program (Teaching to). To be truly successful, school staff must work together and cross curricular boundaries to plan and create meaningful activities and presentations for the students who attend. Using school announcements as well as highly visible bulletin boards to communicate information and projects could be posted in the school (Teaching to). Additionally information can be placed on the school's website with contact information for the coordinator of the program. Inviting local businesses to high school for career days can also create an open forum for questions that provide further information about specific jobs (Teaching to). Once students are able to self-evaluate and determine if they are prepared for college or a career, attendance in these programs may increase.

The Importance of Career Education

It is important for school districts to pay attention to career education and provide after school time to job-related skills. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 1996 and 2006, the United States lost three million manufacturing jobs, but gained seventeen million service jobs (Afterschool, 2009). The jobs held by students' parents are no longer available or the fallback excuse of

“working for my parents business” is no longer acceptable because those businesses may no longer thrive in today’s economy. Today’s economy requires young adults to possess new skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, computer skills, creativity and innovation, and cross-cultural skills (Afterschool). According to the Afterschool Alliance (2009) forty-five percent of high school graduates are lacking the skills to advance beyond entry-level positions. With manufacturing jobs no longer widely available, more and more students must turn to the service sector for particular careers in health care, education, green jobs, security, and energy (Afterschool Alliance). The world is becoming one large global business, meaning jobs are now based on cross-cultural skills such as foreign languages. As of 2009 one in every five jobs in the United States is linked to international trade (Afterschool Alliance). Through after-school programs, school districts can expose their students to global issues, technology skills, and language instruction (Afterschool Alliance).

After-school programs can also function as support systems for freshman who are just entering high school and for seniors getting ready to graduate (Gewertz, 2009). Not only can these programs provide support, they can guide struggling students to stay on track to graduate. Due to the flexibility of afterschool programs students that are within reach of graduation can “buy back” missed assignments, time, and credits outside of school hours and with supervision (Gewertz).

Possibly the most important function for some after school programs is the opportunity for students to make up credits to graduate. According to Afterschool Alert (2009) many educators are using afterschool programs to help struggling students make up credits or courses they may have failed. This provides students the opportunity other than “seat time”, time spent at a desk, to make up their work with more individual attention (Afterschool Alert). Alternative credit attainment offers the school district and the student flexibility to make up credits outside school hours. Students who have a real possibility of making up their classes are more likely to stay in school and graduate (Afterschool Alert).

Credits can be attained through such options as independent study, private instruction, art internships, community service projects, apprenticeships, and online instruction.

In the Stockton Unified School District in California, dropout rates were very high, during the 2006-07 school year with 2,403 students dropping out in grades nine through twelve (Gewerts, 2009). After establishing successful after-school programs and offering credit attainment, the number of dropouts reduced eighty-four percent the following school year (Gewertz). The goal of any school district should be to graduate students who will provide “human capital” to the country leading to increased economic payoffs for the United States and higher quality of life for the individuals (Rozycki, 2009). Ultimately, after school programs are valuable because they turn out young adults who have greater motivation, a higher sense of achievement, better attendance rates, and who are more likely to graduate than students who do not attend such activities. Students who complete after school sessions are more likely to be prepared for college and to enter the workforce.

Students in public school systems in the Appalachian region of Ohio may benefit from afterschool programs and increased career education. The question that needs to be answered at each high school is whether or not the students believe such programs are needed and would they attend them.

Method

The purpose of this study was to determine if an after school transition program and career education classes are perceived to be needed at a high school in the Appalachia region of Ohio. Although there are career centers available that students can attend, many do not because of the past reputation of the institution. This study asked fifty high school students their opinions about the current high school curriculum and whether or not they perceive a need for transition programs.

Location

This study was conducted in a rural high school in the Appalachia region of southeastern Ohio.

Participants

This study sample included fifty high school students from grades nine through twelve. The sample consisted of; ten freshman, ten sophomores, ten juniors, ten seniors, and ten students with a diagnosed disability being served with an Individualized Education Plan. The identified students were diagnosed with mild to moderate disabilities and received services in both a general classroom as well as a resource room. The remaining forty students were drawn from a variety of class levels ranging from traditional or college preparatory to honors classes.

Some of the participants attended classes based on a career-based path while others followed a college preparation program. Having a wide variety of participants allowed for a more representative sample of the student body at the high school. The students also came from a wide spectrum of socioeconomic levels representative of the local school district. Participants included those with no interest in attending college as well as those with great interest in furthering their education.

Surveys were anonymous so participants were not asked to put their names on them. The participants were selected at random allowing for a variety of high school students in the sample. Participants over 18 years of age were asked during classes or homeroom if they would participate in a research study. Those students were given consent forms and directed to return them to the researcher where they would receive the survey. Students under the age of 18 were required to provide parental consent, followed by student assent prior to participation. Each participant was asked to answer qualitative survey questions regarding transition and after-school programs. The participants were

asked to provide written responses based on their opinions in regards to their perception of their own career preparation based on their current education and career plans.

Instrument

To determine if high school participants in this study felt they were being prepared for their post-school transition, they completed a ten-question qualitative survey. The survey included questions requiring yes or no responses along with an area for further explanation. Participants were also asked if they would be interested in an after school program that would engage them in activities they would not normally experience during school hours. Students were then asked to provide suggestions for what skills or activities they would like to learn. For each question, students were given at least five lines to express their answers. The ten questions are listed below.

Question one: In your opinion are your classes at high school providing you with the knowledge and guidance that is needed to start your career path? Please explain.

Question two: In your opinion are your classes at high school incorporating enough career building skills into them? Please explain.

Question three: In your opinion are your classes at high school preparing you for the transition after high school into continuing education or career fields? Please explain.

Question four: Would you be interested in attending an after school program designed to help with transition and career building skills? Please explain why or why not.

Question five: Would you like to see more “real world” skills incorporated into the classroom curriculum? Please explain why or why not and what kind of skills you would like to see added.

Question six: If an after school program would be started what skills and services would you like to learn about?

Question seven: Some after school programs offer apprenticeships and tutorials with local businesses. Would you be interested in learning skills on site at a local business? If yes which ones? If no, why not?

Question eight: Are you or have you contemplated attending Local Career Center? Please explain this thought process. Why or Why not?

Question nine: In your opinion would having a more career-based education curriculum including after school transition programs help your achievement and motivation to do better in school. Please explain why or why not?

Question ten: If after school programs were to begin what would the Alexander School District need to do to get students to attend these sessions?

Participant' responses were collected and analyzed to determine the perceptions of high school students about their current curriculum and feelings about an after school program.

Procedures

The study participants were chosen at random by asking for volunteers in a variety of academic settings. Volunteers received consent forms that required a parent signature as well as the signature of the participant. Once the consent form was returned the participant received a hard copy of the survey. Each survey included ten questions for the participant to respond to. The surveys were completed in the presence of the researcher and collected once finished. Participants were not allowed to interact with others during the completion of the survey to ensure that responses were based only on the opinions of

the participant him/herself. The surveys were completed in a classroom in the high school where the students were enrolled. Each question provided space for participants to include explanations for their answers. On average participants required approximately twenty minutes to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

Once fifty surveys were collected, the yes or no portions of the survey were tallied on a sheet that included each question and a yes or no t-chart. The t-chart was used to incorporate the data into a bar graph displaying the number of participants who responded yes or no to each question. Reasons for the responses were also recorded below each chart. Below are the results of the study displayed in the order the questions appeared on the survey.

Results

The results of the study are presented using charts and participant responses. The questions were formatted for participants to answer yes or no followed by an explanation of the response. From the results a determination about the current curriculum of the high school as well as the need for an after school program could be assessed.

Knowledge and Skills

Question one: In your opinion are classes at [high school] providing you with the knowledge and guidance that is needed to start your career path? Please explain.

Students who responded positively to the first question included the following reasons and explanations to clarify their response; “Local high school offers a challenging curriculum by offering college preparatory classes.” “Most of the classes also incorporate “real world” activities that teach

valuable skills.” “Local high school teachers support the students and create challenging academic activities.”

Students who responded negatively to this question explained; “Local high school classes do not provide situations that require the use certain tools or equipment and may not offer the classes students want to take.” “Students would like to see more AP classes and teachers should stop teaching to the Ohio Graduation Test.” “More information should be provided about college and math classes need to incorporate more “real world” skills.”

Figure 1 provides a graphic display of participants’ responses to question number one

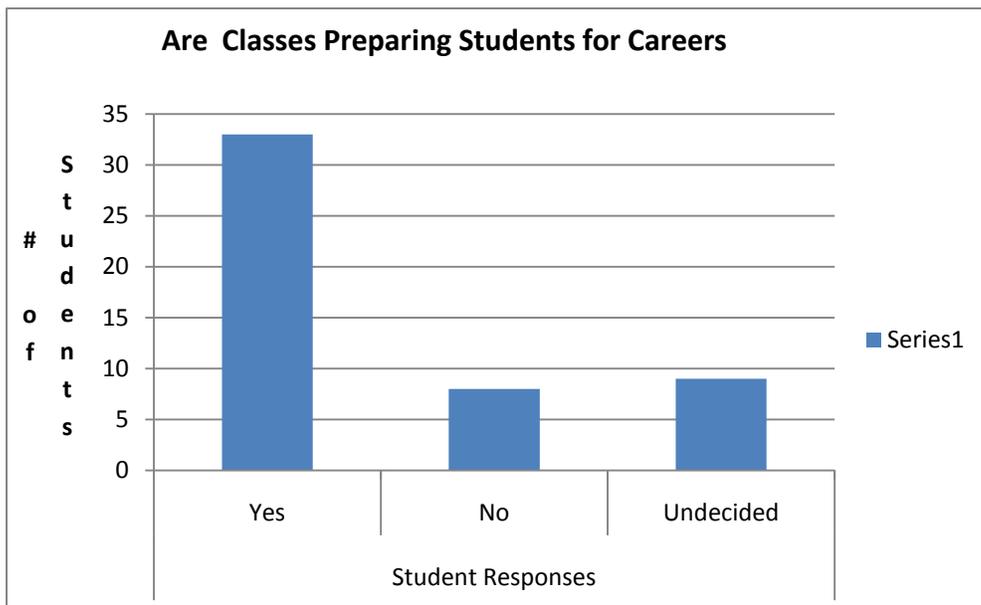


Figure 1. Are classes preparing students for careers?

Participants feel as if the classes offered are doing a good job educating and guiding students on a career path. The data shows that of the 50 students 32 (64%) believe the classes are successful in preparing students for their future while seven (1.4%) students said their classes were not doing a good enough job, and nine (1.8%) students were undecided or responded that some classes do meet their needs and some classes need to be improved.

Career Skills in the Curriculum

Question two: In your opinion are your classes at high school incorporating enough career building skills into them? Please explain.

Students who responded positively to the second question included the following reasons and explanations to clarify their response; “Teachers at the local high school demand important skills to be practiced and most of the classes teach valuable skills.” “There are classes like career search to help students as well as teachers willing to help out with college information.” “The local high school offers a lot of useful electives that students can take to learn valuable skills.”

Students who responded negatively to this question explained; “Assignments should ask students to use more resources and incorporate various career skills.” “Some teachers tell students to study for tests instead of teaching them “real world” knowledge and skills.” “Teachers should incorporate more hands on activities and increase the expectations on students.” “ There should be classes that teach interview skills and provide job-site training.” “New classes should be offered to better prepare the students for jobs and college.”

Figure 2 provides a graphic display of participants’ responses to question number two

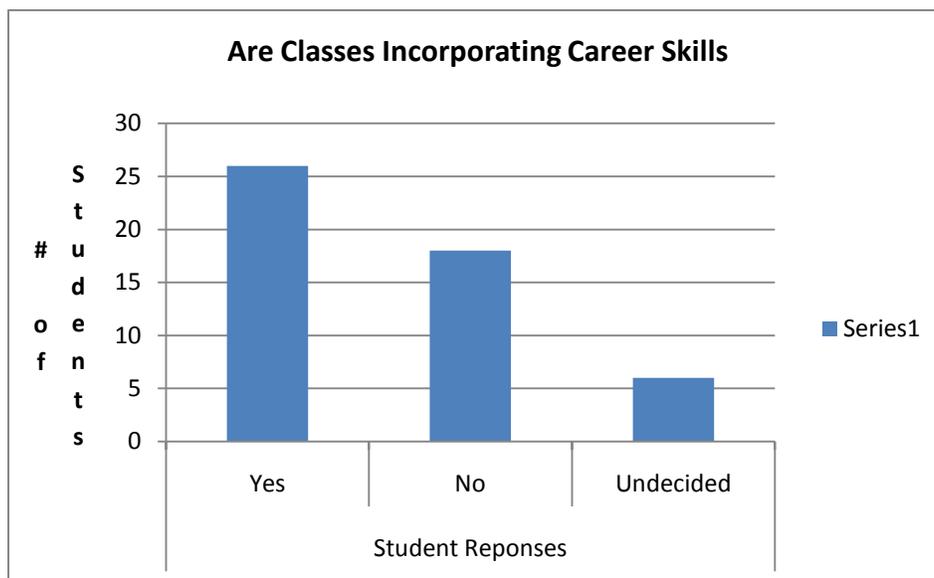


Figure 2. Are classes incorporating career skills?

According to the participants, classes are incorporating enough career building skills into the curriculum. The data indicates 24(48%) students believe classes have enough career skills built in, while 18 (36%) students said more career skills should be added, and six (12%) students were undecided, concluding that some classes do and some classes do not. Two (4%) students did not respond to the question.

Degree of Preparation

Question three: In your opinion are your classes at high school preparing you for the transition after high school into continuing education or career fields? Please explain.

Students responding positively to the third question included the following reasons and explanations to clarify their response: “The advanced classes at the local high school adequately prepare students for college.” “Students are given the choice of attending the local career center for more career based skills.” “Teachers run their classes like college courses and make challenging assignments.” “The teachers who assign projects and papers are helping prepare students for college.”

Students who responded negatively to this question explained: “Classes are preparing students more for college than for careers.” “Teachers need to explain more about transitioning from high school to college or entering the career field.” “Classes are not providing the knowledge students need to choose a career path.” “Classes should be rotated like college classes and teachers should make students write more papers like college professors do.”

Figure 3 provides a graphic display of participants' responses to question number three.

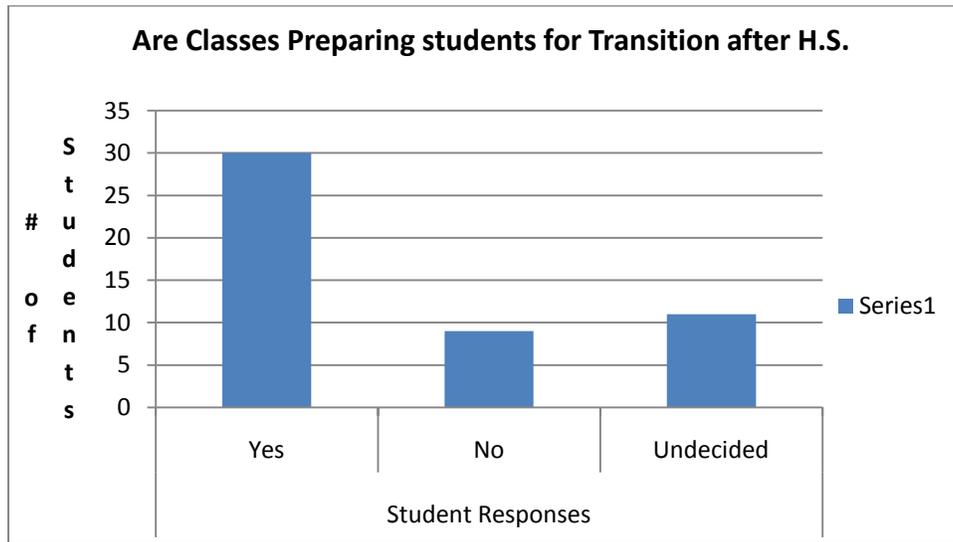


Figure 3. Are classes preparing students for transition after high school?

According to the participants, the school district is doing a good job preparing them for transition after high school. The data indicates of the 50 students 29 (58%) believe they are being prepared for transition while eight (16%) students believe they are not and 11 (22%) students are undecided. Two (4%) students did not answer the question.

Interest in After-School Program

Question four: Would you be interested in attending an after school program designed to help with transition and career building skills? Please explain why or why not.

Students who responded positively to the fourth question included the following reasons and explanations to clarify their response: "Sessions would have to offer hands on activities that were fun, exciting, and not too time consuming." "Program would have to give students a chance to experience life after high school." "After school programs would be helpful if it would fit into students schedules."

“If classes were free and functioned like a club.” “A program like this would be useful to improve career building skills.”

Students who responded negatively to this question explained: “Most students already have too much to do after school such as sports and would not have the time.” “Transportation may need to be provided for students who cannot drive.” “Some students may already work after school.”

Figure 4 provides a graphic display of participants’ responses to question number four.

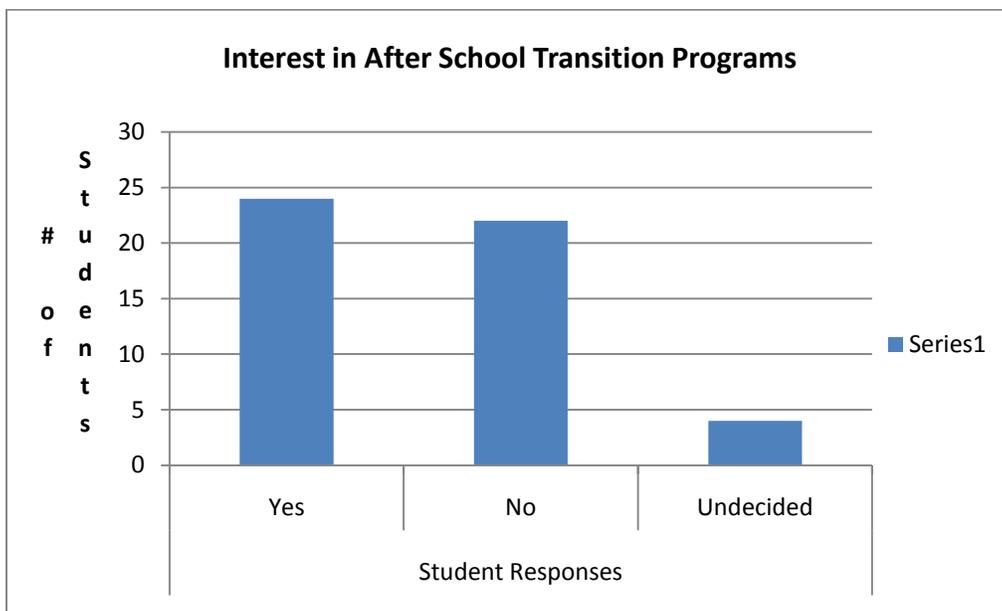


Figure 4. Interest in after-school transition programs

According to the participants, an after school transition program would interest some of them. The data shows that 24 (48%) students would be interested in attending these sessions while 21 (42%) students said they would not have the time or were not interested and three (6%) students were undecided. Two (4%) students did not respond to the question.

Need for More 'Real World' Skills

Question five: Would you like to see more “real world” skills incorporated into the classroom curriculum? Please explain why or why not and what kind of skills you would like to see added.

Students who responded positively to the fifth question included the following reasons and explanations to clarify their response: “Learning career skills could catch students’ interest and help improve career preparation.” “As long as skills were hands on and taught “real world” skills such as math.” “Sessions could help give students experience in particular career settings.”

“Skills: Students would like to learn more about nature and become better at measuring. Instead of reading about careers or college assignments make projects and practice skills.” Students would like to learn more about paying taxes, household items, and balancing checkbooks. Other ideas included cooking, changing oil or a tire, and working with a variety of tools.

Students who responded negatively to this explained: “Some students learn better by not doing hands on activities.” “Most “real world” skills are just common sense.” “Teachers would not take teaching these skills seriously and others already teach such skills.”

Figure 5 provides a graphic display of participants’ responses to question number five.

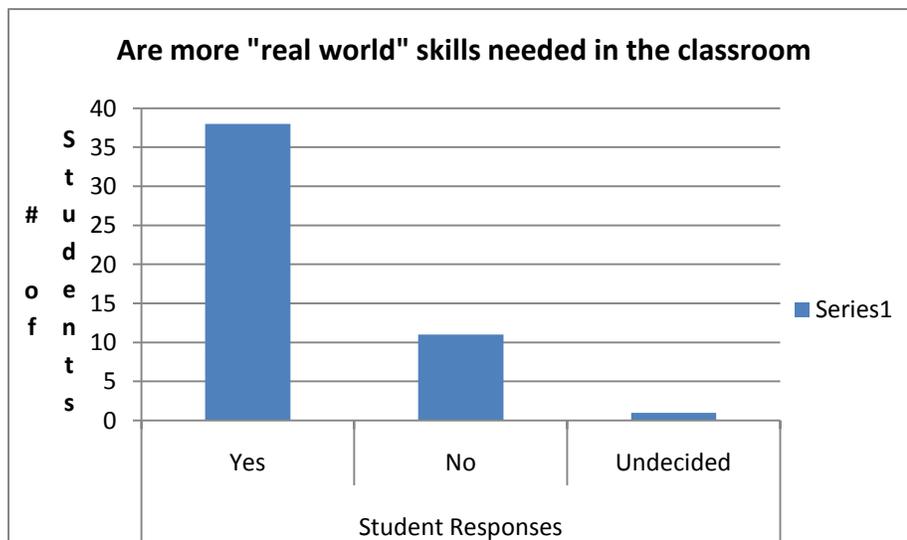


Figure 5. Are more “real world” skills needed in the classroom?

According to the student participants, it would be beneficial for more “real world” skills to be incorporated into the curriculum. The data indicates that 36 (72%) students believe more “real world” skills should be incorporated while 11 (22%) felt that enough skills were already present in classes or were just common sense and one (2%) student was undecided on the matter. Two (4%) students did not respond to the question.

Desired Skills and Services

Question six: If an after school program would be started what skills and services would you like to learn about?

There were many skills and services students would like to see incorporated into classes or an afterschool program. Students expressed interest in financial skills such as balancing a checkbook, paying bills, taxes, and managing money. Students also expressed an interest in career building skills such as time management, career exploration, job-site training, job applications, and writing resumes. Other services mentioned included fashion design, cooking, writing essays, construction trade, and mechanics.

According to the participants, the skills and services they would want to see incorporated the most included; cooking, balancing a checkbook, paying bills, money management, architecture, mechanics, and filling out the FASFA form for college.

Apprenticeships and Tutorials

Question seven: Some after school programs offer apprenticeships and tutorials with local businesses. Would you be interested in learning skills on site at a local business? If yes, which one? If no, why not?

Students who responded positively to the seventh question expressed interest in the following business sectors for jobsite training or entrepreneurships; electrical work, restaurant services, culinary arts, banks, healthcare, construction, law enforcement, the local university, entertainment, veterinarian, nursing home, agriculture, environmental science, and other service sector jobs.

Students who responded negatively to this question explained, “There are no local businesses within the career field I would like to pursue.” “Jobsite training and entrepreneurships would be boring and uneventful.” “Some students may not be looking for a business career.” “Most students already know enough about the careers they would like to do. “

Figure 6 provides a graphic display of participants’ responses to question number seven

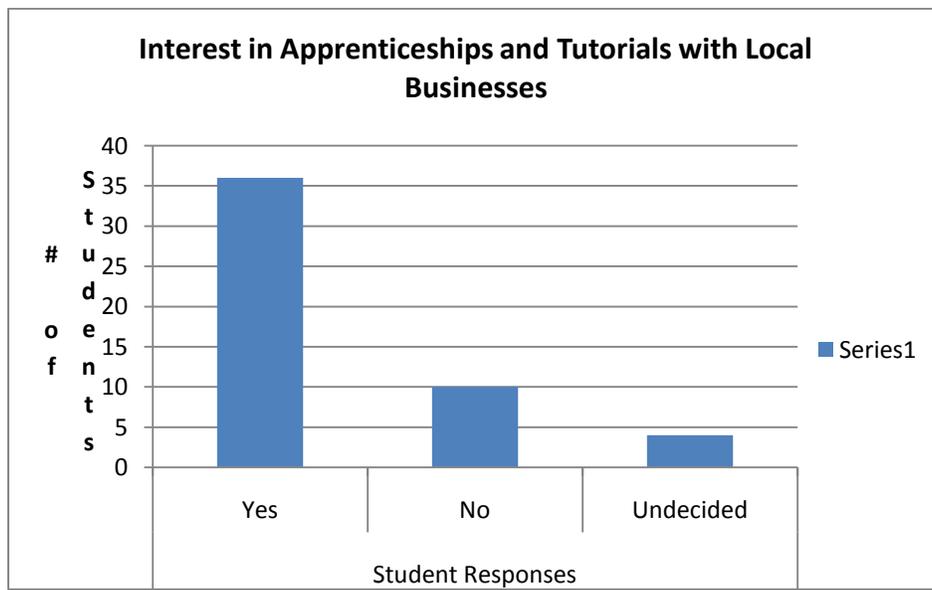


Figure 6. Interest in apprenticeships and tutorials with local businesses

Many participants would be interested in participating in apprenticeships and job-site tutorials with local businesses. Responses indicate that 35 (70%) students would be interested in attending these sessions while nine (18%) students decided this would not be helpful to them. Four (8%) students were undecided on the matter, and two (4%) students did not respond to the question.

Attendance at Career Center

Question eight: Are you or have contemplated attending the local career center? Please explain this thought process. Why or why not?

Students who responded positively to the eighth question included the following reasons and explanations to clarify their response; “The local career center will help students get ready for the “real world” more than regular classes.” “At the career center students learn more in depth about actual careers.” “Also their programs can give students a new start and provide needed experience for job training.”

Students who responded negatively to this question explained, “some students feel that the career center does not truly help and prefer traditional academic classes to career based ones.” “The career center does not offer the programs some students are interested in taking.” “Students who want to attend a four year college cannot attend.” “Students who want a “normal” high school experience are unable to attend the career center.” “Students feel the career center is not challenging enough and there are no honors or AP classes offered.” “Students want to get the best education they can possibly get and cannot get that at the career center because it is too basic.”

Figure 7 provides a graphic display of participants' responses to question number eight.

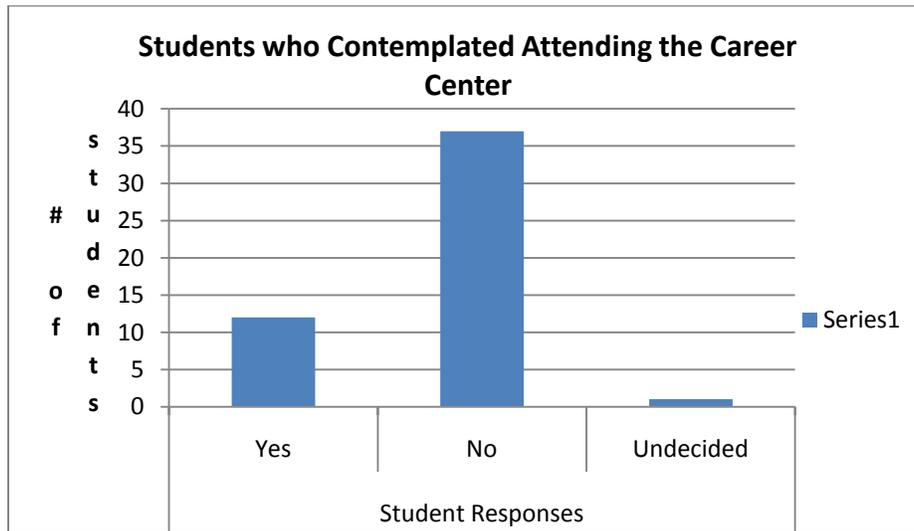


Figure 7. Students who contemplated attending the career center

The majority of participants never contemplated attending the local career center. The data shows that of the 50 respondents, 37 (74%) have never thought about attending the local career center while ten (20%) students said they are either planning on attending or have thought about attending and, three (6%) said they have never really thought about it either way.

Career-based Education and Motivation

Question nine: In your opinion would having a more career-based education curriculum including after school transition programs help your achievement and motivation to do better in school. Please explain why or why not?

Students who responded positively to the ninth question included the following reasons and explanations to clarify their response: "Afterschool programs would provide students with a jumpstart on their lives." "Students would know what they were working for by learning about their careers." "Informing students about the importance in academics within a career demonstrates doing well in

school is important.” “Career-based academics sounds more fun than a traditional experience.”

“Programs would help students make career decisions earlier and require them to set goals.” “Having more contact with professionals and teachers could possibly boost student’s confidence to attain better grades.” “This could make students more excited about their futures.” “Programs could increase students’ excitement about school because classes would feel important and useful.” “Classes would provide more hands on activities to help students learn.” “Students may feel more involved in the school and have a greater sense of the “real world” before graduating.”

Students who responded negatively to this question explained; “Most students are already motivated.” “High school should prepare students for college and it is up to college to prepare students for their careers.” “After school programs would create more work for students and take time away from current studies.”

Figure 8 provides a graphic display of participants’ responses to question number nine.

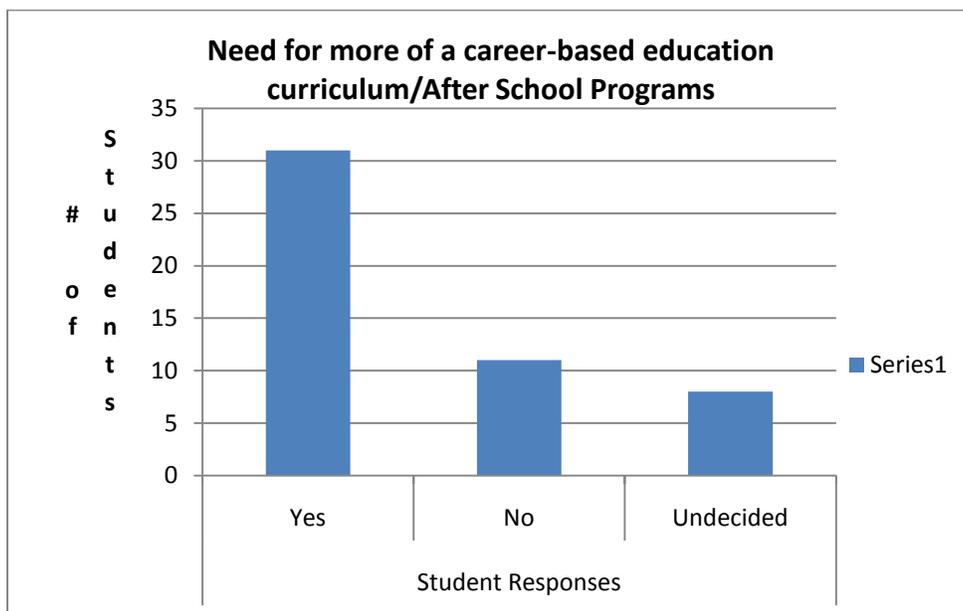


Figure 8. Need for more of a career-based education curriculum/after-school programs

According to the high school student participants the majority felt as if an increase in career-based instruction and after school transition programs would increase their achievement and motivation. The data shows that 30 (60%) students feel this would in fact increase their achievement and motivation while 11 (22%) students said they are already motivated and achieving good grades. Five (10%) students were undecided on the matter and four (8%) students did not respond to the question.

Attendance at After-school Programming

Question Ten: If after school programs were to begin what would the local high school need to do to get students to attend sessions?

Participants provided several suggestions for how to get students to attend after-school programming.

Their suggestions are outlined in the following section. "To attract students programs should provide food before or after the sessions." "Advertise the programs during school hours including bulletin boards and announcements." "Activities need to be beneficial and interesting." "After school classes should not be very time consuming and make it known how much help they could provide students for college." "Students should receive a certificate of achievement or credit attainment." "School should have meetings to make announcements about the program and allow students to ask questions." "Allow for students to socialize, invite guest speakers, and have open houses to show parents what the program is about."

According to the high school participants, the best ways to get individuals to attend after school sessions would be to provide food, make sure activities are fun and interesting, not take up too much time, and offer for make-up credit or elective credit.

The results of this study indicate that high school participants believe changes need to be incorporated to the existing structure of the local high school. These changes could take the form of

altering the curriculum to increase career-based education or the creation of an after school program where students can learn career skills and gain preparation for attending post-secondary institutions.

Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The results of this study demonstrate that the majority of the participants believe their current classes are doing an adequate job preparing them for college or a career after high school, but could incorporate more “real world” skills. The majority expressed an interest in attending an after school program should one be established at the local high school as long as it is engaging and provides important skills. The results confirm the premise of the study, that the local high school needs to incorporate changes to the current curriculum in regards to career-based education and should investigate the possibility of an after-school transition program. The participants provided useful suggestions for specific changes they would like to see.

The high school participants discussed particular skills they would like to learn including cooking and managing money in preparation for life after high school. The results indicate a desire for more hands-on activities including, working with tools and computers. The students suggested that in order to get individuals to attend an after school program there would need to be incentives offered such as free food, credit attainment, fun activities, time for socializing, and transportation to and from the site. An overwhelming number of student participants would be interested in attending job-site training with local businesses or participating in an apprenticeship to learn a trade as part of an after school program.

Although there is a local career center students can attend, most of the participants stated they had no desire to attend the career center because they believe it does not offer a quality education or does not offer a program they are interested in. Students who plan on attending a four year college believe that they cannot attend such an institution and may be missing out on learning valuable academic skills.

The main concern expressed by the students in regards to an after school program is a lack of time to dedicate to it. However, they believe it would be valuable for many of their classmates.

Participants discussed the importance of marketing the program by focusing on the importance of the skills that would be taught and the preparation students would receive towards their career field.

Due to the location of the local school district being in an area of lower social economic status programs preparing students for a career can be very important. As mentioned in the literature review earlier, many different after school programs have been created to help students in under privileged areas and many have gone on to increase graduation rates and attendance. Programs such as the Invention Factory and After School Matters are taking students who may not have had a history of academic success and turning those students around. The purpose of this study was to determine if similar programs are in need at the local high school to increase the wellbeing of the students who attend it.

Based on the perceptions of 50 high school students who participated in this study, it appears that the local high school classes are sufficient at preparing students for transition after high school, but could improve the curriculum to include more “real world” skills. Also, a well-organized and interactive after-school program would interest students as long as they were learning useful information and skills in preparation for their future.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study demonstrate the need for educators to assess the current curriculum. Within the spectrum of math, science, language, history as well as other subjects educators need to incorporate “real world” skills. Many of the participants in this study discussed the need to increase hands-on activities as well as engaging in projects that incorporate life skills. Although this study was

conducted in one specific toward school, institutions who find themselves in similar settings may want to explore the possibilities of career-education and after school transition programs.

High school classrooms are places where students decide their future as well as receive some of the training they will need to prepare for the future. By incorporating “real world” methods educators can increase the positive influence they have on a student. School districts as a whole can incorporate after-school programs with the possibility of reaching students who have been deemed “problematic” or “difficult.” These programs provide a different setting for students to attend while learning skills they believe is valuable instead of lessons they are told are important. According to the research previously reviewed, after school programs have the potential to improve attendance and graduation rates. The findings from this study should encourage the local school district and similar school districts to examine their current structure and decide if their students would benefit from increasing career-based education and creating an after school program.

Recommendations for Future Study

Any future studies investigating this topic may run into several difficulties when collecting data. Beginning the research early enough in the school year providing ample time to collect data and consent forms from students is critical. Examination of parents’ perspectives using surveys could determine what types of academic changes they would like to see made within the school district. Since parents largely influence the opinions and decisions of their children, targeting them for study would provide valuable insights into the viewpoints of the community.

Investigation and comparison of successful after school programs would be a valuable next step. Examining specific programs that target either college-based after school programs or career-based programming would provide a more in depth perspective. By limiting the research strictly to career-based after school programs or college preparation programs, the data could target specific groups of

students. Research could also be focused only on students receiving special education services with an individualized education plan to determine the best transition options for them. The focus on special education would provide more insights on how to better prepare students for transition after high school and a step toward a career or college.

This research study was based on the perceived need for, and interest in career education and after school programs. Once interest and need are determined, further studies may be needed on how to design a successful program including ideas for skills or activities. Due to the amount of research that included partnerships with colleges and other organizations research could focus on the benefits of partnerships both financially and educationally. Research should also explore the benefits of placing students in the workplace or having business leaders come to the school to teach students skills. The more research that can be done on the benefits and need for high school after-school programs, the more likely communities who may need them will start one of their own.

In closing, the results from this study are intended to bring about positive changes to the local high school involved in the study as well as in similar school districts. School districts can assess the effectiveness of their current curriculum and decide if changes in regards to career-based education need to be implemented. Also school districts can investigate whether there is a need for an after school program to educate students about career skills or improve post-secondary preparation. All school districts should reflect on their current education plan for their students and determine if the plan is successful. If the plan is not successful it is the duty of the school district to implement changes to get their students on the right transition track for the future.

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