

High School Employment And Academic Achievement: A Note For Educators

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ABSTRACT

Educators are often in a position to affect student decisions to work during the school term. This study reviews and summarizes the literature on the effect that employment during high school has on academic achievement. The available evidence suggests that part-time jobs for high school students are beneficial as long as the number of hours worked per week stays under 20.

Keywords: high school employment, academic achievement

INTRODUCTION

For school administrators, student employment is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, part-time employment during high school can result in many positive outcomes for students. For example, a direct benefit of part-time employment is that it often can help students make the transition from school to work. Students can get a head start on their future careers or use exposure to a career to help determine whether a particular career is for them. Indirectly, part-time employment can help foster improved work and study habits as students realize that they need to become more efficient with the remaining non-school time. This improvement in organization and study habits can, in turn, facilitate higher student grades.

However, some critics of student employment say that part-time jobs can be detrimental to GPAs and can cause stress and fatigue in students, leading to low performance in class. This is not surprising because every time there are benefits, there are usually costs. It is surely possible that too many hours working outside of school can lead to decreased effort in school. From a policy perspective, especially for education leaders, the relevant question is, “When do the benefits exceed the costs?”; in other words, “How much work is too much for students?”

In this paper, we review and summarize the literature. We find that part-time jobs for students appear to be beneficial as long as the number of hours worked per week does not exceed 20. This paper proceeds with sections providing background on how much students work, review of the literature on student employment and academic performance with an emphasis on how working affects student performance, and a conclusion.

HOW MUCH DO TEENAGERS WORK?

It can be difficult to get a grasp on how many high school students work part-time jobs. For example, the most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’s (2007) Current Population Survey shows that among 16-24 year-olds in high school in October 2006, 31.1 percent were looking for work of some kind and thus were considered to be in the labor force. Many of these students, however, had not found employment and thus were considered to be unemployed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics even though they were still attending high school. Once unemployment was taken into account only 26.8 percent of high school students in this age group had jobs, suggesting that one in four high school students today have some form of part-time employment.

There are some problems with this estimate. First, the estimate clearly misses students who were younger than sixteen in October of 2006. This might not introduce a large bias if the tendency to work remains constant as a student progresses through high school. As we shall see later, however, this is not the case. In addition, because the population in the Bureau of Labor Statistics measure is of individuals from the age of 16 to 24, it picks up students

who are not “traditional” high school students and thus this measure might overstate how many high school students are working. Another issue is the data do not distinguish between summer employment, when education demands are reduced or non-existent, and employment during the school year. Finally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics data does not provide any information about *how much* high school students work when they decide to take a part-time job.

For these reasons, most researchers looking at the issue of student employment turn towards the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY). The NLSY is a nationally representative sample of 9,000 men and women born between 1980 and 1984 and is sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Designed to get a snapshot of the transition from school to work, individuals in the sample are periodically interviewed (typically on an annual basis) and asked questions about their education and work experiences. The database contains extensive information on each young person’s schooling and work history, such as standardized test scores, courses taken, types of employment (self-employed versus wage), and hours worked. The most recent release from the NLSY 1997 on high school employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005) is based on students who attended high school from 1994 to 2002. Thus while this data is the most extensive and complete available, it should be noted that it is somewhat dated. Table 1 provides a summary of the non-freelance work activity of high school students as represented in the NLSY 1997.

Table 1 presents a different and much more complete picture of high school employment as compared to data from the Current Population Survey. Two things are important to note about NLSY data on high school work experience. First, the likelihood of a student having a job increases during their tenure in high school. While only 40.6 percent of freshmen work at any point during the year, 86.7 percent of seniors work at some point during the year. That is also true when we look at the percentage of students who are working during the school year. Only 22.6 percent of freshmen work during the school year, while nearly 75 percent of seniors do. The second important thing to note is that a large number of students are working during the school year.

Table 1. The Work Activity of High School Students

Year in school	% of students who ever worked during the school year or summer	% of students who worked during the school year	% who worked during the summer only
Freshmen	40.6	22.6	18.0
Sophomores	65.4	44.9	20.4
Juniors	78.6	64.6	13.8
Seniors	86.7	74.5	11.8

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005).

How much are these students working? Table 2 provides a partial answer to this question. The table presents data on the number of hours worked per week for students who went on to graduate from high school and worked for more than 51 percent of the school term. No clear pattern emerges in the table about the “typical” number of hours worked while school is in session. Of the 51.8 percent of employed freshmen, who worked regularly enough to be represented in this sample, a majority (26.4/51.8) worked less than 10 hours a week and only around 10 percent worked 31 or more hours. Seniors, on the other hand were both more likely to work regularly during the school term (75.2 percent of employed seniors worked more than 51 percent of school weeks) but seniors who worked regularly tended to work more hours. For example, 19.9 percent of all employed seniors worked 31 or more hours during the school year. The average high school senior, according to the NLSY, works 23 hours per week (Oettinger 1999).

Table 2. Average Hours Worked During School Year

Year in school	10 hours or less	11 to 20 hours	21 to 30 hours	31 hours or more
Freshmen	26.4	13.7	6.2	5.5
Sophomores	14.1	22.0	11.7	6.2
Juniors	11.3	29.2	19.4	9.6
Seniors	6.3	24.5	24.5	19.9

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005).

Note: Population is high school graduates who worked 51 percent or more of school weeks.

Although it is difficult to compare apples to apples because of different methodologies used to calculate student employment, there is some evidence that student employment has increased during recent decades. In 1960, for example, 24 percent of 16- to 17-year-old female students and 34 percent of 16- to 17-year-old male students held part-time jobs (Lillydahl 1990). Female employment, in particular, has steadily risen since the 1960s. In the mid-1970s, the percentage of employed female high school students almost equaled the percentage of employed male high school students, and by 1982, female student employment had surpassed male student employment (Ruhm 1997).

THEORY AND EVIDENCE

Why so many students hold part-time jobs is unclear. Economist Jane Lillydahl says students don't necessarily save their earnings from their jobs, so increased personal savings is not a major factor in the motivation for employment (Lillydahl 1990). According to the 1982 High School and Beyond Survey, only 44 percent of employed high school seniors say they save their paychecks for college, while 69 percent spend them on car expenses (Ruhm 1997). Fewer than ten percent of student employees report contributing their earnings to the living expenses of their families (Lillydahl 1990). Data shows that students who have part-time jobs are commonly white, have a stable family life, and come from a higher socioeconomic background (Lillydahl 1990). High school students may get jobs simply to pad their college applications so they appear to be well-balanced students.

Employment during the school year can help students develop a better work ethic. According to Ronald D'Amico, employment in high school "provides opportunities to assume greater responsibility, authority, and cooperative interdependence" (D'Amico 1984, p. 153). Students who work while still in high school will learn good work habits at an earlier age. They will also develop networking skills earlier than others. Students with jobs will have contacts and references that they can call upon later in life for future employment opportunities. According to one study, seventy percent of employed students work for just one employer each year, allowing them to build strong ties with bosses and coworkers, people whom they normally would not interact with outside of school (D'Amico 1984).

Students who have held part-time jobs during high school have lower unemployment rates after they graduate than students who did not work (D'Amico 1984). Employed students are shown to work many more hours post-high school than students who did not hold jobs during the school year (Rich 1996). Employers may favor students who held part-time jobs while in school because it is a signal of a stronger work ethic than other potential employees. Some individuals who work during high school may stay with that job after graduation. Thus, employment during high school can lower a student's chances of post-school unemployment.

However, holding a part-time job while still a full-time student may be detrimental to a student's well being. Work could place extra stress on students and cause them to burn out and tire of employment and academics. Studies show that intensive work habits are associated with higher dropout rates for white male sophomores and white female juniors (D'Amico 1984). Working too many hours per week has also been related to an increase in class-cutting, probably because employed students "use class-cutting as a strategy for coping with their excess role demands" (Barling, Rogers, and Kelloway 1995). Too many hours spent at work could also cut into a student's chances to participate in extracurricular activities.

Working also cuts into study time for students. Studies show that students who are employed during their summer vacations do not experience a change in their grades during the school year, whereas students who are employed during the school year do. This suggests that having a part-time job during the school year instead of during the summer interferes with studying time for students (Oettinger 1999).

Holding a part-time job while still a student can affect grade point averages. D'Amico notes that "the steady rise in high school employment coupled with the gradual erosion of academic excellence in recent decades may be more than coincidental" (D'Amico 1984). An increase in work hours significantly lowers a student's GPA. Numerous studies show that the breaking point for too many hours of work is 20 hours per week. Students who work up to 20 hours per week do not have a significant decline in GPA; in fact, their GPA may even improve. However, students who work over 20 hours a week have noticeable declines in GPA (Lillydahl 1990). This is probably because students who work more are more likely to not complete their homework and be absent from class. According to economist Gerald Oettinger, an increase in the number of hours worked per week with the number of weeks worked held constant is associated with a decline in grades. However, an increase in the number of weeks worked with the number of hours worked per week held constant is associated with a slight increase in GPA (Oettinger 1999). This suggests that a high frequency of hours worked per week crowds out study time, but a high frequency of weeks worked with a lower number of hours worked per week might actually help a student better manage their study time. Oettinger's research also shows that with up to 20 hours of work per week, a student's GPA only declines by an average of .05 grade points, which is equivalent to just one percentile. However, after more than 20 hours of work per week, the decline is much more significant (Oettinger 1999).

Fifteen to 20 hours of work per week appears to be the breaking point for the average high school student. According to researchers Julian Barling, Kimberley-Ann Rogers, and E. Kevin Kelloway, "Labor force participation by high school students, especially more than 20 hours of part-time work per week, is linked to poorer school performance, increased drug and alcohol use, decreased family contacts, and cynical attitudes toward work" (Barling, Rogers, and Kelloway 144). This is fairly consistent with recent work by Desimone (2006), who shows that a student's GPA increases until hours worked per week reaches fifteen hours per week at which point it begins to decline.

CONCLUSION

Part-time jobs are beneficial for high school students as long as the number of hours worked per week is less than 20. Students who work for more than 20 hours a week do get a head start on future employment, but they also generally have lower grades than other students. Students who work for less than 20 hours per week do not see a major decline in grades, and they also develop better work habits and strengthen relationships with employers. If students obtain a part-time job during high school, they will have better chances at being employed after graduation, plus they will improve their work ethics. However, they must be careful not to work so much as to cause their grades to slip.

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