

MAXIMIZING STUDENT TRAVEL TO AREA
VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTERS

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-----Will high school students travel away from their home schools to take advantage of vocational course offerings?

-----What factors influence student decisions to travel to a neighboring district for vocational training?

-----How can high schools maximize the number of traveling students?

The Research Coordinating Unit of the Washington State Commission for Vocational Education sponsored a study to analyze these and other questions related to student travel.

Introduction

Historically, the percentage of high school students who travel away from their home schools to take advantage of courses offered in neighboring districts has been low. A study completed in Minnesota reports that the majority of students who enrolled in a cooperative vocational program were from the *host* school (Thomas and Smith, 1971). Only 15 percent of the 97 area vocational secondary schools in Texas had 10 or more students enrolled from sending schools (Wong, 1973). In a nationwide study, more than 500 public schools reported cooperating in area vocational programs, but more than half of the participating students belonged to the host schools (Meaders, 1967).

Even though only a low percent of students from other states have been willing to travel, the State of Washington has shown great interest in promoting cooperation among school districts. In 1968, the State legislature made it possible for independent school districts to participate in cooperative programs. The cooperative ventures in Washington have generally taken the form of either a centralized facility (area skill center) or of local districts opening their doors to students from neighboring districts. By 1974, nine geographic regions of the State were jointly sponsoring State-approved interdistrict vocational courses. By 1977, five of these cooperatives were busy developing the educational specifications for vocational skill centers in their regions.

A primary concern of many educators who are planning cooperative programs is whether enough students from outlying districts will participate in the cooperative venture. Obviously, if students will not travel, the cooperative program cannot succeed.

Objectives

The primary objective of the study was to determine whether high school students were willing to travel away from their home schools to take advantage of vocational course offerings not available at their home schools. Further, the study sought to identify those factors that influenced the decisions of students to travel to a neighboring district for vocational training. If the discouraging factors or conditions could be identified, then appropriate intervention techniques may be taken to counteract the negative influences. Conversely, if the encouraging factors could be identified, then certain steps may be taken to maximize student participation.

Methodology

This State-wide study used a mail questionnaire to survey the opinions of 264 traveling students and 169 non-traveling students from 44 representative school districts. The opinions of 126 selected vocational teachers and directors who had first-hand experience with cooperative programs were also analyzed. The sample was stratified to include only those districts, teachers and administrators who had at least three years of cooperative experience. The information obtained from the mail questionnaire, telephone interviews of both in-state and out-of-state vocational administrators, a follow-up study of a skill center feasibility study, and summary data from the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction was analyzed.

Major Findings

During the 1975-1976 school year, the 44 representative school districts reported that less than one percent (232 full-time equivalents) of the total eligible students actually traveled away from their home schools for cooperative classes. Yet, 72 percent of the non-traveling students indicated that they would travel away from their home schools if they could relate the course work to their interests or needs. Fifty-three percent of the non-traveling students reported *no* reluctance to travel to another school to take vocational courses. Sixty-two percent of the non-traveling students indicated that no one ever encouraged them to take classes away from their home schools. Less than

half of both traveling and non-traveling students believed that their home schools adequately informed them about the cooperative courses. The lack of awareness about cooperative course offerings was the most frequently identified discouraging factor by the non-travelers.

The study also suggested that high school students are more willing to travel to community colleges or other off-campus training centers than to neighboring high schools. Eighty-three percent of the educators indicated that program reputation was an essential ingredient to the success of a skill center operation. The quality of the teaching staff was perceived to be the most important factor related to program reputation. Only 23 percent reported that the location and distance to travel was a key to successful skill center operation. Discouraging factors such as feelings of school rivalry, conflict with sports and other home or school activities, travel time and money, lack of parental approval, poor job placement records, and feelings of fear and anxiety were perceived by most informants to have little influence on student decisions to travel.

Summary and Recommendations

The economic realities of declining enrollments and lowered financial bases should serve to firmly establish cooperative programs as an integral part of America's educational system. Cooperative agreements can greatly expand the scope of vocational offerings with a relatively small increase in investment. Joint ventures can also thwart criticism of duplication of effort. Some districts may also look upon cooperation as a means of avoiding consolidation. Cooperative arrangements have the potential of providing many of the benefits of consolidation without having to take the politically sensitive issues of consolidation to the polls.

As evidenced by the study, a relatively small percentage of high school students actually travel. Yet, there is reason to believe that more students would participate if they were: (1) aware of the course offerings, (2) actively encouraged and recruited, and (3) offered courses that related to their occupational goals and needs. If student needs and interests are not in accord with what is being offered, then either the courses must be changed to meet the needs of students or the needs of students must be changed to "fit" the course. Hopefully, the course offerings are in harmony with both student needs and labor market demands. In either case, an accurate assessment of student interest must be an integral part of any determination of course offerings. Accordingly, if both student and labor market demands are taken into account, then a solid foundation for a good program reputation can be established.

Affirmative action is required if the full potential of cooperation is to be realized. Plans must be drawn and implemented that not only inform but actively recruit students. Educators cannot assume that the students will come to them. Educators must seek out potential students and "sell" them on the notion of traveling to take advantage of vocational educational opportunities.

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