

K-12 Comprehensive Career Development

Career development in Wisconsin is part of a comprehensive K-12 developmental guidance curriculum. Through career development all students are exposed to a sequential age-appropriate curriculum dealing with the world of work and careers.

Most of us acquired a superficial and narrow knowledge base of occupations while we were growing up. Our occupational knowledge reflected what we knew about our family members' jobs, the jobs of our neighbors, and the people we came in contact with in our community on a regular basis. This natural occurrence tends to severely limit the career options that students see for themselves. It may explain why so many children mention the jobs of firefighter, police officer, nurse, or teacher when asked what they want to be when they grow up. These jobs are familiar to them in their daily lives.

Research suggests that as children grow older, the occupations that they consider as acceptable to them progressively decrease in number. The occupations they eliminate first are those they perceive as inappropriate to their gender. Next they rule out those occupations that do not fit their social class self-concept as well as occupations that require education and training that they believe are beyond their abilities. It is within this backdrop of what naturally occurs during career formation that the schools, along with parents and the larger community, can provide knowledge and experiences that will expand a student's awareness of the multitude of occupational options available to them. Career development does not seek to force students into premature career choices; rather, it seeks to avoid premature elimination of future options.

Parents play an important role in the career choices of their children. Schools can increase the impact of career development by involving parents in career development activities. Parents armed with up-to-date information can encourage their children to consider paths that will open doors to future careers.

The emphasis in *elementary school* is on career awareness -- what it means to work. Students at this age learn best with concrete examples rather than abstract thought. Activities that incorporate familiar people and places, such as school staff, parents, and local businesses are especially meaningful to elementary students.

Career exploration is the emphasis in *middle school*. Middle school students need to explore the entire career landscape. Teaching them good research skills will greatly assist them in their exploration. Using the career cluster concept, which places similar jobs into broad occupational groupings or families, is a great tool for use in the middle school. A realistic goal for middle school might be: "Each student leaving our middle school will have learning opportunities to explore various jobs in every career cluster." Since each cluster represents a broad spectrum of jobs with varying education and training requirements, studying every cluster will give students a comprehensive understanding of the range of opportunities available. Students also need to be assessing their interests and abilities against each occupation that they study in order to begin to narrow their fields of interest.

At the *high school* level students begin career planning and preparation. If they had the advantage of career awareness in elementary school, and substantive career exploration in middle school, then they are ready for more focused research into their areas of interest and to sample work in those areas. In addition, they need to be learning accurate information about the labor market so that they can make realistic choices based on where they want to live, the supply and demand for specific jobs, the kind of lifestyle they want, etc. It is not enough to know what it is you love to do and to prepare through training and education to do it; you must also find someone who is willing to pay you for the privilege of doing the work you love.