



Rural High School Aspirations (HSA) Study:

School Adjustment for High Risk Youth and Youth with Disabilities

National Research Center on Rural Education Support

<http://www.nrcres.org/index.html>

Introduction

Experienced educators know that high school is an important time for students. During high school students may begin or continue a path that leads them to vocational and educational success later in life or one that leads them to poor outcomes. Much research has focused on the risks and protective factors associated with youth in urban environments; however, more research was needed in the area of students in rural communities. Furthermore, research that has been conducted regarding the outcomes and underachievement of students with disabilities had examined students with disabilities in rural schools. The Rural High School Aspirations (HSA) Study sought to find more information about the needs and outcomes for high school students in rural communities. Researchers at the University of North Carolina and the Pennsylvania State University gathered information from teachers and students in high schools across the country located in rural and small town communities in order to find information that could lead to prevention and intervention for those students at high-risk for troubled outcomes and those students with and without disabilities.

School Adjustment for Rural Youth – Does Disability Status Matter?

In order to better serve students in rural communities the HSA team conducted studies about how high school students with and without disabilities were different from each other on teacher ratings of school adjustment and whether or not students with various behavior profiles (based on those teacher ratings) were different in terms of their disability status. Over 7,000 students from rural communities were studied, of those students, about 10% of them were classified as having emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), learning disabilities (LD), or as English Language Learners (ELL). The researchers found that students with LD and EBD had higher rates of academic, behavioral, and social problems compared to those students without disabilities. Specifically, students with EBD had the most school adjustment problems as rated by teachers including difficulty with social competence and behavior problems. Over 90% of students with EBD were classified as being in high-risk behavior profiles. Seventy-percent of boys and over 80% of girls with LD were in a high-risk behavior profile. The proportion of students without disabilities that were in high-risk behavior profiles was similar to known dropout risk rates for rural youth. These findings helped researchers to better understand the

relationship between disability status and risk for drop-out and other problems.

Students with Disabilities –

Fitting in to the Social Group

Knowing that students with disabilities tend to demonstrate significant behavioral, social, and academic adjustment problems in school lead the HSA team to further investigate specific aspects of these risks. Researchers wanted to understand whether peers with disabilities were socially isolated, socially connected to their peers, or hanging around with peers that could further contribute to the difficulties that they were already experiencing. Data were gathered from over 1,600 students from 20 high schools. Information was collected from teachers about school adjustment and students were asked to nominate who in their school, “hangs around together a lot”. The student ratings of social groups were then combined in order to understand the overall school social network. Teacher ratings were used to create behavior profiles in order to classify students into behavioral types (as in the previous study). The results showed that many of the students with disabilities were not well socially connected and tended to spend time with peers that had high-risk behavior profiles indicating that their peer group may contribute to their problems in school. Students with disabilities from smaller schools, however, tended to be better socially connected than disabled students in bigger schools. Students with disabilities, compared to students without disabilities, did not associate with peers that were necessarily more aggressive but



did associate with students that were rated as average or below average on such characteristics as popularity, athletic ability, friendliness, and emotional adjustment.

How Do Students with Disabilities View Their School and Future?

Research shows that students with LD tend to have lower perceptions of their school ability and tend to value school less than their nondisabled peers. Given these findings and the statistics regarding the underachievement of students with disabilities, it was important to find out if there was a connection between how students with disabilities perceive school and their goals for their future after high school in rural communities. Data were gathered from 73 rural schools from over 8,000 students. Researchers gathered information from students regarding their academic self-concept (how good they thought they were in several subjects), school valuing (whether they viewed school as a valuable pathway for their future), school belonging (feelings of inclusion, respect, and support in their school), educational plans (whether to continue after high school or not), and educational aspirations (how far in school they would like to go). Students with LD were more likely to say that they were not planning on continuing their education or unsure if they were continuing. Students with LD were also more likely to perceive school as having low value to their future. Those students with LD that did have low academic self-concept, low school valuing, and low school belonging were more likely to report that they did not plan on

continuing their education after high school and aspired only to get a GED or high school diploma. Not all students with LD held these attitudes, in fact, one-third of them were in the high academic self-concept, school valuing, and school belonging configuration. Those students aspired to graduate from college and get advanced degrees and more often reported that they planned on continuing their education after high school.

Rural Students' Attachment to Community and Future Goals

It is a widely-held belief that rural communities may be at risk for losing their "best and brightest" young people as they



go on to pursue opportunities in urban areas with more opportunities than their home community. Another concern for rural educators is that some rural youth will view school as being of low value to their future given that they may pursue jobs that are related to their upbringing. The HSA team sought to find out if, in fact, there was a connection between behavioral profiles of rural youth and their future plans and goals. Analyzing data from over 8,700 rural students from 73 schools, it was found that students who were in behavioral profiles of low risk (average or above on teacher ratings of popularity, academic competence, friendliness, and emotional adjustment) reported strong feelings of connection to their home community, valued the rural

lifestyle, and wanted to stay or return to their community as adults. Those students in high-risk profiles, however, tended to view their home communities as having little to offer them and had a strong desire to leave and not return to their home community.

Implications

- ✓ Given that there are varying types of risk profiles for students with and without disabilities, interventions should be specifically designed for the characteristics of the students.

Not all students with disabilities demonstrate high profiles of risk just as not all students without disabilities demonstrate profiles of low risk.

- ✓ Schools need to promote positive attitudes of students with disabilities and try to encourage more connections between disabled and nondisabled peers.
- ✓ Manage schools and classrooms in order to prevent peer group dynamics that encourage high risk behavior and academic disengagement.
- ✓ Students who are high risk may benefit from being encouraged to find positive connections and opportunities within their home communities so that they may be more engaged in school.

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Further Reading

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