



# GETTING AHEAD, GETTING THROUGH, OR GETTING BY?

An Examination of the Experiences and Prospects  
of High School Working Learners.

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## HIGH SCHOOL WORKING LEARNERS AT A CROSSROADS

Consistent with a wider society that holds higher education as the key to getting ahead, the vast majority of high schoolers of all social backgrounds today expect to enroll in postsecondary education en route to their career goals. However, engagement with the labor force often begins prior to postsecondary enrollment. Yet, little is known about the work experiences of today's high schoolers or the extent to which educational trajectories and work experience align during this period. Without meaningful data, pressing questions arise concerning what exactly young working learners' dual status as both students and workers may indicate about their social backgrounds or their future pathways. In particular, to what extent does working during high school indicate effort to gain skills or relevant experience, a much-needed source of income, or an orientation towards work rather than higher education?

In this spirit, this report uses nationally representative data from the United States Department of Education to paint a descriptive portrait of working learners attending U.S. high schools in comparison to their nonworking peers. In doing so, it examines their demographic characteristics, low-income status, and academic preparation for college. Furthermore, it examines the extent to which their plans for the future align with their experiences both in school and at work as high schoolers. Throughout, it considers both the intensity of students' engagement with the workforce (whether or not they work 15 hours or more each week) and whether the student's family is low-income (below 130 percent of the federal poverty line).

## BRINGING NATIONAL EVIDENCE TO BEAR VIA THE HIGH SCHOOL LONGITUDINAL STUDY

The High School Longitudinal Study (HSLs) is the most recent nationally representative, longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Aimed at elucidating students' trajectories through high school and into postsecondary education and the labor force, the 2012 wave of the HSLs surveyed approximately 20,590 high school juniors (11th graders) at 939 schools.<sup>[1]</sup> These students were surveyed about their work history, educational performance, and future plans related to education, work, and family. Sample weights (W2STUDENT) adjust public-use data estimates to reflect the 2012 characteristics of all U.S. high school students.

## HOW DO HIGH SCHOOL WORKING LEARNERS COMPARE TO THEIR PEERS IN DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, LOW-INCOME STATUS, AND ACADEMIC PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE?

Half of all students (48 percent) report working for pay outside of the home during high school and these students are roughly split between those who have worked fewer than 15 hours in their current or most recent job (23 percent) and those who have worked 15 hours or more (25 percent).

**Table 1** draws comparisons between the HSLs students based on their reported work intensity — whether they have never worked during high school, have worked fewer than 15 hours per week, or have worked 15 hours or more per week — and their demographic characteristics, low-income status, and academic preparation for college. As a proxy for academic preparation for college, this report considers whether students had taken Algebra I by ninth grade and earned a grade of an A or B in the course. Extensive research has identified this as a critical milestone in students' preparation for college.<sup>[2]</sup> Earning high grades in Algebra I as a high school freshman (or before) signals not only that a student is on track but also that he or she is thriving on their way to the appropriate college prerequisites.

[1] For extensive documentation of the HSLs, see <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014361>.

[2] Wimberly, G. L., & Noeth, R. J. (2005). College readiness begins in middle school. *ACT, Washington, DC*

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## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Turning first to the demographic characteristics of high schoolers of different levels of work intensity, females comprise 51 percent of nonworkers and those who work fewer than 15 hours per week but 47 percent of those who work more than 15 hours per week. Within the nationally representative HSLs sample, white students are overrepresented among young working learners. For example, whites (52 percent of all students) comprise 45 percent of nonworkers but roughly 60 percent of those who work fewer than or more than 15 hours per week.

Furthermore, where a student lives — their region and the urbanicity of their home setting — is associated with their work intensity during high school. **Table 1** shows that young working learners are drawn disproportionately from the Midwest and Northeast. By contrast, high schoolers from the South are concentrated among those who do not work and those who work more than 15 hours each week (39 percent of each group). Finally, in comparison to their peers in urban and suburban settings, students from rural communities and towns are more likely to be working during high school.

## LOW-INCOME STATUS

Turning now to the socioeconomic origins of high school working learners, one possible motivation for them to enter the workforce as high schoolers is in a response to financial hardship at home.

**Table 1** shows that 27 percent of all students are from families beneath 130 percent of the federal poverty line. These low-income students tend to either not work at all or to work 15 or more hours weekly rather than work fewer than 15 hours. By contrast, the 73 percent of students from families well-above the federal poverty line are more likely to enjoy a more moderate work intensity (fewer than 15 hours weekly).

## ACADEMIC PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE

Finally, **Table 1** examines potential differences in the academic experiences of high school working learners in terms of whether they had earned an A or B in Algebra I by ninth grade, a proxy for academic preparation for college. Sixty-three percent of nonworkers fare well by this measure compared to 69 percent of those who have worked fewer than 15 hours weekly and 62 percent of those who have worked more than 15 hours weekly. This suggests that the students who work a moderate amount of hours each week are the most likely to be meeting the academic milestones required for college compared to those who do not work at all or those who work intensively.



**TABLE 1**

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, LOW-INCOME STATUS, AND ACADEMIC PREPERATION FOR COLLEGE BY WORK INTENSITY**

		HAS NEVER WORKED	HAS WORKED <15 hours per week	HAS WORKED >15 hours per week
<b>GENDER</b> ♦♦				
Male	(50.2%)	49.2%	48.6%	53.0%
Female	(49.8%)	50.8%	51.4%	47.0%
<b>ETHNICITY</b>				
White ♦♦♦♦	(51.7%)	44.6%	62.6%	59.8%
Black ♦♦	(13.7%)	16.4%	9.8%	10.6%
Hispanic ♦♦♦♦	(22.4%)	25.4%	16.1%	19.4%
Other ♦♦	(12.2%)	13.6%	11.5%	10.3%
<b>REGION</b>				
Northeast ♦♦♦	(17.6%)	16.1%	20.0%	19.0%
Midwest ♦♦♦♦	(22.0%)	18.2%	25.3%	27.4%
South ♦♦	(37.7%)	39.4%	31.9%	38.6%
West ♦♦♦	(22.7%)	26.3%	22.8%	15.0%
<b>URBANICITY</b>				
City ♦♦♦	(31.0%)	34.1%	28.0%	25.6%
Suburb ♦	(28.4%)	29.7%	28.1%	25.9%
Town ♦♦	(12.2%)	9.5%	14.3%	15.8%
Rural ♦♦♦	(28.5%)	26.7%	29.7%	32.6%
<b>LOW-INCOME STATUS</b> ♦♦				
Above 130% of Federal Poverty Line	(73.5%)	72.9%	77.5%	74.6%
Below 130% of Federal Poverty Line	(26.5%)	27.1%	22.5%	25.4%
<b>ACADEMIC PREPERATION FOR COLLEGE</b> ♦♦♦				
Did not earn an A or B in Algebra I by 9th grade	(36.8%)	36.9%	30.8%	38.2%
Earned an A or B in Algebra I by 9th grade	(63.2%)	63.1%	69.2%	61.8%
<b>WEIGHTED N</b>		10210	4393	4819

Numbers in parentheses denote HSLS:09 weighted means.

Colored diamonds denote significant differences between the weighted group means via Tukey's range test ( $p < 0.05$ ).



Nonworkers compared to students who have worked fewer than 15 hours per week.



Students who have worked fewer than 15 hours per week compared to students who have worked 15 hours or more per week.



Nonworkers compared to students who have worked 15 hours or more per week.

## WHAT DO YOUNG WORKING LEARNERS PLAN TO DO AFTER HIGH SCHOOL?

As young working learners, many high schoolers are already balancing their efforts between their education and their paid work. Thus, one might expect these students to anticipate continuing both of these in the future. *Table 2* considers students' plans with regard to continuing their education and working for pay, as well as starting a family or caring for children following their high school graduation by their work intensity.<sup>[3]</sup> Further, because these students differ in their status as low-income (*Table 1*) and because economic hardships likely inform students' expectations, *Table 2* disaggregates students' plans by their status as above or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line.

**TABLE 2**

### PLANS RELATED TO EDUCATION, WORK, AND FAMILY BY WORK INTENSITY AND LOW-INCOME STATUS

#### ABOVE 130% OF FEDERAL POVERTY LINE

##### HAS NEVER WORKED

##### HAS WORKED <15 hours per week

##### HAS WORKED >15 hours per week

Continuing education past high school ♦♦	89.0%	89.3%	83.9%
Working for pay ♦♦♦	71.6%	78.3%	89.4%
Starting a family or caring for children ♦♦	6.2%	6.3%	9.3%

#### BELOW 130% OF FEDERAL POVERTY LINE

Continuing education past high school ♦	82.2%	86.7%	79.1%
Working for pay ♦♦♦	80.1%	87.5%	92.3%
Starting a family or caring for children ♦	11.5%	12.8%	15.8%

Colored diamonds denote significant differences between the weighted group means via Tukey's range test ( $p < 0.05$ ).



Nonworkers compared to students who have worked fewer than 15 hours per week.



Students who have worked fewer than 15 hours per week compared to students who have worked 15 hours or more per week.



Nonworkers compared to students who have worked 15 hours or more per week.

Among those whose families are above this poverty threshold, those who have never worked and those who have worked fewer than 15 hours per week have similarly high expectations of continuing their education past high school (89 percent) compared with those who work more than 15 hours per week (84 percent). Furthermore, their expectations to continue working after high school mirror their work intensity during high school such that 72 percent of nonworkers, 78 percent of those who work fewer than 15 hours, and 89 percent of those who work more than 15 hours per week expect to continue to work for pay after high school. Finally, very few students in this group expect to start a family or care for children immediately after high school. However, students who work more than 15 hours per week report this option as part of their plan at the highest rate (nine percent compared with six percent of those who are nonworkers or work fewer than 15 hours per week).

Low-income students also largely expect to continue their education immediately following high school graduation albeit at lower rates than their more affluent peers. Among these students, nonworkers and those who work fewer than 15 hours per week are more likely to expect to continue their education after high school and expectations regarding work mirror students' work intensity during high school, but at higher rates than those who work the same amount but are from more affluent families. Finally, more than one in ten low-income students expect to begin a family or care for children immediately after high school and among low-income working learners who work more than 15 hours per week, 16 percent of these students expect to devote part of their time to starting a family or caring for children just after graduation.

[3] Consistent with the experiences of high school working learners, continuing education, working for pay, and starting or caring for a family are not mutually exclusive options for postsecondary plans.

## TO WHAT EXTENT DO HIGH SCHOOL WORK EXPERIENCES ALIGN WITH STUDENTS' FUTURE PLANS?

Having described what young working learners plan to do after high school, the remaining analyses consider how experiences as high school working learners may be contributing to students' readiness to pursue their goals.

**Table 3** examines the extent to which students plan to pay for their postsecondary expenses using their own savings. Overall, 60 percent of nonworkers compared to 66 percent of those who worked fewer than 15 hours per week and 73 percent of those who worked more than 15 hours per week report in the HSLs survey that they expect to finance their postsecondary education at least in part with their own savings.

**TABLE 3**

### PLANS TO PAY FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION WITH PERSONAL SAVINGS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES BY WORK INTENSITY

	HAS NEVER WORKED	HAS WORKED <15 hours per week	HAS WORKED >15 hours per week
<b>SAVINGS</b> ◆◆◆	59.8%	66.0%	72.6%
Summer job while in high school ◆◆◆	70.1%	81.7%	88.0%
High school job during school year ◆◆◆	54.3%	73.0%	83.7%
Job between high school and postsecondary ◆◆◆	71.6%	77.8%	85.3%
Work study during postsecondary ◆◆◆	73.8%	77.8%	81.8%

Colored diamonds denote significant differences between the weighted group means via Tukey's range test ( $p < 0.05$ ).



Nonworkers compared to students who have worked fewer than 15 hours per week.



Students who have worked fewer than 15 hours per week compared to students who have worked 15 hours or more per week.



Nonworkers compared to students who have worked 15 hours or more per week.

Next, the HSLs asked students to specify whether these savings would come from their jobs held during the summer, the school year, after high school and before enrolling in postsecondary education, or while enrolled in postsecondary education. In general, students' plans correspond to their level of work intensity such that students who work more hours as high schoolers anticipate more sources of savings.

Moving on, working during high school may help students gain experience relevant to their career goals. Students who reported working during high school were asked the extent to which their current or most recent high school job was "not at all related", "somewhat related", or "closely related" to their career goals. **Table 4** shows the alignment of young working learners' most recent work experiences with their career goals by their work intensity and their family poverty status. Roughly three quarters of all high school aged workers report that their most recent job is not at all related to their career goals. Further, only about seven to eight percent of all students report that their work is closely related to what they hope to do in the future. Interestingly, neither

students' intensity of work (greater or fewer than 15 hours per week) nor their family poverty status (above or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line) is associated with meaningful differences in the relatedness of high schoolers' work experiences with their career goals.

These patterns may reflect limited opportunities for most high schoolers — who typically have limited time, prior experience, skills, and geographic mobility — to gain traction on their future career goals. Further, to the extent that more affluent students have career goals that are perhaps more ambitious, defined, or informed than low-income students, the small percentage differences in relevant work experience between these students may mask qualitative differences in their anticipated trajectories.

Finally, given that most high schoolers expect to enroll in postsecondary education immediately following high school, their success will in part depend on their academic preparation for college. **Figure 1** examines how well young working learners are faring in their academic

TABLE 4

RELATEDNESS OF HIGH SCHOOL WORK FOR PAY TO FUTURE CAREER GOALS BY WORK INTENSITY AND LOW-INCOME STATUS

	HAS WORKED <15 hours per week	HAS WORKED >15 hours per week	TUKEY'S RANGE TEST P<0.05
<b>ABOVE 130% OF FEDERAL POVERTY LINE</b>			
Not at all related	75.4%	76.6%	
Somewhat related	18.0%	15.4%	*
Closely related	6.6%	8.0%	*
<b>BELOW 130% OF FEDERAL POVERTY LINE</b>			
Not at all related	68.8%	77.3%	*
Somewhat related	23.1%	15.6%	*
Closely related	8.1%	7.1%	

preparation for college — measured using the A or B grade in Algebra I by ninth grade proxy — compared with nonworking peers. Students whose families fall above 130 percent of the federal poverty line are presented to the left and those whose families fall below this threshold are presented on the right.

In investigating the role of work in students’ academic preparation, a distinct pattern emerges for low-income students (Figure 1). For the majority of students (75 percent) - those well above the federal poverty line - working a moderate amount each week (fewer than 15 hours) may offer an advantage in academic preparation for college over those who work intensively (15 hours or more each week) and those who do not work at all. However, among the 25 percent of students from low-income households, no such benefit to moderate work was found. Rather, for students from households close to or below the federal poverty line, those who work more than 15 hours per week are more academically prepared for college (55 percent) than those who work fewer than 15 hours per week or not at all (51 percent of both groups). Recall that as a group however, low-income students working 15 or more hours each week also tend to be among the most uncertain of whether they will enroll in college immediately after high school (Table 2).

Thus, while the most academically promising students from higher-income families are those who work a moderate amount, the most academically promising low-income students are those who work a great deal. One way to interpret this finding is that the most determined and disciplined low-income students may engage more intensely with both paid work and academics as a

strategy out of poverty whereas work during high school may pose diminishing returns for students not facing intense financial hardship. For example, a savvy student whose family is comfortably above the poverty line may see work less as a financial necessity and more as a way to cultivate a well-rounded college resume, some spending money, and independence but at the same time, avoid working the number of hours that might cut into time to study, socialize, and sleep. Future research should expound on the linkages between academic preparation, work intensity, and financial hardship in the college-going behaviors of high school working learners.

FIGURE 1. ACADEMIC PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE BY WORK INTENSITY AND LOW-INCOME STATUS (%)

