

Preparing for After High School

Linking Education, Career
and
Financial Planning



Summary of
Regional Dialogue Sessions

October 2003

What are the Regional Dialogue Sessions?

In October 2003, a series of four (4) sessions were held in different locations in Manitoba, designed to enable discussion and conversation on issues and opportunities to strengthen the linkage between high school and post high school. Session location dates and locations included: October 16th in Winnipeg, October 17th in Brandon, October 22nd in The Pas and October 23rd in Winnipeg. In addition, the Bureau de l'éducation française Division held a session for Division Scolaire Franco-Manitobaine schools on November 26, 2003. The Final Report on the Francophone session will be distributed to the participants through the Bureau de l'éducation française.

The formal objectives of these dialogues were to facilitate discussion and improve awareness across a range of issues, including the variety of options for learning and range of career possibilities, opportunities to support career planning, and the roles that different stakeholders can play, student financial assistance, and the need for coordination. These dialogue sessions are viewed as the first step involving further conversations that will support the development of more effective efforts in the area of career planning.

Invitations were sent to a mix of educators, administrators and industry representatives. The sessions were organized around a series of questions, with opportunities for both small group and plenary session discussions and question and answer. An emphasis was placed on talking and listening to others, sharing information and building an understanding.

The following provides a synopsis of the discussions that took place and the highlights of the points raised through these conversations.

Why were the sessions held?

Through recent research and the growing attention of concerned educators and employers, a gap has been identified in the levels and use of knowledge needed to make decisions about high school and post secondary learning. Decisions over to what to do during and after high school are often based on limited or inaccurate information, and traditional perceptions that can conflict with the realities of the current career market.






It is also known that information is available on a wide variety of subjects, from a diverse variety of sources, within a range of formats. Even with this assortment of information, access and effective comprehension and use of what is available can be limited.

At the same time, there is a growing number of positive actions being taken within individual schools, divisions and Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, to strengthen various aspects of career planning by students.

Acknowledgement that gaps exist, along with opportunities to strengthen supports for career planning prompted Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth to undertake the regional dialogue sessions. It was felt that attention was needed to bring together practitioners and resource persons, and to begin to foster a

greater sense of awareness and understanding of what exists, what the gaps are present, and what steps can be initiated to reinforce positive career planning approaches.

Some points of discussion that needed to be more fully understood and considered include:




-  The level of awareness of the broad spectrum of career choices and the paths to attain them through high school and post-secondary learning;
-  The extent of informational and 'guidance' resources that are available, and the level of access to such resources;
-  The role of schools, guidance counsellors and Manitoba Education in the provision of information and opportunities to plan for careers;
-  The influence and roles of parents in decision-making, and the accuracy of information available to them, with which to support their children; and,
-  The opportunities to acknowledge and strengthen the roles that all stakeholders play within decisions surrounding career planning and preparation for high school and after high school.

Participants and their feedback?

The sessions contained a blend of individuals from across the school system, and from a wide variety of locations in Manitoba. The majority of participants were directly connected to high schools, either as administrators or guidance counsellors. This mixture enabled the realities within the schools to be acknowledged and better understood, while the wisdom of individual experience was clearly displayed.

The four locations enabled participation from a significant number of school divisions, local high schools and regional colleges. A total of 143 individuals participated, with the majority in the two Winnipeg sessions. It should be noted that, although two sessions were held in Winnipeg, approximately 30% all of the school-based participants in these two sessions were from rural locations. The Winnipeg and Brandon sessions also included a number of industry representatives, while in Brandon and The Pas, representatives of the regional colleges participated.

The vast majority of individuals stated that they did see a value in the sessions. The reasons for this varied, but generally included:

-  The ability to network and make contacts;
-  Sharing ideas and perspectives;
-  Gaining added factual information; and,



Just "being heard".

The sessions also facilitated some understandings across individuals and divisions, creating some common recognition of situations as well as identifying some alternatives to address local circumstances. Many individuals indicated that this was a clear benefit; learning what resources are available, and hearing what others are doing to address common concerns and issues.

The specific mix of individuals and positions influenced some points of discussion, providing for a more detailed understanding of the issues and distinctions. Many of these were reflected in terms of the distinctions within rural, northern or smaller school settings.

Group discussions that were seen to be most beneficial were those with a good balance of individuals (administrators, counsellors, industry, etc.). Opportunities to continue these types of conversations amongst diverse participants are seen to be very valuable and contributing to a growing body of knowledge.

Within many of the group discussions, it was evident that a greater level of understanding was built, that many of the issues are similar, even when they impact differently on different functions.

What was said.

The consistent messages...

Across all of the locations, and within the majority of group discussions, several consistent messages were presented. These messages represent the most common situations and circumstances that need to be given attention. Primary messages are presented below.



It was generally agreed that a bias is seen to exist in terms of a hierarchy of post-secondary education, with university at the top, then college, then apprenticeship or trades or other forms of training. This bias is believed to exist because of parental perceptions of what is best for their children, their (parental) own experiences and a lack of factual, accurate information. In addition, it was acknowledged that teachers may also be contributing to this bias, because they have personal understanding of universities and limited exposure to other careers or trades.

University still tends to be viewed as the best way of obtaining a stable, well paying career. Information that counters these perceptions, and raises awareness of alternatives is seen to be very important, particularly for students that do not consider university as a viable option, and may be left with inappropriate choices.



Accurate and timely information is seen to be key in changing inaccurate perceptions, along with good exposure to the broad range of career alternatives and non-traditional forms of employment. Exposure to alternatives varies considerably. It is recognized that information on the universities (and colleges) is more accessible because these institutions promote and market themselves. Exposure to all forms of careers and post secondary learning needs to be balanced.



The role of parents is seen to be very important, particularly at the younger years. Parents are generally seen as key players in the decision-making process, and yet they may often be those that are least well informed. Exposing parents to the diversity of high school options, career choices and the realities of job stability, career mobility, etc., and to the particular means to achieve different choices is seen to be very significant. Involving parents and maintaining this involvement is seen to be a primary requirement, yet is often very difficult to do. It was also noted that the school's connection to parents is stronger in the lower grades, and the means to retain this connection into the senior years is needed.

As a result, parents also need to be better informed about financing post secondary education. It is believed that parents are still involved in financing post secondary learning, yet they operate without good information. Post secondary education financing is seen to require a level of financial planning that some school counsellors did not feel qualified to provide. More resources and expertise are needed.



Although there remains some debate, it is generally agreed that information should be provided to students and parents prior to the senior grades. This information should begin with general introductions and lead to specific knowledge. Having students and parents identify aptitudes and strengths was viewed as a good way of initiating such discussions.

The level of agreement as to whether career 'planning' should be initiated prior to the senior years was dependent on where the participants were connected. For example, within the Winnipeg session on October 16th, there were a number of individuals connected to the middle years and industry. Discussions in this instance, indicated a stronger desire to have career information initiated earlier – in the middle years at least. Conversely, participants at the Brandon session on October 17th, were primarily attached to high schools, and indicated a preference to have career planning efforts limited to the senior years.

Regardless of the outcome of such a debate, it was generally agreed that information and discussion of career choices and financing options needs to take place substantially before Senior 4.



The issue of a lack of time and resources for counselling, gathering and distributing information that supports career planning, within the schools and divisions, was a recurring theme. This is particularly limiting in smaller divisions and within smaller high schools. It was noted that individual counsellors spend the majority of their time addressing crisis situations, and have little time to actually 'counsel' on careers. Many of the counsellors that participated were part time, and were stretched with other duties.

For these reasons, a need was identified to create an environment where the responsibility for career counselling is shared – that the whole school community, including parents are better informed and actively support informed decisions surrounding high school and post high school.



Within all of this, the role of the Department can be identified. The Department is seen as the keeper and distributor of information. There is a need for the Department to make this information as understandable and accessible as possible. Actions could include an overall master resource list of financial supports, links to other websites, the development of consistent application forms (single format versions), etc.

Considerable interest also exists in having the Department develop and mandate a course on career planning, and / or begin imbedding career exploration and planning into the curriculum in earlier grades. This is seen to be a means of entrenching the concept of planning and preparing young people for employment more fully within schools, which would result in greater effort being placed on this work. Several of the participants, however, debated this suggestion, noting that curriculum additions or changes are already significant and that they affect teachers' ability to teach.

Student financial aid was also discussed from a number of perspectives. Difficulty has been experienced within a number of areas, including:

- The timeliness of receipt of application packages (late in the graduating year is too late, with the suggestion that June of the senior 3 year would be more appropriate);
- Obtaining assistance in completing the forms and understanding all of the implications of the process; and,
- Clear and factual information regarding eligibility and likelihood of receiving financial support.

Increased contact with student financial aid officials, assistance and experience with financial planning and greater promotion of the website application process were all noted as being ways to resolve these difficulties.



It was also noted that, where the dialogue sessions included a number of industry representatives (as in Winnipeg, on October 16th), there was considerably more emphasis placed on the relationship between industry and the school system. This involvement could include anything from the provision of greater exposure to alternative careers, to scholarships and bursaries. Enabling industry and the school system to come together and talk was a definite benefit to both parties.



An issue that was raised within many of the discussions, without resolution, is the recognition that many students are not moving directly from high school to post secondary learning. Some take time off to work, others to gain other experiences, or to generate money for further schooling. Many appear to take an average of one to two years before they re-enter post secondary training. As a result, their connection to the school is lost and the influence of their parents is often reduced. There is an identified need to make information available to these individuals, with the role of the Department seen to be more important.

Regional and School Distinctions...

One message that also came across very clearly, is that there are different needs and circumstances within the various regions in Manitoba, and that these should be taken into account. Practices and approaches are required that are best suited to the realities and circumstances of northern, rural and smaller communities.

A number of issues were raised as key examples of this:



Within many of the smaller, often rural or northern high schools, the resources available for technical / vocational education are very limited. Compounding this situation is the fact that there can be a smaller number of careers present within the local economy to use as examples for students. As a result, exposure to careers in the trades or technology is correspondingly limited. There is a need to provide more information on the trades and technology within the rural and northern settings in order to provide greater exposure and opportunity for choice. It was also suggested by many of the participants, that a direct connection, and frequent visits by staff from Apprenticeship Branch would be very useful.



It was also noted that there are regional differences with respect to accessibility of information that need to be accommodated. Having websites and internet links for families in the north that do not have access to computers, doesn't work well. Within the north, direct contact with real information and a chance to talk about it is seen to be of most value.

Reaching individuals, particularly parents, in their own setting is seen to be particularly important – the hockey rink, sports club, local store, bingo, etc.



Rules and procedures that work within larger urban settings are often seen to penalize smaller rural or northern situations. It was noted that regulations concerning class sizes in Keewatin Community College are the same as that for Red River College. With a significantly smaller population to draw from, many classes in the trades or technology are often cancelled because enrolment does not reach the necessary size. As a result, the regulations are seen to not acknowledge the northern realities, thereby working to limit opportunities for post secondary students.

Similarly, within rural, agricultural settings, the student financial aid criteria that account for the value of parents assets towards eligibility, does not accommodate the reality that farm equipment (while of significant value) is a business asset that is not necessarily reflective of ability to finance schooling. Greater recognition of rural costs and financial capacity to pay for post secondary schooling is needed. In addition, recognition of the cost of housing for rural / northern students who must often travel away from home for post secondary opportunities, is also necessary.

What follows...

The Department clearly indicated that strengthening the linkages between high school and post-secondary educational options and career choices is a priority, and that effort will be expended in ensuring that there are as many educational pathways available as possible and that the overall system of supplying and disseminating information more clearly outlines these options and choices. In support of these efforts, participants across the dialogue sessions identified a number of consistent 'next steps' for consideration.

Briefly stated, these included:



Participants see the value in reviewing the student financial assistance program, particularly with the view of regional biases, eligibility based on ability of parents to pay, and making the forms easier to understand and use. More timely receipt of the information by the schools (prior to the end of students Senior 3 year) is also desired.



Participants would like to see Departmental resources more visible within the schools. This could include direct contact by student financial assistance officials in the schools, and with the parent advisory council groups, and / or resource persons that can build expertise on apprenticeship and trades related careers (holding sessions for students, teachers, counsellors and parents).



There is general belief in the value of having a broader public awareness campaign that would target parents and students, and could address some of the inaccurate perceptions and biases that exist. This could include public media, as well as holding on-going discussions and information sessions in schools.



Connecting industry and employers to the schools is also seen to be a Departmental role (although some schools and divisions are moving forward on this already) that can provide additional resources.



Continued concern was expressed over the need for additional resources within the schools, to enable more time and energy to be put into this importance area.



The idea of identifying and documenting 'best practices' – ways of addressing limitations and overcoming them within individual schools has strong merit. Opportunities to share information and experiences, include, in person (conferences or workshops), a written manual, or other networking means.

Overall, the Department is viewed as the primary source of information, and any and all efforts that can be made to strengthen the quality, simplicity and access to information would be valued. The website was specifically mentioned, ensuring that it is very user friendly, has all of the appropriate links, coordinates and assembles information, and that it is capable of serving as the clearing house for information.

For consideration...

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