SUMMER SCHOOL IS THE NEW SUMMER JOB

WHY FEWER TEENS ARE WORKING—AND WHY IT MATTERS

IT'S 6 A.M. ON A WARM SUMMER MORNING in southwest Philadelphia. While most of her friends are still asleep, 17-year-old Nina Zarwie is getting ready for work. To arrive at her job across the city on time, the rising high-school senior follows an established routine: leave her house by 6:30 a.m., catch a trolley, then a train, then a bus, before finally clocking into her hospital job by 8:30 a.m.

The long commute would have tested most adults, but Zarwie recalls it almost nostalgically.

"When you love what you're doing, it doesn't feel like work," she says.

Planning ahead, arriving on time, taking initiative: these are some of the basics of professionalism. But for most young people, these job skills don't just develop—they must be learned and practiced.

Like Zarwie, many teens have traditionally honed these skills during a summer job—scooping ice cream, busing tables, lifeguarding. Such summer gigs have long been seen as a kind of rite of passage for American teenagers.

Statistically, though, there are far fewer teens like Zarwie today than just two decades ago. The number of 16- to 19-year-olds working during the summer has dropped significantly in that time, from 61 percent in 1998 to 40 percent in 2018.

That has some researchers and educators worried. They argue that teens who forgo a summer job miss out on a uniquely formative experience, one in

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DAVID L. RYAN/THE *BOSTON GLOBE* VIA GETTY IMAGES

Paid summer youth work, such as these lifeguard jobs, is increasingly rare, government statistics indicate, as more young people spend their summers in other ways.

which young people learn important lessons about the working world. Even more troubling, the decline in work may be yet another way in which advantaged students get a leg up on their disadvantaged peers. Teens of color and those from low-income families stand to benefit most from early work experience, some researchers say, yet they're the least likely to land a summer job.

The implications of this trend extend beyond the local job market and into education. Preparing students to be "college-and-career ready" is the stated charge of most high schools today. But can young people be career-ready if they've never worked a job? As employers place greater value on skills like communication and collaboration, how should high schools adapt?

With questions like these in mind, some researchers are making the case for schools to play a more active role in connecting students with work opportunities. "It's clear to me that unless schools and employers together can figure out how to solve this problem, leaving it to kids on their own, it's just not gonna happen," said Bob Schwartz, a senior research fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "And the kids who most need work experience are the ones least likely to get it."

Mapping a Long-Term Decline

Summer employment among 16- to 19-year-olds has trended downward since the late 1980s, when 7 out of 10 teenagers worked over the summer, according to the Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 1). Employment declined most steeply between 1998 and 2011. Forty-two percent of teens had a job in July 2011, compared to 64 percent in 1998. Over the past decade, the rate has remained relatively stable.

While young people of all races are less likely to work today than in the past, white teens have historically held summer jobs at higher rates than their black and Latino peers. That pattern continues today. In July 2019, 47 percent of white teens were working, compared to 39 percent and 38 percent of black and Latino teens, respectively.

Researchers point to a range of explanations for the overall decline and disagree about whether the problem relates to supply (fewer qualified teens seeking jobs) or demand (fewer employers hiring teens).

On one hand, fewer young people appear to be looking for summer jobs as they focus instead on schooling, unpaid internships, and other education-related activities. "Kids are just less likely to apply," said Paul Harrington, director of Drexel University's Center for Labor Markets and Policy. "They're just not showing up in the numbers they have." Indeed, teens today are more likely to be enrolled in school during the summer than ever before. In July 2016, 42 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds were enrolled in school (high school or college), compared to about 25 percent in 1998 and just 10 percent in 1985, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The wording of the question about youth employment on the bureau's Current Population Survey remained consistent from 1985 to 2016. The agency notes that, for the purposes of the survey, "a person in school can be employed, unemployed, or out of the labor force." In a 2010 paper, the bureau reported that the increase in school enrollment is partly attributable to the trend toward school years starting in late August rather than after Labor Day, but that "looking solely at July data, when the majority of school systems would be closed for the summer, reveals that the proportion of teens enrolled has more than tripled in the past 20 years."

At the same time, teens who do in fact want summer jobs face more barriers to employment and stiffer competition than they did in the past. Rising minimum wages have reduced employment opportunities for teens, according to a recent study by the Mercatus Center, a free-market-oriented think tank at George Mason University. The analysis suggests that teens are "priced out" of the labor market as higher minimum wages make it more costly for employers to hire for the low-skilled positions teens most often fill.

Employers appear to be looking to older workers and foreign-born workers instead of young people for those jobs. Why? Employers often perceive teens as less likely to be punctual, less likely to take initiative, and more likely to shirk responsibility, according to surveys and interviews conducted by Harrington and his colleagues at Drexel's Center for Labor Markets and Policy. Their study concluded that "teens, due to their lack of soft skills, are effectively at the end of the hiring queue."

Indeed, evidence indicates that employers value dependability, communication, and similar "soft" or professional skills more than ever. A 2014 paper from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development concluded that soft skills rival cognitive skills in predicting employment and earnings. More recently, a report from the Brookings Institution stated that "employer expectations have risen for work readiness, communication, and other soft skills—qualifications that are difficult for youth to demonstrate without prior work experience."

The upshot is that fewer teens are working even as employers place greater value on the soft skills often accrued through work experience. "There are some things you can do in schools

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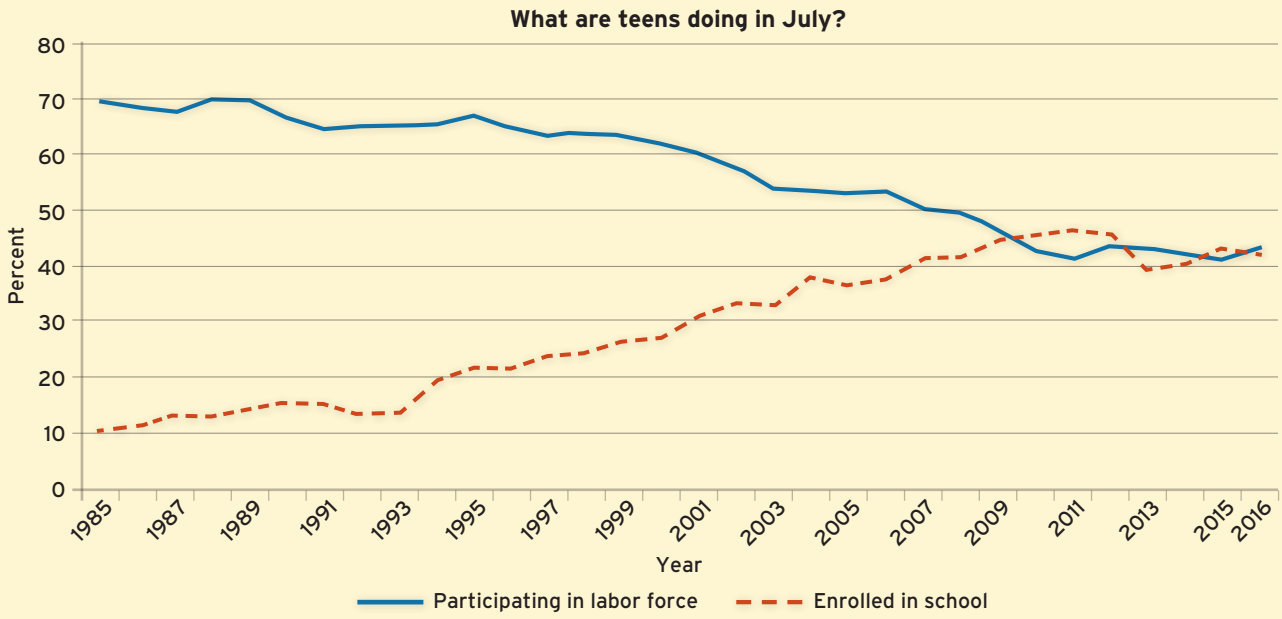
More Teens in School, Fewer Teens at Summer Jobs (Figure 1)

The rate of teen labor-force participation dropped to about 43 percent in the summer of 2016, down from almost 70 percent in 1985. Meanwhile, the proportion of teens enrolled in school in the summer increased to almost 42 percent, from about 10 percent in 1985.



NOTE: Teens are 16- to 19-year-olds. Schools are defined as public or private institutions that confer academic degrees, including high schools, community or junior colleges, four-year colleges, universities, and graduate or professional schools of learning. School attendance can be either full time or part time.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

and classrooms to help develop those skills, but they are basically best learned . . . through work," Schwartz said.

Equity Concerns

What are the implications of this long-term decline in summer jobs and teen participation in the labor force generally? The answer is complicated, partly because it's impossible to generalize about the benefits of a summer job. Rather, researchers caution that the pluses and minuses vary with the timing, intensity, and quality of a job, and on the characteristics of the teens themselves. Consider, for example, a high-school student from an affluent family who works a part-time summer job as an office assistant. The lasting impact of that experience is almost certainly different from that of a student who works a full-time, year-round job at McDonald's to help her family make ends meet.

That said, a number of studies have examined the long-term effects of youth employment and some have found lasting benefits. A 1997 article in the *Journal of Labor Economics* reported that working during one's senior year of high school is associated with higher earnings and wages later in life. More recently, a study from the Brookings Institution and the nonprofit research center Child Trends found that having a job as a teenager (aged 16 to 18) predicts higher job quality in adulthood.

But Martha Ross, a lead author of the Brookings report, is quick to put those advantages into perspective. "At this point, the benefits of a college education are so big that not having one, I think, would swamp any positive effects of getting a job as a teenager," Ross said. "You're going to run into a brick wall of job openings for which you need some postsecondary education." Evidence also suggests that the positive effects of teen jobs have diminished over time.

Is the hand-wringing over the decline in summer jobs misplaced, then? What's so concerning about the fact that teens appear to be spending more time in school and less time working paid jobs? The answer depends largely on the teens you have in mind. "There are some groups who are consciously choosing not to work to focus on academics and extracurriculars," Ross said,

"but there's another group that actually does want to work. A lot of them are actively looking for work, but they just can't find it."

It's the latter group—which is more likely to comprise teens of color and those from low-income families—that most concerns researchers. In particular, they worry that the decline in teen jobs may disproportionately affect students who are already disadvantaged. In the summer of 2018, for instance, the unemployment rate for black teens was twice that of their white peers. Additionally, low-income youth of all racial and ethnic groups are about half as likely to be employed in the summer as their middle-income counterparts. The upshot is that white teenagers from middle- or high-income families are the likeliest to have jobs and accrue whatever benefits come from such work experiences. Meanwhile, teens of color and low-income teens may fall further behind as they lose out on a key opportunity to learn important professional skills and start building contacts.

The bottom line is that the teens who are least likely to secure a summer job are the ones who stand to benefit the most from such employment, researchers say. That's because teens from higher-income families who don't work are likely to find other ways to build soft skills, make professional connections, and gain exposure to different careers. "But if you are a kid from a family that doesn't have strong employment-related networks, then the value of a teen job is amplified, because it might be one of the few chances you have to interact with adults in that way," Ross said.

Trend toward Career Development

It's unclear to what extent education leaders are concerned about or even aware of this long-term decline in teen employment. Even if they are, high schools have few incentives to address the problem. School leaders, by and large, do not see the matter as their responsibility, said Schwartz, who works with educators as part of the Boston-based Pathways to Prosperity Network. "Understandably," he said. "They have plenty of other things on their plate."

Indeed, public efforts to help young people get summer jobs have traditionally been sponsored by city governments and community organizations. Summer youth-employment programs in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and New York City, for example, go back decades and connect thousands of teens with jobs each summer. Studies of these programs have found that some of them have reduced violence and delinquent behavior among participants, but research has not revealed long-term effects on employment or earnings—perhaps because many of these programs were designed not to foster job skills but to keep idle youth out of trouble. Lately, though, some have begun to take on a more intentional career-development focus.

It was through such a program that Nina Zarwie secured a paid internship at a cancer treatment center last summer. Philadelphia's summer-jobs program, run by the Philadelphia Youth Network, or PYN, connected her with the treatment center and also guided her through the application and interview process.

"Before I started, I had zero work experience," Zarwie said. "I was really nervous about the interview." Advice from the network on how to prepare—even how to dress—for it helped calm her jitters.

Zarwie's experience that summer is a testament to the power of meaningful, career-focused early work opportunities. Almost giddily, she recalls shadowing doctors, helping nurses in the center's rehab and nutrition departments, and handling administrative tasks like reviewing and filing paperwork. The experience of observing a surgery, she says, was "life-changing."

Through it all, the mentor she met through the network was there to help her navigate the challenges of a first job, such as when she had to miss work to babysit her siblings. "It's getting you ready for the future and the actual working world," Zarwie said.

Connecting High School and Work

Stories like Zarwie's have some researchers, policymakers, and educators calling for high schools to play a more active role in connecting students to work. U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, for instance, has lamented the "walls" between education and the business community and applauded efforts to expand career and technical education programs.

But "work-based learning," which integrates work experiences into high schools, isn't just a matter of expanding traditional career and technical education programs. First, not all such programs provide opportunities for students to directly engage in on-the-job work. Second, the emphasis in work-based learning is often on developing professional skills such as punctuality and dependability as much as technical competencies such as carpentry. More generally, work-based learning is just one part of a broader effort to provide students with clear pathways to postsecondary credentials that have value in the labor market.

But getting high schools at scale to take work-based learning seriously is a monumental task—one that is unlikely to happen absent significant public-policy shifts. "Right now, what [high schools] are judged on is . . . graduation and college enrollment rates and test scores," said Ross, the Brookings researcher.

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"We don't have any of the major incentives set up to promote work-based learning, which just means there's a tide that you have to go against."

One state that's gone strongly against that tide is Delaware. In 2014, the state joined the Pathways to Prosperity Network, a collection of states and regions working to connect students to careers. The network is a project of Jobs for the Future and the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Since joining the network, Delaware has spent the past six years working to build pathways between its education and workforce systems. Through a partnership between various state agencies, the governor's office, and the higher-education system, the state has dramatically expanded opportunities for high-school students to gain hands-on work experience. In some cases, students also earn industry credentials and college credits.

This year, 16,000 students, from roughly 40 percent of the state's high schools, are enrolled in the state's career-pathways program. That's up from fewer than 2,000 students in 2015. The state has accomplished this growth in part by creating powerful incentives for school districts to start or expand the pathways programs. The state provides financial support, training for teachers, and implementation assistance to school districts. Plus, many district leaders jump at the chance to offer students early college credit, industry credentials, and work experience, says Luke Rhine, the director of career and technical education at the Delaware Department of Education. "In general, it becomes an easy decision for districts and one more way in which they can intentionally build relationships with the community," Rhine said.

DAVE LONDRES

Nina Zarwie in the Oncology Outpatient Rehabilitation Gym at Cancer Treatment Centers of America, Philadelphia. Zarwie worked there for three summers during high school.

Delaware's Appoquinimink School District has adopted the pathways model with particular alacrity. Each of the district's 3,200 high-school students is enrolled in one of two dozen career pathways. Over three years, students take a sequence of courses aligned with their chosen pathway and engage in career-development activities such as job shadowing. As seniors, students participate in a work-study job, apprenticeship, or paid internship relevant to their interests.

The available pathways include traditional career and technical education fields such as construction and machinery, as well as areas such as international studies and business and economics. Each pathway provides opportunities for students to take advanced coursework, earn college credit, and engage in hands-on learning experiences. "What we've done is we've said, 'whatever's good for CTE students is really good for everyone,'" said Mike Trego, the district's CTE coordinator. "And then what's good for all the other pathways is good for CTE students." Starting next year, all students will be required to complete an internship or similar work-based learning experience to graduate.

Shaun Gibbs, a senior at Appoquinimink High School, is participating in the school's finance pathway. After taking a series of finance and accounting courses during his first few years in high school, Gibbs participated in a paid internship last summer at the local chamber of commerce office.

Gibbs speaks candidly about the challenges of his first job in a professional setting. "It might sound silly, but one of the hardest things for me was actually dressing up in business attire and having the mindset of 'I'm going into work,'" he said. "At the chamber, I was always meeting someone, and it was those interactions at the beginning that were awkward." As the summer wore on, though, Gibbs developed more confidence interacting with others and gradually took on greater responsibilities. Set to graduate in May, he plans to continue studying finance in college.

Trego admits the shift toward career pathways, which Delaware has made particularly quickly, hasn't always been easy. Changing the course catalog, building relationships with local employers to develop placements for students, and educating students and

parents about the changes have all presented challenges. But for Trego, hearing Gibbs recount his experience at the chamber of commerce tells him they're on to something. "You would've never heard him talking about networking before this," Trego tells me.

While Appoquinimink and other districts in Delaware have taken up this cause with notable aggressiveness, schools elsewhere can take smaller steps to help prepare students for careers. "What they can do is focus on building career awareness and preparation into the curriculum," Ross said, "whether it's internships . . . or career days or job shadowing or mentoring—some way to bring the work world into the schools as a developmental experience."

If you ask officials in Delaware what's prompted their focus on work-based learning, they probably won't mention the decline in teen employment. In fact, many people are only vaguely aware of the trend. Instead, efforts to increase career-focused education are often oriented toward preparing students to fill jobs in high-growth fields such as health care, information technology, and advanced manufacturing. As workforce needs change, so the thinking goes, high schools should change as well.

JENNIFER TREGO PHOTOGRAPHY

Career and technical education coordinator Mike Trego at Appoquinimink High School in Delaware: "Whatever's good for CTE students is really good for everyone."

While the career pathways model and similar programs did not arise explicitly in response to the decline in teen employment, these approaches implicitly acknowledge that work experience is a valuable piece of college-and-career readiness—and that there are certain professional and social skills that can't be taught in school, but rather are best learned on the job. The reduced likelihood that today's students will obtain those skills from a summer job only heightens the need for schools to expand their role in exposing students to work, supporters say.

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Looking Ahead

The days in which 70 percent of teens worked during the summer are long gone, and economists predict that the decline in teen work will continue. At the same time, the professional skills that teens often develop by working, such as communication and dependability, appear to be more important than ever to employers.

Will schools and cities feel compelled to react to these changes, or even recognize that they're occurring in the first place? As Delaware demonstrates, there are already efforts underway to strengthen connections between high school and the workforce. To really disrupt the waning of teenage employment, though, will require action at a larger scale. And for that to happen, education and policy leaders will likely need more compelling evidence that summer jobs have a lasting effect on teens' educational and employment prospects.

Which brings us back to Nina Zarwie, the Philadelphia high-school student. After working at the cancer treatment center last summer, she plans to graduate from high school this spring and pursue a career in medicine. Originally from Côte d'Ivoire, Zarwie hopes to use what she learns to help others in developing countries.

"I could have been like one of the girls out here that are involved in different activities," said Zarwie. "What PYN did for me, words really can't explain."

David Loewenberg is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.