

School/work balance

Finding a balance between school and work schedules is a reality for an increasing number of young people. On one hand, working while going to school can give students valuable experience in the job market, help them set their educational and professional goals, gain skills, and develop both autonomy and a sense of responsibility. For some young people, working is the only means for them to access post-secondary studies. On the other hand, for more vulnerable students, having an overly full schedule can lead to other dropout risk factors. This is especially true at certain times of the year when increased demands at school (e.g., final exam period) coincide with employers' needing more staff (e.g., the holiday season for businesses, the start and end of summer for the tourism sector).

What the research says

According to a report by the *Institut de la statistique du Québec*,¹ a higher percentage of Quebec students hold paid jobs during the school year than students in the rest of Canada. They also tend to work more hours. In the early 2000s, 40 percent of full-time Quebec students aged 15–24 also had a paid job. This high rate of employment translates into nearly 15 hours of work per week—nearly an hour more than students in other provinces. About half of these students work 15 hours per week or more, a significant increase over previous decades. The report also showed that six percent of youth aged 15–19 worked over 25 hours per week, and this percentage rises to 14 percent among 20–24-year-olds.

Given that the rate of school perseverance and qualification in Quebec is lower than the Canadian average, it seems natural to ask whether having a job negatively affects the school performance of students at or returning to school. Laberge² posits that it is the accumulation of various non-school activities (work, leisure, social, etc.), rather than the total number of hours worked, that leads young people to spend less time on their studies, which in turn leads to poorer grades and lower school engagement.

Students who work long hours stand out from other students in various ways:³

- get poorer grades
- have little hope of graduating or attending college or university
- come from less advantaged areas
- are under-represented in higher education preparation programs
- do poorer on standardized tests

Overall, studies indicate that the negative effects of paid work is lower on students who work less than 15 hours per week than on those who do not work. In other words, students who work a little less than 15 hours per week get better grades and drop out less than those who do not work at all. However, for students who work more than 15 hours, the negative effect is higher than that observed in students who do not work, and the negative effect increases for students working over 30 hours per week.

These findings should be interpreted with care, however. If working can negatively impact school performance, it is also possible that the decision to get a job is motivated by a lack of interest in school and poor grades. One US study of 1800 high school students⁴ shows that students who work long hours, either by choice or out of necessity, were less engaged in their studies and less interested in school even before they started working. Thus, while paid work can affect school engagement, school engagement can also influence the decision to get a job.

For more information

Réseau des instances régionales de concertation (IRC), Chantier national conciliation travail-études
<http://www.perseverancescolaire.com/en/travail-etude/>
Travail pendant les études, la performance scolaire et l'abandon
<http://www.cirano.qc.ca/pdf/publication/99s-41.pdf>

[1] M.-A. Gauthier, M. P. Labrie (2013), Le travail rémunéré chez les étudiants québécois. *Coup d'œil sociodémographique*, 23, Institut de la statistique du Québec, February 2013. Downloaded at: <http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/population-demographie/bulletins/coupdoeil-no23.pdf>

[2] L. Laberge (2012), Effets du cumul d'activités et de contraintes de travail sur la SST des jeunes travailleurs aux études, Presentation of research, Écôbes group. Downloaded at: <http://www.irsst.qc.ca/-webtv-contraintes-travail-SST-jeunes-travailleurs-etudes.html>

[3] L. D. Steinberg, S. Fegley, S. M. Dornbusch (1993), Negative Impact of Part-Time Work on Adolescent Adjustment: Evidence From a Longitudinal Study, *Developmental Psychology*, 29, 171–180.

[4] J.-R. Warren, P.-C. LePore and R.-D. Mare (2000), *Employment During High School: Consequences for Students' Grades in Academic Courses*, Center for Statistics and the Social Sciences University of Washington.

Taking effective action

Action to promote school/work balance in order to improve school perseverance can involve more than simply adjusting work hours. The current social consensus is that it is important to limit the negative effects of paid work on student success. With this in mind, the school/work balance awareness campaigns that are occurring in most regions of Quebec are necessary.

On the other hand, these programs must encompass all of the issues related to working students and not simply the adaptation of work schedules and work hours during school. Researchers have studied the links between school success and paid work; what emerges is that it is also important to tackle the reasons why some students may want to find jobs and spend long hours working, such as poor marks, low educational and career goals, or a tendency toward overconsumption.

Avenues for effective action related to school/work balance

Make sure the school is a vibrant place to be (e.g., student life, extracurricular activities, one-day internships, possibility of paid work at the school).

Engage staff in charge of educational and career guidance in school/work balance activities (e.g., guidance-oriented approach, internships, mentoring).

Raise awareness among school staff about the importance of students' career aspirations as well as paid work, and incorporate these important considerations into their educational plans.

Raise awareness among parents of their role in school/work balance, and assist them in fulfilling this role (e.g., course schedule; time spent on school work, at work, and in leisure activities; consumption; career goals, expectations related to school, work and family).

Raise awareness among parents about the importance of promoting and valuing education, and of not focusing solely on the financial aspects of the student job.

Heighten employer and community responsibility as partners in student success (e.g., flexibility of work hours, adaptation of job responsibilities, recognition of students' academic records, giving messages that support school perseverance, sponsorships, mentoring).

Offer students training and awareness activities (e.g., priority management, time management, stress management, budget management, consumer habits).