CAREER EXPLORATION IN THE ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Abstract

Job shadow opportunities for middle and high school students provides valuable exposure to workplace environments as students look at future career choices. This type of career exploration can help to connect students to careers of interest as part of a career pathway. These experiences can help a student recognize the skills that are needed for a particular job, as well as the day-to-day duties for a person working in a given field.

Military installations located near local school districts are an untapped resource for the career exploration opportunities that are available. Many military and civilian occupations are very similar in nature, allowing for useful connections to be made by students. Making the connections more simplified, for both partners, could allow for more opportunities to take place.

This paper will provide a suggested template to follow when planning an event in any school district located near a military installation.

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**Chapter 1 Introduction**

Asking a middle or high school student to consider what he or she would like to do after high school, is not a simple request. With that question there are things to consider such as interests, goals, strengths and weaknesses. Students should begin the outlining of academic and career goals before entering high school. According to Dahir (2001) “Students should be exposed to career awareness in grades K-6, participate in career investigations in grades 7-8, and engage in career experiences in support of their individual educational plans in grades 9-12 (p. 66).

Students may or may not attend college, but regardless of their choices, they need to have the tools needed to proceed successfully along a career pathway. Career exploration throughout at all grade levels is considered crucial. Using personal learning and career plans (PLCP) for students, the State of Alaska recognizes the need for career planning, starting in elementary school and continuing through adulthood (Career and Technical Education, 2010).

Shadowing professionals in different career fields is one way that students can begin to think of the different opportunities that are available to them in the workforce and how they might reach their goal. The professional organizations of Joint Base-Elmendorf Richardson (JBER) could assist with this important career exploration tool for a large population.

When tallied on September 30, 2013, the Anchorage School District’s enrollment was 40, 028 students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade with 21,006 being students in grades seven through twelve (Anchorage School District). Currently, the JBER community, through the Anchorage School Business Partnership Program, has 29 established partnerships with 25

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Anchorage School District Schools. The goal of this program is to develop quality partnerships

for the benefit of all Anchorage School District students and staff; foster positive working

relationships with businesses; assist in employability and work force development; build bridges of understanding between educational institutions and the community leading to better citizens and employees (Anchorage School Business Partnerships). This has been a platform for which the job shadow event has been developed.

1.1 Problem statement:

Educators today are faced with a difficult task of incorporating the right pieces of the puzzle at the right age or grade level for career exploration. They must get creative when helping students explore and plan by tapping into the resources that are available in their local area. The military community is often an untapped or under utilized resource when speaking of career exploration. Educators could benefit from being more aware of what is available to them and how to more readily access these opportunities through community partnering.

There is limited documentation available offering specific guidance for job shadowing opportunities on JBER. In the past, students may have participated in shadowing events initiated by a parent who is in the military or through an individual shadowing opportunity stemming from one of the JBER/ASD school partnerships. More formal events, targeted at this type of career exploration activity, are needed to build a stronger network of schools and organization to benefit students, now and in the future.

1.2 Statement of Purpose:

The purpose of this project was to assist school districts, located near military installations

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by providing a template for linking them to appropriate military organizations as part of a career pathways. Partnerships between military units and school can offer students another view into their career of interest. Over the last few school years, area middle school and high school counselors have shown an interest in exploring these partnerships in more detail. In the past, student exposure to these partnerships may have been viewed as a recruitment tool; however, what we see in the Anchorage area shows a desire on the part of the military installation leadership to be seen as a community partner. The Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson military installation includes many organizations that are able to serve as mentors for students and offer exposure to many career fields also seen in the local community.

Using data compiled from a job shadow event in 2013, this paper will provide a sample template to be used by the local school district to help incorporate military partnerships into career pathways. Following the National Career Clusters Framework of 16 Career Clusters and related Career Pathways, the outline can be used to assist students as they explore different career options and better prepare for college and career. It will be useful locally, with the focus being on courses of study at King Career Center in Anchorage, the school district’s facility for career, vocational and technical training programs. However, this outline may be used as a tool for school districts in other states to make use of this valuable resource. Due to the majority of local military personnel being members of the Army or Air Force, the focus of this project will be on these two military branches of service.

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**Chapter 2 Review of Literature**

2.1 Career Awareness, Exploration and Preparation

Educators and administrators are faced with the challenge of producing students

who are career aware, have had ample opportunities for exploration and are prepared for college or the workforce. In the report by Dare and Maddy-Bernstein (1999), they state that career theorists have long emphasized the developmental aspect of career development, and the need for it to begin in early childhood. Their recommendations for grades K-6 outline competencies in the categories of self -knowledge, educational and occupational exploration and career planning. These students are considered in the career awareness phase.

Career exploration is the area of focus for students at the middle school level. Arrington (2000) explains that this phase is nestled between career awareness and career planning/ preparation. At this age, students are exploring the world around them with greater awareness of how they fit into society as a contributing member. Faulkner, Steward and Baggett (2006) use agricultural programs to show the importance of allowing students to have the exposure to different career fields so they can see “the big picture” and learn where their interests lie. They remind the reader that some careers are very broad in nature and students will benefit from the chance to explore the different careers within the field. Smith (2000) recommends that teachers and administrators take advantage of the flexibility of the middle school schedule to offer more opportunities for career exploration. For example, a career exploration event could be held

during the school day, inviting community members into the school to talk about careers before students were invited to the worksite.

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After students have made some career related decisions, they can receive guidance from teachers on preparatory approaches to reach their goals and be further exposed to activities relating to career preparation in the upper grades. Dahir (2001) states, “Career plans should include the results of assessments of students' skills, attitudes, and interests by the time they enter grade 8 or 9”. Merritt and Williams (1999) report the need for inclusion of career and technical exploration for all high school students to “minimize the disconnection” between the courses they are taking and how that work will support what they will be doing after school. Research by Visher, Rajika, and Medrich (2004) shows that high school students who participate in career exploration programs are more likely than non-participants to take college entrance and advanced placement exams, graduate from high school and to enroll in two year college programs. These results show the benefit of career exploration for high school students.

2.2 School and community partnering

Research shows that partnerships between schools, businesses and organizations benefit both students and the local community. There is a lack of research available showing an organizational model for partnerships between military organizations and middle and high schools specifically relating to career exploration. The available research shows the benefits and challenges of school partnerships with community organizations and businesses.

A paper produced in 2011 by the Harvard Graduate School of Education suggests the need for employers to play a more active and broader role in the support of the career pathway system.The authors suggest that employers can assist students in middle and high school by offering job shadowing, career counseling and opportunities to work on various work related projects with the employer (Symonds, Schwartz and Ferguson, 2011).

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Students benefit when they are able to engage in activities at school that mirror the real life tasks that will be expected of them as they seek gainful employment outside the classroom. It is also noted that businesses and organizations often share their expertise and experiences with students in ways that compliment the curriculum being taught in the classroom (Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012). They note that effective school-community partnerships should be comprised of an awareness of the overlapping spheres of influences on student development, leadership from an action team, student or learner centered environments, as well as state and district level support. Through community partnering, business professionals can act as mentors, tutors and role models to support students during and after high school (Klein 2012).

A report by Murray (2005) discusses the need for school administrators to look at the establishment of liaisons or partnership coordinators in the schools to assist with school and business partnering. This position could assist both partners with understanding roles and responsibilities to best establish successful and enduring partnerships to best serve the student population.

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**Chapter 3 Template**

During the 2nd semester of the 2012-2013 school year, a job shadow event was planned by staff of the JBER-School Liaison Office, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. The intent of this event was to allow local area high school students to visit the military installation and shadow professionals in careers that they were interested in pursuing after high school. Some students were just seeking to explore different careers to get some career exposure**.** This was the first time an event of this kind was held on the joint base.

After contacting the counseling department at the Anchorage School District, school points of contact were identified for the different high schools and they were asked to offer the job shadow opportunity to their students. Military partners were identified through contact with unit and squadron commanders, asking them if they would like to sponsor a student at their workplace. Twelve high school students were then matched with a mentor in their career field of interest. Ten military organizations, comprised of military and civilian employees, participated in the event. Each mentor planned a day of activities for their student.

The template in this paper was developed to help make connections between the organizations on the military installation and the career that students were interested in exploring. It can be difficult for school personnel to know what careers are represented on a military installation when the organizations are not clearly identified or are

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referenced only in military terms. A goal of the template is to link military career fields with the identified 16 career clusters, making an easier connection for students who are attending Anchorage School District career and technical education programs and to identify organizations that would be beneficial to explore. Recognizing that a template did not exist in the local area, the researcher developed this template as an introductory tool for schools to use. The information gathered from mentoring organizations and the areas of concentration during the job shadow were the basis for which the template was created. It is not considered an end product and will be further developed as job shadow events are held, continually adding to and improving upon the current template.

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**Chapter 4 Discussion**

The job shadow event discussed in this paper shows a step in the right direction for creating a quality program to benefit both students and the community. The goal of the School Liaison Program on JBER is to continue to build upon the foundation that has been established, incorporating more career fields to allow for additional options for students. Through collaborative efforts with the JBER Community Relations Section, a database will be created to store all documentation for viewing by the general public. A website will be created during the summer of 2014 for accessing the materials, as well as a way for outreach between the military installation and the community. The desired goal is to create a developed template incorporating as many career fields as possible for all students in the local area while making it easily accessible to the Anchorage School District, other local school district and educators. In the future, this template could be used as a resource for other military installations and nearby communities.

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