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An Examination of Barriers to Pursuing PSE and Potential Solutions

FINAL REPORT

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, or the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	4
BACKGROUND	4
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	5
METHODOLOGY	6
NOTES ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND DEFINING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION	7
FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS	8
FUTURE PLANS	8
THE DECISION	10
FACTORS AND OBSTACLES	13
BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS - JOINT DISCUSSION	23
CONCLUSIONS.....	29
APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT AND CONFIRMATION SCRIPTS	32
APPENDIX B: MODERATOR'S GUIDES	40
APPENDIX C: REGIONAL FOCUS GROUP SUMMARIES.....	50

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), in partnership with the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF) commissioned EKOS Research Associates to conduct qualitative research to examine barriers to pursuing postsecondary education. This study is one of the few qualitative explorations of this issue, using focus groups to gather an in-depth view of the issue. The specific segment of youth covered by this research is also very narrow, as it encompasses only high school students who are not intending to pursue PSE (or at least are undecided), and their parents. This is the precise target group for additional measures to increase the proportion of youth who attend PSE.

This study explores who is not pursuing PSE and the reasons why. Key issues explored in the discussions include: the obstacles that are faced by students and how these obstacles interact with one another; what roles are played by key players in helping students make these decisions; the factors influencing post high school plans; barriers to PSE; the perceived importance of these barriers and the interaction among barriers; and the impact of finances, academics, information and motivation on plans for after high school. The importance of: the level of information about PSE (e.g., its costs and benefits); availability of financial aid; information on financing PSE; self-identifying as being or not being a potential PSE student; career plans; specific post high school plans (both in short versus long-term plans).

The research involved a series of focus groups conducted in six cities across the country. Two focus groups were held simultaneously in each city; one with students and one with parents. Following independent discussions, the two groups were later merged for a joint session to discuss barriers to pursuing PSE, as well as potential solutions. The focus groups lasted a maximum of two hours, while the joint sessions lasted a maximum of one hour.

Conclusions

Some major conclusions may be drawn from the research with students and parents. These include a number of intrinsic and extrinsic barriers that research participants described as having deterred students from PSE.

Major factors and obstacles that prevented them from continuing their studies after high school were directly linked to their negative perceptions of school, their views of PSE, and limited access to key information. Intrinsic factors identified as barriers to PSE included: general indecision; pressure and anxieties/fear of failure related to PSE; poor grades; learning disabilities; and, negative perceptions of school. Extrinsic factors identified as barriers to PSE included: inadequate information about PSE, varying levels of teaching quality; costs of PSE; PSE entrance requirements; and, a lack of information among parents resulting in less than optimal parental support and engagement in the planning and decision-making process. Intrinsic and extrinsic

barriers to PSE were attributed equal importance as a whole, although certain specific factors were more prevalent and others were more deeply rooted.

Participants proposed a number of potential solutions that could serve to encourage students to continue their studies after high school. Participants focused on extrinsic solutions, since they are likely more readily addressed than the intrinsic factors. Although participants did not attempt to propose intrinsic solutions, many suggested that extrinsic solutions could serve to mitigate the effects of intrinsic factors and barriers to PSE.

The most common solutions proposed by participants included: increasing the amount of information students receive about PSE options, costs and requirements; implement “aptitude-careers-PSE” modules into the curriculum; be mindful of the impact of increased pressure and emphasis on PSE in grade 11; make necessary modifications to the curriculum to accommodate students with different learning styles (including students with learning disabilities); increase the emphasis on the need for high quality teaching and emphasis on the impact of teaching quality on students; offer frequent information sessions about PSE for parents with children in secondary school; review current admissions requirements to enable more students to be accepted into PSE programs and ensure that information is available about requirements; and, increase financial support for PSE and information support that helps both parents and students in starting to plan for the costs of PSE. Although not specifically mentioned by study participants, presumably increased resources in the K-12 system would enable schools to make additional counselling available. This might afford greater opportunity for counsellors to focus on more career counselling and PSE planning, rather than confining the focus to behavioural issues because of constrained counselling resources, which was brought up in several of the discussions.

A few other important findings emerged from this research. One was the need to provide students and parents with more practical information about PSE. There is a tendency to think of PSE as a black box, making it very difficult for some students to envision it as a tangible option. Findings suggest that there is a strong need to present information about PSE alongside information about careers. Not only would this clarify how both are linked, but it would also help students to think more constructively about PSE and potential careers for the future.

Both students and parents supported the idea of implementing “aptitude-careers-PSE” modules into the curriculum to reach students. The purpose would be to help students more systematically explore their aptitudes and interests, link these to different career options and, ultimately, to potential PSE options.

Students in grade 11 and 12 are open to hearing about PSE options. The overwhelming majority of students who participated in this research expressed interest in continuing their studies and hoped to go on to PSE at some point in the future. Students tend to be receptive of help from teachers, guidance counsellors and their parents. In fact, some participants expressed interest in having their parents provide them with information (e.g., about student loans). Discussions with students and their parents revealed that there are still opportunities to help students decide to pursue PSE.

Timing of support and information is critical. Some students receive too little too late. Lack of information and support earlier (and perhaps ongoing) in secondary school leave some students ill

equipped to face the sudden shift in the emphasis placed on grades for the purposes of entry into PSE. This and the possibly narrow focus on specific types of PSE institutions and programs can push those not already decided in the wrong direction. An earlier, more gradual and gentle approach might produce better results.

Finances play a minor role in the decisions not to pursue PSE after high school, but the perception of “wasting money” because of indecision is a strong factor. Few students had looked into PSE options seriously enough to consider the cost of PSE as a major barrier. Most were more preoccupied with figuring out what they wanted to do in terms of PSE and as a career. That said, students seemed very pre-occupied with not “wasting money” if they were unsure about what they would be doing in the future and what they would be using PSE for. Students (more than parents) see money as a factor when they are faced with indecision about the type of career they want, and therefore, the type of PSE program that would be most beneficial to reach their career goals. There is limited understanding and appreciation for the value of PSE in contributing to students’ ongoing knowledge and abilities, irrespective of the type of program taken. Parents tend to see costs as more of a barrier than did students. Students and parents are largely unaware of the cost of PSE. In fact, very few in the study attempted to obtain any information about student loans.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In Canada, education is a provincial/territorial responsibility. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) was established in 1967 as a forum in which to discuss issues of mutual concern. This intergovernmental body was founded to serve as: a forum to discuss policy issues; a mechanism through which to undertake activities, projects and initiatives in areas of mutual interest; a means by which to consult and cooperate with national educational organizations and the federal government; and an instrument to represent the education interests of the provinces and territories internationally. CMEC provides leadership in education at the pan-Canadian and international levels and contributes to the fulfilment of the constitutional responsibility for education conferred on provinces and territories. All 13 provinces and territories are members.

Subsequent to a review of the mission and mandate of CMEC, ministers decided in 2004 to place priority emphasis on three aspects of Canadian education in the coming years: 1) Aboriginal education; 2) literacy; and 3) postsecondary education capacity. CMEC also continues to work in other key areas in postsecondary education, including: sharing information on promising practices; promoting and publishing policy-related research; working with Statistics Canada to maintain and develop appropriate indicators for postsecondary education; strengthening the postsecondary sector and increasing access; supporting international activities; and promoting mobility.

In particular, affordability of postsecondary education (PSE) continues to be a topic of importance and focus for ministers, both in the context of postsecondary education capacity and above-noted continuing areas of work. While considerable work has been initiated in Canada to advance the agenda of affordable and accessible PSE, more is needed. CMEC has launched a series of reports on the issue of affordability. The current research is a follow on to a first piece in this series called *A Literature Review of Postsecondary Education Affordability in Canada*.

Affordability and access to post-secondary education is also a primary issue in the research conducted by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF). The Millennium Research Program was launched in 2001 to assist the Foundation in carrying out its mandate to improve access to post-secondary education and provide students with the educational opportunities they need to prepare themselves for the future. The Research Program advances the study of barriers to postsecondary education and the impact of policies and programs designed to alleviate them. It ensures that policy-making and public discussion about opportunities in higher education in Canada can be informed by rigorous analysis and empirical evidence.

The Research Program achieves this, in part, through quantitative and qualitative studies gauging the attitudes of students and parents towards postsecondary education and their behaviour in terms of preparing for college or university. The Program's work has touched on a broad range of subjects that can be grouped under two broad research themes. The first theme is *Access to Postsecondary Education in Canada*, with a focus on who participates in postsecondary education, who does not, and why. The second theme is on preparing for Postsecondary Education, with a

focus on whether students, families and schools have the information, academic support and financial means necessary to adequately plan and prepare for successful entry into postsecondary education.

CMEC, in partnership with the CMSF commissioned EKOS Research Associates to conduct qualitative research to examine barriers to pursuing postsecondary education. While a number of more generalized quantitative surveys have been conducted to explore barriers to PSE, this is one of the few qualitative explorations of this issue, using focus groups to gather an in-depth view of the issue. The specific segment of youth covered by this research is also very narrow, as it encompasses only high school students who are not intending to pursue PSE (or at least are undecided), and their parents. This is the precise target group for additional measures to increase the proportion of youth who attend PSE.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study explored a number of key questions, including:

- Who is not pursuing PSE, and why?
- What obstacles are faced by those who have decided not to go and how do these obstacles interact?
- What roles are played, if any, by various key players such as parents and educators, in helping students make these decisions?

The issues explored in focus groups included:

- The factors influencing the student's post high school plan, as identified by students and parents;
- Barriers to postsecondary education identified by students and parents, and the extent to which they identify multiple barriers or categories of barriers (i.e., academics, finances, information, motivation);
- The perceived importance of these barriers, or the relative impact of each on the decision to not pursue postsecondary education;
- The interaction among barriers – including the extent to which one barrier might cause another (e.g., does a perceived lack of funds prevent a student from becoming motivated to study beyond high school?);
- The impact of finances on plans for after high school, and the relative importance of: debt aversion, cost-benefit analysis, price sensitivity, cost of leaving home, desire to earn money right away, student financial assistance programs;
- The impact of academics on plans for after high school, and the relative importance of: academic preparation, entrance requirements, and streaming in high school;
- The impact of information and motivation on plans for after high school;
- How important each of the following is:
 - Level of information about postsecondary education, its costs and benefits;
 - Availability (and amount) of financial aid;
 - Information on financing postsecondary education;

- Self-identification as being/not being a potential postsecondary student;
- Career plans; and
- Specific post high school plans and short versus long-term plans.

METHODOLOGY

The research involved a series of focus groups conducted in six cities across the country, including Toronto (on May 22nd, 2008), Saskatoon (on June 4th, 2008), Vancouver (on June 5th, 2008), Saint John (on June 10th, 2008), Halifax (on June 11th, 2008), and Montreal (on June 16th, 2008). The discussions in Montreal were held in French. Two focus groups were held simultaneously in each city, one with students and one with parents. The two groups were merged together for a joint session to discuss barriers to pursuing PSE, as well as potential solutions. The focus groups lasted a maximum of two hours, while the joint sessions lasted a maximum of one hour.

Those who participated in the research met the following criteria:

- High school students in grade 11 who were uncertain they wanted to register full time in either a post secondary program of study, an apprenticeship program, or trade/vocational program; and,
- High school students in grade 12 who were not intending to pursue PSE studies on a full-time basis.

Those excluded from the research had already made one of the following decisions:

- To pursue PSE studies;
- To pursue studies as part of an apprenticeship program;
- To pursue studies in a trade or vocational program;
- To take one or two semesters off from their studies before registering in a full time PSE program of study, apprenticeship program, trade or vocational program.

Parents met the following criteria:

- Parents of students in grade 11 who were unsure about or not intending to pursue university, college (public or private) or apprenticeship on a full-time basis for at least one term;
- Parents of students in grade 12 who were not intending to attend on a full-time basis of at least one term;
- Parent participants did not necessarily belong to the same households as student participants although in most cases the parent participants were parents of a student participant.

Some students and parents were recruited randomly across each city centre. Others were recruited from recruitment lists held by professional focus group recruitment firms. Although students were not asked about household income, parents were. Recruited participants cut across the income spectrum. Recruitment was not conducted by specific schools and there is no known information about the number or types of high schools represented by student participants. A total of 12 participants were recruited per focus group to ensure the participation of at least seven

people. The groups were held in adjoining hotel meeting rooms and audio-tape recorded. All participants were offered a \$100.00 honorarium for their participation in the discussions.

The moderator's guides for students and parents are appended to this report.

NOTES ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND DEFINING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

It should be kept in mind when reading this report that these findings are drawn exclusively from qualitative research. While every effort is made to balance various demographic characteristics when recruiting participants, these groups (and therefore the findings drawn from them) may not be said to be representative of the larger population as a whole. While groups generally indicate appropriate directionality, they do not serve as a proxy for a fully representative quantitative methodology. For the reader's ease, these findings are depicted to some extent as definitive and "projectible". This is, however, true only for the universe represented by these participants. The argument for using qualitative research, however, is that it allows for a more considered and in-depth conversation about the issue under study. This type of discussion provides a richer context for participants' views and more detail on how obstacles to PSE are formed and interact with one another. It further affords dynamic interaction during the sessions and from one session to another session. This affords an opportunity to probe any unexpected themes that emerge from the discussion, or clarify and validate any of the results (with other participants and in subsequent sessions).

In the recruitment of students (and parents), each potential participant was told: "for the purposes of this study we will use the term post secondary education (PSE). This means university, college, apprenticeship programs and private colleges. In other words any formalized education after high school" (see Appendix A). This concept of PSE as any education after high school was also used in the confirmation of participants in the week or so leading up to the discussion session. At the start of each of the six discussions, participants in both the parent and student groups were told that the discussion would be focused on how kids come to their decisions about going to or not going to full-time college or university to other full-time school after high school (see Appendix B for Moderator's Guides). Beyond this initial framing, participants were not asked to confine their comments about PSE to a specific type of education during the discussions.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

This chapter details the findings from focus groups with students and parents, as well as the joint sessions with both groups. The reporting places greater emphasis on the views expressed by students, since they are describing their own situations first hand. The perspectives of parents are specified in instances where they either elaborate on views of students or offer different insights into the issues discussed. Regional differences are outlined only where specific issues are linked to the province's approach to education. Readers should be again reminded that these participants are students with no plans to pursue PSE and as such may express more negative views about education and education-related services than other students would. Discussions also took place with participants in a small number of centres. These views do not necessarily reflect a representative viewpoint of grade 11 and 12 students across the country.

FUTURE PLANS

Most students said they did not feel prepared at this point in their lives to make any long-term decisions about their futures. The majority considered decisions about PSE closely tied to career paths (i.e., what one studies after high school will ultimately lead to a particular career). Decisions about PSE, therefore, tended to be viewed as binding over the long-term, particularly where trades and college was concerned. Consequently, there was tremendous pressure and anxiety about making the "right decision". Students were of the opinion that taking some time off was necessary in order to "figure things out". Parents tended to view their teens as being mostly unsure and undecided about the future. The parents of students in grade 11 often expressed the hope that their child would be in a better position to decide on their future education by the time they neared the end of their final year of high school.

Students typically planned to work or travel after high school, which served to defer decisions about PSE. "I think we have too much pressure on us to choose what we are doing right away; I think going away and seeing new things might help me out". Nearly half said they had definite plans for the next few years, while the other half remained unsure.

The students who planned to work after high school often had clear ideas about the areas in which they wanted to work. These included: the service industry (e.g., the restaurant business, retail, travel); manual labour (e.g., construction, oilrigs and pipelines); the trades (e.g., contracting, plumbing, mechanics, hair dressing); and, sports (e.g., coaching professional athletes and as professional athletes). A few participants said they took high school courses that would enable them to get a job in the trades when they graduated (i.e., in hair dressing and as a mechanic). While some planned to continue working in jobs they already held, the majority were not yet involved in the areas they wished to work. A minority of those planning to work after high school had no clear ideas about what they wanted to do. These participants, who were mostly in grade 11, were of the opinion that they would figure it out when the time came.

Some participants expressed interest in continuing their studies after high school, but faced immediate barriers to doing so. Most opted to work as a result of this. It was most common for these participants to say they did not have the grades to get into a particular program of study, or were missing the required credits to get into a particular program and could not immediately continue their studies for that reason. In a few rare instances, participants decided to work while they waited for more spaces to be made available in specific programs (e.g., law enforcement, firefighting).

Other students said they planned to travel after high school. Some planned to work and travel (i.e., on a cruise ship); others planned to travel as part of a program (e.g., volunteer programs); and, a few were going to make their own arrangements to travel (e.g., backpack around Europe). The majority of those who planned to travel as part of a program had already taken steps towards doing so. This included background research on the programs, speaking with representatives from the organizations and, in some cases, formally signing-up to get involved. Those who were planning to make their own arrangements to travel said they had already started to set aside money for this purpose and decided on particular destinations.

Students looked forward to many different possibilities for their lives after high school. These included: adventures abroad, finding an interesting career, new experiences, expanding their social circles, moving away from home, and, not surprisingly, "starting to make money". In a few instances, participants said they looked forward to "just being done high school" and pursuing more personal interests instead of "sitting in a room and listening to teachers talk". Several seemed to hold a negative view of school.

Some major concerns surfaced in the focus groups with students. A top of mind issue for most revolved around their uncertainty about what they wanted in the future. Many were anxious about the amount of time it might take them to develop a long-term plan. They also worried about the consequences of making the wrong decision about PSE and careers. "I don't want to end up wasting any time or money." "What if you don't like what you picked?" "I am worried about training for a job and not liking it." Minor concerns preoccupying students revolved around living without their friends and family for the first time and being able to find work.

When asked what, if anything, might alter their plans for the future, students expressed a few different opinions. Some were very confident about the plans they made and felt that nothing was likely to change their minds. Those who were slightly less confident about their plans for the future felt that these plans might be altered, but were not sure exactly what it would take for this to happen: "You never really know until you get into it". A few students pointed to specific factors that might change their current plans. One participant, for example, said his current plans for the future might be altered if he discovered a program of study that was perfectly suited for a student like him. Another said his plans to work in manual labour would be altered if he were injured on the job: "I would probably try to get a slacker job in an office".

THE DECISION

The decisions made by students about PSE appeared to be largely impacted by their exposure to information about PSE (e.g., the kind of information they received and the point in time when they received it), the amount of time they spent contemplating PSE options, pressure felt from parents to pursue PSE, as well as specific events or situations that prompted students to change their minds about PSE. Students were of the views that their friends had very little impact on their decision-making process. Many parents, on the other hand, felt that friends, including boyfriends and girlfriends did have a significant impact on their child's weighing of post-high school options.

Choosing not to continue their studies after high school was generally a difficult decision for students to make. Several seemed to make this decision because they felt like it was their only option, either because they were not ready to make any long-term commitments, or because they did not think they had high enough marks for PSE. Discussions with these students suggested that they had not completely ruled out PSE as a future possibility. Deciding not to go on to PSE after high school was only easy for students who were absolutely certain that they never wanted to pursue PSE (i.e., participants who realized the careers they were interested in did not require them to pursue PSE). Almost all of the parents who participated in the research held out hope that their child would pursue PSE at some point in the future and many were convinced of this: "I think he'll realize that working labouring jobs in construction is pretty hard work. I think he'll end-up going to college, or at least getting a trade."

The overwhelming majority of students said they did not think about PSE in grade 8. It was noted: "Maybe you start thinking about 'what you want to do when you grow up' when you are a kid, but you don't really start thinking about college or university until much later." Teachers and guidance counsellors did not typically communicate with students about PSE in earlier grades. A few participants felt that they would not have been mature enough to begin thinking about PSE in grade 8— "I was too busy playing baseball in grade 7 and 8 to care about anything else". Others suggested that they were not inclined to begin thinking about PSE in grade 8 because there was no incentive for them to do so — "[the end of high school] just seemed like it was so far away." It is difficult to know whether exposure to information about PSE in early grades would be useful given these results. That said, it might be precisely this exposure earlier in the decision-making process that would start kids thinking about these issues earlier, giving them a greater opportunity to look for information and thinking about what suits them best in terms of PSE.

The majority of students decided on a plan for their future around grade 11. While some said they had begun considering their options earlier on (e.g., around grade 10), few had reached a firm decision before grade 11. A few participants made their decision abruptly when they came to terms with the fact that the end of high school was quickly approaching. A few students said they remained completely undecided about what they would do after school until grade 12. "I made my decision two weeks ago when I found out that a friend of mine made \$75,000 after working two weeks on oilrigs". Minimal time spent considering the options for PSE may be symptomatic of limited access to information about PSE in early grades. The abrupt recognition of the ending of high school and need to think about PSE seems to result in a similarly abrupt increase in pressure

to command good grades and plan more carefully for the future (as noted in more detail in the next section). This seems to be debilitating for some of the students who are not well prepared to withstand the change in pressure and deal with the sudden requirement for high grades and good decision-making.

Most students said their parents and family members originally expected them to continue with their studies after high school. Participants with firm career visions (e.g., working as a contractor or coaching athletes) or plans to take some time off to travel usually indicated that their parents were supportive of the decision they made, despite their original preference for PSE. Those who were less certain about what they wanted to do often reported that their parents still hoped they would attend PSE. Some participants said their parents merely encouraged them to go on to PSE in the future, while others said their parents put considerable pressure on them to do so. In certain instances, students described being pushed by their parents to pursue PSE because they had either not attended PSE themselves, or had continued their studies after high school, and wanted to see them succeed. "My mom is flipping out because she wants me to go; she wants me to do well in life." "My dad wants me to go because he never went and he doesn't want me to make the same mistakes he did—he realizes that he can't force me to go though." In other instances, parents seemed to press students to continue their studies after high school because they had no clear direction. "My parents are always like: you can't be sitting there for too long—you need to get a move on". "You've got to do something". "My parents tell me 'you need to go to school' and I keep telling them that I don't know what I want to be. They will try and tell me to be something and I am like, 'but I'm not good at that'." Students expressed that parents were more inclined to nag them about PSE than to provide them with practical information that could help them to decide what they might like to study. In many cases, the pressure put on students by their parents made students feel inadequate and stressed out about not having a long-term plan. This seemed to add to their fears about making the wrong decisions. It is interesting to note that most parents were of the mind that they did not push their teens to pursue PSE, but merely tried to encourage them to do so: "As long as he's happy."

Some students identified specific events or situations that prompted them to decide against continuing their studies immediately after high school. In one instance, a presentation put on by Katimavik prompted a student to consider volunteering after high school instead of PSE. The presentation had an effect on him because he was not sure what he wanted to study and saw volunteering as a temporary solution to this problem. Another student, who originally wanted to enrol in a college business program like her older brother, decided against PSE when she saw how many hours her sibling was required to work after he graduated and landed his first job. Another student assumed he would continue his studies after high school on a sports scholarship, but decided against PSE after an injury, took time off from sports to recoup, and got lower grades because he no longer had "an outlet". Students provided a few other examples like these. They typically chose not to continue their studies after high school, either because they were made aware of other options that seemed more suitable, or because something turned them off their original plan and they needed time to figure out a different plan.

Only a few students were certain they never wanted to pursue PSE. These participants had clear visions about the careers they wished to pursue, which they believed would not require continuation of their studies. One participant wanted to become a screenwriter, for example, and

had already written a screenplay that he was in the midst of trying to pitch to producers. Another participant planned to work as a contractor for his uncle's company and eventually wanted to take over the family business. These participants thought the most effective way to launch their careers was simply to start working in the field.

School guidance counsellors and teachers were thought to have very little impact on the decisions made by students. Teachers did not seem to provide students with very practical information about PSE. Only a minority of participants had interacted with their school's guidance counsellor. Those who spoke with their guidance counsellor typically reviewed their grades and discussed their aptitudes in certain areas. The guidance counsellor often recommended certain courses and sometimes provided them with information they did not already know about PSE. Very few participants had approached their guidance counsellor to inquire specifically about PSE. Some students viewed their experience with the guidance counsellor as "a waste of time" because they had already decided not to pursue PSE, whereas others considered it useful because they received new information about PSE that might be of help to them later on (should they decide to continue their studies). In most cases, discussions with guidance counsellors took place after students already began considering alternatives to PSE. Parents had mixed views about the role and influence of guidance counsellors. In the eyes of some parents, counsellors were thought to deal mainly with "problem cases" as opposed to provide students with advice: "It's a huge school and I think that there are only two of them. They don't have the time to sit down with every kid and look over options." Parents were unanimous in the view that teachers played a pivotal role in their child's success (or lack thereof) at school, and flowing from that, their child's interest and ability to pursue PSE: "My daughter was always really good at math and she'd had the same teacher for two years. She really liked him. He knew how to handle her and motivate her. Then this year she has a different teacher and her grades went down the drain."

As noted, students generally felt that their friends had very little impact on their thinking about PSE. Almost all of these participants said they came to their decision before speaking with their friends. As with parents, some friends were supportive of the decision, while others expressed disappointment. A few of their friends warned them, "If you take a year off, you won't go back". Two participants indicated that their decisions not to continue their studies immediately after high school caused some tension in their relationship with friends. They noted: "My friends tell me I am stupid for not going because they are all going, but I have no idea what I want to do yet." "One of my friends is really smart and she's into good grades and stuff. She doesn't think that going off to another country is a good plan." These participants said they defused the tension by avoiding conversation about their plans after high school. As such, negative reactions from friends seemed to have little lasting effect. It should be noted that several participants said they simply did not broach the subject of plans for life after high school with their friends: "We are all just going ahead and doing our own thing...it doesn't really come up in our conversations." That said, parents were more apt to suggest that girlfriends and boyfriends sometimes had a significant impact on decisions about PSE.

FACTORS AND OBSTACLES

A number of different possible factors and obstacles to PSE were discussed in the focus groups with students and parents, as well as in the joint sessions. Findings suggest that a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors and obstacles dissuade students from continuing their studies after high school. Some of these are more pronounced than others (e.g., lack of information about PSE), whereas others are slightly less common but more deeply rooted (i.e., learning disabilities). These factors and obstacles are explored in the following pages. They have been categorized in terms of: a) School; b) Program of Study; c) Finances; d) Family; e) PSE; f) Alternatives to PSE; and g) Information. Findings reveal that the most significant factors and obstacles to PSE surrounded school, perceptions of PSE and information received by students.

a) School

Students had very mixed perceptions of school that were based on their personal experiences in primary and secondary schools. While many suggested that they liked learning and generally enjoyed being at school with their friends, they voiced a number of issues and frustrations that caused them to hold negative views of school. These issues proved to be major barriers to continuing studies after high school. Specific issues pertained to quality of teaching, curriculum, treatment of students with special needs, adverse learning conditions, as well as province-specific approaches to education.

According to students and parents, the quality of teaching varies tremendously from one teacher to the next, particularly with respect to teaching students with special needs: "Teaching the straight 'A' student isn't difficult. It's teaching the kids who have trouble that's the real test. And from what I've seen, a lot of teachers just don't take an interest in the kids who don't learn as well as others." This was thought to have considerable impact on students' engagement in school, self-esteem, and their general academic performance (i.e., grades). Some students reported they had had a "great teacher" who was well versed in the subject they taught and could hold their interest, as well as spark their enthusiasm. These teachers were said to have a positive effect on the overall academic experience of students because they took a keen interest in them and worked to help them succeed. Participants suggested that great teachers did not represent the norm. Many shared negative experiences they had with what they considered to be substandard teachers, which included uninterested teaching staff and teachers who insisted on giving their students "a hard time". Substandard teachers neither engaged their students, nor encouraged them to do well.

Many students spoke of their frustrations with an uninspiring curriculum. These participants were of the opinion that a considerable proportion of what they are made to learn is "useless" and has "no clear purpose". A few felt they were made to "memorize the same things year after year", which was not considered stimulating for students and often turned them off school. Participants expressed a preference for courses that are designed to teach students new skills, impart "useful information" and adequately prepare them for the future (either in terms of PSE or a career). A few participants felt that courses should cater

to various types of learners, as opposed to taking one standard approach to teaching all students. They specifically suggested there should be less rigidity in assignments and students should be encouraged to approach their work more independently and creatively. Participants suggested that the current curriculum does not serve to motivate students and may account for a general lack of interest in school, making it seem like a “burden” or obligation. A few students said they stopped turning in assignments and started skipping class when they lost interest in what they were learning.

Some students noticed a sharp and dramatic shift in the school atmosphere around grades 11 and 12. They noted that it becomes “more serious” in the senior grades and felt that there is a need to treat it as such. “If you don’t take it seriously, you won’t go far.” Participants also explained that there is a sudden increase in the level of difficulty of course material and students are required to focus more on the “harder” courses (e.g., sciences and languages). The atmosphere was often described as shifting from “laid back”, “relaxed” and “easy going” to “stressful” and “hard”. More pressure is added, as students are also expected to make important decisions about PSE around this time. A few participants considered this sudden change difficult to cope with. There was a general sense with some students that the combination of increased difficulty at school and pressure to make a decision about PSE was overwhelming. This sudden shift (likely precipitated by the critical juncture in PSE decision-making) happens at a time that students need to be thinking positively and proactively about school. Students, neither particularly positive about school, nor well versed in matters regarding PSE, seem to be less adequately equipped to make these decisions. This inability to deal with the sudden change and pressure, coupled with uncertainty (having not had much previous PSE information or done much thinking about PSE beforehand) has many deferring their PSE decisions.

A significant minority of students participating in focus groups reported having learning disabilities, which, according to them, caused them to struggle with school. Students with learning disabilities and parents of these students suggested that many schools are not adequately equipped to meet their special needs. Specifically, teachers are not properly trained to recognize students who may have special needs. A few parents said they had to pay out of their own pockets to have their child tested. When teachers do not take the necessary steps to ensure that students who may have special needs are formally identified (e.g., through the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee), they ultimately prevent them from getting the help they need to succeed. One student with dyslexia, who was not diagnosed until later in secondary school, said that his teachers made no effort to help him, treating him as though he was “worthless”. This caused the student to suffer from low self-esteem and extreme anxiety, eventually making it very difficult for him to perform. A few students and parents of students who had been formally identified as having special needs reported that teachers did not adjust the curriculum to accommodate their students (e.g., alter programs in terms of content, process, product and evaluation). They also suggested that resources were not made available to help these students. Students with learning disabilities who were not given the proper attention they needed typically obtained low grades, suffered from low self-esteem, feared failure

and disliked school. This was a major barrier, not only to PSE, but also to graduating from high school.

Some students reported that school conditions (e.g., budgets for books and libraries) had a negative effect on them. Several students participating in the research expressed the view that some schools seem to suffer from under-funding, making it difficult for students to learn to their full capacity. One participant, who was interested in photography, for example, noted that it was impossible for her to take art courses seriously at her school because they did not have the funding to offer proper classes (for photography, media studies, fine arts, drama and literature). She remarked, "I hear the neighbouring high schools have dark rooms, kilns and actual acrylic paints...we have poster paints." Another noted that he opted to be home schooled because the middle school he attended was so under funded. He stated: "Our so-called library had one book shelf with books on it and computers from '95". Some group participants said that less than optimal learning conditions prevented students from discovering their talents, interests and aptitudes. Some considered them to be an obstacle to PSE.

Some students in the Vancouver and Montreal sessions expressed frustrations with some province-specific approaches to education. Participants in Vancouver discussed their difficulties with British Columbia's current requirements for graduation. This specifically includes doing 180 hours of volunteer or work and physical activity. In many cases, it also involves developing a "student portfolio" to be orally presented to teachers. The portfolio focuses on student's passions and plans for the future. Participants took issue with the fact that teachers did not seem to respect plans for the future that did not involve PSE. "You start speaking and tell them you aren't going and they get looks on their faces like you're already off to a bad start." They also took issue with the fact that these requirements seemed to change from one year to the next, which often leaves students scrambling to make sure they have successfully completed each component. Some participants in Montreal spoke strongly against the new "reform" program, which was introduced in Quebec. This involves learning through teamwork. Participants noted that grading, under this approach, is based on the team instead of the individual

A minority of participants were involved in extracurricular clubs or activities. Those who were involved tended to play on sports teams (e.g., football, rugby and hockey). Only a few were involved in extracurricular activities in some other capacity (e.g., art club or entrepreneurial club). Students were largely not interested in extracurricular activities and spending time at school after hours.

b) Program of Study

Students did not consider the programs of study in which they were enrolled to have any impact on the decisions they made about PSE. The majority of students had a general awareness of the different streams offered at their school and almost all felt that they had enrolled in the "right program" for them and would not be inclined to make any changes if it were possible (e.g., switching from an academic program to a more applied program). Discussions with students suggest that having more information about the purpose of the different streams, as well as a better understanding of the requirements to apply for

different PSE options, might prompt some to make different decisions about the streams they choose. While this could serve to encourage some students to continue their studies after high school, it should be noted that decisions related to program of study did not constitute a major obstacle to PSE.

While most students had a clear idea of the different programs of study offered at their school, some did not seem to understand the purpose of each different stream. It was not entirely clear, for instance, that advanced programs enable students to go to university. Students often reported that their school offered a combination of academic and applied programs. The most common streams were: advanced academic, regular academic, general and applied programs of study. The overwhelming majority were required to select a program of study towards the end of grade 10 and commence the program in grade 11.

Most participants were enrolled in an academic program of study. While participants did not suggest that the programs of study they had chosen had an impact on their decisions to continue their studies after high school, concerns related to the sudden shift in the atmosphere at school around grades 11 and 12 may suggest otherwise. It is possible that some of the students who enrol in academic programs of study become overwhelmed by the increased level of difficulty in their courses and begin to question whether or not they are in fact ready for any kind of PSE. It is possible that having more information about the purpose of each program and more information about different PSE options could lead to different outcomes in terms of students pursuing PSE.

Parents remarked that schools often recommend non-academic streams for students with poor grades as a way of helping these students excel because these programs of study are considered "easier". Parents also noted that non-academic streams and/or special education classes are often recommended for students with learning disabilities because the schools do not know how else to accommodate students with special needs. Programs of study were considered to be a major obstacle by parents in cases where students with learning disabilities were streamed into non-academic programs and not provided with any further assistance: "I'm convinced that my son could get to university if he had the right support, but it's just easier for the school to shove him into Special Ed. and forget about him."

c) Finances

Finances appeared to play a more minor role in the decision not to pursue PSE after high school insofar as other factors tended to be more significant (e.g., indecision related to what they want to do in the future and concerns over grades). Students and parents alike were largely unaware of the cost of different PSE options. Only a few participants had looked into the cost of PSE. Most were of the impression that PSE was generally expensive, but manageable.

Several students reported that they had some means of paying for PSE. Many said their parents had set some money aside for them for PSE and offered to support them while they continued their studies. Most did not seem to know exactly how much money had

been saved on their behalf and how the money was saved (e.g., as part of a fund). "My parents said there is enough for me to do whatever I want." A few others thought they could probably pay for PSE with money they saved from working (either on a full-time basis before going onto PSE, or on a part time basis while they went to school). Two participants were to receive large sums of money from settlement claims when they reached the age of 19 and felt that "money is not an issue". These participants were confident that they would be able to pay for PSE, despite not knowing how much it would cost them.

Students who did not have the means of paying for PSE typically said they would take out a student loan if they decided to go. Several seemed to accept school debt as part of the PSE experience. "You find some way to pay it back in the end." "You have your whole life to pay back the student loan." A few students voiced some concern over the process of taking out a student loan (e.g., whether or not they would qualify for the loan) and expressed some discomfort with the idea of owing money after graduation. "I have heard that they are really difficult to pay back." "I don't like owing people money." Despite these concerns, the prospects of getting a student loan came across as being a very minor obstacle to PSE.

While students tended to view PSE as a worthwhile investment, they expressed tremendous anxiety about making the wrong decision about programs of study and wasting money. "You really have to be sure that this is what you want." The cost of PSE was an issue insofar as it added to their anxieties about decisions related to the future. Both students and parents felt that many children worried about "wasting money"; "I think that's a big part of it. We're not well off, but we've told her that we will do what it takes to pay for it if she wants to go. The other day she told me that she didn't want us to waste money because she might fail in college."

Parents tended to worry a little more about the cost of PSE than did students, but most did not see finances as a major barrier. Some expressed concern about finding the means to help their teens pay for school. They wondered if their teens would qualify for loans and bursaries, and worried about how they would be able to afford PSE. "They say we make too much money. That's funny because we don't make a lot of money." It is interesting to note that quite a few parents appeared to be thinking of the cost of attending university when discussing finances despite the fact that apprenticeship or community college were the only PSE avenues that they had considered: "You hear about kids graduating \$40,000.00 or \$50,000.00 in debt."

d) Family

Family was not considered to be a major barrier to PSE, although it should be noted that there appeared to be some disconnect between students and their parents. Findings suggest that parents may take the wrong approach to discussing PSE with teens, either by putting too much pressure on them or not being as involved as students may like them to be. Family members, including older siblings who were currently studying at a PSE

institution, were often viewed as reliable sources of pertinent information on PSE, as well as role models.

As previously noted, a majority of students said their parents and family members originally expected them to continue with their studies after high school. While some parents supported their teens' decisions to begin their careers or take time off to "figure things out", others strongly urged their teens to continue their studies after high school. Parents who put pressure on students to pursue PSE were thought by students to take the wrong approach. Students often felt like they were being nagged, as opposed to encouraged or engaged in a conversation with their parents about possible future options. This particular approach was thought to fuel tension between teens and their parents and as having the potential to close the door on effective communication about PSE between both parties.

Many students seemed to question their parents' credibility on the subject of PSE. They were not confident that their parents were knowledgeable sources of information when it came to PSE, either because they did not have a firm grasp of the different possible options or because they did not have a fresh perspective when it comes to PSE. Many of the parents that participated in the research corroborated this view. Quite a few felt that they lacked the experience and information to speak knowledgeably to their children about PSE options: "I never went to college or university and neither did my wife. I just know that if you don't go to school, life is going to be tough." Some of these parents expressed concern and frustration at their own lack of knowledge and its impact on their ability to guide their children. Others, however, felt that it was the school's role to impart information and provide guidance to children on matters related to PSE.

Nearly half of students said their parents had completed some form of PSE and the rest said that their parents had never attended PSE. Parents who had PSE were considered unreliable insofar as the information they provided had a tendency to be dated and limited to one particular kind of PSE experience. Parents without PSE were considered unreliable sources of information because they had no direct experience with PSE. "My mom doesn't know too much about it because she never finished high school and my dad only knows about SIAST." In either case, students felt that their parents were unable to provide them with any concrete guidance because they were out of touch with basic information about PSE, including the different available options, the cost of tuition, and entry requirements. A few students wished their parents were somewhat more knowledgeable about PSE, especially in relation to finances. These participants said they would feel more comfortable talking to their parents about student loans than approaching guidance counsellors. "I would want them to tell me more about what I would be getting into with that."

A few students said that their parents had researched PSE options on their behalf. These parents shared information they felt would be of interest to their teens. The information was usually about different schools, specific programs of study, course descriptions and career related information. Students whose parents had researched PSE information on their behalf were often receptive to this kind of help from their parents, as long as they did

not feel as though their parents were making major decisions on their behalf or forcing them in any particular direction.

Some students had family members, such as older siblings, who were currently studying at a PSE institution. Both students and parents felt that older siblings had a potentially important role to play in terms of sharing reliable and pertinent information about what may be expected (e.g., degree of difficulty, social life, degree fulfillment and enjoyment). "His sister goes to U of T and she lives at home, so he has some idea of what it's like." Hearing about their recent experiences with PSE was considered helpful.

On the whole, parents were moderately involved in the school lives of their children. Some had been more involved when their children were in elementary school and left their teens to take responsibility for their own education in high school. Other parents tended to be very involved, from elementary school to high school (e.g., helping out with homework and inquiring frequently about school). Students expressed a preference for moderate parental involvement. They did not object to assistance from their parents, but preferred to make their own final decisions when it came to PSE and their futures.

e) Envisioning PSE

Many students (and parents) had difficulty envisioning PSE, particularly university life. At the same time, students and parents had limited knowledge of apprenticeship programs. It seemed that community college was easiest for people to relate to. The difficulty that students in grade 11 and 12 have in picturing themselves in PSE was felt to add to their already significant sense of trepidation; a type of fear of the unknown. According to both parents and students, this fear could constitute a significant barrier to pursuing PSE upon graduating from high school: "He was all set to go to university and then he just got psyched out. He came to me and said: 'Mom, I don't think I'm intellectually mature enough to go to university in September.'"

Most had only a very general sense of what PSE included. They commonly described it as: "college and university"; "anything involving studies or school that comes after secondary school"; and, "any education you get after high school that you have to pay for". Perceptions of PSE were largely shaped by the kind of information students had received about the different options. Those who received more information about university and college, for example, viewed PSE primarily in terms of these two options. While they understood that PSE also included other options, they seemed less certain about these.

Some students had difficulty distinguishing the different PSE options and the purpose of each one. While some suggested that college diplomas enabled students to become "technicians" or "assistants" (e.g., dental hygienists) and university degrees enabled them to become specialists (e.g., dentists or doctors), they tended to have trouble elaborating any further in terms of the other possible options. It was clear that both students and parents were unaware of the range of possibilities related to PSE, and, even more so with respect to possible careers: "I think that kids and even parents, when we think about jobs,

we think of the same ones people have for years: doctor, nurse, lawyer, teacher, policemen, construction worker, carpenter, but there are thousands of careers out there.”

Most students did not know what to expect in terms of PSE. Only a few participants said they had visited actual campuses to get a sense of student life. Others seemed to think of student life in terms of stereotypical media portrayals (i.e., nice dorms and keg parties). Participants were largely unaware of the variety of programs offered by different PSE institutions and diversity in the formatting of the programs (e.g., certain programs are designed to be more hands-on and do not require students to submit written assignments). Only a minority of participants said they had perused course descriptions for PSE programs. While many knew that university programs tended to last longer than other kinds of programs, they were largely unaware of the timeframes for completing different types of degrees and certificates.

Generally, participants were not familiar with the specific requirements needed to get into the different PSE programs. While students realized that higher grades were needed to get into university, and, to a lesser extent, college programs, they knew very little about the grade requirements for apprenticeship programs. Only a few students had looked into grade requirements for particular PSE programs. Others tended to assume that higher grades are a universal requirement for PSE. Given that sudden pressures to make good decisions and get good grades had a considerable impact on the decision made by students to pursue PSE immediately after high school, low awareness about entry requirements for PSE programs represents a significant obstacle to PSE.

f) Alternatives to PSE

Perceptions of the alternatives to PSE were not a barrier to continuing studies after high school. Most students neither glamorized work life, nor had unrealistic expectations about the labour market. With the exception of those with clear visions about the careers they wished to pursue, most viewed alternatives to school after high school as a short-term break until they decided exactly what they wanted to do with their lives. That said, this break seems to represent a good respite from the pressures exerted in the last year or two of high school (and ultimately an escape from having to make the decisions that they are finding so difficult to make).

Students realized that opportunities were more limited for people who entered the work force at a young age. They were highly aware that fewer jobs are available to those without PSE and without work experience. While students looked forward to “making some money” and being able to move out of their parent’s home, they realized that it would probably be very difficult to find work that would sustain their interest. Some envisioned themselves either working in retail or the service industry, because they would not be able to find better jobs. Most realized the consequence of working in these kinds of jobs: “You are going to get tired of doing the same job everyday if it is something that doesn’t interest you.”

Students located in areas other than Vancouver and Saskatoon felt that it was highly unlikely that they would be able to find a high paying job without PSE and without relevant work experience. "Maybe my parent's generation could go out and do that, but it doesn't seem realistic for us." Participants located in the West were aware that high paying jobs were readily available for individuals who were interested in working as labourers. "You get \$18.00 to \$25.00 an hour at the place I want to work." A few remarked that while the pay is excellent, manual labour is difficult work, potentially dangerous and cannot typically be done for a long period of time.

g) Information

Having limited access to information was a significant barrier to PSE. Students generally received limited information from their teachers, school guidance counsellors and parents about the full range of PSE options. Discussions with students highlighted a number of areas where they thought they could benefit from more information. Findings suggest that exploring the full range of PSE options with students earlier on, and increasing the level of detail of information that is shared with them as they mature, may prompt more students to continue their studies after high school. As described earlier, most students reported that they did not think about PSE-related issues until grade 11 or later, and they perceived a sudden shift in the need to think about PSE and do well in school. Perhaps information earlier on and an opportunity to begin thinking about PSE earlier, in a less pressurized atmosphere, would afford more time to think about educational pathways, and better equip them as a result to deal with the shift in the environment in Grade 11.

According to students, information about PSE was sometimes disseminated at school through presentations. The presentations were typically put on by their teachers, guidance counsellors and by representatives of PSE institutions (usually from/for local universities and colleges) who visited their schools and set up information booths. Students who attended these presentations usually found them to be somewhat helpful in that they had the ability to provide some new information about PSE. They did, however, suggest that general presentations were often too broad in focus and had the potential to inundate students with information about PSE. Some said that these presentations sometimes omitted certain "key" details about PSE (e.g., cost of tuition), which they considered to be somewhat frustrating. Students who attended presentations put on by representatives of PSE institutions felt that these kinds of presentations were most useful for students who already knew they wanted to go to that particular school, since it enabled them to ask the representatives specific questions, and less useful for students who were undecided about what they wanted to do. The information provided by these representatives was generally about the school (e.g., student life on campus) and less about the specific programs offered.

Students also obtained information about PSE at school through pamphlets and brochures that were distributed to them by their teachers and guidance counsellors. These printed materials were usually for specific universities and colleges. They were not considered very useful to students who were undecided about PSE because they provided a very

vague snapshot of PSE. Students did not seem to receive general information packages about PSE from their schools.

As noted previously, a minority of students spoke to their school guidance counsellors about PSE. According to students, guidance counsellors had minimal involvement in helping them make decisions about PSE. Only one student reported that his school guidance counsellor was very involved in helping students make decisions about PSE. The student said that his guidance counsellor visited the classrooms of students in different grades (from grade 9 to 12) to provide information about PSE and held one-on-one meetings with students to discuss their plans for the future.

Some students had done their own research online. They specifically looked at the homepages of colleges or universities they might be interested in. A few had investigated department specific sites to get an idea of courses for different programs, while others had done more general searches. Some felt as though they were successful in finding the kind of information they were looking for. Others said they did not succeed in finding everything they wanted to know.

Parents and students also spoke about high school “careers” (or life-skills) courses that required them to spend an entire semester researching different career paths and PSE options. These courses were said to be specifically designed to allow students to look into different career options and to investigate the steps that need to be taken to “get there.” The students who took this type of course tended to be better informed about PSE than other students. This approach was thought to be a helpful way to learn about different PSE options as they pertain to the student’s interests. Most parents were under the impression that these types of “career” or “life skill” courses/modules were compulsory. The sense was that the courses were moderately helpful although many students did not take them very seriously. This points to the importance of timing in making the course available, and perhaps the need to introduce the course material in graded levels of detail and context over several years, as students begin to turn their attention more and more to the issue.

Students were asked if there was any information about PSE that they felt they needed. The majority said they wanted to learn more about:

- Requirements for admission (i.e., the grades and credits required to get into different PSE programs);
- Detailed descriptions of different PSE programs;
- Career options related to different programs of study;
- The cost of tuition for different PSE programs; and
- Financing options for PSE (e.g., student loans, bursaries and scholarships).

Students in grade 11 seemed less curious about finding out more about PSE, assuming that they would figure things out in grade 12.

Parents were divided about the extent to which students could easily access quality information to help them make wise choices related to PSE and future careers, with some asserting that the Internet provided all the information that students need. Related to the

issue of information, parents agreed that teenagers often struggled with discovering their talents, aptitudes and interests. A number of parents suggested that students might benefit from information about different kinds of careers to help them gauge their interests and to make links between their talents and interests on the one hand, and career options on the other. Parents also agreed that teenagers vastly underestimated the number of career possibilities: "Aside from being a journalist, she doesn't see how being a good writer can earn you a living." In essence, parents saw the issue of careers and PSE choices as being tightly intertwined, particularly for students whose PSE options were limited to apprenticeship and community college, given the more applied nature of these programs: "If you study sociology at university you could end up in any number of jobs; you don't need to have a career picked, you just need to be interested in sociology. If you're apprenticing to be a plumber, you have to want to be a plumber, so for those kids they have to have a pretty good idea of the job they want to have."

Students were asked when they felt would be the best time for them to receive information about PSE. The majority shared the view that the timing of this information was very important. A number of students felt that grade 9 is too early to begin introducing information about PSE to students because students will not take it seriously. "Grade 9 is too early because you think the end of high school is a long time away." Other participants thought it might be useful to begin receiving the information earlier on. "There is no harm in exposing youth to this kind of information, even if they don't care right away"; "knowing about it earlier would be better"; and, "the earlier you know it, the quicker you can utilize it—even if you do not decide right away." One student recalled that he was ready to receive information about PSE options in grade 9 and was thankful that his school guidance counsellor spoke to him about careers in the pharmaceutical industry. The majority of participants suggested that students are most receptive to information about PSE (and career options) in grade 10 and that this is the best time to start talking to them about it.

BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS - JOINT DISCUSSION

The students and parents who participated in the research were brought together to discuss the main barriers to PSE and possible solutions. In instances where there were an equal number of students and parents, participants were paired. Otherwise they formed groups of three. Participants were asked to begin the plenary session by generating a list of what they considered to be the most significant barriers to PSE. The teams of students and parents could either choose to develop a common list or create their own list (in cases where they disagreed). They were then asked to read their list aloud to the others.

Students and parents were highly engaged in the activity and appeared to work very well together. For example, the students were as active and assertive as the parents. The joint sessions across the different regions produced similar lists of significant barriers to PSE, which included a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The intrinsic barriers included: general indecision; pressure and anxieties/fear of failure related to PSE; poor grades; learning disabilities; and, negative perceptions of school. Extrinsic barriers included: inadequate information about PSE, varying levels in the quality of support and assistance provided by educators; PSE entrance

requirements; cost; and the limited support offered by parents as a result of their own lack of information about PSE requirements, costs and options. These barriers are further described below:

- **General Indecision:** Participants considered general indecisiveness about what students plan to do in the future, either in terms of PSE or career, as one of the most common reasons for not immediately continuing their studies after high school.
- **Education-Related Pressures and Anxieties:** The combination of pressure from educators and (to a lesser degree) from family members to pursue PSE and general anxieties over making the “right decision” for the future, were described as significant factors preventing students from continuing their studies after high school. This pressure was said to begin quite suddenly and sharply in grade 11. Student-parents groups felt that pressure and anxieties related to preparing and planning for PSE caused many students to shy away from this option and consider other alternatives instead. Related to this was a general fear of failure.
- **Poor Grades, Negative Perceptions Regarding School and Related Low Self-Esteem:** Poor grades were considered a significant deterrent to pursuing PSE. Students who chronically obtain low marks are most likely to have low self-esteem, fears of failing and tend to dislike school, which deters them from pursuing any studies after high school. Poor grades also prevent students from being accepted into a number of PSE programs because they do not meet the entry requirements. Negative perceptions of school often lead to disengagement and a reluctance to pursue higher education: “Kids who hate school don’t discriminate — they hate all school.” For a subset of students leaning disabilities cause students to struggle with school, serve to exacerbate the poor grades, low self-esteem and negative perceptions of schools.
- **Inadequate Information on PSE Options and Relationship with Careers:** Participants were of the opinion that inadequate information about PSE definitely prevents some students from continuing their studies after high school. They explained that the majority of the information that is provided to students about PSE pertains to university and college. Perceptions of PSE typically surround university and college because students are not given enough information about other PSE options (e.g., apprenticeship). Related to this is less than optimal information and opportunities to explore different career options, as well as the linkage between careers and best PSE pathways to pursue specific career options. Participants expressed a strong interest in having this information to make better choices.
- **Varying Levels of Quality of Educators and Support from Educators:** Participants were of the opinion that the quality of educators can vary quite significantly and that this, along with varying levels of support offered to students by different educators can play a major role in deterring students from continuing their studies after high school (if they do not have high quality teaching and support in education-related decision-making). Less than optimal teaching quality was described as a de-motivator for students that served to reinforce negative perceptions of school and made it less likely that students would achieve relatively high grades.

- PSE Entrance Requirements: This was raised in the discussion as an obvious barrier to students with average and below average grades.
- Parental Lack of Information about PSE: Parents' lack of information about PSE options, costs and requirements ultimately limits parents' ability to support their teens in their education-related decision-making, which was also seen as a significant barrier to continuing studies after high school. Additionally, participants considered parents blindly pushing students towards PSE even if students are not sure about attending puts more pressure on students and ultimately serves as a barrier to PSE. More informed (and therefore more engaged) parents could mean that they are able to do more to help students to realize the wide range of available options in terms of PSE and career paths.
- Costs: This barrier was on many teams' lists. The results of the focus groups, however, suggest participants overrated this obstacle since relatively few participants spoke convincingly or knowledgeably about the cost of potential PSE options, particularly apprenticeship and college. This barrier seems to be more of an afterthought, once describing the actual conditions under which one does not attend PSE, rather than a main precipitating factor in making the decision not to pursue PSE. It would seem from the discussions (certainly with students, if not with parents) that one makes the decision not to attend long before considering the costs in a significant way. That said, once a decision is made not to attend PSE there seems to be relief at not having to figure out the cost implications. Conversely, it seems likely that it is the students who are fairly certain that they will attend PSE that begin to think about (and perhaps worry about) the cost implications. From the results of the discussions in this study, it would seem that, at least most of the students who participated, never really got as far as concrete cost considerations in the decision-making continuum.

After each group shared their list with the rest of the room, participants were asked to take some time to identify potential solutions. Students and parents tended to suggest solutions targeting extrinsic factors and barriers to PSE. Participants seemed to believe that intrinsic factors and barriers to PSE could be positively affected by proposing solutions to extrinsic barriers (e.g., better teachers would lead to higher motivation and better grades, which in turn would boost self-esteem; better and more information would reduce indecision and fear of the unknown). Most participants also seemed to understand that extrinsic solutions are most tangible. It is easier to suggest implementing "aptitude-careers-PSE" modules into the curriculum, over the course of many grades, which would serve to increase student awareness of PSE than attempting to suggest solutions that will explicitly target the pressures and anxieties felt by students about PSE. The most common solutions that were generated by parent-student groups included: increase the amount of information students receive about PSE options other than university and college; implement "aptitude-careers-PSE" modules into the curriculum; make necessary modifications to the curriculum to accommodate students with different learning styles (including students with learning disabilities); improve the training of teachers; offer frequent information sessions about PSE for parents with children in secondary school; lower current admissions requirements to enable more students to be accepted into PSE programs; and, increase financial support for PSE. These solutions are further described in the order of emphasis that participants seemed to place on them:

- Increase dissemination of information pertaining to a wider range of PSE options: Increasing information about PSE, in a way that places more emphasis on options other than university, was thought to be one way to encourage more students to continue their studies after high school. Several participants felt there is currently too much focus on university in discussions with students about PSE. This is seen as painting a narrow picture of PSE. Since it is already common knowledge that university is an obvious option, and that students who are likely to attend are also more likely to have found the information they need, participants suggested that there is a need to put less emphasis on the dominant options and focus more on the other options, particularly apprenticeship, that students seem to know far less about.
- Implement “aptitude-careers-PSE” modules into the curriculum: Participants felt that general information about PSE should be complemented with practical information that is relevant to each student. As such, many suggested that implementing “aptitude-careers-PSE” modules into the curriculum is the best approach to reaching students. The purpose of these modules would be to help students more systematically explore their aptitudes and interests, link these to different career options and, ultimately, to potential PSE options. The majority of participants suggested that this approach would be extremely beneficial to all students and should be mandatory across the country. It should be noted that many such courses already exist in most provinces, however, the research would suggest that these courses need to take on greater prominence and possibly be better strategized so that students can derive more from them (as very few participants talked about these types of courses, either that they currently take, or have taken and benefited from in the past). With regard to timing to best address students needs, such modules might begin in the lower secondary grades with general discussions about aptitude and interests, moving in the middle years of secondary education into exploring the linkages between aptitudes and interests with types of careers, and finally in the later high school years focus on exploring types of institutions and programs available to prepare students for certain types of careers, as well as information about cost and scholastic requirements typically associated with different types of institutions and programs.
- Introduce information about PSE and an opportunity to think about PSE-related issues earlier in the curriculum. Although many students indicated that the PSE decision did not have any meaning or significance to them until grade 11, the opportunity to start thinking about PSE earlier would help to insulate students against the sudden change in emphasis on PSE in grade 11. If students are given information and an opportunity to begin looking into PSE options that might work for them in grade 9 and 10 (as per bullet above) they may be better equipped to handle the pressure in grade 11.
- Awareness of the impact of the sudden shift in emphasis on PSE in grade 11. Related to more information and an opportunity to start thinking about the future and PSE, educators need to be mindful of the tremendous pressure that is being exerted in grade 11. For students who are doing well in school, with a solid appreciation for the importance of PSE and some concrete plans to attend PS, this pressure may not seem unduly sudden or harmful. For those more vulnerable students who are not commanding good grades, a general lack of interest in school and no solid plans for PSE, this pressure can have a

significant and negative impact. A slower and less dramatic introduction to thinking about the implications of grades on PSE decision-making might be better for this more vulnerable segment of students. If it is not possible to direct different levels of emphasis to different segments in this way, then perhaps increased support for this segment, in order to mitigate these pressures would be helpful.

- Increase support for students who are unsure about educational path or generally vulnerable in school: Participants felt that the current curriculum is not flexible enough, which may account for poor grades and negative perceptions of school. They suggested that the curriculum should be redesigned to make school more interesting for students with different learning styles (including those with learning disabilities). Several participants felt this could be achieved by changing the requirement for assignments (i.e. taking a less standard approach). They proposed that students should be allowed to submit assignments in a variety of different formats (e.g., video, print, audio recording) so long as they effectively demonstrate a firm grasp of the skill or subject matter taught. While they realized that there are limits to the different kinds of approaches that can be taken (e.g., written assignments for language courses could not be substituted), they expressed that some change is necessary to increase the overall appeal of school, as well as to motivate and engage students. Also, additional support from educators and guidance counsellors in the K-12 system for this more vulnerable segment of the population to help them plan and make PSE decisions.
- Increased uniformity of high quality teaching and emphasis on impact of teaching styles and quality on students: Participants suggested that there is a need to increase students' access to high quality teaching and varied teaching styles. Several noted that the "really great teachers" are not the norm and suggested that this has a considerable adverse effect on students. They felt that the only solution to this problem is to train teachers to take different approaches in their classes with students, particularly those who have more difficulty learning. Related to this, educators need to be mindful of the impact that the varying levels of teaching quality has on students' motivation in school and their potential to learn and do well in school.
- Information sessions about PSE available for parents: Participants suggested that information sessions should be offered by high schools to parents. They suggested that the sessions should focus on disseminating information to parents about the different PSE options that are available, including programs in their area, admissions criteria and cost of PSE. Several added that parents should also be informed about possible funding opportunities for students and provided with detailed information about student loans. Participants were of the opinion that providing parents with more information about PSE would enable more fruitful dialogue with their teens about the future. It may also serve to engage those parents who have traditionally been less engaged. Making this information available early on may also be beneficial, as parents may have a longer horizon for thinking about this information, and may be able to introduce the issue to students earlier on. It may also help parents to become engaged earlier in their child's secondary education.

- Change admissions criteria: Some participants were of the opinion that changing current admissions criteria would encourage more students to look into PSE. Aside from the obvious benefit of increasing the number of people who enter PSE, some participants pointed out that such a move would also reduce some of the pressure and anxieties that students feel about having sufficiently high grades to be accepted into a PSE program. That said, the lack of information about the admissions criteria seem to be as large or a larger part of the decision matrix than the actual criteria for admissions.
- Increase financial support for PSE: Many participants suggested that increasing available financial support for PSE might help to reduce some of the pressure and anxieties about PSE, including the fear of “wasting money” if they end up choosing the “wrong” program, although many students may have this fear based on a lack of accurate information about the costs of PSE). Participants suggested that increased financial support should include bursaries, scholarships and grants for the various different PSE options (i.e., not only for university and college). Related to this suggestion, there was general agreement that lower tuitions fees would also help to mitigate the anxieties about wasting money on the wrong choice.

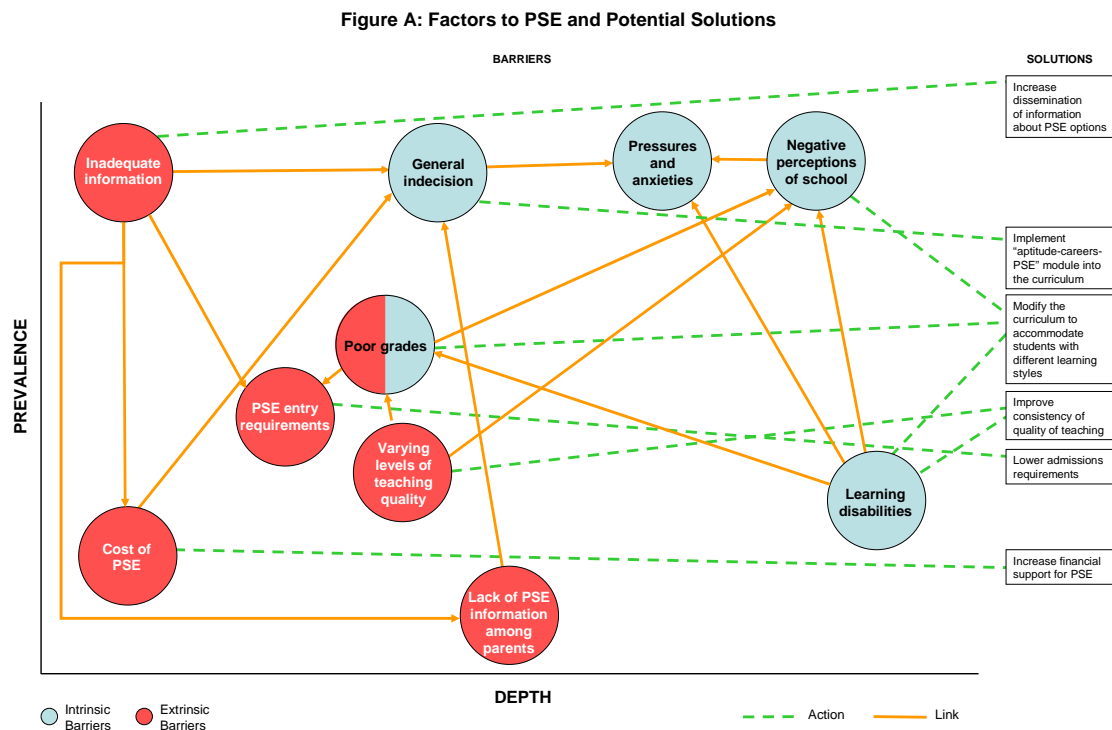
CONCLUSIONS

Some major conclusions may be drawn from the research with students and parents. These include:

- A number of intrinsic and extrinsic barriers deterred students from PSE.
 - Major factors and obstacles that prevented them from continuing their studies after high school were directly linked to their negative perceptions of school, their views of PSE, and limited access to key information.
 - Intrinsic factors that were identified as barriers to PSE included: general indecision; pressure and anxieties/fear of failure related to PSE; poor grades; learning disabilities; and, negative perceptions of school.
 - Extrinsic factors that were identified as barriers to PSE included: inadequate information about PSE, varying levels of teaching quality; costs of PSE; PSE entrance requirements; and, a lack of information among parents resulting in less than optimal parental support and engagement in the planning and decision-making process.
 - Intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to PSE were attributed equal importance as a whole, although certain specific factors were more prevalent and others were more deeply rooted [Refer to Figure A].

- Participants proposed a number of potential solutions that could serve to encourage students to continue their studies after high school.
 - Participants focused on extrinsic solutions, since they are likely more readily addressed than the intrinsic factors (and some extrinsic factors, such as lack of accurate information, may serve to fuel intrinsic ones, such as a fear of failure, concern for high costs of PSE, and indecision/wasting money).
 - Although participants did not attempt to propose intrinsic solutions, many suggested that extrinsic solutions could serve to mitigate the effects of intrinsic factors and barriers to PSE. [Refer to Figure A].
 - The most common solutions proposed included: increasing the amount of information students receive about PSE options, costs and requirements; implement “aptitude-careers-PSE” modules into the curriculum; be mindful of the impact of increased pressure and emphasis on PSE in grade 11; make necessary modifications to the curriculum to accommodate students with different learning styles (including students with learning disabilities); increase the emphasis on the need for high quality teaching and emphasis on the impact of teaching quality on students; offer frequent information sessions about PSE for parents with children in secondary school; review current admissions requirements to enable more students to be accepted into PSE programs and ensure that information is available about requirements; and, increase financial support for PSE and information support that helps both parents and students in starting to plan for the costs of PSE. Although not specifically mentioned by study participants, presumably increased resources in the K-12 system would enable schools to make additional counselling available. This might afford greater opportunity

for counsellors to focus on more career counselling and PSE planning, rather than confining the focus to behavioural issues because of constrained counselling resources, which was brought up in several of the discussions.



A few other important findings emerged from this research. They include:

- There is a need to provide students and parents with more practical information about PSE.
 - There is a tendency to think of PSE as black box, making it very difficult for some students to envision it as a tangible option.
 - Findings from the focus group discussions suggest that there is a strong need to present information about PSE alongside information about careers. Not only would this clarify how both are linked, but it would also help students to think more constructively about PSE and potential careers for the future.
 - Both students and parents supported the idea of implementing “aptitude-careers-PSE” modules into the curriculum to reach students. The purpose of the modules would be to help students more systematically explore their aptitudes and interests, link these to different career options and, ultimately, to potential PSE options. As noted earlier, many provinces already have these types of courses in their core curriculum, but perhaps these need to be looked at more closely for the type of content they contain and prominence they receive (among teachers and students), as well as how they are structured and the timing of when they are offered to students.
- Students in grade 11 and 12 are open to hearing about PSE options (now and some point in the future).

- The overwhelming majority of students who participated in this research expressed interest in continuing their studies and hoped to go on to PSE at some point in the future.
- Students tend to be receptive of help from teachers, guidance counsellors and their parents. In fact, some participants expressed interest in having their parents provide them with information (e.g., about student loans).
- Discussions with students and their parents revealed that there are still opportunities to help students decide to pursue PSE.
- Timing of support and information is critical. Some students receive too little too late.
 - Lack of information and support earlier (and perhaps ongoing) in secondary school leave some students ill equipped to face the sudden shift in the emphasis placed on grades for the purposes of entry into PSE. This and the possibly narrow focus on specific types of PSE institutions and programs can push those not already decided in the wrong direction. An earlier, more gradual and gentle approach might produce better results.
- Finances play a minor role in the decisions not to pursue PSE after high school, but the perception of “wasting money” because of indecision is a strong factor.
 - Few students had looked into PSE options seriously enough to consider the cost of PSE as a major barrier. Most were more preoccupied with figuring out what they wanted to do in terms of PSE and as a career. That said, students seemed very pre-occupied with not “wasting money” if they were unsure about what they would be doing in the future and what they would be using PSE for.
 - Students (more than parents) see money as a factor when they are faced with indecision about the type of career they want, and therefore, the type of PSE program that would be most beneficial to reach their career goals. There is limited understanding and appreciation for the value of PSE in contributing to students’ ongoing knowledge and abilities, irrespective of the type of program taken.
 - Parents tend to see costs as more of a barrier than did students.
 - Students and parents are largely unaware of the cost of PSE. In fact, very few in the study attempted to obtain any information about student loans.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT AND CONFIRMATION SCRIPTS

INTRO

Hello, my name is _____ and I'm calling from EKOS Research Associates Inc.

We are calling on behalf of the Ministers of Education across Canada. Recently you or someone in your household answered a computerized call from our office indicating that there is either a student in grade 11 or 12 or a parent of a grade 11 or 12 student in this household. Is this correct?

- Yes, eligible household 1
- No, there is no one that is eligible in this household 2

INTR1 [0,0]

Everyone intro

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada is conducting a study on the decision-making process and reasons that youth consider when deciding not to pursue a post secondary education. We have 2 different sets of discussion groups that we are conducting: one with youth and one with parents in Saskatoon. Each one will be a small group of only 8-10 people.

These discussion groups are scheduled to be held on Tuesday, June 24th from 6:00pm to 8:30 pm. One group will be with parents of teens in grades 11 or 12, and the other will be with grade 11 or 12 students themselves. Parents and students do not have to come together to be able to participate. All participants will be given an honorarium of \$90.00. I'd like to ask you just a few questions to see if you qualify.

TYPE

Are you a?

Read list:

- Parent of a Grade 11 student 1
- Parent of Grade 12 student 2
- Grade 11 Student 3
- Grade 12 student 4
- (DO NOT READ) DK/NR 9

DEFN

For the purposes of this study we will use the term Post-Secondary Education. This means university, college, apprenticeship programs and private colleges. In other words any formalized education after High School.

INTSTU

STUDENTS

Many students do not intend to continue on with education beyond high school and this may be for a variety of reasons. As it stands now, may I ask if you are planning to attend post secondary Education?

- Definitely will not attend 1
- Probably wont attend, no firm plans, unsure 2
- Probably will attend but after a break 3
- Definitely will attend 4
- (DO NOT READ) DK/NR..... 9

INTPAR

PARENTS

Many students do not intend to continue on with education beyond high school and this may be for a variety of reasons. As it stands now, may I ask if your grade 11 or 12 teen is planning to attend post secondary education?

- Definitely will not attend 1
- Probably wont attend, no firm plans, unsure 2
- Probably will attend but after a break 3
- Definitely will attend 4
- (DO NOT READ) DK/NR..... 9

INTR3

Would you be interested and available to participate in this important discussion to be held on Tuesday June 24th from 6:00pm to 9:00 pm?

The groups are being held at: Radisson Hotel, 405 20th Street East. Parents in the Giotto Room, while students are in the Ruebens Room. For directions and parking information call (306) 665-3322.

- Yes, interested and available 1
- No, not interested or available at all 4

FNAME

Thank you! We will call you back a day or two before the group in order to touch base and see if you have any final questions. If you wish to contact us at anytime in the interim please feel free to. You can call us at 1-800-388-2873 (please reference the Saskatoon Group about post-secondary education when calling) or email us at cmec@ekos.com. Now, may I have your contact information?

Verify spelling of name, address etc. Please get street address as well

PARENTS

I would like to get some information to given us a sense of who will be participating in the group.

SEX

Record gender of respondent

DO NOT ASK

- Male 1
- Female 2

EDUC

PARENTS

What is the highest level of schooling that you have completed?

- Some high school or less 1
- High school graduate 2
- Some college 3
- Community/Technical college or CEGEP graduate..... 4
- Private college graduate 5
- Some university..... 6
- Bachelor's degree 7
- Graduate degree 8
- DK/NR..... 9

QAGE

PARENTS

What is your age, please?

READ CATEGORIES IF NECESSARY

- Under 25 1
- 25-44 years 2
- 45-64 years 3
- 65 years or older 4
- DK/NR..... 9

INC

PARENTS

What is your annual HOUSEHOLD income from all sources before taxes?

- <\$20,000 1
- \$20,000-\$39,999 2
- \$40,000-\$59,999 3
- \$60,000-\$79,999 4
- \$80,000-\$99,999 5
- \$100,000 or more 6
- DK/NR 9

QAGEX

STUDENTS

In what year were you born?

NOTE: ANSWER THE FULL YEAR, I.E. 1977 as "1977"

IF HESTITANT MOVE ONTO NEXT QUESTION

QAGEY

STUDENTS

May I place your age into one of the following general age categories?

- Under 25 1
- 25-34 years 2
- 35-44 years 3
- 45-54 years 4
- 55-64 years 5
- 65-74 years 6
- 75 years or older 7
- (DO NOT READ) DK/NR 9

MINOR

Do you consider yourself to belong to any of the following groups?

PROMPT IF NECESSARY: A member of a visible minority by virtue of your race or colour

READ LIST, CHOOSE ONLY ONE; IF MORE THAN ONE: To which group would you identify yourself with more?

A member of a visible minority	1	
An Aboriginal person.....	2	
A person with a disability.....	3	
(DO NOT READ) None	8	X
(DO NOT READ) DK/NR.....	9	X

SNWBL1

STUDENTS Snowball question

As I indicated at the start, we are conducting two groups. Do you think that one of your parents (or guardian) might be interested in participating in a group discussion like this?

Again, it will be held on Tuesday June 24th from 6:00pm to 9:00 pm?

The groups are being held at: Radisson Hotel, 405 20th Street East. Parents in the Giotto Room. For directions and parking information call (306) 665-3322. Also, they will be paid \$90 for their attendance as well?

I could wait on the line while you ask them or call you (or that person) back later this evening or tomorrow night to follow-up if that would be better?

Yes.....	1
No	2
DK/NR.....	9

NAME1

Can I have a name and phone number to call them?

TEL1

Telephone number (including area code) ATEL1; T14 L1 C14 1

SNWBL2

PARENTS Snowball question

As I indicated at the start, we are conducting two groups. Do you think that your teen might be interested in participating in a group discussion like this?

Again, it will be held on Tuesday June 24th from 6:00pm to 9:00 pm?

The groups are being held at: Radisson Hotel, 405 20th Street East. Youth are in the Ruebens Room. For directions and parking information call (306) 665-3322. Also, they will be paid \$90 for their attendance as well?

I could wait on the line while you ask them or call you (or that person) back later this evening or

tomorrow night to follow-up if that would be better?	
Yes	1
No	2
DK/NR.....	9

NAME2

Can I have a name and phone number to call them?

TEL2

Telephone number (including area code) ATEL2; T14 L1 C14 1

THNK

Thank you for your cooperation and time!

End of Interview

Completion 1

Confirmation Script (Follow-Up o Recruitment)

My name is _____ and I'm calling from EKOS Research Associates.

Someone from our office contacted you last night about attending a focus group discussion. I just wanted to follow-up on that and see if you had any questions about it.

It's going to be a small group of about 5 to 7 students from different parts of Vancouver. Each person in the group will be about the same age, currently attending grade 11 or 12. That's the case with you as well, right? (Get confirmation of grade 11 or 12)

You'll be talking about what's involved in the decision to continue on or not continue on in school after high school. It's mostly about why kids might decide not to go on and everyone in the group is pretty much thinking right now that they won't go on (or aren't sure about whether to go on). That's the case with you too, right? (Get confirmation that not PLANNING to attend part or full time to university, college or trade school in the next couple of years at least).

There are lots of reasons why kids don't continue on after high school and this group is about discussing those reasons. It is absolutely not about telling kid what they should do or whether these are good or bad reasons. It won't be anyone's place to judge; it's just a conversation. And, everyone will be in a similar place, thinking about the same kind of stuff, so it might be interesting that way. It'll be really low key – just a small group chatting. No one ever comes away from these things regretting that they attended or feeling badly about attending. There are no right or wrong answers during the discussion – we simply want to know what you're thinking about it all..

So, you're in, right? You'll be there? It's next Tuesday night, June 3rd from 6pm – 9pm. Can I ask you to write it down on a calendar somewhere or stick a note on the fridge or something so you'll remember?

Have you told your parents that you will be attending? They have no problem with you coming to this discussion group or being given a cash incentive for spending the evening in a group discussion with other students?

If you give me your e-mail address I will send you all of this in an e-mail, with the date, time and directions and you can print it off and bring it with you next Tuesday so you don't get lost. We'd like you to come a few minutes early so that the group can start on time. Can you try to get there for 5:50 please?

Do you have any questions?

So I'll send you an e-mail with the details we talked about and then someone will give you a quick reminder call on Monday, before the session. They may just leave a message on the answering machine if you aren't there, but you'll get some kind of reminder.

Appendix B

Moderator's Guides

DISCUSSION GUIDE - STUDENTS

MAY 25, 2008

INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER (10 MINUTES)

- The purpose of our discussion here today is to talk about how kids come to their decisions about going to or not going to full-time college or university or other full-time school after high school. There seems to be a wide range of circumstances and reasons for why kids choose not to go or feel that that can't go on to post-secondary. We'd like to explore those with you. Although you've all been selected at random, you have in common the belief that either you won't be going on to college or university or full-time private college for at least one term, or that you may not be going on.

- Explanation of format and "ground rules":
 - Groups are being audio-taped and observed by members of the research team. Your comments remain confidential. The audio tape will only be accessed by the research team of EKOS, the Council of Ministers of Education and the Millennium Scholarship Foundation, and for the purposes of developing quotes for the report.
 - Please try to speak one at a time.
 - There aren't any right or wrong answers to the things we'll be talking about — we're just looking for your honest opinions.
 - It's ok to disagree. Please speak up even if you think you're the only one who feels a certain way about an issue. It's also ok, though, if you change your mind based on things you hear or new information.
 - Moderator's role: raise issues for discussion, watch for time, make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
 - First of all I'd like us to go around the room and ask each of you to introduce yourselves and tell everyone what grade you're in.

FUTURE PLANS (15 MINUTES)

So, what are you thinking you will do after high school? (Job? Trade school? Part-time school and work?)

- Why is this a better option for you? (Learn better this way? More comfortable? Need the money/can't afford? Can't decide what to study/what career to pursue?)
- What are you looking forward to? What are you worried about? What kind of job do you expect to get/be applying for? (Job or career/stepping stone to something else).
- What things would change this decision for you?

THE DECISION (35 MINUTES)

SURE: When did you make this decision?

- Recent? What grade? All at once or slow decision?

UNSURE: Did something change your mind/made you unsure or were you never sure about it?

- Did you ever intend to go?

Was there a specific event or moment that happened? What was happening in your life or at school at that time? What and why did it have that effect on you?

Did you think in grade 8 that you would be going to PSE? In grade 9 or 10? Did you ever think about it at all? What were you thinking that you'd be going to? What kind of school (university, college, trade school, etc)?

Did anyone have input into the decision? Did anyone talk to you about going or not going? Who

- Counsellor/teacher
- Parent/family member
- Friend
- Anyone else?

How did this person influence your decision?

Did you tell anyone about your decision right away?

- If kept to self – why?

If told– who and what was their reaction (surprised, upset, disappointed, happy, supportive)? Why did you decide not to go? (Reasons)

Moderator notes – anatomy of reasons - probe to find out:

- Avoidance (school or money issues)? Or, looking forward to work/change?
- More than one reason - what is most important piece/reason? Describe what other things might affect this decision? One reason “bigger” (implications) than the rest?
- Describe the how these reasons come up as reasons not to go to school. What happens first? What happens next?

Was it a difficult decision to make? How much time did you spend thinking about this? (Was it a relief when it was made?)

FACTORS - BARRIERS (55 MINUTES)

Now, I'd like to explore each of a number of different areas that have an influence on some people's decision not to attend college or university.

School – So how do you feel about school? (Do you like it? Avoid it?)

Moderator's notes: explore feelings of powerlessness/inadequacy/failure/boredom – fear/avoidance

- Has it always been like this or did it change (when and why)?
- Has the amount of pressure and seriousness of school changed in grade 11 or 12? Did this have any effect on your thinking? Where was this pressure coming from? Was anyone helping you to figure out what kind of decisions you have to make and helping you make them? Who? How does it make you feel?
- Friendly or foreign? Means learning, homework, a hang out, friends, being alone?
- Activities/sports/clubs? Ever spend time after class?

Program – What program are you in at school - an academic program or an applied program? (How different is this and why do you prefer it?)/If no formal streams – What kind of courses are you taking in school?

- When did you start in that program?
- Did being in this stream contribute to the decision you have made?
- Would you say now that it was the right program for you? If not, is it hard to transfer from one to the other after you've started?

Finances –How large of a factor was money in the decision?

- Why?
 - college or university costs too much - no savings to pay for it? Don't think can get loans/bursaries?
 - don't like huge debt at the end?
 - isn't worth the money to go?
- What part costs a lot (books and tuition or living expenses/having to move away/live on your own)?

Parents/family – Did your parents think that you would go to PSE?

- Did they ever talk about you going? When did start talking about it (age or grade)? Where did they think you would go (i.e., what type of school)?
- Did your parents go to PSE? Other family members? Are your parents able to tell you about what PSE is like?
- How was it talked about (expectation, family tradition, enjoyment, a necessary evil, an option/up to you, give you what they didn't have)?
- As far as you know, did your parents put savings away for you to go to school? Did they plan for you attending PSE (saving, special account, getting information about PSE and costs)?
- How involved have your parents been in your school (in elementary? In high school? Talk about homework/ projects)? Have you talked about what courses to take and what you might be good at or want to do in the future?

Social circle - Does your decision match what most of your friends are thinking on this?

- Do you talk about it?
- Have you made plans for after school (e.g., travel, move)

What does PSE mean to you? When you think about going to PSE, is this a university or community college? Is it also private college courses? Does it include trade school/apprenticeship?

- When you think about planning for school or deciding whether to go or not, are you thinking about all of these types of PSE or just university?
- Do you know what the different requirements are for different types of schools? (e.g., difference between requirement for grades in university versus college versus trade school? The difference in the tuition? The number of years of school and how much time spent in class?)
- Do you have a general idea what kinds of careers you'd go to university for, and which ones you'd go to college for or trade school?

What are the alternatives to school after high school and how do you feel about them/? For example, what do you think about work?

- What kind of opportunities do you think that people have when they enter the workforce at a young age?
- Do you think that they are at advantage or disadvantage? Does it serve them better or not as well later in life?
- What kind of images comes to mind from what you see of the people around you who are working? Is work fun, glamorous? Does it represent freedom? Money? Power?
- How do you see the world of work in the images in the media?

Information – Did you or your parents get any information about PSE and the costs? Loans and scholarships?

- What information?
- Where did it come from?
- Was it clear, helpful?
- Have you had anyone to talk to about what you're good at and what that might mean for courses or programs you could take? Did you talk to a guidance counsellor (PSE or job)? Did it help with your thinking?
- Do you feel like you have enough information to make the right choices for you? Was there information that you needed but didn't have?
- Was the idea of school ever "sold to you" as a good idea? Were you ever rewarded for doing well or staying in school? Was school ever cool?

When do you think that you would get the most out of this type of information and help in making decisions like this?

- What would you want to know in grade 9? How about in grade 10 or 11?
- What about if you were asked to take a course or get school credit in some way for finding out about what schools you go to for certain things and what the requirements are for each type?
- Would this help you to understand what to take through high school and what to plan for in terms of grade and types of courses and how much schooling and money and loans and all of that you would be looking at?

- Would it be useful to involve your parents in this? Should part of the credit be to tell your parents what you found out and discuss with them what the different options are and get their thoughts?

WRAP-UP

- As you may know, there is another group discussion going on in another room. It is taking place with parents of students your age, who are also not intending to go to full-time PSE after high school. They've been talking about exactly the same issues that we've been discussing. Now, I'd like to have us get together in a larger group of both students and parents for the last hour and I'd like to swap some of the different perspectives and opinions, to see who similar or different they are.
- Before we join the other groups, I'd like us to summarize what we've talked about here a little bit. One way to do that might be for us to list 5 things from what has been discussed here today that we think kids think about on whether or not to go to PSE and what goes into that decision that would really surprise parents to hear; that they wouldn't be thinking about at all.

LARGER GROUP (STUDENTS AND PARENTS) 50-60 MINUTES

- (10 minutes – 5 minutes each) General synopsis from each moderator about what was said and comparisons/observations drawn.
- (5 minutes overall) Any immediate reactions or thoughts on this from anyone? Any of your own observations about similarities or differences?
- (15 minutes) We'd like you to break into groups of 3 or 4, with a good mix of parents and students, and we'd like you to talk about what the biggest barriers or most important barriers are to kids going to PSE. We'd like you to talk about what happens, and when and how it happens. Then once that is done, we're going to do a second exercise to change that and think about how to remove those barriers. What I'd like for you to do is have 1 person in the group write down those main reasons for kids deciding not to go to PSE and also list when and how it happens and to whom.
- (15 minutes) Now, I'd like you to work in those same groups to figure out what you would change to have more kids going to PSE. It could be anything you want. It could be giving kids money or tutors or more information or it could be giving parents money or information or whatever you think is going to address the issues you just talked about. For each solution, I want you to write down, what needs to change, when it should happen, to whom and how for it to be effective. If you agree among the people in your group, great! But, if not, just write down the additional things that some people don't agree on and make it a longer list. Not everyone has to agree with the entire list..
- (5 minutes) That's the end of the session. Did anyone have anything that they wanted to share with the group or tell us about from any of these last discussions? Something startling, disturbing, funny? Anything like that?

WRAP-UP (2 MINUTES)

- Does anyone have anything else they would like to add about what we've talked about?
- I want to thank you all for coming....

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!

DISCUSSION GUIDE – PARENTS

MAY 25, 2008

INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER (10 MINUTES)

- The purpose of our discussion here today is to talk about how kids come to their decisions about going to or not going to full-time college or university or other full-time school after high school. There seems to be a wide range of circumstances and reasons for why kids choose not to go or feel that that can't go on to post-secondary. We'd like to explore those with you as parents. Although you've all been selected at random, you have in common the belief that a child in your household likely won't or may not be planning to attend college or university or full-time private college for at least one term, or that you may not be going on.
- Explanation of format and "ground rules":
 - Groups are being audio-taped and observed by members of the research team. Your comments remain confidential. The audio tape will only be accessed by the research team of EKOS, the Council of Ministers of Education and the Millennium Scholarship Foundation, and for the purposes of developing quotes for the report.
 - Please try to speak one at a time.
 - There aren't any right or wrong answers to the things we'll be talking about — we're just looking for your honest opinions.
 - It's ok to disagree. Please speak up even if you think you're the only one who feels a certain way about an issue. It's also ok, though, if you change your mind based on things you hear or new information.
 - Moderator's role: raise issues for discussion, watch for time, make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
 - First of all I'd like us to go around the room and ask each of you to introduce yourselves and tell everyone how many children you have and what grades they're in.
- In this discussion we are going to be focusing on the decision to go or not to go to PSE so we'd like you to think about that child in your home that is in either grade 11 or 12 and

pretty sure that they are not going to attend full-time school after high school, or not at all sure about whether they will or not.

FUTURE PLANS (15 MINUTES)

- So, as far as you know at this point in time, what path is your son or daughter planning to take after high school? (Job? Trade school? Work?)
 - Why do they think that this a better option for them? (Learn better this way? More comfortable? Need the money/can't afford? Can't decide what to study/what career to pursue?)
 - How do you feel about the choice that they are making? Are you looking forward to it? Are you worried about it? What kind of job do you expect them to get? (Job or career/stepping stone to something else).

THE DECISION (40 MINUTES)

- SURE: When did your son or daughter first make the decision not to go to full-time college or university?
 - Recent? What grade? All at once or slow decision?
 - Surprise or always knew they wouldn't be going?
- UNSURE: Did something change their mind/made them unsure or were they never sure about it? Did they ever intend to go?

Was there a specific event or moment that happened? What and why did it have that effect on them do you think?

Did you or anyone else have input into the decision as far as you know? Who?

- Counsellor/teacher
- Parent/family member
- Friend
- Anyone else?
- How did this affect the decision?

What were their reasons for deciding not to go as they've expressed them to you?

Moderator notes – anatomy of reasons - probe to find out:

- Avoidance (school or money issues)? Or, looking forward to work/change?
- More than one reason - what is most important piece/reason? Different reasons (separate) or pieces of a puzzle? One reason "bigger" (implications) than the rest?
- How does one reason affect the others? Did one reason occur before the rest to start a chain reaction? How did it cause the other reasons to start?

Was it a difficult decision for your son or daughter to make do you think? How much time did he or she spend thinking about this? (Was it a relief when the decision was made from what you could tell?)

FACTORS - BARRIERS (45 MINUTES)

Now, I'd like to explore each of a number of different areas that have an influence on some kids' decision not to attend college or university.

School – How does your son or daughter you feel about school? (Like it? Avoid it?)

Moderator's notes: explore feelings of powerlessness/inadequacy/failure/boredom – fear/avoidance

- Has it always been like this or did it change (when and why)?
- Do they talk about school as a friendly or foreign place? Means learning, homework, a hang out, friends, being alone?
- Activities/sports/clubs? Ever spend time after class?
- Is their school in your neighbourhood? (similar or different?)

Program – What program are they in at school - an academic program or an applied program?

(How different and why prefer it?)

- When did they start in that program?
- Do you think that being in this stream contributed to their decision not to go?
- Do you think that this the right program for your son or daughter or did they wish that they had been in the other stream? How hard is it to transfer from one to the other once already in one stream?

Finances –How large of a factor was money in the decision? Why?

- Did they give you the impression that they think college or university costs too much? (No savings to pay for it? Don't think can get loans/bursaries?)
- They don't like the idea of huge debt when finished school?
- It isn't worth the money to go?

Parents/family – Did you think that your son or daughter would go to PSE?

- Did you ever talk about going or not? When did you first talk about it (age or grade)?
- How was PSE seen/talked about in the household (family tradition, enjoyment, a necessary evil, an option/up to them, a change from what you did)?
- Some parents are able to put some savings aside and some are not. Was any savings ever put aside for your son or daughter to go to school? Did you plan in some way for your child to attend PSE (either by saving, opening a special account or getting information about PSE and costs)?
- How involved were you in your child's school (in elementary? In high school? Talk about homework/ projects)?

Social circle – As far as you can tell, does your son or daughter's decision fit with what most of their fiends are doing after high school?

- Is this something that they talk about with each other, as far as you've heard?
- Have they made any plans together with friends for their time beyond high school (e.g., travel, move)

Information – Did you or your child get any information about post-secondary education and the costs of going to PSE? Loans and scholarships?

- What information?
- Where did it come from?
- Was it clear, relevant, helpful?
- Did they have anyone to talk to about all this stuff (e.g., what path might be best for their skills and interests)? Are people telling them about what the different requirements are and how that matches with them specifically? Did your son or daughter ever talk to a guidance counsellor about PSE or a job? Did it help with the things they were thinking about?
- Do you think that they have all the information they need to make an informed decision for themselves? Was there information that they needed but didn't have, as far as you know? Was there information that you as a parent would have liked to have but didn't have?

Do you think that this would help your son or daughter? When do you think that they would get the most out of this type of information and help in making decisions like this?

- What about if they were asked to take a course or get school credit in some way for finding out about what schools one goes to for certain things and what the requirements are for each type?
- Do you think that this would help them to understand what to take through high school and what to plan for in terms of grade and types of courses and how much schooling and money and loans and all of that they would be looking at?
- Would it be useful if they involved you, the parents in this? Would you be interested as parents to be involved in this type of thing (say if your son or daughter was told to come home and share the information with you so that everyone in the household could be brought up to speed)? Should part of the credit be to tell parents what you found out and discuss the different options and get your thoughts as parents?

WRAP-UP

- As you may know, there is another group discussion going on in another room. It is taking place with students your son or daughter's age, who are also not intending to go to full-time PSE after high school. They've been talking about exactly the same issues that we've been discussing. Now, I'd like to have us get together in a larger group of both students and parents for the last hour and I'd like to swap some of the different perspectives and opinions, to see who similar or different they are.
- Before we join the other group, I'd like us to summarize what we've talked about here a little bit. One way to do that might be for us to list 5 things from what has been discussed here today that we think parents think about on whether or not a kid should go to PSE and what goes into that decision that would really surprise kids to hear; that they wouldn't be thinking about at all.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!

APPENDIX C

REGIONAL FOCUS GROUP SUMMARIES

The following pages detail the specific findings for this study based on focus groups with students and with parents in Saint John's, Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Saskatoon and Vancouver.

SAINT JOHN'S

Students

A total of seven students participated. Three were in grade 11, while the others were in grade 12.

The Future Plan

A few participants had definite plans following high school. One intended to take a year off and reapply to a power-engineering program he did not get accepted into; one planned to become a pathologist and take a year off to wait for more space to become available in the program; and one wanted to bartend. The majority of participants were less clear on what they wanted to do. Several discussed taking time off and continuing to work in jobs they already held. These participants had no firm plans for PSE and said they needed more time to "figure things out".

When asked what they looked forward to, some discussed the possibility of finding an interesting career, while others discussed the experience of living away from home. When asked what they worried about, participants seemed to have a variety of concerns. A top of mind issue for most revolved around not knowing what to do in the future. Some said they feel stressed about the amount of time it might take them to reach a decision. Several also worried about possibly making the wrong decision. "What if you don't like what you picked?" "I am worried about training for a job and not liking it." "I don't want to end up wasting any time or money." A couple of participants were concerned that their marks might prevent them from doing what they end wanting to do. One participant was somewhat worried about moving away from friends and family.

The Decision

Several participants indicated that they started thinking about PSE as early as grade 11 and as late as grade 12. No one in the group had begun thinking about PSE before grade 11. It was noted: "Maybe you start thinking about 'what you want to do when you grow up' when you are a kid, but you don't really start thinking about college or university until a lot later." A couple of participants said they began seriously considering their options for the future when making their course selections in grades 11 and 12. Participants did not identify any specific events that might have triggered them to make decisions they have made about PSE. A majority decided to take some time off from school when they were unable to identify any career work that would be of interest.

Most felt that their decision had not been strongly influenced by others. School guidance counsellors were thought to mostly help students who had already decided to pursue PSE in selecting appropriate courses. Participants did not tend to see guidance counsellors as a resource for those who had not yet chosen a direction. Although participants noted that it is common for guidance counsellors to provide information about options for PSE, many of those who were undecided or unsure about PSE had not bothered to speak to their guidance counsellor.

While many noted that their parents have expectations for them to continue with their studies after high school, they suggested that their parents were not very useful in helping them to figure out a path to take. In many cases, it is because the parents themselves had very little information to offer about PSE. Participants felt that their parents were out of touch with current PSE options, either because they had never experienced it first hand or had not experienced it recently. Those who were undecided about their futures typically just felt pressured by their parents to do “something”. One participant noted, “My parents are always like: you can’t be sitting there for too long—you need to get a move on”. Another stated: “My parents tell me ‘you need to go to school’ and I keep telling them that I don’t know what I want to be. They will try and tell me to be something and I am like, ‘but I’m not good at that’.”

Participants said they made their decisions about PSE regardless of what their friends did or said. Those who knew that they eventually wanted to continue their studies had made up their minds before speaking with their friends. Some of those who were undecided or unsure about their futures felt that their friends pressured them to continue their studies after high school, but offered little by way of helping them choose a possible direction. In some cases, the decision not to attend PSE appeared to represent a point of contention in the relationship: “My friends tell me I am stupid for not going because they are all going, but I have no idea what I want to do yet.” A couple of participants were explicitly informed by friends “If you take a year off, you won’t go back”.

All had spoken to family and friends of their plans. In many instances, participants noted that there was some surprise and disappointment with their decisions. The idea of not having “a plan” seemed to raise some concern with parents and create anxiety. Participants noted that while their decision to take time off to “figure things out” was not an easy one to make, it seemed necessary. Those who had a plan and were taking a break as a means of getting into their program of choice felt that their decision was not a difficult one to make.

By and large, participants came across as anxious about reaching a decision about the direction they would take. Most did not seem happy with their current situation or confident that the decision they had made not to continue right away was the right one to make.

Factors and Obstacles

School

Participants generally held positive views of school. Many said they liked school because they got to be with their friends and socialize. They seemed to view it as a necessary step in life and accepted it for what it is.

While all admitted to getting bored with the curriculum from time to time and receiving lower marks in certain courses, none suggested that school made them feel powerless, inadequate or like a failure. In fact, participants seemed to express few negative views of school.

Some noted that the quality of teaching and subject matter of courses has a huge impact on their level of engagement in school and in specific classes. Many participants seemed to have a “favourite subject” or “good teacher”, which made school more appealing. Few said they were engaged in any extracurricular activities.

Several said they noticed that school was definitely getting more serious in the senior grades and that there is a need to take it seriously at that point. One participant noted, “If you don’t take it seriously, you won’t go far.” When asked to clarify what they meant by “more serious” participants specified that courses were getting more difficult, they had to focus on “harder” courses (e.g., sciences, maths and English as opposed to physical education, drama, art and music) and make important decisions about the future based on the courses they selected.

Program of Study

Most students indicated that there were not clear streams at their school. There was typically one general program created which ensured that students have the necessary credits to get into either college or university, should they decide to do so. The general program allowed students to specialize in either the arts or the sciences. Only a few participants were aware of the difference between academic and applied programs. They indicated that an applied program was recently created at their school.

Finances

Finances did not seem to be a major barrier to pursuing PSE. In some cases, participants said their parents had put money aside specifically for PSE. One participant noted, “My parents said there is enough there for me to do whatever I want.” Others felt they could finance themselves or take out a student loan, if needed. While a few expressed some concerns over how complicated the process of taking out a student loan might be and the idea of going into debt, this was not perceived as a major obstacle. One participant suggested, “You find some way to pay it back in the end”.

Friends

It is interesting to note that most participants indicated that their circle of friends are continuing their education, with many going to university. As previously noted, some participants expressed that their friends seemed to take issue with the fact that they were either undecided or unsure about PSE, or taking time off to get into the program of their choice. In other cases, participants said their circle of friends did not really discuss their plans to continue studying: “We are all just going ahead and doing our own thing...it doesn’t really come up in our conversations.” Only one participant said that no one in her circle of friends had definite plans to continue their studies because they were also undecided.

PSE

Many participants had a good idea of what PSE entails. It was suggested that it is “any education you get after high school that you have to pay for”. Participants explicitly noted that PSE includes university, college, trade school and apprenticeship programs. They realized that there were different requirements for each.

Alternatives to PSE

Participants had mixed views of alternatives to PSE. One noted that she had a friend who graduated from high school and got a job making \$100,000 a year. Most conceded that the possibility of getting a high paying job without PSE is rare today. “Maybe my parents’ generation could go out and do that, but it doesn’t seem realistic for us.” One participant noted that she did not want to continue working minimum wage jobs for the rest of her life, but had no real desire to begin looking into PSE options until a clear path emerged.

By and large, participants came across as anxious about reaching a decision related to the direction they would take. Many did not seem happy with their current situation or confident that the decision they had made not to continue their studies immediately was the right one.

Information

Participants noted that their parents were not very involved in helping them to plan for PSE. It was common for them to say that their parents had not done any research on their behalf about programs or average costs for PSE. One participant said of his parents, “They don’t have a clue”.

A few participants had done their own research online. They specifically looked at the homepages of colleges or universities they might be interested in. A couple investigated department specific sites to get an idea of courses for different programs, while others had done more general searches. Only a few said they were successful in finding relevant information.

Some also attended presentations about PSE at school. While they described these presentations as somewhat useful, there was tendency to feel like “something was missing.” It should be noted that they often could not describe what was missing. Participants were merely of the opinion that a wider range of information should be covered.

When asked what kind of information they would want to find out more about, participants offered several responses. Some said they looked for possible career choices related to programs of study. Others looked for costs related to PSE, requirements for admission and specific course descriptions for different programs of study. Participants in grade 11 seemed less curious about the process, assuming that they would figure things out when the time came.

According to participants, the best time to receive information about PSE is around grade 10. Many shared the view that receiving information in grade 10 might help with the decision making process for course selections in senior grades. Many participants felt that grade 9 is too early and that

students would likely not take the information as seriously at that point. "Grade 9 is too early because you think the end of high school is a long time away."

Most did not feel like PSE was sold to them by parents and teachers. As one participant noted, "It isn't a forced issue." Many were given the message that there are multiple paths to choose from and that they could do anything they wanted. Nevertheless, participants seemed to be focused on making the "right decision".

Parents

A total of seven parents participated. Three of the teenagers in question were going into grade 12, while the others were going into grade 11.

According to the parents, three of the seven teenagers had definite ideas about the career they wanted and of the path to take in order to get there: "He wants to be an industrial mechanic. He applied for a program but can't get into it until next year because there isn't enough room." Another student aspired to be an engineer, while another aimed to be a paediatrician.

The other parents described their teenagers as being "unsure" or "undecided" about careers paths and specific PSE programs. It is important to note however, that all but one parent fully expected their teen to attend PSE. The trades were seen as a fall back for a couple of parents.

Parents did not have a very good grasp of how streaming worked in the province. Nor were they certain about what stream their teen was in. Most thought that their teen was in a program that made them eligible to go to university. At the same time, four parents noted that their teen had spent some time in special education classes.

Parents felt that their teen, as well as their other teenagers, began thinking about PSE at some point between the ages of 14 to 16 years. They also noted that teenagers thought more in terms of careers and lifestyle hopes than of PSE per se: "Well she wants to make a lot of money, so that's why she's trying for engineering."

Most described their teenagers as undecided about the future. It is also important to note that most of the teenagers in question had just recently completed grade 10. Thus, parents felt that their teen's uncertainty was understandable: "I ask her. She doesn't know. She might figure it out next year or the year after that. That's okay."

Parents were confident that their teenagers had a solid grasp of their talents and interests. Later in the discussion, however, they agreed that the schools should do more to help students discover these things.

When asked about barriers to PSE, parents all reiterated their belief that their teen would attend college or university: "Oh she'll go. It's just a question of in what." The discussion of potential barriers revealed the existence of a number of minor barriers:

Finances were an issue for 3-4 families. It was expected that their teen would have to rely on a combination of part-time/summer work and student loans. Parents assumed that their teenagers would qualify, but none had looked into the program: "I guess we'll do that next year." Parents agreed that student loans were a worthwhile investment overall: "I did it. It took me a while to pay them back, but it was worth it."

Their teen's lack of motivation was thought to be an issue by 2-3 parents. It is also important to note that the descriptions provided by parents suggest that teenagers are motivated not by intellectual curiosity, but by the pursuit of a career and lifestyle. In this sense, parents felt that teenagers perceived PSE as a duty, in the same way primary and secondary school was.

As noted, indecision was a major characteristic of the teenagers according to the parents, but not seen as a barrier per se. Peer pressure and the influence of romantic relationships were also thought to constitute obstacles to PSE. As in other groups, parents felt that teachers played a crucial role in the grades their teen received and the overall level of motivation they had for staying in school and going on to PSE. Grades were seen as an obvious barrier to university, but not to college or apprenticeship: "If she can't get into university, she'll go to college."

Unlike most other parents, these participants felt that their teenagers had access to enough information to help them make informed decision about careers and PSE. Some spoke about the wealth of information available on the Internet. Others talked about "career days" at school as well as other opportunities which students had to learn about PSE institutions: "He went and checked out the firefighting college in PEI. He has all the information he needs."

While the lack of information about PSE was not seen as a significant barrier to PSE and parents felt that their teenagers had a solid grasp of their talents and interests, there was general agreement that schools should incorporate a class or class module devoted to self-discovery (e.g., aptitudes and interests) career planning and information on PSE. Parents also said that they would be happy to participate in such a class or module.

HALIFAX

Students

A total of seven students participated in Halifax. Four were in grade 11 and three were in grade 12.

The Future Plan

Some had definite plans for their lives after high school. Two participants planned to travel. One wanted to go around Europe, while the other planned to undertake volunteer work in France. One participant wanted to be a screenwriter and was in the process of trying to sell a screenplay to producers. Three planned to work after high school to have more time to decide what they want to do in the future. One was unemployed and unsure about his plans after high school.

Those who planned to travel looked forward to their adventures after high school and were confident about taking time off for this purpose. The participant who wanted to be a screenwriter looked forward to being successful in the film industry. Others seemed to look forward to “just being done high school”. When asked what worried them, a few of those who were undecided said that they worried about not already knowing what they will do. A majority of participants did not express any concerns about their future plans.

The Decision

Only two participants had arrived at a decision not to continue over time, based on their interests. The participant who planned to become a screenwriter had been home schooled and knew earlier on that he was interested in writing for movies (and mentioned that he had considerable time to work on refining his writing skills). The participant who planned to travel to France had previously lived there, always realized that she liked traveling, and knew for quite some time that she wanted to go abroad after high school before looking into PSE options. “I think we have too much pressure on us to choose what we are doing right away—I think going away and seeing new things might help me out.”

Others noted that the decision was made more abruptly within the last year after they realized they were not exactly sure what they wanted to do. One wanted to travel to Europe to discover herself and find out what she might want to do. She wanted to avoid making the wrong decision and “wasting money or time”. Another participants who wanted to be a dentist had changed his mind in grade 10 when he realized this route would require “too much effort”.

None had made decisions about their futures any earlier than grade 11 or 12. Some were of the opinion that it was too early to be making those kinds of decisions before their senior years in high school because they were less focused on their futures. As one participant noted, “I was too busy playing baseball in grade 7 and 8 to care about anything else”.

Three of seven participants had spoken with a school guidance counsellor about PSE. These discussions were often initiated when the participants sought guidance for course selections. In each case the guidance counsellor looked at their grades, asked them about their interests and either provided information about PSE or suggested certain career paths that made participants reflect on their futures. While these participants tended to view their discussions with the guidance counsellors as a “waste of time”, each one admitted that it clarified some information about PSE (e.g., degrees, courses offered, schools specializing in certain areas) that they could use at a later point when considering PSE options.

All participants had spoken to their family and friends of their plans. Most indicated that their families and friends were generally supportive and neither overly concerned nor surprised by their decisions. Only one participant felt that her parents pressured her to plan for PSE, telling her: “You’ve got to do something”. Others felt that their parents saw the benefits in taking some time off (either to work or travel) as a means of discovering what they wanted to do in the long term.

Participants were generally satisfied with the decision they reached regarding the continuation of their studies after high school. Those with a firm plan (e.g., to travel, to become a screen writer) did

not find the decision difficult to make. Others found it a more difficult decision to make, but thought they made the right decision given that they were unsure or undecided about what they wanted to do.

Factors and Obstacles

School

Participants expressed mixed feelings about school. On one hand, they spoke of it being more “laid back”, “relaxed” and “easy going” in the earlier grades. On the other hand, they spoke of their frustrations with school becoming more “serious” and “stressful” in the senior grades, courses seeming to have no practical application or use, and being surrounded by overworked and disinterested teaching staff.

Participants noted that the quality of teaching varies tremendously, having a significant impact on their engagement in specific classes, and subsequently on their academic performance. They noted that some teachers are more interested than others in seeing their students do well and helping them get good marks. They also noted that they find it most helpful when teachers teach them new skills and impart “useful information” that will come in handy in the future, instead of making them “memorize the same things year after year”.

There were many complaints about the Nova Scotia public education system. Participants noted PSE institutions in other jurisdictions undervalue the marks they receive because their education system is seen as a “joke” across the country. They explained: “Universities and colleges in other places will look at our marks differently because we are coming from the Nova Scotia public education system” and “people from this province are at a real disadvantage when they go to university or college in another provinces because they have to catch up on things they haven’t already learned”. This was thought to put a tremendous amount of pressure on students to get high grades in their senior years of high school and work harder to catch up when they enter PSE institutions.

Two participants expressed that some schools in the region are highly under funded, making it difficult for students to learn to their full capacity. One participant who is interested in photography noted that it was impossible for her to take art courses seriously at her school because they did not have the funding to offer proper classes (for photography, media studies, fine arts, drama and literature). She remarked, “I hear the neighbouring high schools have dark rooms, kilns and actual acrylic paints...we have poster paints.” Another noted that he opted to be home schooled after moving from Ontario to Nova Scotia, because the middle school he attended was so under funded. He stated: “Our so-called library had one book shelf with books in it and computers from ‘95”.

Program of Study

Students were generally aware of the different streams at their school. Most schools seemed to offer an advanced academic program, a regular academic program, a graduated program and optional programs. One participant noted that his school offered an international baccalaureate

program, in which he was registered. Participants were mostly enrolled in regular academic programs.

Finances

Finances appear to play a role in the decision not to pursue PSE after high school. Only one participant said that his family had invested money for him for PSE. Several others expressed concern over being able to get the money to go to college or university. While they seemed to accept school debt as part of the experience, many seemed to stress over the thought of being in debt if they had to take out a loan. One noted, "I have heard that they are really difficult to pay back". A few said they would have to work to save money for PSE before they went. These participants tended to worry most about choosing the wrong course and wasting money.

Others seemed to feel like college and university educations are not always worth the price of tuition. One participant voiced, "It's just an expensive piece of paper to me". Some said that college and university educations are not always effective in leading to careers in certain areas. A few participants were aware of people who had B.A. degrees who ended up working in retail or restaurants and viewed their experiences as not being worth the money or the effort. These participants conceded that college and university degrees should not be pursued for the sake of having a degree, but only pursued if the individual is sincerely interested in a particular program of study.

Parents

Almost all noted that their parents expected them to pursue PSE. A couple of participants said there is a huge push from their parents to continue their studies after high school. Some parents merely asked to see if their teenagers have developed a plan, while a few others went so far as to research PSE options on their behalf and share information that they thought might be of interest to them. According to participants, information usually shared relates to the cost of university, programs of study and career related information. Some participants suggested that they were receptive to help from their parents, as long as they did not feel like their parents were making major choices on their behalf.

Friends

It is interesting to note that most participants indicated that their circle of friends are continuing their education, with many going to university. Notwithstanding this, most participants expressed that their friends supported them in their decisions not to continue their studies after high school. A few noted that their friends seemed indifferent to their plans.

PSE

Many participants had a good idea of what PSE entails. They were generally aware that it includes university, college, trade school and apprenticeship programs. Participants were also aware that

there were different requirements to get into each program and that university programs tend to take a longer time to complete.

Alternatives to PSE

Those who had firm plans for what they would do following high school had clear notions of the existing options to PSE, which include traveling, volunteering and working. They looked forward to new experiences outside of school as well as the prospects of “making some money” in a full time job.

It should be noted that participants did not glamorize the idea of entering the work force immediately after high school. Many realized that the majority of positions available to high school graduates are low paying (i.e., in retail or the restaurant industry), with the exception of a few high paying jobs (i.e., construction and call centre work). Several noted that these are not the kinds of jobs they envisioned themselves doing for the rest of their lives. One participant stated, “You are going to get tired of doing the same job every day if it is something that doesn’t interest you.”

Information

As previously noted, a few participants said their parents were somewhat involved in helping them to plan for PSE. Some had done research on their behalf and shared pertinent information with them. When asked if they generally thought parents should be more involved in helping teenagers plan for PSE, participants expressed mixed views. Some noted that parents should be more involved. Specifically, parents could help their teenagers to understand more about taking out loans and figuring out the costs of PSE (e.g., books, tuition and student living expenses). Others disagreed and said that not all parents are interested in taking such an active role and not all teenagers are interested in having their parents get more involved in helping them. These participants thought that those who wanted to be involved would simply become involved on their own and that providing parents with more information probably would not have much effect.

Some participants had looked for information online related to PSE. Most looked at the homepages of colleges or universities they might be interested in. Some participants sought out information related to specific programs of study and admission requirements. Those who conducted their own research online tended to say they found most of the information they were looking for.

A few attended one or more presentations about PSE at school. While they said they found some of the information in the presentations pertinent and relevant, the presentations were not deemed as useful as they could be. Two participants noted that the presentations they attended seemed to inundate students with information and not focus enough on key issues that students should be made aware of, including PSE costs and financing options (e.g., loans, bursaries and grants).

While participants noted that students tend to pay the most attention to PSE information in senior grades, several felt that it is never too early to expose students to this kind of information. They remarked, “There is no harm in exposing youth to this kind of information, even if they don’t care right away”; “knowing about it earlier would be better”; and, “the earlier you know it, the quicker you can utilize it—even if you do not decide right away.” While they felt that PSE should not be pushed

on to students, they were of the opinion that PSE options should be casually discussed in earlier grades to ensure that students are properly informed about their options to pursue studies after high school.

Some participants felt that parents, teachers and media sold the idea of PSE to them on a regular basis. "When people meet you their first question is always 'what do you do' and the second question is always 'where did you study'." A few said they resent that there is so much focus on PSE when it is "not for everyone" and "not the only option". One participant explained that she had a friend who went to university, studied what her parents and guidance counsellor told her to, and had a break down in her second semester because she wondered why she was really there to begin with. These participants said that less emphasis should be placed on PSE as the only option after high school and suggested that equal weight should be given to all the possible options for the future.

Parents

A total of seven parents participated in the group. Most of teenagers in question were either entering grade 11 or 12 in September, while two were graduating in June. One of the teenagers was home schooled. All participants were very engaged.

According to the parents, one of the teenagers in question was likely not going on to PSE. Rather, he was embarking on a career in film, having already written and submitted a screenplay to producers. He also had had discussions with people in the film industry in Halifax and came to the conclusion that PSE was not necessary for him to pursue his goal. His mother also explained that her teen had been home schooled for years because he did not fit into the public school system well: "It just didn't work for him. He's very smart and very serious, and felt that high school would just be a waste of time." Two teenagers were contemplating apprenticeship. Two others were considering university or college, while two of the parents said that their teen would likely attend community college.

With the exception of the screenwriter, the parents tended to describe their teenagers as "undecided" about careers and PSE. They painted a picture of teenagers not wanting to "make a mistake" in pursuing the wrong path. Participants attributed their teenagers' indecision to uncertainty about career possibilities, as well as uncertainty about what they wanted to study: "She's good at things like art and English, but she's thinking of taking business because there are more jobs in that field, but she doesn't really know what to do." Two other parents explained how their teen was planning on taking a "year off" to travel, work and contemplate their future. The parents supported this decision. It is also important to note that all of the parents in the group were supportive of the paths being considered by their teenagers.

Parents felt that their teenagers had only recently been seriously thinking about potential careers and PSE in the last year or so, with some adding that the thought given thus far by their teen had been fairly limited: "She really doesn't know. She was thinking of joining the Navy, maybe college or a trade."

Parents described a situation in which they encouraged their teenagers to think about careers and PSE, but tried not to pressure their teenagers to pursue a particular path. Teachers and guidance counsellors were said to play a minor role, as were friends and boyfriends/girlfriends.

With the exception of two teenagers, the others were in the midst of trying to figure out what path to take. In other words, they had yet to come to a decision about PSE. It's important to note, however, that all of the parents (including the parent of the home schooled screen writer) were fairly confident that their teen would attend PSE.

Several barriers were identified. Three of the seven teenagers did not like school. In one case, it was because the student was not sufficiently challenged; and, in the other two cases they struggled to pass/obtain decent grades. As far as the other teenagers were concerned, their parents described them as enjoying the "social" aspect of school, while obtaining fair to high marks. In short, they went to school out of duty, not interest. Grades were a potential barrier for two of the teenagers who were considering university.

Two of the teenagers were enrolled in a non-academic program (H2O), which allowed them to enter college or an apprenticeship program. The others, according to parents, were in programs that allowed them to enter either university or college.

Finances were seen as somewhat of a barrier overall. Like with many other parents and teenagers, however, this was more of a theoretical barrier at this stage in the process. For example, none of the families who expected that student loans might come into play at some point had looked into the issue.

The teenager's social circle was not seen as much of a barrier. Some parents acknowledged that boyfriends and girlfriends could have an influence on the decision-making process, but that this did not necessarily constitute a barrier.

Parents were divided on whether their teenagers had sufficient, easy access to quality information to help them make wise career and PSE choices. There was agreement, however, that teenagers at that age often struggled with discovering their talents, aptitudes and interests. More specifically, a few of the parents explained how their teen was having difficulty making a link between what they enjoy doing/are talented at on the one hand, and career possibilities on the other. For example, parents felt that teenagers vastly underestimated the number of careers that are available to people: "Aside from being a journalist, she doesn't see how being a good writer can earn you a living."

Parents agreed that schools should devote more attention to helping students discover their talents and aptitudes. One parent explained how after having been out of the workforce for a number of years she paid for career counselling, including testing aimed at identifying personality traits and aptitudes: "I think it costs \$300.00 and lasted a week. They gave me a different test every day. It was great." Parents thought that schools could incorporate a similar approach. A couple of the parents cautioned, however, that such tests needed to be administered by "professionals" and that the information should be presented in a way that did not make teenagers feel boxed in by the

results: "I think you have to be careful. You want these to expand choice not narrow them." "I think it would have to be voluntary."

MONTREAL

Students

Eight youth participated in the Montreal group. Half reported being in secondaire 4, and half in secondaire 5.

Future Plans

Half did have definite plans for their life following high school. One planned to obtain his DEP in construction; one planned to work on a cruise ship for a period to travel; one planned to enter the contracting business owned by his uncle with a view to taking the company over eventually; and one hoped to start his own business in retail.

Several others wished to continue their studies, but faced barriers to continuing. Two students reported that, while they had planned to attend CEGEP, they could not do so immediately. One needed to obtain her high school English credits to continue, and planned to attend adult continuing education to do so, and to pursue a DEP simultaneously. Another indicated that she expects to enter CEGEP eventually, but she had been refused for next year due to lack of space. In the meantime, she identified pursuing a DEP and work as a hairstylist as her "plan B". A third student identified himself as dyslexic, and noted that he had struggled throughout his primary and secondary studies, resulting in low self confidence and crippling anxiety which was making it very difficult to write exams and get the grades needed to continue. The last student planned to take a year off to work, to try and figure out what she wants to do in life.

When asked what, if anything, might change their mind or their plans, several indicated that if they learned of an interesting option or career they had not been aware of, they might reconsider. A few did have plans to return to school eventually (such as the student planning to travel by working on a cruise ship), once they knew for certain what they wanted to study or what career they wished to pursue. Several indicated that while they had the grades needed to continue, they had no firm plans to do so given that they had no idea what they wanted to do.

The Decision

Several participants indicated that they had come to the decision not to continue gradually over time, based on their experiences and their interests. The participant who planned to obtain his DEP in construction had done several work placements in construction and felt confident that he wished to pursue a trade in this field. The participant planning to work on a cruise ship was excited at the prospect of enjoying herself, working with the public and getting tanned; deferring post-secondary education to when she would have a clear idea of what she wants to study. The students who wished to be entrepreneurs and work for themselves (one in his uncle's contracting business, the

other by starting his own business) had seen positive examples of youth succeeding as entrepreneurs, and were convinced that they wanted to “be their own boss”.

Others noted that the decision was made more abruptly within the past six months, when they realized that they did not have the grades, all the credits, or acceptance at CEGEP to be able to continue immediately. One participant expressed frustration at his desire to continue, but inability to do so based on his current grades and difficulties with anxiety. One had made the decision to take a year off when she was unable to identify any career or work of interest, even following visits to a career counsellor.

Few participants felt that their decision had been strongly influenced by others. Several did, however, note that their parents felt strongly that they should continue their studies, or at least complete their high school education. Several note that their parents do continue to expect that they will pursue their studies further (particularly those missing credits or other requirements to continue).

Many participants felt that they had been influenced by what they observed or had learned from experience. One noted that while her mother was very happy in her career, her work had no link whatsoever to her past studies in history. This convinced her that it would be better to wait to be sure of what work she really wanted to do before enrolling in PSE. As noted, some had seen positive success stories of entrepreneurs, which gave them the encouragement they needed to pursue their plans.

All participants had spoken to family and friends of their plans. One noted that she made sure to speak of her plans to “avoid surprising or disappointing them”. Most indicated that their families and friends were generally supportive and not overly concerned or surprised by their decisions. A few (those not able to continue immediately) again expressed that their parents were not happy and wished to see them complete and continue their education at CEGEP.

Each participant articulated clear reasons or factors resulting in their decision to not pursue post-secondary education, which have already been enumerated. With one exception, they did not find their decision very difficult to make. They noted, “We can always change our mind”. One who wished to continue, but was experiencing great difficulties in school (many linked to his dyslexia), was not happy with his situation.

Factors and Obstacles

School

Participants expressed mixed feelings about school. On one hand, they spoke of fun with friends and socializing at school. On the other, they spoke of their frustration with courses that seemed to have no practical application or use, and of substandard teachers. They disliked taking courses that seemed “useless”, or where there “is no clear purpose”.

Participants expressed that the quality of teaching varies tremendously, and has a huge impact on their engagement in school or in specific classes, and subsequently on their academic performance. They spoke of “great” teachers, who knew their subject matter well and could engage their interest and enthusiasm, and others who had either little command of French (new Canadians), English (in English classes) or little familiarity with the subject matter they are teaching.

Participants also spoke strongly of a new “reform” program or approach which was introduced in Quebec to the grade below them (and which affected many younger siblings) as a very poor approach to learning (through teamwork). They noted that grades under this approach are strongly affected by teammates and not just the individual, and suggested that students are “just getting stupider” through this program.

One participant in particular expressed that primary and secondary school had been very negative for him. He was not diagnosed as dyslexic until later on. Consequently, he always felt that teachers treated him as “worthless” throughout school. Teachers did not make an effort to help him and did not recognize that there were reasons why he struggled. As a result, he now suffers from very low self-confidence and extreme anxiety, which makes it almost impossible for him to write exams or achieve the grades he needs to pursue a career in animal care.

Another participant indicated that school had been very negative for her until she switched schools to one where she could advance at her own pace for her final years of high school. She noted that she had been able to bring up her marks to the point that she may be able to attend CEGEP (despite not being accepted for next year given a lack of space).

Few participants had been engaged in any clubs or activities at school. One participant had joined a young entrepreneurs club, and another had been in football for several years. Others indicated they “do not like school enough to stick around after hours”.

Program of Study

Most students indicated that there were not clear streams at their school, although several noted that they had been in an advanced class for a particular subject. The subjects studied by participants varied significantly. Some expressed a strong preference for science and math, and others for the arts or for language. One expressed a strong preference for subjects where there is a great deal of opportunity for participation by students.

Finances

Finances were clearly not an obstacle or decision-making factor for participants. Many noted that their parents had offered to pay for their education, and were willing to support them should they continue. A few noted that they were not willing to “waste their parents money” when they were uncertain of the career or type of studies they wished to pursue.

Parents

Roughly half the participants noted that their parents obtained PSE themselves, while the remaining half indicated that they did not. Those whose parents did not pursue their own education or complete high school note that their parents urge them “not to make the same mistake”. Several note that their parents did set aside money for their PSE. One (planning to enter a family contracting business) noted that his parents are now spending the money saved on travel as they can see that he will not use it for PSE. A few participants note that they have older siblings who have continued on to post-secondary studies.

Participants indicate that their parents are engaged in their education. They are encouraging them to continue their studies or at least to complete secondary school. A couple feel that their parents are “too involved” or place “too much pressure” on them.

Friends

It is interesting to note that most participants indicate that their circle of friends are not continuing their education, and many note that their friends do not all expect to complete secondary school. One noted that “my friends are jealous because I have a plan” of what they will do after high school, while another notes that “if I listened to my friends, I would have quit already”. Many suggest that school, and planning for education, is not a frequent topic of discussion amongst their friends. One, who plans to start a business, indicates that his friends are of a similar mind and that they have seen positive success stories from others to encourage them.

PSE

Many participants were quite clear on what PSE entails, describing it as “anything involving studies or school that comes after secondary school”. Several note that the options you can pursue depend on your grades. They indicate that the length of programs vary by what you want to study. Several had an idea of how many years were required to obtain a university degree.

A few, however, were less clear or knowledgeable, and expressed confusion over the term PSE. These participants indicated that they “never heard that term before”, and asked, “What does it mean?” One participant, listening to another describe university options, asked “What is a doctorate?”

Alternatives to PSE

Given that most participants had clear plans of what they would do following high school, they did have clear notions of the options to PSE that exist, which include trades (DEP), continuing education, work, and entrepreneurship. Many looked forward to the independence of work. One, who planned to work on a cruise ship, was excited at the prospect of “meeting new people, getting new ideas”.

They identified the imagination, enthusiasm, energy and openness of youth as the advantages of entering the labour market young. Disadvantages were their lack of experience, which limits their job security. Others also noted that people might be less apt to respect them or have confidence in them, particularly as an entrepreneur/boss.

One participant indicated that while she would like to work, her parents do not support this option and are insisting upon continuing education to obtain the missing credits needed to continue her education. Another (the participant with dyslexia) expressed a desire to continue his education and a fear that he would end up with a "crappy job" which does not reflect his true capabilities.

Information

Several participants indicated that they had obtained information on available programs of study at the PSE level. They had obtained information and documentation from teachers, career counsellors, or other students (friends, siblings) who had already gone on to post-secondary studies. They had obtained print information as well as information word of mouth. Many also spoke of a web site, which details various trade-training options available in Quebec (DEPs).

Other participants seemed far less informed. They had no idea of what they wanted to "do" or "be", or of the programs of study to support different options. One participant indicated, "I want to go into early teenhood education but only because other people say they see me doing that".

Many ridiculed career aptitude tests that they had taken (offered by a guidance counsellor). They indicated that the results had either been too vague ("I should work with people") or too specific and unhelpful ("said I should be a window washer"). None felt that such tests offered any real or concrete guidance as to a potential career path.

Some did identify a need for better and more information on career options and paths of study linked to each. They note that it would be good to have some information earlier on (secondaire 2 or 3) to help guide course choices.

In terms of PSE choices, most felt that the information needed is out there "if you look". They suggested that there is "lots of information on the Internet". They did not feel that there was any need to increase the information or to offer a high school credit on this topic.

They felt that education (secondary and post-secondary) was always being "sold" to them. They quoted parents and teachers as constantly saying, "education is important", "you have to finish high school", and of adults cautioning them "don't make the same mistakes I did".

Parents

Seven parents participated. Almost all of the teenagers in question were in their second or last year of high school and varied in age. Participants were very engaged.

Overall, there was a great deal of commonality in the situations described by the parents. Perhaps most significantly, all were hoping to see their teen graduate from high school, but had doubts about the prospects of success. Indeed, the likelihood that their teen would attend PSE was

thought to be fairly low by all parents. Essentially, the focus in these families was to help their teen obtain a high school education: "I want him to finish, but he wants this to be his last year." Some held out some hope that their teen would obtain a technical diploma from CEGEP.

It is important to note that most, if not all, of the teenagers in question were in a special education program. This was described as a setting in which students have all of their classes with one teacher and the same 12 to 15 classmates (akin to elementary school): "He doesn't change classrooms, nor does the teacher change. He stays there for math, science, French, etc. The only time he changes class is for shop or gym." The teachers were also said to have specialized training in teaching teenagers with learning disabilities.

It is also important to note that a number of the teenagers in question appeared to have significant behavioural issues: "My kid is suspended for the rest of the year." "Mine just got suspended too, but he can go back." Parents explained that their teenagers did not get along with teachers very well, and had a tendency to defy authority: "You can't tell him to do anything."

According to parents, all of the teenagers were interested in leaving school as soon as possible in order to work. About three out of the seven teenagers in question had a definite idea of the work they wanted, including one who was already working full-time as a cook.

While parents expressed mild disappointment at their teen's lack of interest in PSE, all said that they supported, or at least understood, the choice their teen was leaning towards making: "Of course I would like him to finish high school and go to CEGEP, but what can I do? He can't stand school. At the end of the day, we have to support him in what he does."

Most of the parents felt that their teen, and older teenagers in general, do not think very much or very realistically about PSE. In the case of their teen, thoughts of the future revolved around leaving school as soon as possible and entering the world of work: "I don't think they think very much about that kind of stuff." Parents did not have a good idea of when their teen decided not to pursue PSE. It seems from their descriptions, however, that PSE was never on these teenagers' radar screen.

As in other groups, teachers were said to have a large influence on teenagers' success and failure. All of the parents shared stories of how "good" and "caring" teachers were able to relate to their teen and bring the best out of them, while "poor" or "impatient" teachers had played a significant role in turning their teen off of school. Friends were also thought to have a huge influence. Here, quite a few parents described how their teen had gotten into the "wrong crowd" and had suffered because of it: "I tell him: 'if you hang around with little bums you're going to be a bum.'" Parents felt that they had some influence, but that their relationship was often a struggle: "You can't tell them what to do. You can't even suggest it and you'd better not tell them: 'I told you so.' You have to tell them things in a way that they think it's their own idea."

Several barriers were identified. As noted, an intense dislike of school was the main barrier to PSE. In addition to this, was the fact that the teenagers had poor grades, some behavioural issues, a few learning disabilities and a history of conflict with teachers and others in positions of authority. Many

of the teenagers in question also appeared to be “loners”, skipping or toiling in isolation and shame in special education classes.

The program that these teenagers were in (mostly a form of special education) did not prevent them from undertaking an apprenticeship program or from obtaining a technical diploma at CEGEP.

Finances were thought to be a minor barrier for one or two, though this was largely a hypothetical obstacle. Parents noted the relative affordability of PSE (i.e., CEGEP in Quebec).

It was apparent that the parents had struggled to raise their teen. It was also obvious from the discussion that at least half of the parents possessed no more than a high school education themselves. It seems that the most these parents could do was to explain to their teenagers how their own lives had been made much more difficult because of a lack of education and of other bad choices they had made: “He knows how everything has always been a struggle for us. How hard it is. I hope it sinks in and that he stays in school, at least to finish high school, but I don’t know.”

As noted, friends were thought to have a significant impact. Having fragile and low self-esteem, it seems that these teenagers sought the comfortable friendship of young people in similar situations, creating a type of mutually reinforcing circle of underachievement and rebellion.

Lack of information about PSE options was thought to be an issue, but one, which was of secondary importance. Other factors, such as loathing school, were much more significant. Parents did feel, however, that their teen lacked the information and opportunities to discover their talents, interests and aptitudes. And that this, in turn, undermined their self-confidence.

Parents all agreed that the schools needed to place greater emphasis on assisting in thinking productively and realistically about the future. In particular, they thought it would have been very helpful to allow teenagers to discover their talents and aptitudes through, for example, questionnaires (e.g., personality inventory, etc.). They also felt that teenagers would benefit from knowing more about the labour market and more specifically, from linking their interests and talents to concrete employment opportunities. Having teenagers map-out PSE paths to potential careers was also thought to be an excellent idea. Parents said that they would be willing to participate in any way they could. They also pointed out that schools did not offer as much career information as they did in the past: “Guidance counsellors deal with behavioural issues.” “There is not systematic way for kids to see guidance counsellors. They have to make an appointment themselves, and there is a stigma attached to it.”

TORONTO

Students

Only one student in grade 12 participated.

Future Plans

The participant had a definite plan for his life following high school. He intended to take part in a 9-month volunteer exchange through Katimavik. He hoped that the volunteer exchange experience would help him decide on a direction for the future. The participant noted that this would give him the opportunity to try out different work, including event planning and building community housing, and help him find out what he likes. He mentioned that his sister's friend had done the same thing upon graduating high school and eventually became a coordinator for Katimavik.

When asked what he looked forward to, the participant said, "traveling around the country" and "just helping people out in small villages or towns". He said that he might end up taking part in Canada World Youth after the 9-month volunteer exchange. He did not mention having any worries. The participant noted that he would only be inclined to change his plan if he found a program that was perfectly suited to him— "For the moment I have no clue what that would be". He was unsure about both possible programs of study and future careers.

The Decision

The participant had come to the decision not to continue his studies gradually over time. While he originally thought of attending Humber College to take comedy writing or York to study Spanish, he began considering other options after he attended a school presentation about the Katimavik Program. It seemed to him like "a great opportunity" and he did not struggle to make his decision.

The participant noted that he did not think about PSE in grades 8 and 9. He was too young to take it seriously at that point. While he began really considering the possibility in grades 10 and 11, he decided against it because he was not sure exactly what he wanted to do. The participant noted, "Maybe eventually if I do find a field that I am interested in, I might do studies for that—but it seems like for now I am not going to."

The participant did not really feel as though his decision had been strongly influenced by others. His parents seemed to support his decision to partake in the Katimavik Program and were happy that he had a plan for his life after high school. He did, however, note that his mother was inclined to push him to pursue PSE because she herself has a degree from a PSE institution.

While the participant mentioned that his school guidance counsellor was very helpful in providing information to students and making time to speak to them about PSE options, it did still not effect his decision to partake in the Katimavik Program after high school.

The participant noted that he is happy about the decision he made. He saw friends stressing about getting good grades and getting accepted into programs of study and was relieved that he did not

have to go through that. The Katimavik Program seemed like a good option until he determined a long-term plan.

Factor and Obstacles

School

The participant expressed mixed feelings about school. While he stated, "I love learning", he felt that many of the courses did not appeal to his learning style. He noted that he had little interest in completing assignments, essays and tests. He tried to explain, "I just don't like things that have so many guidelines". He further noted, "I have ADD and took meds for a while and then stopped and took something else — I guess I use the ADD as a kind of excuse not to do work." The participant was not motivated by his high school courses. He did not consider himself to be a good student in the sense that he put so little time and effort into completing his course work.

The participant did not feel too stressed out by school, although he acknowledged that he should probably put more pressure on himself to succeed. He felt that he definitely took a different approach to school than his friends in the sense that he is "more easy going" about it. He felt that his parents are more supportive of him and do not seem to put much pressure on him to succeed, compared to the kind of pressure other students' parents put on them.

The grades received by the participant were somewhat of a barrier to continuing his studies, and he expressed some concern over getting accepted to a PSE program because he does not have the grades. He noted that he was in his "second year of grade 12" and said he failed some classes.

Program of Study

The participant indicated that there were clear streams at his school. He was personally in an academic "pre U" program and thought it was the right program for him. He took courses in English, drama, humanities and some sciences. It is interesting to note that he felt that being in an academic program has not influenced his decision not to pursue PSE.

Finances

The participant suggested that finances did not play a major role in his decision not to continue his studies after high school. He noted that his parents had set money aside for him to pursue PSE if he decided to do so. While he did not know exactly how much had been put aside, he seemed fairly confident that it would be enough to cover a considerable proportion of his expenses. The participant suggested that the thought of taking out a student loan made him feel somewhat uncomfortable: "I don't like owing people money." That said, he said he would be inclined to take out a student loan if he decided to continue his studies and realized he needed the money. He said he would feel confident about going to his father to find out more about financing "he's really good at money stuff".

The participant said he did not typically discuss the subject of financing PSE when speaking to his friends. He did mention that he knew of one of his friends whose parents had been putting \$75.00 a week aside for him to go to PSE since he was born as part of a government fund and that all of this friend's expenses for PSE would be covered.

The participant was aware of bursaries being made available by the province for students who go to French schools and plan to continue their studies in French. He noted that they could receive approximately \$1000.00 for their studies. The participant was also aware of additional bursaries made available to francophone students living in certain regions, including Ajax, for PSE.

Friends

School and plans for education were sometimes discussed in the participant's group of friends. He had friends who were continuing their studies at university and college and seemed to enjoy what they were doing. These friends were honest with the participant about academic challenges they faced, such as the increased level of difficulty of courses, but seemed to communicate that putting in the extra work was worthwhile. Stories from friends pursuing PSE did not seem to encourage or inspire the participant to do the same.

The participant noted that seeing friends and classmates in high school stress over getting accepted to PSE programs also did not encourage or inspire him to take the same route. He stated, "I feel sorry for people who are stressing so much and I don't want to be in that position."

Parents

While his parents took interest in his academic performance and his mother was very involved in his education (i.e., speaking to teachers and helping him with his homework), the participant was not sure whether or not his parents expected him to go on to PSE. They seemed to leave the decision up to him and put money aside in case he decided to continue his studies after high school. He felt like his parents supported him and did not pressure him to make any particular decision.

PSE

The participant was generally clear on what PSE entails. He knew that it encompassed college, university and trade school. He also realized that there were different requirements for each. The participant mentioned that he took a "careers class" in high school, in which he had to look up different requirements pertaining to each option.

The participant was also aware that the PSE experience was different based on the option chosen to continue studies after high school. He noted that university courses were composed of lecture and discussion groups, while college classes were more "hands-on". He stated that a college education enabled students to become "technicians" or "assistants" (e.g., dental hygienists) whereas university education enabled them to become specialists (e.g., dentists or doctors).

While the participant was aware that higher marks were required to get into university programs, he did not exactly what the average mark was to get accepted into different programs of study. He said he would look this information up to clarify this.

Alternatives to PSE

Given that the participant had a firm plan to do volunteer work after high school, he was aware of some alternatives to PSE. Other options he had considered included traveling or working. He said that he might have considered traveling around Canada or working for his father's businesses (running a French book store) if he had not decided to partake in the volunteer exchange.

While he acknowledged that a PSE might increase pay rates for individuals joining the work force, he felt that it is not a necessary precursor to making a lot of money. He noted, "Some of the richest people in the world do not have a degree from a PSE institution, like Bill Gates who dropped out of Harvard." The participant did not seem to glamorize work life. He noted that working straight out of high school is best only if it's to pursue a particular dream or interest. His father was a good role model, having not continued his studies after high school and ending up owning his own business. The idea of entering the work force after high school and working a minimum wage job long-term, just for the sake of working, was not considered appealing.

Information

The participant was generally well informed on PSE options. As previously noted, he researched PSE options as part of a "careers class" he took in school. Through this class he was required to investigate the different options and look into specific programs and courses related to each. He also added that his school did a "good job" of sharing information related to PSE options with students.

The participant reiterated that his school guidance counsellor was very helpful in providing information (either print materials or verbally) to students and making time to speak with them about PSE. The guidance counsellor started visiting different classes at the beginning of grade 11 to broach the subject of PSE. This often included a general discussion of the different possible options, entry requirements for different schools and the costs of tuition and student living. The participant also noted that the school guidance counsellor offered information sessions for students to impart specific information about PSE (i.e., student loans and scholarships). According to the participant, students took interest in the information.

The participant noted that different colleges and universities visited his school and set up information booths in the lobby for students. A representative stood at the booth and answered specific questions and handed out brochures to students. He noted that this was especially helpful for students who knew they wanted to attend a particular college or university and had specific questions in mind.

The participant had done some personal research about PSE. He looked online to find out about different programs of study being offered by Humber College and York University. He was interested in finding out about different courses being offered and to get a sense of the workload

for each. He also approached his school guidance counsellor about costs related to going to university and was given a sheet with information specific to York University, which he found helpful. The participant said he had visited some college and university campuses with friends who were interested in attending particular PSE institutions. Overall, the participant said he had no difficulty finding the information he was looking for.

The participant noted that his parents did not provide him with much information about PSE because they did not know very much about it. He said he would have liked to see more of an effort to inform parents about the process involved so that they can help their teenagers.

According to the participant timing is an important issue. Although he found the career class he took in grade 10 to be quite useful in terms of informing him about PSE options, he was of the opinion that this kind of course should be offered in later grades (e.g., grade 11 and the beginning of grade 12) to ensure that the information is fresh in the minds of students around the time that they begin making decisions about PSE. He did not believe that students would retain information they learn about PSE in grades 8, 9 and 10.

Parents

Five parents participated. Each had more than one teen, except in the case of one of the participants. Three of the teenagers in question were in grade 11 and two were in grade 12. Their ages ranged from 15 to 20 years. In three instances, parents had other teenagers who were in or had graduated from university.

One teen planned on going to university, but was contemplating taking a year off because he was concerned he was not “intellectually mature” enough. He had become discouraged in a recent visit to the university he wanted to attend: “He talked to professors, saw the buildings and the other older students and got intimidated.” The other four teenagers were still deciding about going to college, entering apprenticeship programs, and to a much lesser extent, going to university.

Three out of four had a learning disability and experienced similar situations surrounding the inadequacy of the public school system in meeting their special needs. In two cases parents said they had to pay out of their own pocket for tests, assessments and advice. All four teenagers were struggling with grades and suffered from an apparent lack of confidence.

With the exception of the teen bound for university, the other teenagers were still deciding what to do with their future. They had thought about the issue since about grade 9 and had become discouraged in more recent years. Grades appeared to be the main cause of uncertainty, along with a perception that one needs very high grades to go to university or even college. Participants agreed that there is a huge lack of information and guidance about non-university options.

Participants noted that parents have the most impact on their teen’s decision to continue their studies after high school. All expressed that they wanted their teenagers to obtain some form of PSE. Two were working hard to explore PSE options with their teenagers.

Friends and peers were said to impact decisions about PSE to a lesser extent. Participants noted that teachers and guidance counsellors do not seem to have the time to provide advice about PSE to poor or mediocre students, leading these students to close certain doors very early (e.g., putting teenagers in non-academic streams).

According to participants, the biggest barriers are poor grades and a lack of knowledge about non-university options. For some, the allure of working full-time and making money was also a big pull factor: "My son is clearing \$400.00 a week and living at home. He has lots of disposable income."

According to parents, teenagers tend to think about PSE in terms of careers and lifestyle. They do not appear to factor in their abilities, interests and aptitudes as much as they should. Someone who is creative, for example, with an aptitude for visual art and dance, but has poor grades in science, might dream of being a veterinarian because they like animals and because they view it as an ideal career. By grade 11 the student realizes that his/her grades are not good enough for university. Veterinary technician through college might be an option, as could other potential careers and paths to PSE, but the school does not have the time to explore these with the student. This student might have succeeded as a veterinary technician, or been a talented graphic artist in an advertising firm or a highly paid carpenter had proper support and advice been made available to them. Parents agreed that teenagers should learn more about their personal strengths and weaknesses and how to plot a PSE/career path based on these.

Parents were somewhat uncomfortable speaking about their teenagers' grades. In the case of most of their teenagers, grades were the main barrier to pursuing PSE and especially attending university. Parents were exploring non-university options with their teenagers, including enrolling later as mature students. There was a general sense that students need very high grades to get accepted into university.

Only one parent noted that their teen was enrolled in an academic stream. The others had been placed into "easier" programs based on their poor grades. Parents noted that non-academic streams are often recommended for students with learning disabilities because the school does not know how else to accommodate them. Parents felt that the school system is not equipped to determine why students might be getting low grades and how best to accommodate students with special needs.

Finances were not an issue for the parents. All were willing and able to pay for PSE in its entirety, or to pay for part of it. In the later case, parents wanted to make sure that their teenagers made a financial contribution towards their education in order to instil certain values in them. Parents agreed that while finances was not a barrier per se, they believed that their teenagers felt pressure not to fail in the pursuit of PSE because they did not want to "waste" their parents' money. There was agreement that the fear of disappointing parents and squandering their money could easily dissuade some teenagers from pursuing PSE, particularly university.

These parents were middle class people who valued an education and who were engaged in their teenagers' lives, including career and PSE-related issues. It was also apparent that while all wanted their teenagers to obtain a degree from a PSE institute, they appeared not to want to put pressure on their teenagers. They were also very open and encouraging about non-university

options, such as apprenticeship programs. Participants noted that they wanted their teenagers to be happy. It should be noted that 3 of 5 parents expressed some scepticism about the benefits of a university education, particularly in the arts and humanities: "What are you going to do with a BA in English?" All of the parents perceived the trades as a wise career option, noting shortages in key areas and high rates of pay.

Older siblings were seen as having a potentially large influence on decision-making related to PSE. In some cases the influence could be positive; providing the younger teen with some idea of what to roughly expect from PSE/university (e.g., degree of difficulty, social life, degree fulfillment/enjoyment, etc.): "His sister goes to U of T and she lives at home, so he has some idea of what it's like." Siblings could also be a source of pressure: "It was pretty much expected that he would follow in his brother's footsteps", as well as a source of discouragement: "His sister was always a high achiever. She had top marks. He's struggling. He gets down on himself."

Lack of information was also seen as a significant barrier along with poor grades. As noted earlier, parents felt that schools did not place enough emphasis on helping teenagers plan and make choices about careers and PSE. They explained how naïve and immature teenagers in high school can be, leading to unrealistic expectations about what the future will hold: "My kid wanted to be a race car driver last year. Now he wants to make cabinets." They also felt that the removal of grade 13 was a disservice to teenagers: "A lot of them just are not ready. They need that extra year."

Parents raised the idea of more formally and significantly incorporating career and PSE exploration into the curriculum. They felt that this would mitigate the fact that school counsellors and teachers do not seem to have the time or inclination to provide in-depth advice to students that do not excel academically. Such an emphasis would also help compensate for the likelihood that some parents might not have the knowledge or ability to assist their teenagers.

Parents pictured a credit course with the following elements:

- Allow teenagers to discover the talents and aptitudes and provide examples of how these can lead to fulfilling and rewarding careers.
- Similarly, expose teenagers to a broad range of careers to address the reality that teenagers have almost no knowledge of career possibilities beyond the most culturally popular ones (e.g., nurse, physician, accountant, lawyer, teacher, paramedic, social worker, etc.).
- Allow teenagers to gain an understanding of different career possibilities, including the opportunity of speaking with those in the career/site visits, educational requirements, supply and demand (i.e., prospects), pay and benefits, etc.
- Have teenagers identify paths to careers of interest to them, including PSE programs (e.g., schools, programs, required grades, duration, etc.), required certification/professional designations, the cost of PSE, and how all of this information relates to the streams and classes they are currently enrolled in and the grades they are obtaining.

Parents said that they would be happy to participate in such a course.

SASKATOON

Students

Seven youth participated in the Saskatoon group. Three were in grade 11 and the rest were in grade 12. It is interesting to note that two of those in grade 12 said it was their second year in the same grade.

Future Plans

Half did have definite plans for their life following high school. One planned to get into graphic arts or video games; one planned to work on oilrig or pipelines; one wanted to get a job in interior design; and, one was going to do a one-year exchange that would involve doing high school courses (with no consequences if poor grades were received). Three participants said they were unsure about their plans following high school. Two said they thought they might get jobs after high school, although they were not specifically sure what they wanted to do. Another participant was interested in pharmacy studies, but was not sure he had the grades to get into a PSE program.

Some participants said they looked forward to being done high school because they wanted to “start making money”, travel, try different jobs and meet new people. One noted that she looked forward to doing something of more personal interest. She said she was tired of “sitting in a room and listening to teachers talk.”

Two others were not looking forward to being done high school and having to work. One participant said she liked high school because she liked learning and liked her teachers. She noted, “its also nice because I don't have to work and I don't know who would hire me because I don't have any experience.” Another participant stated, “I have worked full time for the last three years and I definitely think working blows more than school.” He explained that he worked full time hours and also did high school full time. He noted that manual labour does not pay very well and is hard on one's body—“I would rather be sitting in a class room and learning for 6 hours.”

The majority could not think of anything that would alter their decision about their plans following high school. The participant who had planned to work on oilrigs noted that he would be inclined to do something else if injured on the job: “I would probably try to get a slacker job in an office.”

The Decision

It was most common for participants to make plans for their future in grades 11 and 12. Many suggested that they were not inclined to begin thinking about their futures any earlier because they felt there was little incentive to do so — “it just seemed like it was so far away.” For some, plans were made abruptly after they identified a particular area of interest. One participant only came to the realization that she wanted to travel to Japan only after taking a Japanese language course in grade 11, for instance. Three of the participants seemed to base their decision to work after high school on making money, as soon as the end of high school came into focus. On participant noted, “I made my decision two weeks ago when I found out that a friend of mine made \$75,000 after

working two weeks on oilrigs". In the case of these participants, the decision was based mostly on what they would do for money in the short term and how they can support themselves when they move out.

Only two participants said they made their decisions earlier than grades 11 and 12. For these participants, the decision was made gradually over time. They had identified their interests earlier on and began taking small steps towards what they wanted to do as soon as possible. For example, the participant who was interested in working in pharmaceuticals said he started focusing on specializing in the sciences around grade 10. The participant who was interested in graphic design began taking art courses in and outside of high school when she realized that this area was her passion.

Few participants felt that their decision had been strongly influenced by others. While a few noted that their parents had encouraged them to continue their studies after high school, they suggested that their parents did not push them to go in any particular direction and were more laissez faire about what they did. One participant said her parents used to encourage her to get into engineering when she was younger, because they recognized that she really liked science and technology. When she told them she was not interested in this path, she said that they "just laid off". Participants noted that their parents were supportive of their decisions regardless of what they decided to do, "They even suggested I take year off".

A minority of participants had spoken to their school guidance counsellor about their plans following high school. A few had approached the guidance counsellor on their own terms, whereas others were required to do so when selecting courses for senior grades. Meeting with the guidance counsellor typically took place around grade 10 and 11. In most instances, the guidance counsellor advised students what courses to take and provided some information on PSE options to consider after high school (e.g., brochures for different schools and website addresses for different schools). In one case, the guidance counsellor strongly encouraged students to take steps towards applying to PSE. Meetings with the guidance counsellors were viewed as being somewhat helpful in that some learned new information about PSE. Participants suggested that guidance counsellors seldom broached the subject of careers or entering the labour force.

A minority of participants said they had spoken to their friends about their plans for the future. These participants indicated that the conversation they had with friends had little impact on their decision. While participants generally noted that their friends were supportive of their decisions not to pursue PSE, one participant mentioned that she had a close friend who was disappointed that she did not plan to continue her studies after high school. "One of my friends is really smart and she's into good grades and stuff. She doesn't think that going off to another country is a good plan." The participant described conversations with this friend on the subject of PSE as being somewhat tense.

Participants did not find it difficult to make the decision they made about PSE. Once again, they tended not to view their plans following high school in terms of a major decision about PSE. Most thought of what they decided to do as a short-term plan.

Factors and Obstacles

School

Participants expressed mixed feelings about school. A few said they liked learning and though they had good teachers. A few others viewed it as a better option than having to go out and get a job. A majority tended to view it as a necessary obligation or a “burden” that seemed to prevent them from being able to go out and make money or get more involved in areas that interested them (e.g., drawing and interior design).

A few participants noted that they had received low grades at school. This was sometimes due to their lack of interest in the curriculum or teachers and other times because they experience difficulty in certain areas (e.g., math class). Most were not concerned with lower grades. Only the participant who was interested in a career in pharmaceuticals worried that his grades in certain math and science courses might prevent him from being accepted to a PSE program specializing in this area.

Program of Study

Some participants indicated that there were clear streams at their school. A few were aware of advanced, enriched, regular and modified programs of study. One participant noted that his school also offered an “H cap” program. He explained that it enables students who have completed all their compulsory credits (e.g., English and math), but are missing optional course credits, to do manual labour and get credits for it. “They take you on the job site and you do construction, helping to build houses and decks, and get your credits that way.”

Finances

Finances were not a major obstacle or deciding factor for participants. Two participants said their parents had set some money aside for them for PSE. Several others had not looked into the PSE costs and were fairly confident that they could just take out a student loan to help cover their expenses. It should be noted, however, that a few participants raised some concerns about increases in living costs in the province, tuition and student loans. In relation to increased living costs, it was noted, “Money is always a concern. My rent has gone up twice in the last three months.” Another participant who had looked into the cost of tuition and books for university stated, “I realized it would be about \$1000 a semester just for books.” While many realized that they could take out student loans to help pay for PSE, a couple of participants suggested, “you really have to be sure that this is what you want.” In other words, they felt that decisions about PSE should not be taken lightly.

Friends

As previously noted, a majority of participants suggested that school and plans for education did not come up as a frequent topic of discussion amongst their friends. Those who were aware of their friend’s plans implied that many of their friends intended to continue their studies after high

school (e.g., university, college or trade school). Only a few said their friends made plans to work immediately after high school. Most were not sure exactly where these friends planned to work.

PSE

Participants were largely aware of what PSE encompasses, describing it as “school after grade 12”. It is interesting to note that some tended to view it more in terms of university, whereas others viewed it more in terms of applied studies (e.g. Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology “SIAST”). For many, perceptions of PSE were tied to the kind of information they had received most. For example, those who had parents that spoke to them about university were more inclined to consider PSE in this particular light, whereas those who attended information sessions about applied study programs considered PSE more in terms of this kind of PSE institution.

It is interesting to note that a few participants expressed confusion over the requirements to enter different PSE institutions. While many understood the requirements for entering university, they were not sure exactly what was required for more technical or applied studies. Participants specifically wondered if grade 12 was necessary to get into SIAST, or whether it was just optional.

Alternatives to PSE

Many had thought more about alternatives to PSE than they had about PSE. As previously noted, they considered options mostly in terms of work and travel. Many looked forward to the independence of work and the prospects of making some money for self-support (e.g., to move out of their parents house). “You get about \$18.00 to \$25.00 an hour at the place I want to work.”

Most of those planning to enter the work force after high school did not seem to glamorize work life. They realized that only certain kinds of jobs would be made available to them without PSE and that it would be more difficult to find work in the areas that interest them most (e.g., pharmaceutical industry). Two participants were highly aware of the negative aspects of working in manual labour (e.g., prone to injury, difficult on body and often cannot be done for a very long time).

Information

Four of the seven participants indicated that they had obtained information on available programs of study at the PSE level. They had obtained information mostly from teachers and school guidance counsellors. This information included both pamphlets and word of mouth.

Two participants said they researched information on PSE options as part of a “career workout course” they opted to take in grades 10 and 11. The course required students to look into different career options and investigate different steps that can be taken to “get there.” Those who took this course found it helpful but acknowledged: “It’s not for everyone” and should not be made mandatory for students. There seemed to be a fear that this might turn some students off because they are not interested in investigating these possible avenues from the start.

A majority of participants said they had attended a presentation for SIAST around grade 11. The presentation was put on by representatives of SIAST and served to inform students of different programs they could register for at that particular PSE institution.

Most felt as though their parents were not well informed about PSE options and were not reliable sources on this front and not helpful with career decisions. A few participants thought it would be beneficial if their parents were more informed and involved in decisions about PSE. These participants said they would feel more comfortable approaching their parents about information on PSE than their friends or teachers. One participant thought it would be helpful if her parents were more knowledgeable about the different PSE options. "My mom doesn't know too much about it because she never finished high school and my dad only knows about SIAST." Another participant wished his parents knew more about student loans and could provide him information on this front. "I would want them to tell me more about what I would be getting into with that."

Some participants were of the impression that it would be useful to receive more information earlier on. One suggested that he was ready to receive information about PSE options in grade 9 and was thankful that his school guidance counsellor spoke to him about careers in the pharmaceutical industry. Others believed that while this kind of information might be helpful to some in grade 9, "People aren't as worried about what they do after high school because its still three years away." For this reason, these participants suggested that it might be more effective to begin sharing information about PSE with students around grade 10.

Parents

A total of seven parents participated. Most of the teenagers in question had just completed grade 11 and were going into their final year of high school. Two teenagers had recently graduated from high school. As in the other groups, these participants were very engaged.

All of the parents described their teenagers as "undecided" with respect to PSE. This indecision, however, related mainly to the type of PSE and field of study, rather than being undecided about whether or not to go. All of the parents felt that there was a fair to good chance that their teen would attend PSE, with most hoping that it would be university.

All of the parents said that they believed in PSE. For example, they felt that there was a strong connection between higher education and success in the labour market (e.g., higher income, more rewarding work, less physically demanding work). A number of the parents expressed regret at not pursuing PSE or at having dropped-out. They also said that they shared this regret with their teenagers: "I don't want my son to have the kind of job I have. It's just too hard physically." "I dropped out of university. I had to take care of a baby. I regret it and she knows how I feel." "We struggle. She's seen us struggle. I tell her that she needs to go to PSE." All of the parents said that they talked to their teenagers about PSE and the related issue of careers.

Three of the seven parents felt that there was a reasonable chance that their teen would go to university. One parent was certain that her teen was university-bound. One parent was fairly certain that his daughter would attend community college to learn computer graphics. One parent explained that apprenticeship made sense for her son and that he was thinking of joining the

armed forces. The last parent explained how his son is a musician playing in a band and that anything was a possibility there: "It depends on how the music thing goes. He might go to university and take music, or he might not go to PSE at all."

Parents describe their teenagers as considering their options, with three or four planning on taking a year off to work, travel, save money and "recover" from high school. Many parents felt that their teenagers were feeling "pressure" about making "the right choice" with respect to field of study, as well as the type of PSE they will attend.

The lure of obtaining a job and of moving out on one's own was described as a major barrier to PSE. Parents talked about the recent economic "boom" in the province and the positive impact it has had on employment opportunities, as well as on wages: "You can drive a truck for \$26.00 an hour right now." They also noted the influence that the longer-standing Alberta boom has had: "You can go next door too. There is so much work." Parents agreed that it wasn't just the lure of relatively high-paying jobs that was at play, but the fact that this was for many kids connected with independence. That is, moving out of their parent's home: "It's pretty powerful. They can get jobs, make money move out, have complete freedom. No more rules." These participants understood how their teenagers could be tempted to eschew PSE for a job and an apartment, but they also said that they explained to their teenagers the potential drawbacks of short-term thinking: "Booms don't last. You still need an education."

Saskatoon parents almost all felt that finances constituted a barrier to PSE for their teen. It is also important to note that despite this concern, parents did not have a very good grasp of PSE costs or of the CSLP program: "We haven't looked into that yet." A couple did mention, however, that one of their other teenagers had been denied a student loan because the household income was too high: "They said we make too much money. That's funny because we don't make a lot of money." Participants also felt that it was possible that their teen felt pressure not to "waste" their parents' money and/or accumulate a student loan if they failed to complete their program or were unable to find a decent job after graduation. Indeed, some parents felt that the fear of wasting money/incurring debt led teenagers to procrastinate: "I think that's part of it. I think that's why she wants to take a year off. She wants to think about it, she doesn't want to make the wrong choice."

Related to this last barrier was indecision. Seen as a key factor by many parents, it was also linked to a lack of motivation and self-confidence. Indecision with respect to PSE was also linked to indecision about careers. While almost all of the kids in question had a career in mind, parents said that their teen did not have a very in-depth, and/or in some cases, realistic view of potential careers: "We went to Drumheller last summer to see the dinosaurs. She wants to be an archaeologist, but she doesn't really know anything about it." They also expected their teenagers to change their minds about careers several times.

Lack of grades was seen as a barrier by half of the parents. All felt that their teen would graduate, however, and could likely enter college if their grades were insufficient for university. It is also important to note that parents did not appear to have knowledge of university entrance requirements.

Their teen's academic program (or stream) was not seen as a barrier. Except for one teen, all were in university eligible classes. Peers and social pressure was seen as a barrier by the parent of the teen who planned a career in music: "Yeah, if they start making it they won't want him to go off to school, that's for sure."

Unlike the other groups with parents, these participants expressed confidence that their teen was aware of their interests and talents, and in many cases, had been so for many years: "People have always told my daughter how good she is with kids. She knows that."

Views were mixed among parents concerning the level of support their teenagers received from the school system in helping them to make PSE and career-related choices. Most of the parents said that their teen had participated in a credit course, which, among other things, addressed careers and PSE. Some parents also felt that teachers provided fairly good support and encouragement to teenagers: "Teachers are a lot better than when I was in school. They'll take the time now." Parents were also divided about the extent to which their teen had a decent grasp of what PSE might be like. Among those who felt that their teen did, siblings in PSE were seen as a key positive influence, as were visits to a campus and exposure to representatives from various PSE institutions.

VANCOUVER

Students

Seven youth participated in the Vancouver focus groups. Two had recently completed 12 and five were in grade 11.

Future Plans

Almost all had definite plans for their future following high school. One planned to obtain her license as a hairdresser, work in a salon for a year and then become a flight stewardess; one wanted to become a professional lacrosse player; one wanted to become a life guard and a synchronized swimming coach; one wanted to work in retail; and, one wanted to become a professional tennis athlete. Only one participant was undecided about her future.

Participants said they were not sure if anything might change their decision about the future. As one participant noted, "you never really know until you get into it". Most were fairly confident about the plans they had set for the future. Interestingly, participants conceded that they did not feel ready to make any life long decisions at this stage of their lives.

The Decision

Several participants indicated that they had come to a decision not to continue gradually over time. Some had come to make this decision based on the where they saw their talents and abilities. The participant who planned to become a synchronized swimming coach realized she could do this job after attending a national level swimming competition and determining that she possessed all the

necessary skills to coach. Likewise, the participant who planned to become a hairdresser based her decision on the fact that she enjoys this kind of work and considers herself good at it.

A few had initially considered PSE as an option, but eventually changed their minds. One participant had a brother who got a business degree from a college and subsequently got a job in the field. She had considered taking the same route he did until she realized how many hours he was required to work and what little time he got to spend at home. Another was interested in a sports scholarship, but changed his mind when he tore his ACL and had to take time off to recoup and realized his grades were slipping because he did not have an outlet. Another participant was interested in the university experience when he was younger but later decided he did not have the grades to get accepted.

Some said they had not completely ruled out the possibility of pursuing their PSE studies at some point in the future, but needed more time to figure out exactly “what to take”. These participants wanted to consider all their options in order to make the “right decision”.

Participants indicated that school guidance counsellors had no input into their decision. In fact, when asked if they had ever consulted their school guidance counsellor, none had done so. Teachers also seemed to have limited input into their decisions, except for the participant who planned to become an airline stewardess. She noted, “My teacher knows people at Air Canada and said she would help me get a job”.

Family members seemed to have some input into the decisions made by participants. One participant noted that constant pressure from parents to get a university degree turned her off the idea. A few others, who said they were definitely pressured by their parents to pursue PSE, felt “stressed” about figuring out a long term plan and “nervous” about making the wrong decision. “My parents keep telling me ‘go to school and do something with your life’”. One said his father supported his decision to begin working right away after high school. He noted, “My dad thinks I shouldn’t finish school because I am not motivated enough by the courses I take—he told me just to work”.

Few participants felt that their decision had been strongly influenced by friends. Some friends felt they should continue their studies immediately after high school, whereas others seemed to support their decision to take another route. Their options were inconsequential.

Participants said they found the decision they made about life after high school very difficult to make. They expressed considerable concern over making the wrong decision and their ability to make one that they will successfully be able to see through. A participant explained that she found the decision difficult because of the “amount of career choices out there”. She noted that it is very difficult to narrow the list of choices down.

Factors and Obstacles

School

Participants tended to have very negative attitudes toward school. They spoke of their frustrations with the curriculum (e.g., classes being “too easy” and school being a “joke”), with the approaches to teaching (e.g., some teachers being “overly slack” and others deliberately trying to make the lives of their students difficult) and with poor learning conditions (e.g., “overcrowded class rooms”).

Participants also expressed their frustrations with province wide requirements for graduation. This specifically involves 180 hours of volunteer or work and physical activity. In many cases, it also involves developing a “student portfolio” to be orally presented to teachers. The portfolio focuses on their passions and plans for the future. Participants took issue with the fact that teachers did not seem to respect plans for the future that did not involve PSE. “You start speaking and tell them you aren’t going and they get looks on their faces like you’re already off to a bad start.” They also took issue with the fact that these requirements seemed to change from one year to the next, which often leaves students stumbling around at the last minute to make sure they have successfully completed each component.

Program of Study

Most students indicated that there were clear streams at their school, including advanced and applied programs. The majority were in advanced programs. Students were asked to select a particular stream in grade 10. Participants said they were happy with the streams they had selected and would not want to switch from one to the other.

Only one student noted that her school did not offer the option of different streams because it was very small. She said she might have been interested in taking more applied or technical courses if they were made available, but she was never given any choice in the matter.

Finances

Finances were not a major obstacle or decision-making factor for most. Two participants had previously been in accidents. One was going to receive a \$24,000 settlement when she turned 19 and another participant, who had already turned 19, had received a \$17,000 settlement. These participants said: “money is not an issue”.

Two other participants said their parents had set some money aside for them for PSE, should they decide to go. One was confident that the money saved would be enough to pay for tuition. The other figured that her studies would cost about \$60,000. While she acknowledged that the money her parents had saved would help her, she felt like she would also have to take out a student loan. She expressed some concern over having to pay back a student loan.

Other participants had given very little consideration to the cost of PSE and did not seem very concerned about paying back student loans. One remarked, "You have your whole life to pay back the student loans".

Friends

Some participants had friends who were currently pursuing PSE or friends that planned to continue their studies immediately after high school. Those currently pursuing PSE related positive messages to them. "My friend is in university studying to become a brain surgeon and loves it." Those who had friends who planned to continue their studies next fall said their friends were looking forward to the experience. These participants seemed unaffected by what their friends were doing. A few participants said they did not speak about PSE options with their friends.

Others indicated that they have friends who have chosen different paths. One participant spoke of a friend who became a published author at the age of 17. Another noted that many of his friends faced troubles with the law and some had even been in jail. Some of these friends opted to take culinary art studies during their incarceration.

Parents

Half of participants said their parents had continued their studies after high school and expected that they would do so as well. As previously noted, a few participants felt that their parents put too much pressure on them to pursue PSE. "My mom is flipping out because she wants me to go; she wants me to do good in life." Others felt like their parents merely encouraged them to go. "My dad wants me to go because he never went and he doesn't want me to make the same mistakes he did—he realizes that he can't force me to go though."

A few participants said their parents began speaking to them about PSE in grade 9. Initial conversations revolved mostly around areas of interest and possible career paths. Participants explained that when they reached grade 11 and grade 12, conversations with their parents were mostly about their decisions to attend PSE.

PSE

Participants had vague ideas of what PSE encompasses, describing it as either university or college. It is interesting to note that some participants tended to view PSE mostly in terms of university. When asked about PSE, these participants spoke about having the freedom to study what interests students most, professors who place the responsibility of learning on students and social life on campus (e.g., big keg parties).

One student who had difficulty distinguishing college from university asked, "What is the difference between college and university?" The other participants in the group were able to explain some of the basic difference between the two. They noted that there are different requirements for each and that degrees from each institution can lead to different kinds of jobs. "You might get higher paying jobs if you go to university." They also noted that the length of time spent in university tends to be longer than the length of time spent in college.

Alternatives to PSE

Participants were well aware of the alternatives to PSE. They discussed traveling, working and getting on the job training. There was a strong sense among them that they did not need PSE to "get ahead." They pointed to many examples of well paying jobs that did not require individuals to have PSE, including that of elevator operator and longshoreman. Participants stated, "There are sweet jobs out there" and "you just have to have the right connections."

When asked if they thought people who join the work force immediately out of high school are at an advantage or a disadvantage, most suggested that they are at an advantage. They suggested that these individuals do incur debt, gain working experience and end up making similar wages as their friends who graduate from college. One participant explained, "by the time they get out you already have a steady job, a house and no loan to pay back." These individuals were thought to have a "good head start".

Information

Four out of seven participants had obtained information on available programs of study at the PSE level. Most had obtained information online or from representatives of PSE institutions who had come to visit their school. This information was of limited interest to participants.

As previously noted, none had spoke with a school guidance counsellor about PSE options. Two participants noted that their schools did not have a school guidance counsellor. Others viewed their school guidance counsellors as "useless" and, for those with lower grades, unapproachable. One participant noted, "My school guidance counsellor just sits there all day and goes on face book."

A few participants noted that parents did some research on their behalf. Parents provided them with pamphlets for different school and print-ups of course descriptions and program information that might be of interest to them. One participant had a relative who worked for UBC come to his house and discuss the university with him. While some appreciated the efforts their parents went to, others felt as though their parents should let them look into PSE on their own. They did not want to be told what to do and did not want to hear about how much "potential" they have.

Participants felt that information about PSE is readily available and would not be all that difficult to find if they looked.

When asked when information on PSE should be disseminated to students, most agreed that it should be around grade 10. They felt that students were not sincerely interested in this kind of information at an earlier stage.

Parents

Six parents participated in the focus group. Most had more than one teen and most of the teenagers in question were in grade 11.

All of the parents were fairly confident that their teen would obtain some type PSE at some point in the future. Some parents believed that this might happen in two to three years after finishing high school (enrolling as a mature student).

Two of the six parents felt that their teen might have the required courses, and possibly the grades, to get into university immediately after high school. Others thought their teen would likely have the requirements to get accepted to community college.

Two out of six had a learning disability and had common experiences related to the inability of the public school system to meet their special needs. All but one of the teenagers struggled with grades and suffered from a lack of confidence and hope because of it.

With the exception of one parent, whose teen was apparently convinced that he would earn a living as a professional athlete, the other parents described their teenagers' outlook on careers and PSE in very similar terms. They noted that their teenagers are not forward looking or future-oriented, they "live for the moment". From this perspective, a month into the future is a long time. Two teenagers had jobs, with one working almost full time. This experience has allowed them to see that they can earn a living. One teen, however, has also concluded that she does not want to work in a low wage job for the rest of her working life: "She says 'Man, I don't want to be a 40-year old woman making \$8.00 an hour.'"

As noted, all but one of the teenagers had always struggled in school. From this perspective, the thought of finishing high school only to immediately jump into PSE, is unappealing. According to the parents, their kids wanted to do something different before going back for PSE. Two wanted to work full-time, while two others wanted to travel.

Parents noted that their teenagers are discouraged and lack hope. Aside from having struggled through school their entire lives, including with learning disabilities, parents thought that their teenagers are very cognizant of the extremely high achievers around them. More specifically, they described mainly Asian and Southeast Asian students who "Never get below 95%", and who "are constantly studying". In the eyes of the average and below average students, these achievers are the ones that are destined for university. The contrast between the two groups of students is multi-faceted and very large: "These kids have no balance in their lives." This leads some teenagers to conclude that they are clearly not university material, and perhaps not college material either. The second impact of the high number of extremely high achieving students in the Vancouver area has been to drive up university entry requirements: "BC universities have the highest requirements in the country. My eldest teen had to go to university in Ontario because he couldn't get in here."

With the exception of the teen likely bound for university, the other teenagers were still deciding what to do with their future. They had not thought about the issue very much and had become discouraged and a little overwhelmed by the challenge of getting through high school. It seems that the more challenges one faces, the least likely they may be to try to chart a path for the future. Basically, the teenagers are procrastinating while making the best of their current situation (e.g., living at home, working part-time, having a bit of money, partying with friends, meeting boyfriends and girlfriends). "Thinking about the future is depressing, so they don't, even though there are likely some viable PSE-related avenues out there for them."

Five of the six teenagers were in peer groups (i.e., best friends) that were in very similar situation with respect to outlook and grades. That is, struggling with school, thinking short-term, lacking confidence and discouraged about their future: "I think that a lot of kids have no hope. They think, what's the point of thinking of careers and things like that when they know they don't have the grades to get there."

Parents appeared to be at least moderately involved in trying to help their teenagers make wise choices about their future and exploring options. It was also apparent though that they were also simply trying to maintain a decent overall relationship with their teen. In this sense, they appeared not to want to place too much pressure on them to pursue PSE right away: "I don't talk to Tila much right now. We've had some difficulties. She's living with another family now."

As noted, and consistent with Toronto, the biggest barriers are poor grades and a lack of knowledge about non-university options. For some, the allure of working full-time and making money is a pull factor: "She loves her job at McDonalds. She's an assistant manager now. She's done well. She might do that for a while."

As in Toronto, parents agreed that their teen, and teenagers in general, did not have a very good sense of how to channel their talents, aptitudes and interests into viable careers. Nor did they have a good grasp of how to take advantage of PSE to hone their talents. Parents agreed that teenagers should learn more about their personal strengths and weaknesses and how to plot a PSE and career path based on these.

Only one (and possibly two) of the teenagers in question was enrolled in an academic stream. The others were put into easier programs based on their poor grades (and in 2 cases a learning disability). Grades were the biggest barrier, along with finances.

Related to grades was the issue of the quality of teachers and teaching. Parents agreed that their teenagers obtained much higher grades when they "liked" or "got a long" with their teachers. In a couple of instances, parents spoke about how their teen managed to excel when properly motivated and helped by a teacher. Overall, parents felt that there was a strong link between teachers and their teenagers' grades.

Finances were a major issue for parents. Two were single mothers earning low incomes. One father categorically stated that he and his wife could not afford to pay for their teen's PSE. Another parent indicated that they could provide some help, but that student loans would be the main source of funding. Most of the parents were sceptical about taking out a student loan to pursue PSE (i.e., that the time and money involved in pursuing PSE might not result in a better job/career). It is also important to note that most of the parents were drawing on examples of student debt that are consistent with attending university away from home, even though they were sure that their teen would not be attending university. This suggests a lack of information about the cost of attending a local community college and of pursuing an apprenticeship.

One parent who expected her daughter to attend university noted that an older sibling was having a positive influence on their teen's decision-making: "He graduated from Western and has a great job."

Lack of information was seen as another big barrier. As noted earlier, parents felt that the schools did not place enough emphasis on helping teenagers plan and make choices about careers and PSE. They also felt that their teenagers might not pay much attention to this information anyway, pointing out the ease with which one could access a range of information through the Internet: "There's lots of information out there. I don't think my son is very interested though."

The idea of more formally and significantly incorporating career and PSE exploration into the curriculum was very well received by parents. They felt that this was particularly important for teenagers who would not be attending university. The following elements were supported:

- Allow teenagers to discover the talents and aptitudes and provide examples of how these can lead to fulfilling and rewarding careers.
- Similarly, expose teenagers to a broad range of careers to address the reality that teenagers have almost no knowledge of career possibilities beyond the most culturally popular ones (e.g., nurse, physician, accountant, lawyer, teacher, paramedic, social worker, etc.).
- Allow teenagers to gain an understanding of different career possibilities, including the opportunity of speaking with those in the career/site visits, educational requirements, supply and demand (i.e., prospects), pay and benefits, etc.
- Have teenagers identify paths to careers of interest to them, including PSE programs (e.g., schools, programs, required grades, duration, etc.), required certification/professional designations, the cost of PSE, and how all of this information relates to the streams and classes they are currently enrolled in and the grades they are obtaining.

