



Education

A tool to help children and adults think about careers

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, February 28, 2010



Long ago, my little twins dawdled suspiciously when my husband and I tried to pick them up from a nursery. When the other kids were gone, our boys pulled a certain book out of hiding and announced that we would be taking it home. No, my husband explained, but we'd go buy another copy. The kids were adamant: we were taking that book, right then, period.

With silly, little-kid images, "Richard Scarry's What Do People Do All Day" showed lots of grown-up jobs, airline pilots, farmers, shop keepers. It had no story of any kind, but became a reading sensation in our house because of the juicy conversation it provoked. Who had these jobs described by the book? What did the parents of the twins' friends do for a living? How do you get rich? Why would that job need you to stay so long in school? The book, eventually dog-eared and tape-ridden, helped us paint a landscape of the world of work waiting for them when they grew up.

But by the time the kids were in middle school, they were no longer riveted by parental wisdom, and school had nothing about careers for them. Why not harness adolescent narcissism to make adult work relevant? It's not hard. Ask: What are you good at? What do you want to do for work? Why does math matter? I'm convinced that asking those questions might have kept a couple of my kids more on track.

And that was back in the late 1990s, when the "school-to-career revolution" was in full swing. Some high schools were busy organizing job shadowing, summer internships and relationships with industry partners. Teachers trained to make their curricula relevant to the real world. I still marvel that this revolution was only for kids in high school, when it seemed late to start thinking about the future.

In regular schools (not vocational schools), the "revolution" lasted into the mid-2000s and then fizzled as if positioning the kids for a productive adulthood was yet another useless education fad. In the end, most school-to-work efforts were surprisingly ineffective at talking kids into the appeal of careers in science and technology, or just getting more of them onto promising paths. Worse, most career initiatives were add-ons, extra burdens on teachers with too much on their plates already, jammed into a school day that is too short.

The high-school dropout rate remained fairly steady, at just under a third of the kids.

As the "revolution" fizzled in the mid-2000s, the Governor's PK-16 Council became alarmed about Rhode

Island's struggles with work force development. That council, of representatives from early-childhood education through college and adult work force development, asked the Rhode Island Higher Education Assistance Authority (RIHEA) to see if modern technology could help with the job of connecting students to information about careers, colleges and financial assistance. RIHEA was created specifically to help Rhode Islanders connect with the financial assistance for college or training.

And thus was born WayToGoRI (W2G). Check it out: www.waytogori.org. Log on. Create an account. Get your kid to create one. Everything on it — surveys, resumé builder, searchable financial-assistance bank — is free.

It's Rhode Island's own "what people do all day," in a slick, vast, searchable online tool.

The site has portals for students in elementary, middle, high school or college. There's a portal for parents. Perhaps you yourself are an adult looking for a new career. Each portal has similar materials, but geared to the age group.

So, for example, users can take surveys to help them figure out what they are interested in, what sort of people they might like to work with, what working conditions are important. The site graphs the results and saves them for you, so you can look back at your answer from six months ago. Those surveys alone would have lured my middle-schoolers into exploring the world of work through their consuming interest in themselves.

Search for careers. Plug in forester, surgeon or hairdresser. W2G tells you how much schooling you need for each career, expectable wages, and what other, similar careers might be available. If you find something interesting, W2G shows you colleges and programs that can train you. And then, at your fingertips, saving hours of work, is a section on grants, fellowships and financial aid.

The site navigation is a snap. So less than three years since its launch, employment offices are using it, as are private, public and parochial schools.

The point is that most kids only know of the careers that are right in front of them. Dad's an electrician; Mom's a teacher. Oh, and TV shows us that ER doctors are gorgeous and some policemen drive Maseratis, which is not helpful. Kids can no longer roam their small town and observe the butcher, the baker and candle-stick maker. Who knew actuaries make so much money and have such high job satisfaction? And what on earth is an actuary anyway?

WaytogoRI opens up a whole world of jobs few even know exist. My husband and I barely scratched the surface.

Next week, we'll talk to eighth graders and see how W2G works in a school setting.

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