



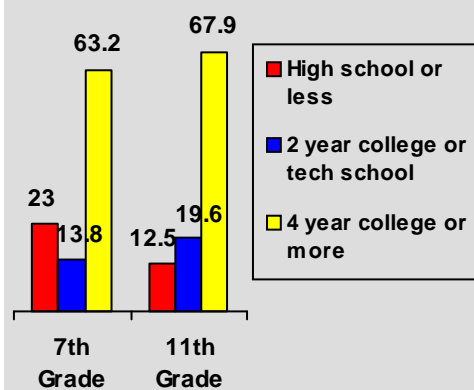
## EDUCATOR FACT SHEET THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOLS IN EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Summer 2006

### What Are Rural Pennsylvania Students' Educational Aspirations?

Whether or not to attend college is an important decision for Pennsylvania youth. During the 2004/2005 school year 1,536 7th and 11th grade students participated in the Penn State's Rural Youth Education (RYE) Study. As shown in figure 1, approximately two-thirds of both 7th and 11th grade students aspire to go to a four year college. Just under twenty percent of 11th grades students report wanting to attend a 2 year college or technical school after high school, and even fewer 7th grade students (13.8%) aspire to finishing their education at this level. Nearly one

Figure 1. Percent of students reporting these educational goals



fourth of the 7th grade students aspire to only a high school education or less, compared to 12.5% of 11th grade students who have these low aspirations. The difference in educational aspirations between 7th and 11th grade could be that these younger students are unsure of the educational requirements needed to match their career interests. By 11th grade, students have had more career exploration opportunities

These student aspirations are good news! For young adults to be competitive in today's work environment, education or technical training beyond high school are often necessary. The RYE study finds that who students talk to about their career and educational goals is important. Following is more information on those to whom students talk about their futures.

#### Career Aspirations 7th Grade

◆ 67% of the students in the study aspire to professional or managerial careers

#### 11TH GRADE

◆ 60% of the students in the study aspire to professional or managerial careers

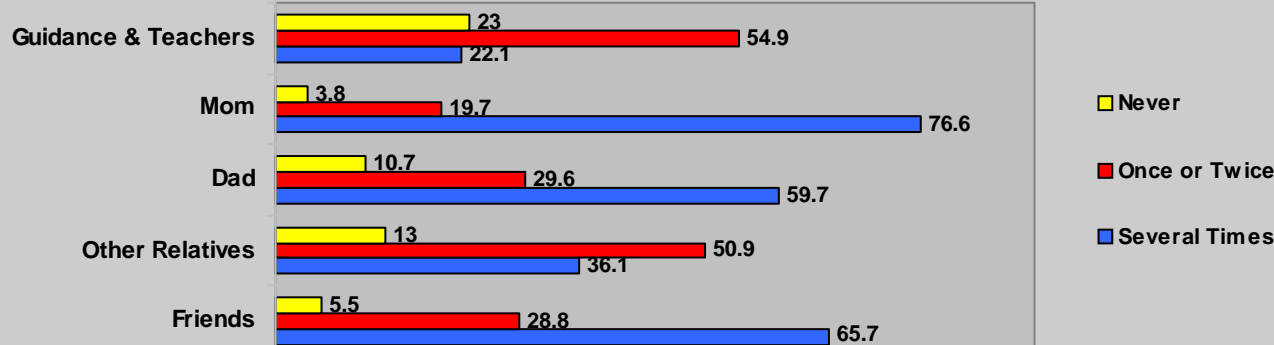
These career aspirations will require students obtain more than a high school diploma.



### Who Do Students Talk to About Their Educational and Career Goals?

How students develop their career and educational goals is complex. Especially for rural adolescents, making decisions around career choices, education that supports those choices, and where they will be able to live in order to fulfill their aspirations can be difficult. In making these decisions, adolescents need support and advice of the many individuals who play significant roles in their lives. The RYE Survey asked how frequently students talked to their guidance counselors, parents, relatives and peers about their career and education goals. Figure 2 describes these results, and the following page is a discussion of these roles.

Figure 2. Percentage of 11th grade students who talk to others about their educational and career goals a certain number of times.



## Who Youth Talk To Continued.....

The influence of significant others in adolescent development is well known. The role of helping students unravel their confusion and ease the conflict they might be having over their developing goals is a shared responsibility. The amount of time students spend talking with others about their educational and career goals is associated with educational aspirations. The more time spent discussing educational and career goals, the more likely students are to aspire to higher education.



Parents are perhaps the single most important socializing force influencing the developing aspirations of their child. As the RYE Study shows, students do talk to their parents often about their goals. Adolescents turn to their parents for advice and support, and seek their approval for ideas they may be considering. However, parents may not have access to information that may be needed to give appropriate advice. They may also be unaware that their own misconceptions about career choices, job markets and the education needed to pursue a career might influence their child from following an educational or career path that might actually be beneficial to their child.

Most students in the RYE Study also reported talking to their peers on several occasions. An important phase of adolescent development is bonding with peers and turning to peers for approval. Because youth see their peers as not only a social resource, but a resource that supports their developing goals, discussion of educational and career aspirations with peers can have a positive influence. This is true especially when these peers hold high aspirations themselves and do not participate in delinquent and antisocial behaviors.

**Guidance counselors and teachers also play an important role in educational aspirations.** Most RYE students reported talking to their teachers or guidance counselors once or twice by a greater percentage than several times or never. This is not unreasonable since it may be unrealistic, considering the number of students, for teachers and guidance counselors to have individual contact several times with each student to discuss career and educational goals. The information that students receive from their teachers and guidance counselors often is more indirect occurring implicitly through the curriculum, during assemblies or through other forms of outreach. This indirect information is also important!

## Helping Students and Parents

- **Know what your community has to offer and share this with parents and students**—Middle school and high school years are a time when students are forming perceptions of their community as a good place to live, raise a family, get an education and a good job. Parents and students may not know or have misconceptions of current employment and educational opportunities within their local area, and assume that goals either can or cannot be achieved in their rural home areas. Providing students and parents with resources describing local career and educational opportunities can be a starting point for discussion about developing educational and career goals and where these goals can be achieved.
- **Promote discussion across generations**—This can be achieved by providing opportunity for interactive forums for young people and adults to discuss career and life planning issues together. Forums where adults talk to the student without the opportunity for open discussion may not be as effective as conducting round table forums where students are more free to bounce around ideas and ask questions about their educational and career goals. Larger groups can be intimidating for some students and they may not feel as free to share, so smaller group sizes might work better. Invite parents to the round table.
- **Encourage students to be active within their community and to take leadership roles**—A community resource identifying volunteer opportunities within the community can be developed and provided to parents and students. Many communities already have these lists. RYE research has identified that student involvement in community volunteer activities is related to higher educational goals and a desire to remain in their rural home area. Volunteering in the community and assuming leadership roles help youth develop decision making and goal setting skills. In addition, they learn about the

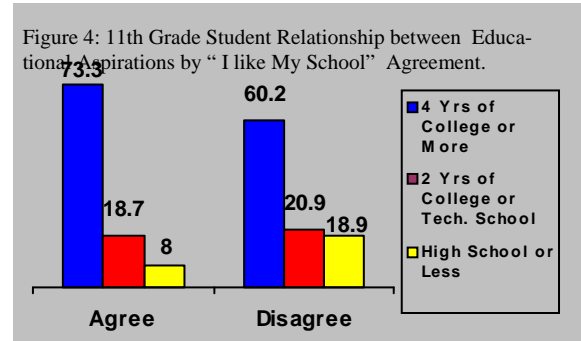
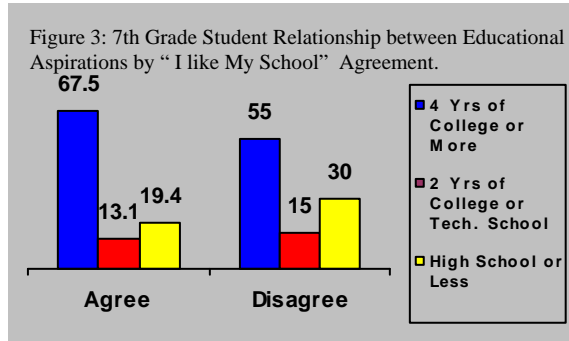
## How Important is School Environment?

Students spend more time in school than they do participating in any other activity and in many cases more than they do in their homes (during waking hours). It is no wonder then that the school environment plays an important role in youth well-being. It may be easy to overlook the importance of the overall school environment since a great deal of an educator's time and efforts are necessarily devoted to the academic needs of their students. However, a supportive learning environment not only contributes to students' general well being it also plays a role in their developing educational aspirations. Students in the RYE study were asked a number of questions relating to the school environment and the following page describes the relationship between different aspects of school environment and educational aspirations.

## School Environment Continued...

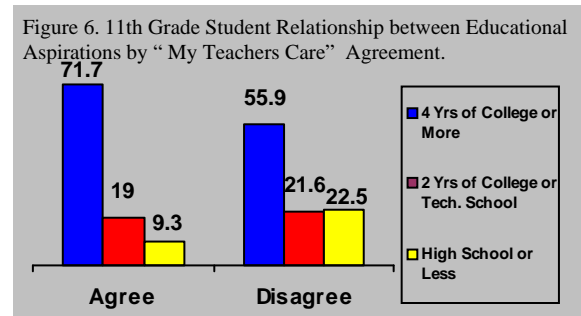
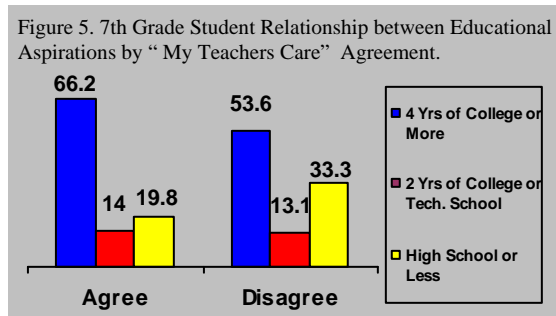
### Students That Like Their School...

Overall, about 66% of students in 7th grade who participated in the RYE Study responded yes when asked if they liked their school. Of the 7th grade students who said ‘I like my school’ 67.5% aspire to four years of college or more compared to those who said they did not like my school (55%). Fewer of the 7th grade students (19.4%) who said ‘I like my school’ aspire to high school or less compared to those who said they did not ‘like my school’ (30%). For those in 11th grade, about 60% overall said “I like my school’. Nearly three-fourths of students in 11th grade who say ‘I like school’ aspire to four years of college or more compared to 60.2% those who said they did not ‘like my school’. Figures 3 and 4 below describe these relationships.



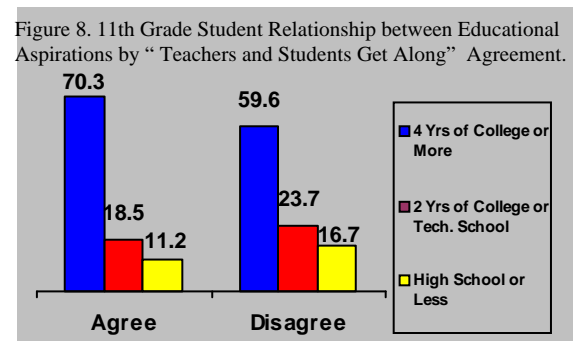
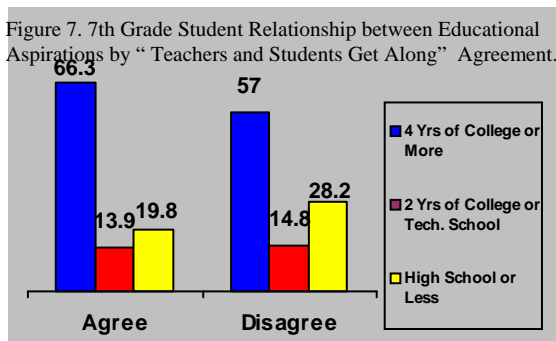
### My Teachers Care About Me...

More than three fourths of the 7th and 11th grade students overall agree that their teachers care about them. Administrators and teachers should be quite pleased with these results! Not only is this emotionally supporting to students, it also plays a role in their educational aspirations. When students agree that their teachers care about them they also express higher educational aspirations. Figures 5 and 6 describe these relationships.



### Teachers and Students Get Along...

In the 7th grade overall, about 66% of students agree that teachers and students get along, and 78% of 11th grade students agree. Although the middle school percentage may seem low, it’s important to remember that middle school is often a difficult transition for students, and their relationship with teachers takes on a different role than when they were in elementary school. The early middle school years are a time when students are learning to communicate and problem solve in more adult ways, and students having difficulty with this transition may be more likely to disagree that they get along with their teachers. However, it is important to recognize that for both grades getting along with teachers is related to higher educational aspirations. Figures 7 and 8 describe these relationships.



## School Environment Continued...

### Feeling Safe and Bullying...

Being bullied and feeling safe are two school environment issues that are of concern to everyone. Twenty percent of 7th grade students compared to 9% of 11th grade students agree with the statement that they get bullied by other students. When students responded to the statement "I feel safe at school" about 25% of both grades disagreed. Feeling safe and school bullying are closely related. When bullying is present, the level of safety felt by students goes down, whether or not they themselves are the victim. Any report of bullying and feeling unsafe should be taken seriously. Feeling unsafe can be a distraction to learning and can have negative impacts on emotional well-being. Following are some helpful resources on school safety and school bullying.



### School Safety and Bullying Resources

<http://www.safeyouth.org>

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/new/releases/bullies.cfm>

<http://www.sshs.samhsa.gov/initiative/resources.aspx>

<http://www.stopbullyingnow.com/>

<http://www.antibullying.net>

[http://www.stopbullyingnow.com/Brown\\_safe\\_schools.pdf](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com/Brown_safe_schools.pdf)

Evidence based prevention programs are often required by grantors who provide funds to schools. The following website is an excellent resource for exploring what evidence based program might work the best for your school. <http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/>

In addition, the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) puts out a call for applications for schools to apply for Safe School Healthy Students grant initiative funds. Although new applicants weren't accepted in 2006, this may be a potential future funding source, and there are specific awards to rural communities. The grant announcement website is <http://sshssamhsa.gov/apply/default.aspx>

### Other Factors Contributing to School Environment

Students were also asked if they thought discipline and rules were fair. Overall, 64% of 7th grade students and 52% of 11th grade students agreed. Another question asked of the students is if disruptive students get in the way of learning. Just over 65% of both 7th and 11th grade students agree with this statement. Only small differences in educational aspirations were associated with these school environment variables, but the direction of agreement and higher educational aspirations is the same as previous school environment factors.

### Rural Youth Education — Next Steps

The study is a longitudinal study following students over time. The original survey was administered to students in 7th and 11th grade during the 2004/2005 school year. These same students will participate in the RYE study again in the 2006/2007 school year. Following students over time will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to how youth develop and achieve their educational, career, and residential goals.

The researchers are grateful to the students, parents and schools for their support of the project. We look forward to providing additional fact sheets and information regarding the results from the RYE Study.

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More information about the RYE Study can be found at the following website:

<http://fipa.aers.psu.edu/RuralYouthEdProject.htm>

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