

**Career Readiness Strategies for Middle-Grade Students**

**Impact Initiative**

**Class of 2018-19**

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## **Introduction**

Today's employers expect entry-level employees to be self-aware about their skills and goals, in addition to being prepared academically. The Wilson Impact Initiative selected our white paper topic on the question "Is there a way to increase career readiness skills through career readiness strategies for middle school students?" While many employers offer career opportunities at the high school level, at this student age, it may be too late to ingrain these skills.

## **Background**

Local information:

12,718 Students are enrolled in Wilson County Schools

6 Middle Schools (4 are low performing) - low performing can be defined by test scores or number of students (usually 20 percent or more) that are not proficient in reading or mathematics for two or more years.

2 Charter Schools (1 low performing)

3 Private Schools

There are no current programs, to our knowledge, outside of the SPOT, SAY and Boys and Girls Club that offer enrichment and extended hours to middle school students.

There are some middle school activities or groups available as Youth Groups in many area churches. These activities are limited to 1 or 2 days. Social groups for middle school students lack variety and transportation is a major barrier.

General:

Discussions with local employers stated their hardest part of hiring people was the lack of soft skills (personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people). When those would-be workers are still in middle school they have very little idea about their future occupational paths. Except through informal discussions with people in their lives, students typically have not examined career-related choices. Thus many adolescents enter high school ill-equipped to select courses that would support choices they must eventually make. A student may, therefore, fail to enroll in the courses or join in the types of activities that would contribute to a successful and satisfying career. Middle school students are preadolescents and adolescents who are in a period of rapid change in their lives personally, socially, and academically. They are growing toward independence of thought and decision making. A Career Planning Program is consistent with the needs of this age (Benz, 1996).

Most published research has been "school" time focused. School time is a very small portion of a middle schooler's day. From our interviews, we gathered the need to implement mentoring, afterschool and summer programs to this age group.

Students in middle grades are making decisions that greatly affect their future educational and career paths. Many times students do not have the necessary information or assistance to help them make decisions that would engender success in their educational and career paths. For

students to be able to think about their career plans with any depth, they must have a foundation of career awareness and career exploration experiences. These experiences can help students realize what is required of them when interested in a certain career or career cluster and help them form realistic career plans. Implementation of a six-year plan of study, curriculum infusion, and job shadowing are just a few of the critical elements that need to take place in the career exploration phase. These elements, along with others found in a comprehensive career guidance program, can help assure students are cognizant of the many educational and career opportunities available to them and how to capitalize on these opportunities.

Waiting until high school to explore different careers is too late. Strategies used to help implement career exploration may include:

- Curriculum infusion/integration: including career clusters, National Career Development Guidelines, service learning, career classes
- Career counseling/information
- Assessment: including achievement and interest. Students at this age should complete some form of career assessment.
- Life skills/personal development: including decision-making skills, time management, study skills, etc.
- Work-based learning: including school-based enterprises, job shadowing, mentoring, etc. (Arrington, 2000)

A study of 291 middle school teachers revealed the potential of career education infusion into the core curriculum, with nominal but statistically significant differences in gender, subject matter, and socioeconomic status of the school (Arkos, et al 2011).

Many factors influence students when it comes to college and career decisions. These include parent education level, family socioeconomic status and financial resources, parents' educational expectations and support for the child, the child's values, abilities, and interests, academic achievement, peer influence, gender, the child's temperament and personality, career human agency, and perceived opportunities and barriers. Yet, it is important to note that, beyond all of these factors, the school environment can have a significant influence. Schools can provide information that students may be lacking when it comes to making career decisions. A lack of information about career options arises from one or more of the following challenges: (a) lack of knowledge of the steps involved in choosing a career, (b) lack of knowledge about oneself related to career (e.g., values, aptitudes, interests), (c) lack of information about career and postsecondary options, and (d) lack of knowledge about how to gain further information to assist in the process of decision making (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Patton & Creed, 2007; Johnson, 2000; Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005; Chen, 2006; Hijazi, Tatar, and Gati, 2004).

Theories of career development lend some understanding about how students might overcome these challenges. From an ecological perspective, career development occurs within critically embedded contexts that include family, peer group, and school (Young, 1983). Within these contexts, a student's career aspiration develops simultaneously with self-concept (Gottfredson, 1981) and may be associated with the development of personal identity (Erikson, 1963). Gottfredson explained the process of "circumscription," whereby children and adolescents tend

to seek and limit themselves to careers that are in line with their self-concepts and, as indicated by Young, with their perceived place in society and the contexts within which they live. Circumscription, which may occur as early as fifth grade (Auger, Blackhurst, & Wahl, 2005), is most noticeable when a discrepancy exists between a child's career aspiration (the career a person would like to have) and career expectancy (the career to which a person actually expects to have access). When this divergence occurs, students have a higher likelihood of college and career indecision (Patton & Creed, 2007), and this affects short- and long-term educational and career goals.

There are examples of successful after-school programs in areas such as Georgia (Popwell, 1991), Texas (Hebert, 1993), Toledo (Bergin et al., 1992), and New York City (Hatkoﬀ, 1994). One school district in Tennessee (Jones, 1995) was actually able to double the time that the schools were open without raising taxes through the use of judicious planning and resource management. In addition, many public libraries throughout the country have developed programs to serve so-called "latchkey children" during after-school hours (Dowd, 1995). In many of these programs, it takes a combination of school personnel, community volunteers, and neighborhood youth leaders working together to devise, develop, and maintain successful after-school programs. It was concluded that active involvement in some kind of structured neighborhood youth program was what separated promising from more fatalistic (McLaughlin and Irby, 1994). In the future, these programs, which offer a combination of academic, cultural, recreational, and life skill activities for students, can provide a welcoming, safe, and educational oasis in the barren desert of out of school hours.

From student responses of after-school programs, the survey revealed that the vast majority did not participate in after-school programs (77.2%) or lessons of any kind (86.5%). Students reported extensive time spent watching television or hanging out with friends. Weekends presented a similar pattern of unstructured social activity with even more television viewing and considerably less homework (Shann, 2001).

### **Problem Statement**

There are virtually no clear national-level expectations to integrate career education in the content curriculum. However, some states have addressed this concern. For example, Missouri has career education grade level expectations that are delineated within the school counseling comprehensive program guide (Gysbers, Stanley, Kosteck-Bunch, Magnuson, & Starr, 2008). There are limited after-school electives and summer programs for youth, that they willingly want to participate in. While some programs exist in Wilson, and we recognize great programs are working, we want to help expand opportunities to all middle school-aged students through electives, mentoring, and out of school programs.

## **Findings**

Our class discussed three possible ways middle school youth could be connected to career readiness all day, every day. Character building, career readiness, and soft skill enhancement need to happen all the time, just not while in school or in an after-school program.

We conducted a series of interviews.

Interviews:

Jeremy Jeffers (Power Plex, in Wilson, NC) stated that social media has a huge impact (some positive, most negative) on middle schoolers. “Middle schoolers no longer know how to interact and communicate with others.” He sees a big need for after school and summer programs for this age and mentoring strategies.

Principal J.T. Tribula (Forest Hills Middle School in Wilson, NC) shared the current mentoring program includes the Gentlemen’s Agreement (male only), Shine Girls with Wave Church: (20 year olds that meet with 10-15 girls in middle school to work on character education), and Beta Club (community service project with schools and is extremely involved and consistent). He would love to have an after school program that would provide tutoring and structured social time for middle schoolers, there is not currently one available to all middle schoolers free of charge. He is not aware of a summer program that is available to middle school ages that is free of charge. He believes that the summer is the prime time to build stronger relationships with these students. Some concerns he believes parents might have are summer vacations and transportation. He believes the biggest gap with middle schoolers that needs to be addressed is between the church and school. This is his biggest passion and he feels that short-term missions need to be focused on our local schools.

Principal Pope (Elm City Middle School in Elm City, NC) shared that in-school career readiness strategies include counting back change, basic customer service skills, greeting, professional dress versus casual dress, overall organizational skills, literacy and math skills, interviews, and how to fill out job applications. Schools could also provide electives such as computer programming, finance, and life skills. After school programs could promote physical fitness, social skills, homework help, tutoring for struggling students, and provide mentors while keeping them safe. Mentoring could be enhanced to create better confidence and self-esteem in middle school youth.

Based on the interview information we broke these ideas down into three “Pillars”. The pillars are mentorship, electives, and after/off school/summer programs.

## **Pillars**

### **Mentorship**

Definition:

A trusted counselor or guide, shares knowledge and life experiences.

Why is it Important?

- Molds youth in a positive way
- Opens eyes to cultural differences
- Conversations
- Positive role model in their life
- Gives youth life experiences
- Gives youth someone who believes in them and cares about them
- Key process in learning
- Exposure to things they wouldn't normally be exposed to

Problems that could arise

- Consistency: The mentor has to commit to at least a year and to see the youth a minimum of once a week
- Dependability: If a mentor does not live up to the program, it will not work and will make the student feel they were rejected. The youth who need this are the ones who have already been let down
- The leader of the mentor program will have to be ready to step in and be a mentor to that student if a volunteer fails
- Mentors cannot judge

Programs that Mentor include but are not limited to:

- YOUTH of Wilson
- Gentlemen's Agreement

Research:

Some of the benefits of mentoring young people are hearing the powerful stories of teens whose lives have been changed by a single, caring adult. Listening to those stories are everywhere, and many people are likely to have a story of a mentor from their youth. Mentoring has an impact on positive youth development. One of the largest mentoring studies ever conducted continues to support this thinking and links mentoring to a reduction in bullying. A five year study sponsored by Big Brothers Big Sisters Canada found that children with mentors were more confident and had fewer behavioral problems. Girls in the study were four times less likely to become bullies than those without a mentor and boys were two times less likely. In general, young people showed increased belief in their abilities to succeed in school and felt less anxiety related to peer pressure.

Mentoring is particularly beneficial to disadvantaged teens. A study conducted by North Carolina State University showed that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to attend college when they have a mentor, particularly a teacher.

A study of African American youth conducted by the University of Georgia showed how important mentors were to teens with hardships. For example, young people who had experienced discrimination, family stressors, and abuse were less likely to break the law or engage in substance abuse if they had a positive mentoring relationship. Again, their mentors provided the relational support to help them believe in their abilities and overcome difficult life challenges.

While many studies have focused on the effects of mentoring disadvantaged teens, they reap big developmental dividends from non-parent mentoring relationships during their high school years. Regardless of income level, the research showed that teens grow intellectually, interpersonally, and emotionally from supportive mentors. For example, most reported they were better planners, organizers, and problem-solvers, and they grew in self-confidence and self-awareness.

Non-parent mentors – teachers, clergy, and civic leaders – were highly instrumental in how these teens learned to believe in themselves and tackle challenging goals.

### **After School/Summer Programs/Off School**

Definition: Programs that occur after the end of the traditional school day or when class is not in session, i.e. summer.

Why is it Important?

- Molds youth and has a positive impact
- Positive and safe environment
- Team building activities
- Diverse backgrounds
- Brings in different focus areas (health, wellness, tutoring, mentoring, soft skills, character building)
- Helps demonstrate responsibility and what work looks like

Problems that could arise

- Youth not showing up consistently, could be by choice or lack of transportation

Programs that are currently in place or committed to Wilson include but not limited to:

- SPOT
- SAY
- Salvation Army Boys & Girls Club
- Healthcare Foundation of Wilson and YMCA after-school program (with Wilson Forward, Wilson County Schools, and City of Wilson)



### Research:

A survey was conducted by the Healthcare Foundation of Wilson with the support of Wilson Forward, Wilson County Schools, and Greenfield School to gather data directly from middle school aged students and parents in Wilson. (See Appendix) These tables indicate the need for middle school youth to have organized activities and their desire for career readiness to be part of that program. Career readiness was the fifth choice in what middle school students would like an after school program to offer.

According to a study conducted it was shown that after school programs played a critical role in the success of middle school students. Not only is academic achievement important, but so is social development and the prevention of risk behaviors. After school programs benefit the students “personal, social and academic life”. It also “improves school attendance and engagement in learning” and “improves test scores and grades” (Afterschoolalliance.org, 2008).

After school programs have the potential to impact a range of positive learning and development outcomes. This means that just because there is an after school program available, it does not mean that it is fully capitalizing on its capabilities. According to the article, three factors are essential:

- Access to and sustained participation in the program
- Quality programming and staffing
- Strong partnerships among the program and other places where students are learning, such as their schools, their homes, and other community institutions (Sedl.org, 2008).

One of the essential factors of a successful after school program is “access to and sustained participation in the program”. “There was a significant reciprocal association between consistent extracurricular activity participation and the development of interpersonal competence”. This means that it is important for students to get involved in the programs, but they must also maintain participation. (Cairns, Farmer, and Mahoney, 2003).

### **Electives**

#### Definition:

An elective course in school is one taken by choice rather than to fill a particular requirement, although students still receive credit for it. While all middle schools require the four core subjects of English, history, science and math, and a half year of physical education, most students are then allowed to choose from a menu of classes like band, orchestra, chorus, art, home economics, drama, and technology. Electives vary from each middle school.

#### Why is it Important?

- In school graded course
- Explores careers
- Communications enhancements (teamwork, job shadowing, industry/building field trips)
- Orients to the world of work

- Ability to apply for real-world work-related components to existing courses (BB&T App, Merck)

#### Problems that could arise

- Lack of teachers and/or high-quality staff
- Lose middle school teachers at a faster rate than other grade level schools

#### Programs that are in place or will be soon include but not limited to:

- Computer skills
- Business & Entrepreneur
- Family & Consumer Science
- Biotech & Agriculture
- Computer design – coding & programming (coming next year)
- STEM labs (coming next year)

#### Research:

Surveys of larger NC school systems showed the availability of career exploration electives, some of which are also available in Wilson County Schools.

#### Wake County Electives

- Career Competencies - Emphasis on career development is on the awareness and refinement of knowledge as it relates to the experience of simulated work tasks.
- NOICC - National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee - Develops career development competencies to help students discover abilities and interests and to begin to formulate educational and career plans.

#### Career Development Education in Wake County, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Wilson:

- Exploring Careers - Provides an orientation to the world of work. Emphasis is placed on self-awareness, understanding the world of work, and the career planning process. Based on the National Career Development Guidelines.

#### Skills learned in the course include:

- Communication
- Personal Management
- Teamwork
- English language arts are reinforced

#### Work-based learning strategies include:

- Business/Industry field trips
- Job Shadowing
- 1. Exploring Personal Characteristics & Careers  
Project-based instruction in self-awareness, understanding the world of work and the career planning process. Modules covered explore how career choices are influenced by interests, attitudes, values, personalities, learning styles, and skills.

2. Exploring Careers & Employment (9 weeks)

Modules covered to explore the world of work, employment success, and job search techniques.

Both of the above electives participate in Future Business Leaders of America competitive events, community service, and leadership activities. They also provide students the opportunity to apply essential standards and workplace readiness skills through authentic experiences. In the 2018-2019 school year, 410 Wilson County School students participated in those two electives.

### **Conclusion**

The Healthcare Foundation of Wilson has committed to a strategic initiative to provide an after school program for all middle schools. We support this effort and applaud the Healthcare Foundation of Wilson and the Wilson Family YMCA for this initiative. Part of this program will include activities in career readiness as shown by the need gathered in the surveys (see Appendix).

Wilson County Schools offer courses in career exploration similar to larger school systems. Middle school students still have a difficult time understanding what work looks like. Dr. Mills points out that middle schoolers are not exposed to employment opportunities partly because of staffing issues and there is less flexibility than ever because of funding. So, while these courses are offered, a lack of funding does not allow students to fully realize the benefits of such courses.

The crux of the problem is that it is very difficult to demonstrate to students what work is, particularly at the middle school level. These are important and formative years where a student can begin to shape a potential career path. However, it is a challenge to expose students at that age to a potential career or for them to understand what skills they need to eventually be successful employees. Parents can help reinforce that, but unfortunately, not all students have a strong home support system. Thus, we need to focus on the mentorship pillar so that students can see the advantages of “real work”. If the business/industry professionals are paired with students in a mentorship program, and that can be maintained, students will ultimately benefit from being continually exposed to the work environment.

From our research, we recommend Wilson consider summer programs to enhance middle school youth in career readiness. Our community is in desperate need to find responsible, qualified young adults to hire in the workplace. We feel the middle school age is the right time to start teaching them soft skills and character building, which will help lead them to be career ready. From a school perspective, there are things that can be done at the school which the school board is already looking into but there are also challenges. We have identified that we have a good variety of after school programs that are available now or soon will be.

We are young leaders that see the importance of helping youth grow and learn to be successful in life, but we need people like you. People that care about our youth, care about our community and want great job candidates in the future. We need people like you to help mold and shape these young children into young adults that will serve our community.

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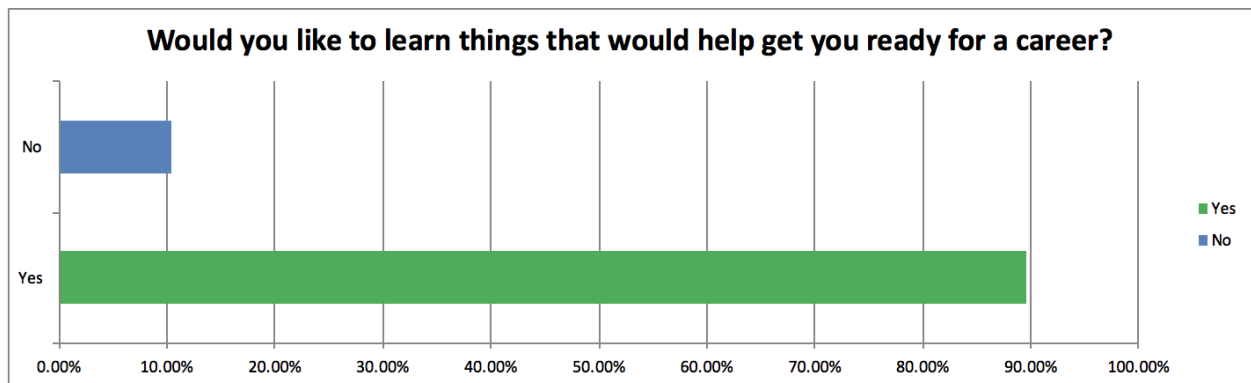
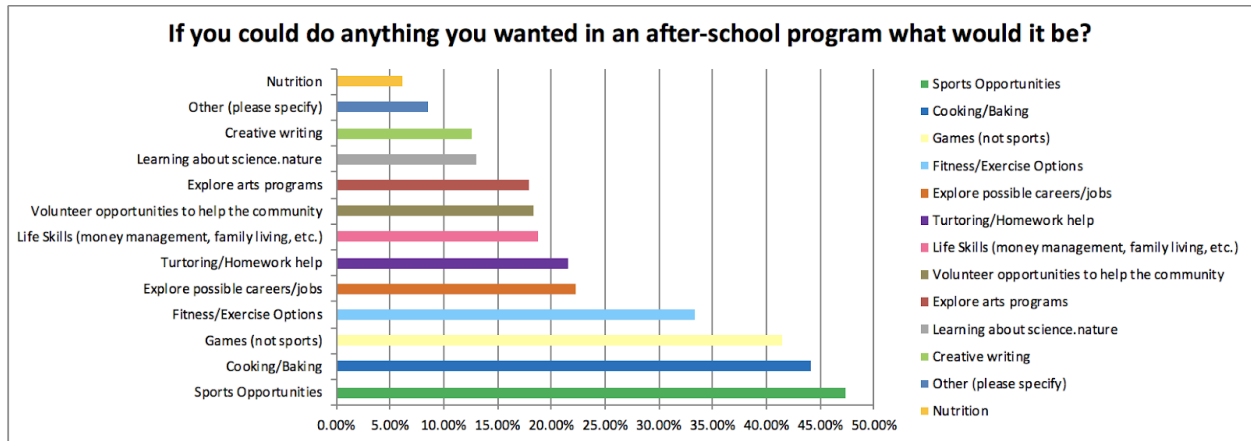
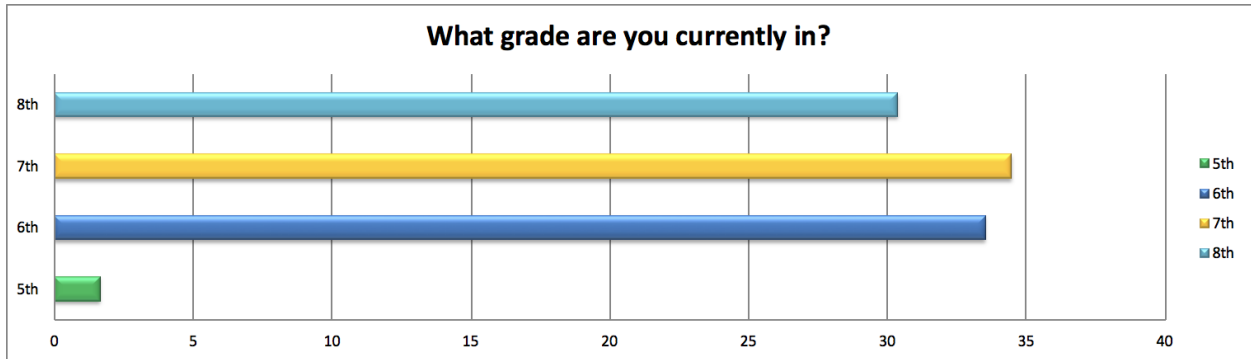
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## **Acknowledgments**

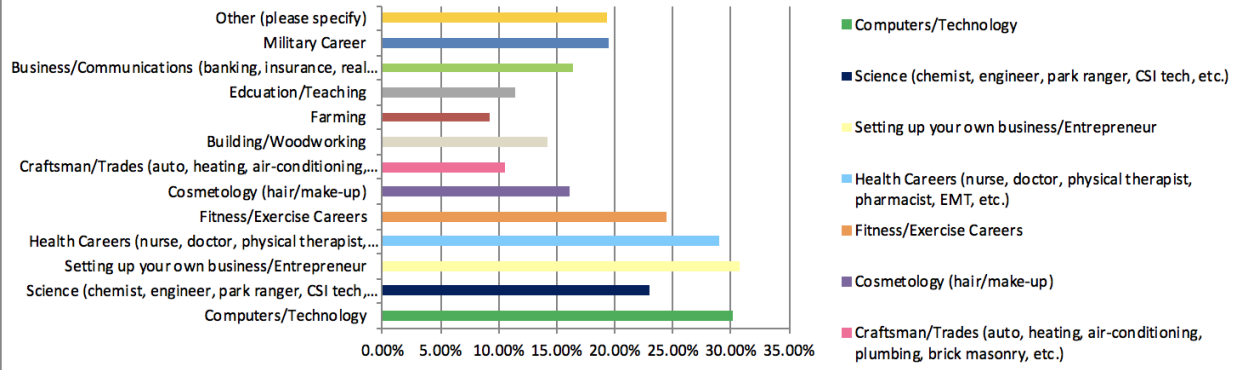
The members of the Impact Initiative wish to thank **Ryan Simons** of the Wilson Chamber of Commerce, **Paula Benson** of Wilson Forward, the Wilson Economic Development Council, and to our guest speakers for the guidance and encouragement provided throughout this project.

## Appendix

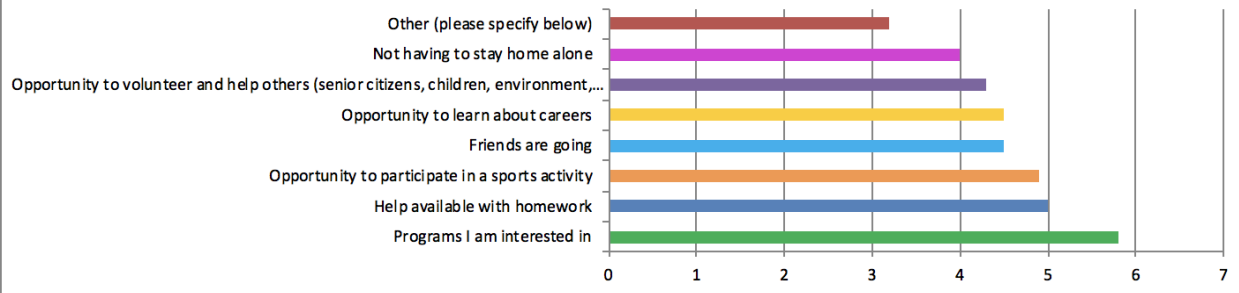
The following information and respective charts have been prepared and shared by the **Healthcare Foundation of Wilson** Out of School Time survey of middle school youth.



### Check the careers/jobs you would like to learn about (check all that apply)



### What would make you excited about participating in an after-school program? Rank in order of importance.



### If you wanted to participate in these activities, is there anything that would keep you from being able to participate?

