

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WHY AN HONORS STUDENT WANTS TO SKIP COLLEGE AND GO TO TRADE SCHOOL

As worries about student debt rise, states and businesses increasingly push faster, cheaper paths to the workplace; parents are stumped

By Douglas Belkin
March 5, 2018

Raelee Nicholson earns A's in her honors classes at a public high school south of Pittsburgh and scored in the 88th percentile on her college boards.

But instead of going to college, Ms. Nicholson hopes to attend a two-year technical program that will qualify her to work as a diesel mechanic. Her guidance counselor, two teachers and several other adults tell her she's making a mistake.

"My dentist told me to (work on cars) as a hobby, but she kept telling me with my potential I should really go to college," said Ms. Nicholson, a junior in at Charleroi Area High School in western Pennsylvania.

The friction around the best path forward after high school is popping up around the country as anxious students and families try to figure out how to pay for four years of college. At the same time, business groups and state governments make the case for a free or much cheaper vocational education.

The conversation is being fueled by questions about the declining value of a college degree as well as the rising cost of tuition and student debt. Low unemployment and a strong job market are exacerbating an already growing skills gap, raising prospects for tradespeople like welders who are in high demand.

Still, the decision to forgo a four-year degree runs counter to 30 years of conventional wisdom.

"Parents come from a generation where everyone was pushed to go to college and the tech schools were for the bad kids," said Dawn LeBlanc, principal of the North Montco Technical Career Center in Lansdale, Penn.,

In 2009, the last year for which data is available, 19 percent of high-school students were concentrating in vocational subjects, down from 24 percent in 1990.

Even as more students enroll in college, "40 percent to 50 percent of kids never get a college certificate or degree," said Tony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. And among those who do graduate, about one-third end up in jobs that don't require a four-year degree.

This has prompted a rethink about the value of colleges and is fueling a separation between the winners and losers in higher education.

These forces are leading to a course correction now rippling through U.S. high schools, which are beginning to re-emphasize vocational education, rebranded as career and technical education. Last year, 49 states enacted 241 policies to support it, according to the Association for Career and Technical Education, an advocacy group.

Pennsylvania is among the states trying to increase the number of students attending career and technical high schools.

"We've got to make sure we're sending the right signals and also preparing people for the world as it really is not as maybe we'd like it to be," said Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf.

Dr. Carnevale calls the movement a "counterrevolution." But he also believes it will remain a hard sell, particularly in affluent suburbs and for high-achieving students.

Kathleen Mallee and her husband are both professionals with college degrees in the well-heeled Philadelphia suburb of Collegeville—and they always figured their 14-year-old daughter would follow in their footsteps. But she has her heart set on a vocational school, where she wants to study cosmetology and computer science. Ms. Mallee frets that decision will be looked down upon by her neighbors, but she isn't confident a college degree will help their daughter get a decent job and could saddle her with debt.

"As soon as you say 'debt-free,' my husband is relieved," said Mrs. Mallee, "He just doesn't want her to incur a lot of debt and struggle. And I don't want her to study the wrong thing (in high school) and struggle."

The family has until April to decide.

Ms. Nicholson seemed destined for college at an early age.

"Raelee was smart from the time she was a baby, from the time she was two nobody could dress her, she was always a leader and she had her own mind," said Raelee's mother, Beth Nicholson, a nurse. "I always expected her to go to a four-year college. That was my expectation."

But when she was 14, Raelee rebuilt a car with her older cousin.

"We worked on it the entire summer and when we got it running it was the best feeling in the world," she said. "I really like working with my hands."

She doesn't listen to those trying to dissuade her from her passion. "Diesel mechanics charge \$80 an hour," she says.