

The formation of a career or vocational identity is a critical developmental task of childhood and adolescence [1]. The process begins during the primary school years or arguably even earlier [2]. It entails developing an understanding of one's values, attitudes and competencies; engaging in career exploration and planning; and establishing viable career goals [3]. The process intensifies during adolescence, as students strive to establish their sense of individuality and integrate personal goals and values [4]. While individuals play the most important role in the formation of their career identity, it is also influenced by parents, peers and school staff and the social and economic context of the local environment [5]. Some students have a strong sense of career identity when they graduate from secondary school, while others have only a general direction. Many students find this period stressful, especially if they feel they must settle on a career direction prior to graduation. The role of parents and schools is to support students in their career exploration and planning. This includes helping them set high but realistic expectations, helping them overcome perceived obstacles, and ensuring they know where and how to find pertinent information about further education, training and employment.

Key Findings from the Research

- Most students begin proactively engaging in career exploration and planning during the latter stages of secondary school. This process goes hand-in-hand with the development of their personal identity as they understand their interests and values, gain confidence in their abilities and take responsibility for their decisions [5]. By the end of secondary school, about 20% of students have made a stable career choice. The majority of youth do not settle on a career path until age 25 [6].
- A small percentage of students commit to a career path in elementary school or during the early stages of secondary school, without engaging in the career exploration and planning process. Quite often, their choices are influenced by the expectations of parents and other role models. Students who make commitments without much exploration often do not establish a true sense of their career identity [1].
- The age at which youth establish a career identity is related to gender and influenced by parental expectations, socioeconomic status and geographical location [1][6][7].
- Schools can play a key role in helping students develop their career identity. The process entails providing them with opportunities to understand and appreciate their personal strengths and values, engage in job and career exploration, learn where to obtain information about jobs and careers, and develop the skills required to apply for jobs or post-secondary programs [8].

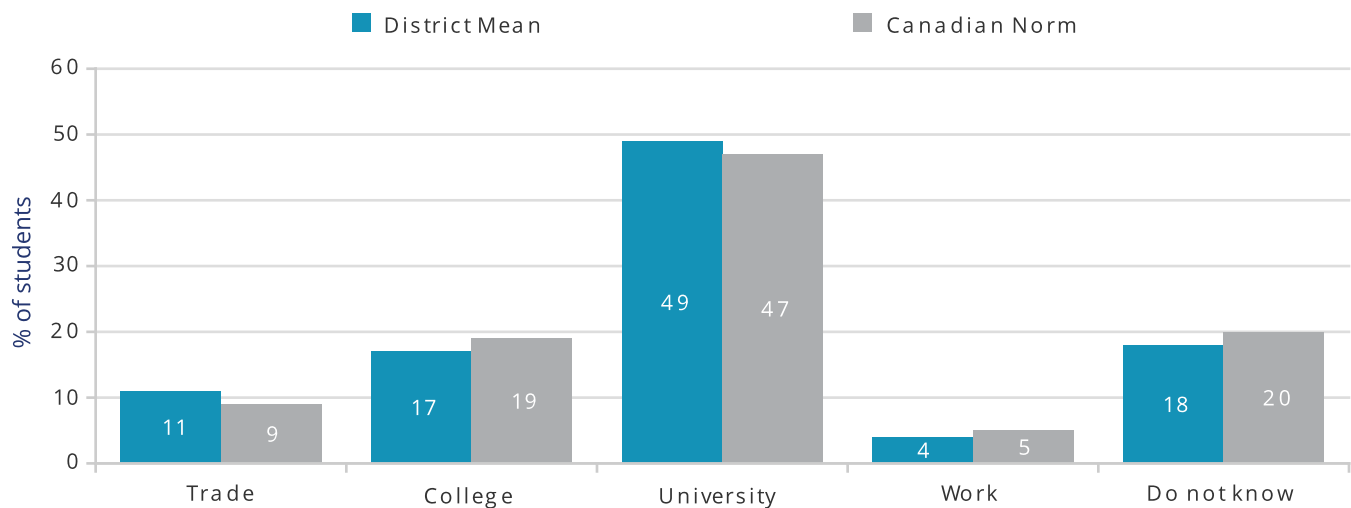
The OurSCHOOL student survey includes several questions about the formation of students' career identity. Students are asked about their plans immediately after graduating from high school, whether they know the type of job or career they want to pursue, and the extent to which they are engaged in career exploration and planning. Students are also asked about their knowledge of personal strengths and values, the factors they consider to be obstacles in achieving their goals and the availability and use of school resources.

In Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190), 3,518 students from 31 schools completed the OurSCHOOL survey between 06 May 2025 and 30 May 2025, which included a module on the career pathways of students. This report summarizes the results.

Aspirations and Career Identity

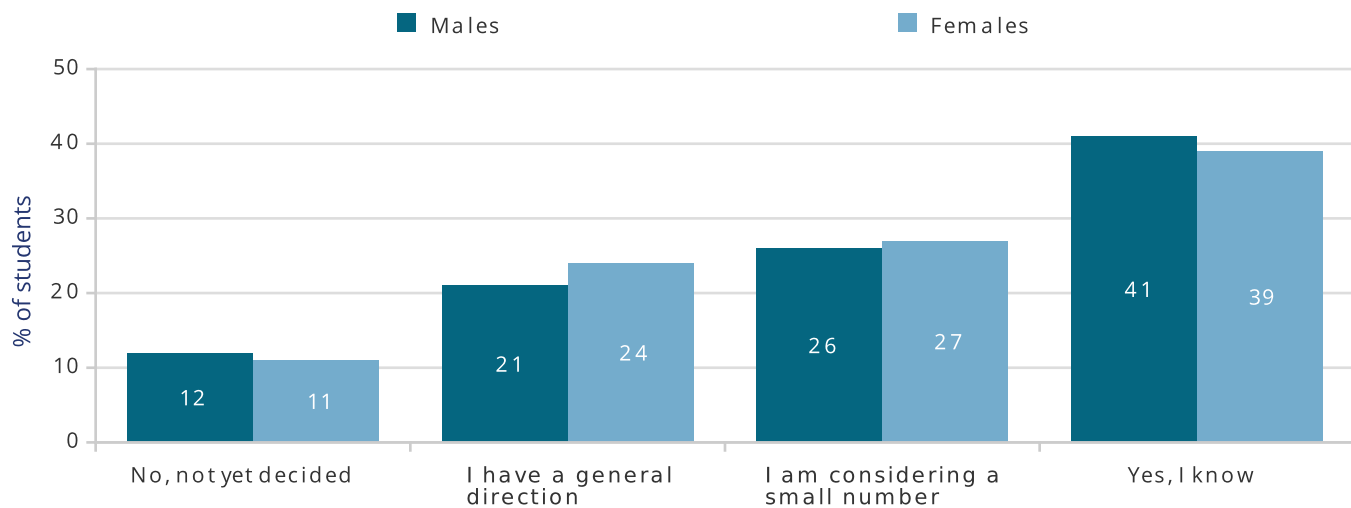
For most students, the first step in establishing a career identity is deciding whether they want to enter the work force after high school or pursue some form of post-secondary training. The post-secondary plans for students in Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190) are shown in Figure 1. The results are shown alongside the national norm.

Figure 1: Students' post-secondary plans



Students were asked whether they know the kind of job or career they want to pursue after they graduate from high school. In Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190), 39% were committed to a particular career path, while a further 49% were either considering a small number of jobs or careers or knew the general direction they were heading. Figure 2 shows the results for Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190) broken down by males and females.

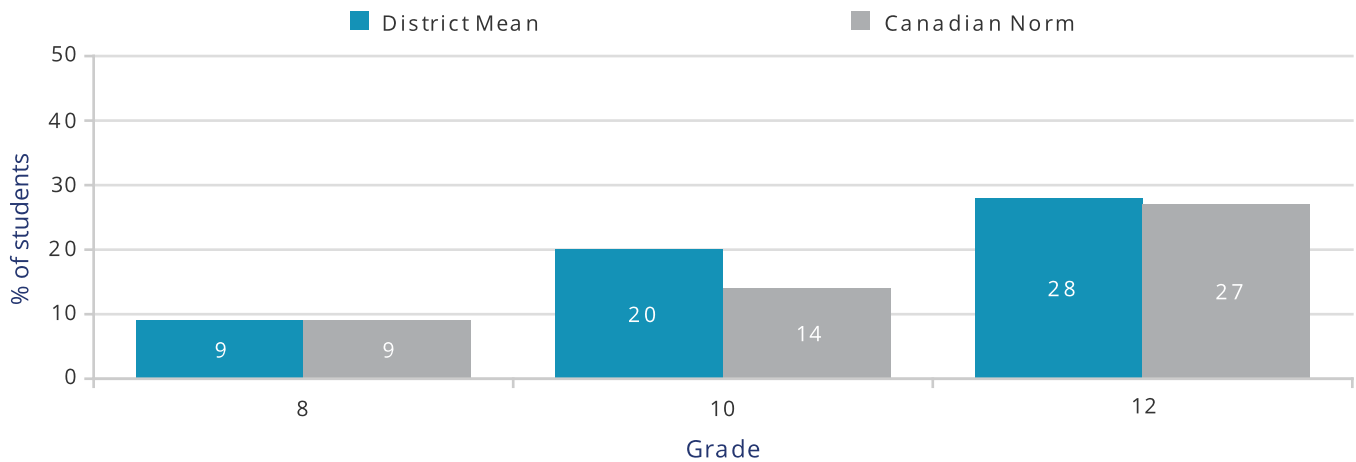
Figure 2: Students know what job or career they want to pursue after graduation



Career Exploration and Planning

Students were asked a set of questions about how often they talked with their family, friends, or a teacher or guidance counsellor about the jobs or careers that might fit with their interests or values. The percentage of students for Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190) who are engaging in career exploration at least once a month are shown in Figure 3, broken down by grade. The results are shown alongside the national norm.

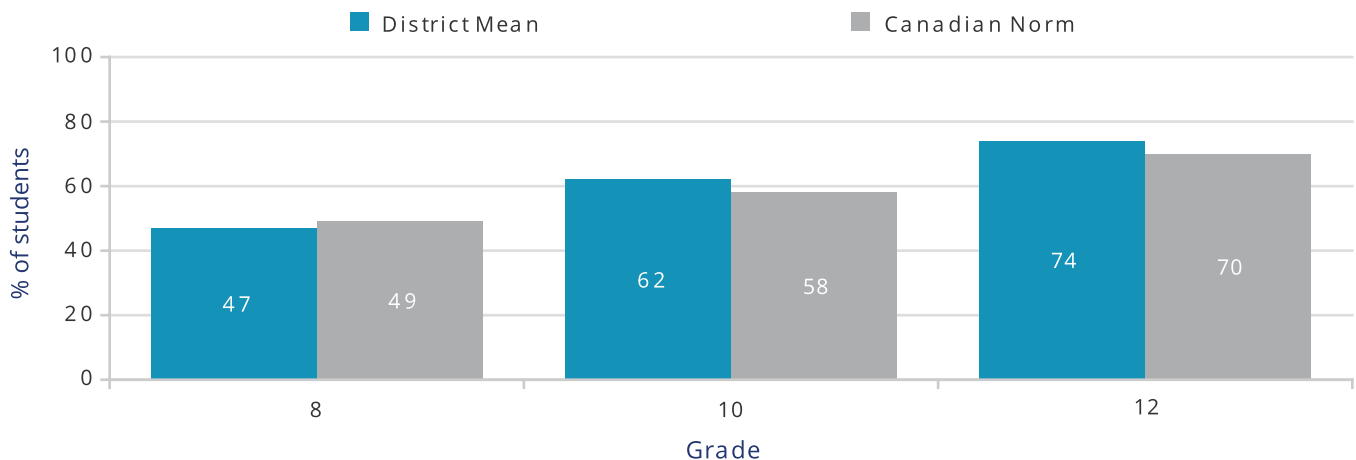
Figure 3: Frequency of career exploration and planning



Students' Knowledge about the World of Work

Students were asked eight questions about their knowledge of the jobs or careers that interest them. The percentage of students for Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190) are shown in Figure 4, broken down by grade. The results are shown alongside the national norm.

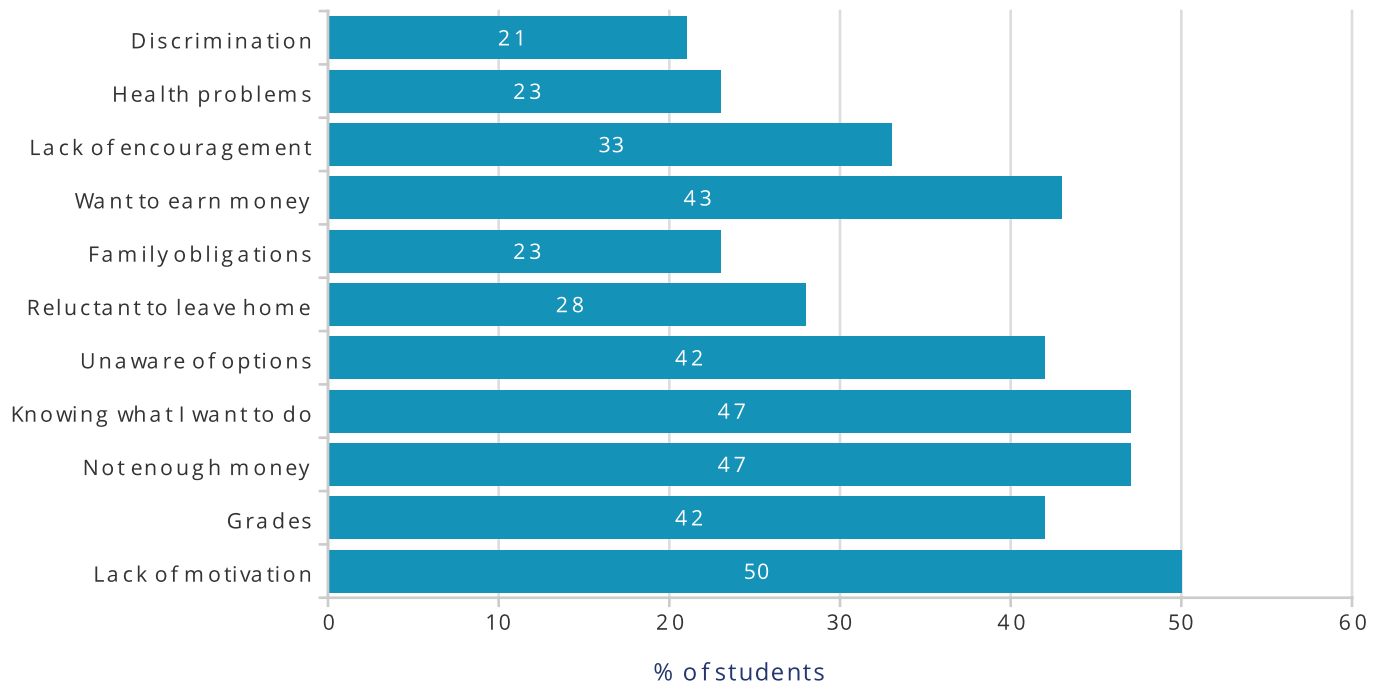
Figure 4: Students' career knowledge



Perceived Obstacles

Many students feel that one or more factors will prevent them from reaching their job or career goals. Figure 5 shows the percentage of students in Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190) that reported each potential obstacle.

Figure 5: Obstacles preventing students from reaching their job or career goals



What Schools Can Do

The literature stresses the importance of students engaging in career exploration and planning at an early age [1]. However, a number of research studies indicate that relatively few students start the process before grade 11. Many of the strategies that schools typically employ, such as providing apprenticeship programs or opportunities to job shadow do not seem to have strong effects. Some students follow a career path that is consistent with their interests and relative success in school subjects, such as language arts, mathematics or chemistry, but for most students the link between school subjects and jobs and careers is not readily apparent.

A strategy to help students engage in the process early is to have them prepare a two- to three-page written career plan at the beginning of grade 9 or even earlier [8]. The plan would include six elements: a portrayal of their attitudes and values; an account of their current social and academic skills; the identification of a job or career they might pursue after they finish high school; the pathway associated with this job or career, including the skill and educational requirements; an assessment of the family, school and community resources that would enable them to achieve their goals; and the identification of any barriers that may prevent them from achieving their goals. Their plan could be revised each year.

The aim of having students prepare a career plan is to foster a 'growth mindset' – a proactive approach towards visualizing and planning the future. It can help students learn about the process of career exploration, including how to take stock of their personal attributes and seeing how these may fit with a particular job or career. It is a tool for social-emotional learning; that is, developing self and social awareness, setting goals, and building relationships and decision-making skills. Perhaps most important, a written plan can be used to start a dialogue with friends, family and school staff, enabling students to set high but realistic goals.

Two of the core elements of a positive classroom climate that have a strong relationship with students' academic achievement and well-being are teacher-student relations and setting high expectations. Teachers can strengthen these elements by talking with students about their job or career aspirations and helping them set high but realistic expectations. In their classes, teachers can discuss the links between subject content and various jobs and careers.

About OurSCHOOL

OurSCHOOL is an evaluation system that includes dynamic web-based student, teacher, staff and parent surveys. The system provides leading indicators of student engagement and wellness, and the aspects of classroom and school learning climate that research has shown affect student engagement and learning outcomes. Please see www.thelearningbar.com for further information.

About this District Report

This report was prepared by Dr. J. Douglas Willms, President of The Learning Bar, with support from The Learning Bar's staff. This report can be printed free of charge for use in staff meetings and professional development activities. It can also be reproduced for distribution to parents and guardians.

References

1. Skorikov, V. B. & Vondracek, F. W. (2011). Occupational identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (eds.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (pp. 693-714). New York: Springer.
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Key Findings from the Research

- Most students begin proactively engaging in career exploration and planning during the latter stages of secondary school. This process goes hand-in-hand with the development of their personal identity as they understand their interests and values, gain confidence in their abilities and take responsibility for their decisions.⁵ By the end of secondary school, about 20% of students have made a stable career choice. The majority of youth do not settle on a career path until age 25.⁶
- A small percentage of students commit to a career path in elementary school or during the early stages of secondary school, without engaging in the career exploration and planning process. Quite often, their choices are influenced by the expectations of parents and other role models. Students who make commitments without much exploration often do not establish a true sense of their career identity.¹
- The age at which youth establish a career identity is related to gender and influenced by parental expectations, socioeconomic status and geographical location.^{1,6,7}
- Schools can play a key role in helping students develop their career identity. The process entails providing them with opportunities to understand and appreciate their personal strengths and values, engage in job and career exploration, learn where to obtain information about jobs and careers, and develop the skills required to apply for jobs or post-secondary programs.⁸

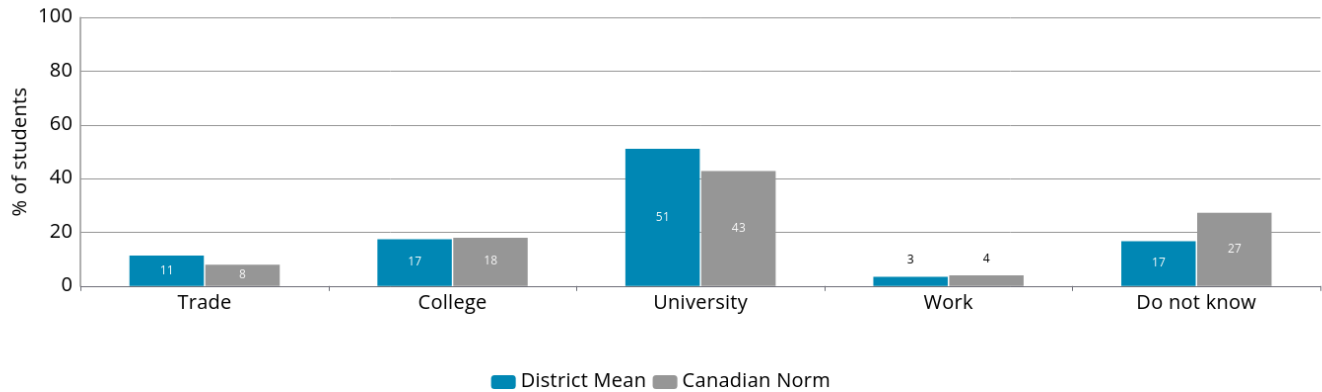
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In Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190), 3,942 students from 34 schools completed the OurSCHOOL survey between 11 May 2026 and 10 Jun 2026, which included a module on the career pathways of students. This report summarizes the results.

Aspirations and Career Identity

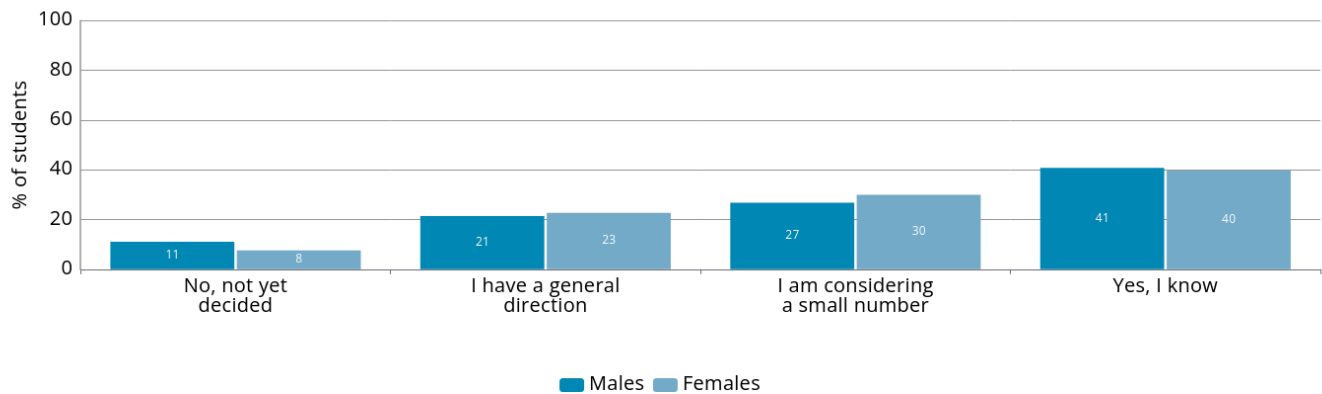
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Figure 1: Students' post-secondary plans



Students were asked whether they know the kind of job or career they want to pursue after they graduate from high school. In Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190), 40% were committed to a particular career path, while a further 50% were either considering a small number of jobs or careers or knew the general direction they were heading. Figure 2 shows the results for Rocky View School Division No 41 (1190) broken down by males and females.

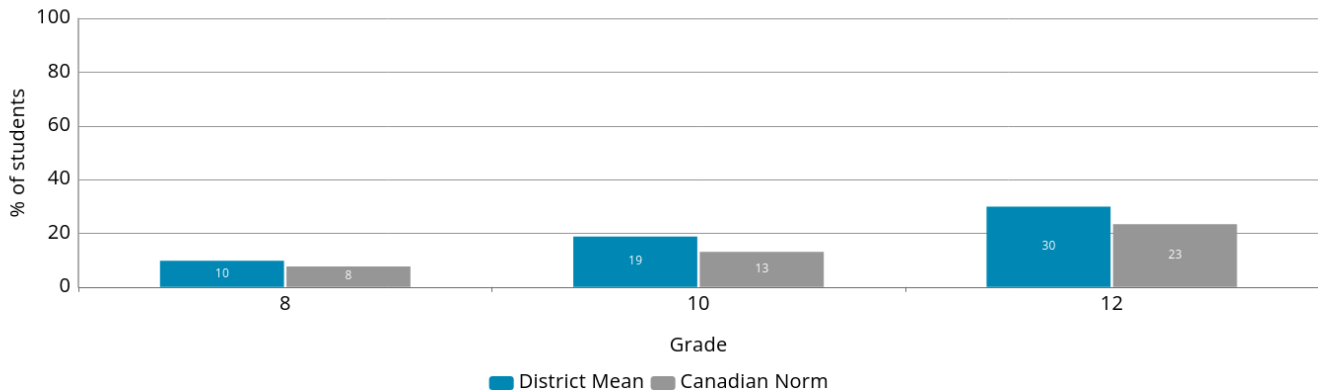
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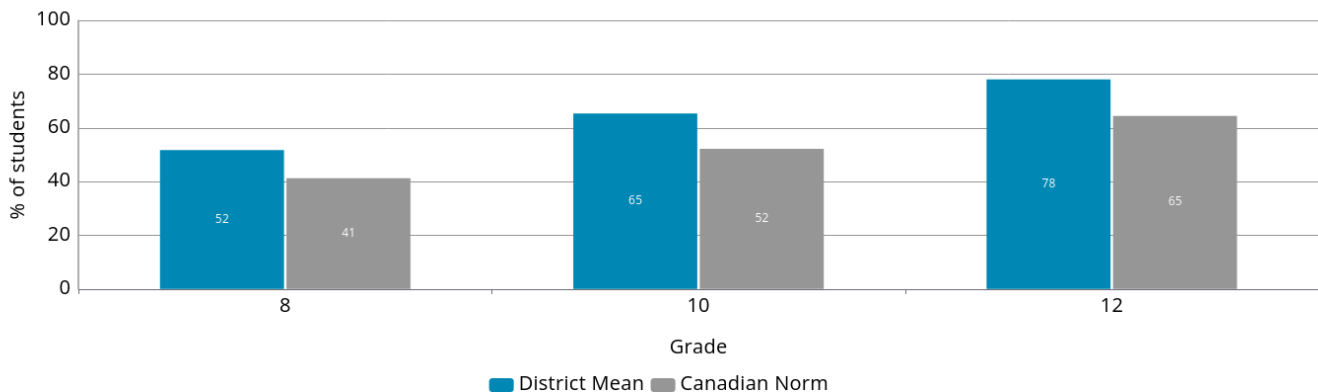
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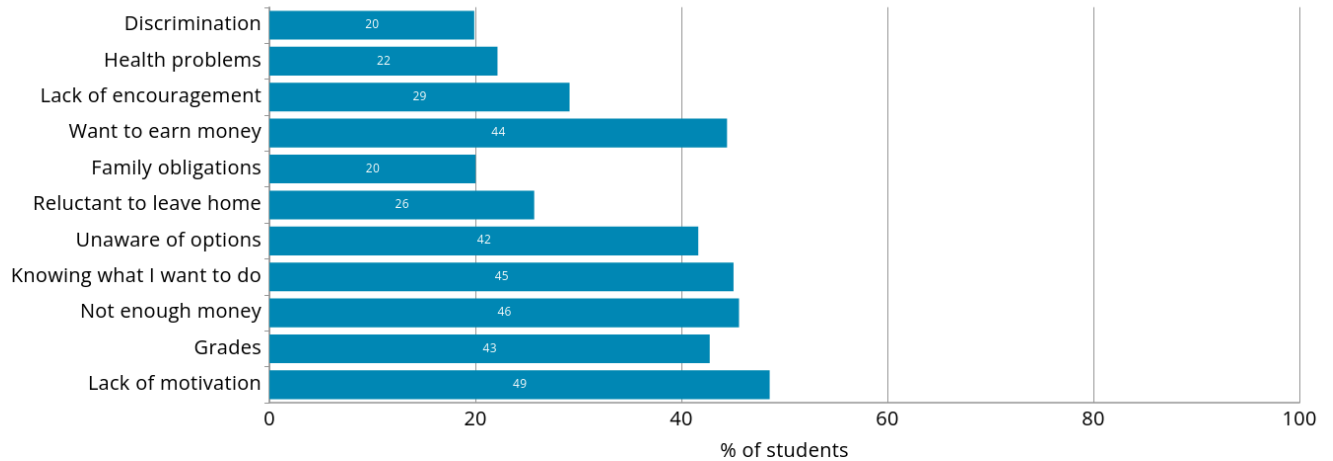
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References

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