Workforce Development for Rural Missouri

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Workforce development is a hot topic in Missouri right now. The governor deemed the issue important enough to give it prominent mention in his state of the state speech. One critical component of workforce development is ensuring that students from rural high schools are prepared to enter the workforce and get good jobs. Graduation follow-up data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) can tell us what high school graduates from rural districts do after graduation, and this data can direct workforce development efforts.

After graduation, districts and schools follow up with their graduates to see what they’re currently doing, and then DESE compiles the data. I connected the DESE data with the federal data set that labels each district with different locale types, ranging from big cities to remote rural areas. You can see the results in the graph at the top of this post (the data may not add up to 100 percent due to data privacy and inability to contact all students).

Looking at the 2018 data, 33 percent of rural district students entered employment and 35 percent enrolled in a 2-year college following graduation, both of which were the highest percentages for each category out of all locales. On the other hand, rural schools had 21 percent of its students attend a 4-year college or university, the lowest percentage out of all locales.

Workforce preparation for rural communities, thus, should have a strong focus on preparing students for high-demand, well-paying jobs they can enter soon after graduation.
This could mean students taking the proper classes and having access to the credentials and skills training they need to be set up for a successful career immediately. Taking job-specific courses or earning college credit during high school should also be an option to help bridge students from high school to technical school.

Missouri needs to consider the data when planning for workforce development. There are good jobs available to Missourians, and the state needs to make sure students are ready to fill them.

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