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Career planning needs earlier start: study

OTTAWA — As students head back to class, a report warns their schools are not doing enough to help prepare them for their future careers.

The study by the think-tank Canadian Policy Research Networks, covering a range of school-to-work transition issues, suggests planning can be too little and too late in many schools.

"We're not doing enough by way of preparing our youth to plan their learning choices and careers," Ron Saunders, the report's author, said in an interview ahead of its release today. "We need to provide better career planning skill development, as well as information to young people, earlier."

The study emphasizes that early intervention is key and it recommends introducing career planning initiatives as early as Grade 6. While that may seem young, Saunders says you can start talking to children at that age about the different paths open to them and the aptitudes associated with those disciplines.

Saunders said it's not enough to just make information available — students have to be taught what to do with it and how it relates to them. They need the skills to use the information in order to make certain choices along the way, he said.

Having employers come to speak to students, offering co-operative programs and other initiatives that connect students with the labour force have proven successful, the report finds.

Robust career development programs are important, according to the Canadian Policy Research Networks, because they help reduce dropout rates, motivate more students to pursue post-secondary education, inspire people to consider non-traditional careers — women

seeking trade jobs, for example — and help students find jobs that match their talents.

Few schools provide adequate career services, the report notes, and a widespread and coherent system simply doesn't exist.

Because education falls under provincial jurisdiction, the think-tank calls on the provinces to improve their ability to integrate career planning into the curriculum and to co-ordinate with each other in sharing effective practices.

"You get the odd school board that has taken leadership on this, or the odd pilot project. There doesn't seem to be much effort to identify best practices and scale them up and make them widely available," said Saunders. "Some provinces are starting, but certainly there's hardly anybody who seems to have a comprehensive career planning curriculum strategy in place."

Some existing strategies are too heavily focused on setting students on an academic path toward university and fail to present other viable options such as vocational paths that would lead to careers in skilled trades, for example, the report said.