

# Show them the money: But keep kids career expectations realistic

BY MISTY HARRIS, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JULY 8, 2010



Encouraging kids to follow their dreams is great, if they want to be a dentist or a veterinarian. But what if they expect to be the next Justin Bieber? File photo.

**Photograph by:** Getty Images, Getty Images

---

Encouraging kids to follow their dreams is great, if they want to be a dentist or a veterinarian. But what if they expect to be the next Justin Bieber?

Although youths overwhelmingly say they picture themselves attending college, a new study finds only those focused on careers requiring post-secondary education actually put in the work to do so. The other half — and it was indeed about a 50-50 split — envision becoming sports stars, famous athletes or entertainers, which was linked to poor grades and less time spent on homework.

Fortunately, researchers uncovered something that trumped even the grandest of YouTube success expectations: money.

When the students were shown a graph depicting the link between earnings and education, they were a whopping eight times likelier to hand in an extra-credit assignment the next day than those youths in

a comparison group.

The study, to appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, involved 561 seventh- and eighth-graders from lower-income neighbourhoods in Detroit, Mich. — areas in which the study authors note kids have limited access to successful, college-educated adults to emulate, and are thus in greater need of motivation to pursue post-secondary education.

Similarly in Canada, wealthier young people are twice as likely to go to university as poorer ones — a statistic that hasn't changed in nearly two decades.

"We see a strong link between income and education in the census data. But when you ask students how much they expect to earn in the future, and how far they expect to go in school, the correlation is actually pretty weak," says co-author Mesmin Destin, an incoming professor at Northwestern University. "It shows us that students aren't making the connection between education and income."

By visually demonstrating the extent to which hard work in school can pay off — literally — educators give kids a less vague, more salient reason to learn. And schools need every advantage they can get at a time when youths are bombarded with examples of overnight celebrity.

"That is definitely a barrier — especially in low-income contexts, where kids are more vulnerable to those types of messages," says Destin. "It takes more to get through their filters now."

Though young people have had designs on stardom for as long as the concept has existed, psychologist Jean Twenge says the perceived ease at which it can be attained these days has been a game-changer for educators.

"The enemy in most movie plots today is the person who says, 'You can't do that, you need to have a backup plan,'" says Twenge, an associate professor at San Diego State University. "So teachers are in a somewhat difficult position, because . . . if they tell someone they should read a few books and learn some things, there's this strange cultural idea that they're the bad guy."

In 2007, the Pew Research Center polled 18- to 25-year-olds on the top goals of their generation and the No. 1 response, at 81 per cent, was to get rich. In second place, at 51 per cent, was to be famous.

Twenge, author of *Generation Me*, says Destin's findings on incentivizing learning make good sense in the context of such priorities.

"You can't just tell this generation what to do; they need to know why," says Twenge. "They have the attitude of wanting it all, but they also face the cold, stark reality that just paying the rent takes a lot of money now."

[mharriscanwest.com](http://mharriscanwest.com)

© Copyright (c) Postmedia News

