

Education pays off to big degree

Dollar figures show value of at least having high school diploma.

By Ken Stephens - The Hutchinson News - kstephens@hutchnews.com

There's no more powerful evidence for graduating from high school than that found in the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

A Kansan at least 25 years old who **dropped out had median income of \$20,383** a year, compared with **\$26,063 for a high school graduate**, according to 2005-09 data compiled by the survey.

The difference could cover a lot of things, from a car payment to rent. Over a 50-year working lifetime, it would be \$284,000.

And there are similar jumps in median income for each succeeding level of education.

Those who earn an associate's degree or get at least some college experience will earn a median of \$30,669 a year. A bachelor's degree will be worth \$43,208 and a graduate or professional degree \$53,667.

The estimates come from the data compiled by the American Community Survey between 2005 and 2009. About 22,000 Kansans were surveyed each year, and the income adjusted to 2009 dollars for computing into a median, which means that half the workers would earn more than that figure and half earn less.

The survey also found that the more education a person has, the less likely she is to be unemployed. The statewide unemployment **rate for those without a high school diploma was 9.67 percent** over the five-year period, **5.63 percent for high school graduates** or those with a GED, 3.98 percent for those with an associate's degree and 2.16 percent for those with a bachelor's degree or more.

Similar stats impress students

Kent Blessing, Hutchinson High School's career counselor, said he believes the income discrepancy between those who graduate from high school and those who don't is the most important. How much the degree is worth can be affected by how long it takes and how much it costs to earn the degree and whether there are jobs in the field upon graduation, he said. But the difference between those who graduate from high school and those who don't is real and immediate.

One way he tries to impress the difference upon students is by asking them to quickly guess the annual income of someone who earns \$16.50 an hour. The students will guess \$20,000 or \$25,000 at the most, he said, then are surprised to learn it's about \$34,000.

Then he asks them to guess the annual income of someone earning \$7.25 an hour (\$15,000). That's not enough, they'll all agree.

"By no means should they want to quit school for \$7.25 an hour," Blessing said. "We do want them to understand what it takes to be a valued worker in the workplace and have some understanding that \$7.25 is close to poverty level."

When he visits freshman English classes, 95 percent of the students will say they plan to go to college. But Blessing knows that half of them won't and only 30 percent will actually get a degree. College isn't the best option for everyone, he said, and Hutchinson High School attempts to address that with its Career and Technical Education Academy.

Blessing said we face a shortage of skilled workers, and those with provable skills in technology, building trades, health science and other fields will have good job security in the future. And post-high school certificate programs short of college degrees may be the ticket for some.

Income data also shows gender gap

Among the many aspects of employment, the American Community Survey also shed light on a large gender gap in median income.

Kansas men without a high school diploma have a median income of \$24,502, which is 42 percent higher than that for women (\$14,301). Men with a high school diploma have median income of \$32,166, or 38 percent more than women (\$19,872).

Going farther up the educational ladder, the gap shrinks but is still substantial. With an associate's degree, the gap is 37 percent (\$38,716 for men, \$24,529 for women). The gap is 34 percent for those with a bachelor's degree (\$53,828 for men, \$35,413 for women) and 33 percent for those with graduate or professional degrees (\$67,790 for men, \$45,412 for women).

Laszlo Kulcsar, director of the Kansas Population Center at Kansas State University, said two reasons for the gender gap are the fact women are more likely to have career interruptions because of children and the fact that Kansas is "fairly conservative about what women should do in life." Most good-paying jobs, such as managers, heads of companies and even universities, still seem to be reserved for men, he said.

But the gulf between the earnings of men and women at the bottom of the educational ladder is harder to explain. Whether a man or woman is working the cash register at a store shouldn't make any difference, he said. The difference there, he said, is probably because more women tend to work part time.

Reno County lags behind state

The American Community Survey also found that workers in Reno County are paid significantly less than the state average at every level of education.

Reno County residents with less than a high school education have median income of \$16,219, or 26 percent less than the state average. The gap drops to 4.4 percent for those with a high school diploma (\$24,971 in Reno County), but from there the gap grows at each succeeding level of education.

With some college up to an associate's degree, Reno County residents have median income of \$27,613, 11 percent less than the state average. With a bachelor's degree, median income is \$37,375, 14.5 percent less than the state average, and with a graduate or professional degree the median is \$46,211, or 16 percent less than the state average.

"The big difference is for college degrees," Kulcsar said. "If you invest a lot of time and effort to get a graduate degree, it's more beneficial for you to leave Reno County to get more return on your investment."

And the gap between Reno County earnings and those in the state's more affluent counties would be even greater than the difference between the medians for Reno County and the state as a whole.

Just down K-96 in Sedgwick County, for instance, residents earn \$1,000 to \$2,000 more than the state average at every level of education except for those who dropped out without graduating from high school.

Of 34 occupational categories in the study, only eight paid better in Reno County than the state average. Lawyers topped the list, with a median income of \$81,538 in Reno County, well above the state average of \$64,484.

Other categories that paid better in Reno County were service occupations, health care support, firefighters, building and grounds cleaning and maintenance, production occupations, transportation and moving and material movers. In most cases, the difference was \$1,000 to \$2,000 a year.

After the legal profession, health diagnosing, treating practitioners and other technical occupations had the highest median wage in Reno County at \$53,182.