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Shaping The Future: Reinforcing Career Navigation in Rural Senior High Schools Under DepEd's Strengthened Curriculum

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(Photo of Grade 12 senior high school TVL - Home Economics students during their product presentation in Albay, Philippines.)

The Department of Education's relentless pursuit of high quality education resulted to the Strengthened Senior High School Curriculum which was implemented this School Year (SY) 2026-2027. One of the key features of the improved curriculum is a more flexible and elective-based system offering to the senior high school learners. This policy brief highlights key issues on the strengthened senior high school curriculum specifically on the introduction of "doorway option" where the learners are given the opportunity to choose elective subjects outside their chosen track, or to "cross-track" elective subjects. While this amendment supports interdisciplinary learning, without strategic intervention, this supposed to be advantage may unintentionally exacerbate already-existing economic disparities and affect students' access to opportunities. This paper gives emphasis on the need for a more organized, localized, and inclusive approach of assuring that all students will be guided as they head towards their dreams and aspirations in the future.

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Introduction

Are Our Students Truly on Track?

Republic Act No. 10533, or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, institutionalized the K to 12 Basic Education Program, covering Kindergarten through Grade 12 (Republic Act No. 10533, 2013). The reform includes six years of primary education, four years of junior high school, and two years of senior high school. After reviews of the K to 10 and senior high school curricula, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced the strengthened Senior High School (SHS) curriculum for School Year 2026–2027. The revised SHS curriculum was framed as a "strengthening" of the program, based on a comparative analysis by the Assessment, Curriculum, and Technology Research Center (ACTRC). The SHS Curriculum Review by ACTRC is an extension project of the K to 12 Curriculum Review completed by the same agency. However, it was found to have fallen short of its intended goals (ACTRC, 2024). Thus, the agency has several key recommendations which were integrated and became the foundation of the Strengthened SHS Curriculum which intends to make learning more flexible and responsive to students' aspirations.

The original structure of Senior High School curriculum which was implemented in 2016 under the K to 12 reform has four tracks: Academic, Technical-Vocational, Sports, and Arts and Design. The rigid structure of the SHS program confines students to a specific strand, preventing them from exploring subjects outside their chosen specialization. The inflexibility of the system contributed to the misalignment between learner interests and career aspirations, highlighting the need for curriculum reform (Department of Education, 2025). The strengthened SHS curriculum reduced the four tracks into two: Academic and Technical-Professional (TechPro). Among the 'strengthened' features of the revised curriculum, this paper will emphasize the introduction of a "doorway option" to the senior high school learners. This will enable students to freely select courses from different tracks according to their desired career path or exit strategy. Students from the Academic track can choose to take elective subjects from TechPro, and TechPro students are also free to take elective subjects under the Academic track. This set up promotes flexibility and liberate the students by giving them the freedom to explore subjects outside their chosen tracks to broaden their skill sets, and thereby recognizes the reality that their aspirations may evolve in the process (Department of Education, 2025).

During implementation of the original SHS curriculum, many learners remained uncertain about their track and postsecondary direction. They are often influenced by peers in their decision-making, thus completing their basic education with no firm choice of what career to take after graduation. Career decisions are shaped by interests, family expectations, and financial circumstances; in a study of 100 graduating SHS students, these factors were reported as influential in balancing personal aspirations with economic realities (Reyles et al., 2024). In addition, entrance exams in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) must be taken early on, leaving them to make a decision based on circumstances they face at the moment. Bicol University includes Income Tax Return (ITR) or Certificate of Tax Exemption (CTE) and related document as one of the requirements for the entrance exam (Bicol University, n.d.). According to some students, ITR is hard to secure especially that some parents are not coming from the working class, which then adds up to the many hindrances in taking the exam. Students who aspire to enroll in SUCs usually end up in community colleges taking whatever course available, leaving them no choice, as it was also the most practical choice for the time being.

Though the introduction of the doorway option became more customized and relevant to the students, it poses challenges. Lagon (2025) emphasized that students must be guided in making decisions "based on their goals, capacities, and contexts". These factors must be considered in a way that students' track in senior high school aligns with the industry as well as in higher education. Although the doorway option is more customized and relevant to learners, it increases the need for systematic guidance. OECD evidence from PISA and TALIS shows that rural students are, on average, less likely than city students to expect completing a university degree, even when their socioeconomic status is similar (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). DepEd should therefore ensure that increased choice is accompanied by structured, context-sensitive advising.

Key Issues

Gaps in Career Support Structures

Guidance counselors are essential in fostering meaningful educational and career decisions. However, a national representative World Bank assessment found that teacher deployment, professional development, school funding, and the learning environment remain uneven across Philippine regions and provinces, with schools serving poorer communities generally more resource-constrained (World Bank, 2016). The Second Congressional Commission on Education's final report in 2026 cited the lack of guidance counselors as one of the concerns with 79% (4,460 items) of DepEd's guidance counselor posts remain unfilled. Due to this shortage, DepEd Secretary Sonny Angara made an estimate of roughly 14 years before the department could completely fill up the vacancies. Given the complex interplay of factors influencing students' career aspirations, relying on regular teachers without specialized training for career guidance can result to

inconsistent and potentially inadequate advice for students. The role of guidance counselors is very crucial especially in these times of transition from the K to 12 curriculum to its revised or enhanced state. These constraints make it risky to assume that every school can provide the same level of individualized career support without targeted staffing and training.

Narrow Career Perspectives

Future career trajectories of students depend on their limited awareness and interest, which was evident in the study of Jiang et al., (2024). Due to their limited exposure to diverse environments and social circles, some students are primarily familiar with the careers held by their immediate family and friends. Students who are exposed to only certain careers or occupation tend to take the same path for themselves, regardless whether they have the inclination or none. Sometimes, even if the students have the potential, they would still prefer careers which are subpar of what they can effortlessly achieve – the reason why career guidance is a very meaningful undertaking for the students to experience. Effective career guidance assists the students to realize their talents and passions that connect them with relevant and career possibilities. The predetermined path shown by others may not anymore be pursued by the students, rather, strengthened career guidance can help students chase careers which they are passionate about. OECD evidence indicates that rural–urban differences in academic performance often diminish after socioeconomic status is considered, but the persistent gap in university expectations points to the importance of aspiration-building and informed guidance (OECD, 2019).

Equity Issues in Senior High School Access

The move toward a more flexible curriculum is welcome, but students are not equally positioned to benefit from choice. Career path preferences of senior high school students are shaped by their interests, family expectations, and financial situations (Reyles et al., 2024). Students often face difficult decision to counterbalance their passion and the realities of their financial circumstances. Students may be given the choice to pick freely on what to pursue for their studies, but sometimes, poverty is limiting. Indicated in the Shape Paper of the strengthened curriculum that though elective subject availability depends on the student interest, it may also vary depending on the school capacity and resources. Students in urban schools often have access to a wider range of educational pathways compared to those in rural or under-resourced areas, leading to unequal opportunities. Jamim et al. (2022) cited the socio-economic status of the students as one which has a positive impact on students' career choices. The costs associated with specialized Senior High School tracks, along with transportation difficulties, may disproportionately affect students from lower-income families, creating inequalities in access to the programs of SHS. In 2024, home internet access was 68.7% in the National Capital Region but only 27.7% in BARMM and 21.2% in the Zamboanga Peninsula (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2025). Thus, a doorway option may reproduce inequality if rural learners cannot access the same electives, devices, connectivity, transportation, or advising available in better-resourced settings.

Deficiencies in Educational Facilities and Resources

DepEd has long identified classroom and facility shortages as challenges in Philippine education. Complete learning facilities in schools significantly enhance the learning process for students (Frameilia et al., 2023). A Philippine Institute for Development Studies assessment found spatial inequality in classroom-student ratios and continuing gaps in water, sanitation, electricity, computers, and internet access; it also reported that only 67.3% of public senior high schools had internet access in the cited monitoring data (Navarro, 2022). Learning facilities and resources not only include infrastructures like classroom buildings and laboratories, but also educational tools and materials such as books and equipment which are all vital in the teaching and learning process. The lack of adequate classroom forces students to utilize laboratory rooms and undersized junior high classrooms which are too small for SHS students. Even with the presence of laboratory rooms or buildings, there is still a lack of materials and equipment needed especially on the TVL Track specialized subjects. Textbooks intended for use when Senior High School began in 2016 were only delivered in 2025 which likely impacted the quality of education and resources available to students during that period. The World Bank likewise found significant differences in the quality of the learning environment across regions and provinces and reported that schools serving poorer communities were more resource-constrained (World Bank, 2016). These findings support the policy brief's concern that schools in rural and under-resourced areas may be unable to offer the full range of electives without targeted infrastructure and equipment investments.

Household connectivity also creates a practical barrier to ICT-supported career navigation. Although 48.8% of Philippine households had internet access at home in 2024, the national figure concealed large regional differences, and high subscription cost was the leading reason households lacked access (58.3%) (PSA, 2025). DepEd should therefore treat connectivity, device availability, and transport costs as equity indicators when planning doorway electives and career-guidance services, rather than assuming that online information is equally accessible to all learners.

Barriers to Effective Assessment and Monitoring

The strengthened SHS curriculum allows students to take electives outside their chosen track, but cross-tracking complicates assessment and monitoring. Although this gives the students the freedom of choice, it poses problems in designing standardized assessment that measures mastery across different combinations of subjects. The current SHS assessment frameworks were purposely intended for strand-specific learning, however, the introduction of clusters and doorway options requires a different method of evaluation. Evaluating student learning is critical for educators to track progress, improve instruction, and motivate students (Batton et al., 2015). The lack of standardized assessments for students engaging in cross-tracking within the revised curriculum makes it more challenging to accurately measure their learning outcomes and the effectiveness of the program.

Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

Strengthening Career Guidance in Rural Senior High Schools

The expertise and knowledge of a guidance counselor can provide customized career orientation and planning. Because counselor capacity is uneven, DepEd should train teachers in a clearly bounded set of referral, information, and career-exploration functions, while prioritizing qualified counselors for schools with high learner-to-counselor ratios. Career exploration should be integrated throughout SHS rather than delivered only as a year-end activity. It should include local labor-market information, postsecondary requirements, scholarship and financial-aid guidance, and structured exposure to careers beyond the learner's immediate community.

Designing Localized Career Pathways

DepEd should assist rural schools in developing practical SHS elective pathways linked to local employment, further education, and community development. The 2019 PIDS process evaluation found that not all schools offered the tracks and strands students wanted, which could push learners into less-preferred options (Brillantes et al., 2019). Local needs assessments should therefore combine student-interest surveys, employer and higher-education consultations, graduate tracer data, and regional labor-market information before elective offerings are approved. By considering elective pathways tailored on the needs and demands locally, schools can better position the curriculum thereby enabling the students to shape their futures and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of their communities.

Aligning Elective Options with Socio-Economic Contexts

With the many studies conducted about the factors that affect students' choice of course in college, socio-economic factor has always been one being identified. Socioeconomic conditions should be treated as implementation variables, not merely background characteristics. Students' career preferences are influenced by family expectations and financial situations (Del Rosario et al., 2024; Reyles et al., 2024), while national connectivity data show that the cost of internet subscriptions is a major access barrier (PSA, 2025). DepEd should provide targeted subsidies or shared facilities for transportation, devices, connectivity, and practical training materials so that a learner's elective choice reflects interest and aptitude rather than household resources.

Formalizing Monitoring and Evaluation for Policy Impact

DepEd should institutionalize a standardized monitoring and evaluation framework across SHS. School-based monitoring units should track learner pathways from elective selection through graduation and into higher education, employment, training, or entrepreneurship. The system should publish disaggregated indicators by rural-urban location, region, sex, income proxy, disability, and school resources. Baseline measures should include elective availability, counselor coverage, class size, facilities, internet access, participation, completion, and transition outcomes; annual tracer studies should then be used to identify whether the doorway option is narrowing or widening opportunity gaps.

Conclusion

Is having a choice enough to empower learners? The strengthened SHS curriculum can expand learner agency, but autonomy is meaningful only when students have comparable information, resources, and feasible options. Philippine evidence documents rural–urban differences in achievement, regional disparities in household connectivity, and persistent inequalities in school infrastructure and learning environments (David et al., 2018; Navarro, 2022; PSA, 2025; World Bank, 2016). DepEd should therefore implement the doorway option together with targeted career guidance, localized pathways, equitable resource allocation, and transparent monitoring. This approach would make flexibility a mechanism for inclusion rather than a reform whose benefits accrue mainly to learners in better-resourced schools.

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Declaration

Dola AI was used in finding relevant terms and paraphrasing some ideas and Manus AI was used as guide to correct citation in APA style but the entire conceptualization was solely crafted by the author.

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