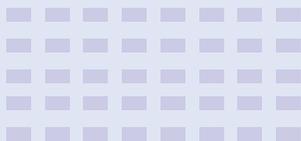


**WHITE
PAPER**

Why Career Exploration Should Begin in Middle School —and How to Make It Happen



Programs that help students explore possible career pathways are critical for a number of reasons. For instance, they make education more directly relevant for students by connecting the concepts taught in class with various careers. They also expose students to new possibilities that can help them chart a successful future.

Many school systems build career exploration into the high school experience. However, evidence suggests that middle school is actually the best time to begin this process. This white paper examines why career exploration is important in the middle grades, and it describes key characteristics of a successful middle school career exploration program.

Every student deserves high-quality career exploration

For students to be fully engaged in instruction, they must perceive it as relevant to their future. A 2006 study funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, called *The Silent Epidemic*, surveyed young people across the United States to

discover why they dropped out of high school. The top reason, mentioned by 47 percent of survey respondents, was that school seemed boring to them because they couldn't see a link between what they were learning in class and their own lives.¹

Career exploration provides a clear purpose to instruction. It helps students understand how the concepts they're learning within the core curriculum relate to specific jobs after high school. It gives them a compelling reason to pay attention in class, beyond simply doing well on the test.

Exploring possible career pathways also opens up additional choices for students. "You can't be what you can't see," says Mike Dardaris, senior director of career learning for Stride Learning Solutions.

When students begin planning for their future, their aspirations are limited by the careers they are familiar with—jobs they've learned about from their immediate environment, or careers they've seen in movies and on TV. But many fulfilling and rewarding careers don't get the attention of Hollywood, and



"You can't be what you can't see."

— Mike Dardaris, Senior Director of Career Learning, Stride Learning Solutions

students from low-income families in particular aren't exposed to as many career options as their peers from more affluent families. Career exploration can show students a wider range of options than they might discover on their own.

It can also help students understand what they *don't* want to do for a living. When Kristen Trostel taught social studies, she had a student who wanted to be a mortician—that is, until he learned what a mortician's job was actually like during a school-based career exploration unit.

“All students should have visibility into all jobs and roles.”

— Kristen Trostel, Senior Program Manager, Stride Learning Solutions

For Trostel, who is now a senior program manager for Stride Learning Solutions, career exploration is a matter of equity. “*All* students should have visibility into all jobs and roles,” she says. No student's career aspirations should be limited by where they grow up and what jobs they've seen within their immediate surroundings.

Why middle school is the ideal time to start

Hands-on career exploration at the K-12 level allows students to try out various roles in a risk-free environment to see what jobs they might like. If students wait until college to explore possible careers, they could end up spending a lot of extra money if they switch pathways.

Research suggests that career exploration is most effective in the middle grades, says the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE).² Developmentally, this is when students are most receptive to trying new experiences and exploring new interests. It's also when students are

exploring their own identities and beginning to develop their sense of self.

“It's important to let kids try out different identities,” says Heather Buskirk, director of instruction for career learning at Stride Learning Solutions. “Hands-on career exploration is a great way to do that.”

Girls, minorities, and at-risk students are more likely to start limiting their career aspirations once they have been exposed to stereotypes about which jobs are appropriate for whom, ACTE says—and that typically happens around middle school. Career exploration in the middle grades can get them excited about possible careers before their opinions have formed.

What's more, middle school is a time of transition in a young person's life, and students are at a higher risk for disengaging from learning as they face challenges in growing up and navigating new environments. Career exploration in the middle grades can help engage students at a time when they're particularly vulnerable; according to *The Silent Epidemic* report, 81 percent of students who did not earn a high school diploma said that relevant, real-world learning opportunities would have kept them in school.



Four keys to a successful program

While career exploration should begin before students reach high school, a high-quality program should also include certain characteristics. Here are four keys to a successful career education program in the middle grades.

A comprehensive approach with a wide range of career options

The more career options that students are exposed to, the more likely they are to find a pathway that interests them. A high-quality program allows students to explore many of the most popular career clusters in the National Career Clusters® Framework.

A high-quality program also includes opportunities for students to hear from professionals within these career pathways, as well as college students who have chosen these fields of study, so they can learn what to expect if they choose these fields for themselves.

Hands-on, project-based learning

In order to choose a career pathway that might be right for them, students should have a deeper understanding of what each career involves and the skills that are required for success. The best way for students to develop this knowledge is to give them opportunities for hands-on career experience, ideally through the use of project-based learning (PBL).

With PBL, students develop their knowledge and skills by working on an authentic problem, challenge, or learning task that has real-world relevance. Projects typically culminate in an artifact, performance, or presentation that is shared publicly.

Students assume the roles of career professionals as they complete each project. For instance, they might be tasked with designing a website for a retail client. In the process, they might learn firsthand what it's like to be a marketing specialist, a web coder, and/or a graphic designer. Trying these roles out for themselves is a much more valuable learning experience than simply reading about them.

“You can't really understand someone's job until you've walked in their shoes,” Buskirk says.

Opportunities to learn and practice 21st century skills

Another important benefit of PBL is that it provides an opportunity for students to learn and apply so-called “21st century skills” such as communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and adaptability—all skills that are just as critical for workplace success as core job skills.

As students are working together on a group project, they're learning how to collaborate effectively. As new challenges arise, students are learning how to work through these problems and apply innovative thinking to solve them. These are the same kinds of situations that students are likely to encounter in whatever career field they choose, and PBL helps them become adept at handling them.

Extended learning through internships, clubs, and student organizations

A high-quality program for exploring career pathways in the middle grades should allow students to extend their learning by taking part in internships, workplace tours, job shadowing opportunities, and/or career and technical student organizations (CTSOs).

CTSOs support and expand on what students learn in career education programs. They help students connect with business leaders and develop their leadership skills through community service activities and industry-based competitions at the local, state, and national levels.

According to the National Coordinating Council for Career and Technical Student Organizations (NCC-CTSO), more than 2 million middle school, high school, and postsecondary students nationwide participate in nearly a dozen CTSOs that map to the National Career Clusters® Framework. Examples include the Future Business Leaders of America and the Technology Student Association.

“I saw student growth that I never would have thought possible—and problem solving as a natural way of learning.”

— Sandra Burris, a teacher at the Cyber Academy of South Carolina

Student participation in CTSOs correlates with stronger academic motivation and engagement, better grades, more employability skills, and higher college aspirations, research suggests.³

Removing barriers to implementation

Integrating career exploration into the middle school experience can be challenging, especially if teachers have to design project-based learning activities by themselves. [Stride Career Explorations](#), a cross-curricular online career exploration program, removes the barriers to entry by making this process easier for educators.

The program begins with two introductory online courses that give students a chance to explore six

high-demand career clusters—Agriculture; Arts, AV, and Technical Communications; Business and Marketing; Healthcare; Manufacturing; and Information Technology—using a project-based approach to learning. Once students have completed these initial courses, they can dive deeper into specific career pathways that interest them.

For each project, students take on the role of a career professional as they’re challenged to complete an authentic learning task. Students are invited to take part in the project with an artifact, such as a memo or a set of meeting notes, that adds realism to the scenario.

All projects are collaborative in nature, giving students an opportunity to learn critical workforce skills. At the end of each project, students share their work with a larger community.

Stride Career Explorations can be easily integrated into any middle school environment, whether in person, fully online, or a blended-learning setting. It enables all students to take part in rich career-based learning experiences, regardless of where they live. Each project is fully customizable, while providing structure and a simple entry point for teachers.

“Creating high-quality projects that are fun and engaging while still covering the necessary content is a hard ask,” says Buskirk. “It can take years for teachers to develop this skill.” Stride Career Explorations “provides an easier transition to project-based learning for teachers, allowing them to focus on implementation.”

Sandra Burris, a teacher at the Cyber Academy of South Carolina, calls the program’s approach “life-changing from a teaching perspective.”

“It’s so much fun to guide students in doing these projects and watch how they just run with it,” she says. “The students have knocked my socks off with some of the things they did. I feel like I learned as much as I taught.”

In using the program, Burris’s students have learned about careers they weren’t aware of before. They’ve tried their hand at various roles and learned essential workplace skills. Perhaps best of all, they’ve learned a lot about themselves, where their interests lie—and what they’re capable of.

“I saw student growth that I never would have thought possible—and problem solving as a natural way of learning,” Burris observes. “That’s the magic of project-based learning. You can’t really script that.”

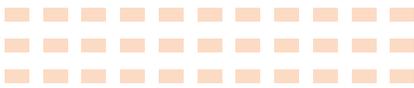
Leveling the playing field

Exposing students to a wide range of career options transforms their idea of what’s possible and helps them plan successfully for the future. Research suggests that middle school is the best time to reach them, and a project-based learning approach is a highly effective strategy. Although career education programs can be challenging to implement, Stride Career Explorations simplifies the process.

“Students don’t have to live in an IT hub to think about IT as a career,” Buskirk concludes. “They don’t have to attend a school with a huge career and technical education program to have broad exposure to rewarding careers. That we can offer the same high-quality opportunities to every child is a game changer.”

To learn more about Stride Career Explorations, visit stridelearning.com/learning-solutions.





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- ¹ Bridgeland, John, et al. *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises (on behalf of the Gates Foundation), 2006. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED513444.pdf>
 - ² Career Exploration in Middle School: Setting Students on the Path to Success. Association for Career and Technical Education, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.acteonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ACTE_CC_Paper_FINAL.pdf
 - ³ Alfeld, C., et al. Looking Inside the Black Box: *The Value Added by Career and Technical Student Organizations to Students' High School Experience*. National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, University of Minnesota, 2007. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED497343>

About Stride Learning Solutions

Since 2000, Stride Learning Solutions has been a leader in strategic solutions to solve district challenges. Stride Learning Solutions' flexible online and blended learning options boost modern instruction and promote lifelong student success. With an innovative platform, comprehensive digital courseware, adaptable technology, and extensive support, Stride Learning Solutions is equipped to help your school or district empower a brighter future for learners.

To learn more, visit stridelearning.com/learning-solutions.

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