

Beyond the Basics: A Youth-Led Study on What Career Exploration Should Include in Middle School

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While research is traditionally led and conducted by adults trained in research methods and analysis, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) flips this traditional paradigm by identifying those most impacted by research and bringing them into the process as co-researchers. Recognizing the power of YPAR, EdTrust's national office, in partnership with Identity Youth, completed its first YPAR project focused college and career readiness in on middle school — a crucial time when students are developing stronger identities and forming clearer ideas about their futures.

We conducted this project in Montgomery County, Maryland, with six middle and high school students as co-researchers — prioritizing the recruitment of students of color, whose perspectives are too often left out of these conversations — who wanted to understand what kinds of experiences students want middle schools to provide to support college and career exploration. The YPAR team collectively built knowledge, developed focus group protocols, conducted five focus groups with 29 middle and high school students identifying as Black or Latino, analyzed the data to identify themes, and developed policy recommendations.

In this study, the youth on our YPAR team served as both co-researchers and participants, and the participatory nature of this project ensures their interpretations of the findings reflect both their own experiences and what they heard from other participants. We found that while students are eager to plan for their futures, middle schools often fail to meet their needs. Students want more than just basic information; they are looking for deep, practical, and personal connections to potential careers.

Key Findings

1. Career exploration feels too narrow in middle school. Students are frustrated that schools only present common or “obvious” career paths. They want to explore a wider variety of interests. As one eighth grader noted, “They show the career ideas... but like, it doesn’t give options... if you go to class and like, the first four options: film, art, scene art — the simple options, and then that’s it.”

2. Students crave practical “real-world” details, including what it takes to get to a career, and what it’s like in the career on a practical level. Students want to go deeper into what it’s really like in various careers, suggesting “workshops related to what the guest speaker is talking about so you can really see what it’s like in their job.” Students also want to know the pathway to a career, including required education, salary expectations, and daily stressors. An eighth grader interested in becoming a neurosurgeon explained, “I want to know the things I would need to know... classes you have to take, the extracurriculars, education, how much effort they have to put into these things.”

3. Values and impact matter. When choosing careers, students prioritize helping others and aligning work with their personal values. One eighth grader shared that a field trip to a patent courthouse shifted their perspective after meeting a judge who discussed how he navigates his personal faith alongside his professional responsibilities. Students want to know “what you get out of it to help others” and are interested in “defend[ing] people from injustice.” Middle schoolers are drawn to careers that have real impact on others and want to know how people in various careers do that.

4. Students need better access to adult guidance. Current guidance is often inconsistent. Students reported long wait times to see school counselors and a lack of personalized attention. One seventh grader remarked, “They come once to our school... and they just don’t come again. And I feel like a lot of students have a lot of questions... but like, they can’t ask nobody.” Students emphasized that trust and comfort are vital; they cannot express their true goals to an adult they don’t know or who seems unapproachable.

5. Classroom learning must connect to the real world. Students are more motivated when they see how classwork applies to future careers. They suggested using capstone projects — where students work to solve real-world problems — in all programs, not just specialized ones. Hands-on activities like bridge-building competitions or mock trials help students understand how their current studies lead to future success.

Recommendations

To address these findings, we propose changing policy and practice to improve career advising, provide middle school students with deeper exploration of college and career options, and integrate career-connected learning into academic learning. Specifically, we recommend districts, states, and the federal government enact the following policies:



District Policy Recommendations

- Hire school counselors and college and career navigators in every middle school, with clear roles, manageable caseloads, and dedicated time to advise students one on one.
- Fund and create learning time in schools for standards-based, project-based, and career-connected learning across all classrooms, not only in Gifted and Talented or selective magnet programs.
- Build partnerships with local employers, community colleges, and community-based organizations to give students real-world and hands-on career-connected learning experiences like internships, job shadowing, and collaborative projects.
- Address financial and transportation barriers so all students can participate in career-connected learning opportunities, whether on site at school or off site in the community.

State Policy Recommendations

- Require every middle school to have a dedicated, on-site school counselor and a college and career navigator — two distinct roles, funded by the state — who develop and regularly update individualized career plans with every student.
- Provide ongoing training so school counselors and navigators can deliver career advising that is culturally responsive and relevant to each student.
- Require or incentivize districts to offer at least one career exploration course in middle school. This could be a standalone course or embedded in existing coursework to expose students to a broad range of careers, help them identify their interests and values, and build awareness of career opportunities.

- Build state-level infrastructure to connect districts with employer partners, community colleges, and career exploration resources, so schools are not building those relationships from scratch on their own.
- Create and share frameworks that connect academic subjects like math and English to career exploration and train educators to use them so students can see how their coursework connects to careers they care about or may not yet be aware of.
- Ensure that all students have access to high-quality project-based learning experiences (e.g., capstone learning opportunities) that connect to real-world careers and reinforce academic skills.

Federal Policy Recommendations

To support these changes across the country, we recommend that the federal government:

- [Pass the Mentoring to Succeed Act \(S.299\)](#) to fund school-based mentoring programs and prioritize funding schools with a high percentage of students from low-income backgrounds.
- Increase federal investments in school counselor and college and career navigator workforce pipelines, addressing both the shortage of licensed school counselors and the need for dedicated navigator roles, to ensure every middle school student has consistent access to a trusted adult who can support their college and career exploration.
- Increase investments in career and technical education (CTE) and work-based learning, including job shadowing, internships, and industry partnerships, and explicitly extend eligibility and funding priority to middle school programs.
- Encourage states to strengthen college and career readiness in middle school by incorporating career readiness indicators into their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) consolidated state plans and supporting innovation through dedicated grant competitions.



Practice Recommendations

In addition to policy changes to create the conditions for meaningful career exploration, implementation is also crucial. The following is guidance for schools and districts based on our research findings:

- Engage students directly in designing career exploration programming, through surveys, student advisory groups, or co-planning processes, so offerings reflect actual student interests rather than assumptions about what students want to explore.
- Include concrete, practical information in career exploration activities: education requirements, daily responsibilities, salary expectations, and how people in various careers connect their work to their values and desire to help others.
- Ensure career exploration activities help students connect career options to their own values and desire to make an impact, not just their interests and aptitudes, such as through tools grounded in the National Career Clusters Framework.
- Treat individualized college and career planning as an ongoing, meaningful process rather than a compliance exercise. Plans should be revisited annually with students, grounded in genuine conversation about their interests and goals, and used to actively guide course selection and pathway decisions.
- Create multiple touchpoints for middle school students to learn about their high school pathway options, including advanced coursework and CTE programs, through advisor conversations, family nights, and peer-to-peer outreach from high schoolers, well before students arrive at high school. Align academic advising with students' interests as they continue to learn about these options.

By advancing these policies and leveraging best practices when implementing changes, we can ensure that middle schoolers receive the guidance and practical experience they need to build a meaningful future.

