

FEBRUARY 17, 2026

# STARTING EARLIER STARTS WITH US

## A COMMITMENT TO PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THEIR FUTURE

Today's students are navigating an increasingly complex world, and many understandably struggle to make decisions about their future. Our rapidly evolving economy and emerging technologies create both unprecedented opportunities and new challenges for career stability. Students face an expanding array of postsecondary pathways in an increasingly global and fast-paced environment that demands early preparation and intentional support. Students need more experiences, guidance, and a longer runway to develop the skills, tools, and knowledge necessary to identify, prepare for, and land in a rewarding career.

As leaders dedicated to putting all young people on an intentional path to a fulfilling and financially-secure life, we have come together to deeply assess the needs of our middle school students and **stand united in our call for career exploration as a key foundational element to lifelong success.**

Though we collectively represent different regions, contexts, and perspectives, we are aligned around a core set of principles that should guide middle school career exploration work across our country:

- **Every middle school student deserves high-quality career exploration.**
- **States have a responsibility to provide a clear vision, expectations, and support for quality career exploration.**
- **Career exploration experiences should be varied, personalized, real-world, and hands-on.**
- **Career exploration must be a coordinated effort between schools and the broader community.**
- **Career exploration's impact should be incentivized, captured, and rewarded.**

While we believe in the importance of documenting students' career and academic planning, students have made clear that those **annual paper-and-pencil activities are simply not enough.** All middle school students should have authentic opportunities to evaluate their own aptitudes and interests and build a clearer understanding of the range of careers available to them. They should have opportunities throughout middle school to engage with professionals in their fields of interest through activities like career mentoring, immersive career exploration activities, workplace visits, and hands-on career learning to build their future pathways. Our schools must be a place where our students learn not just about academic concepts, but how those concepts are applied in the real world. While our high school pathways and postsecondary programs are an essential part of our states' education-to-workforce systems, students and families may not all be prepared to successfully navigate and engage in these programs toward their individual goals. **We aspire to provide middle school students with high-quality comprehensive career exploration, supported by strategic academic planning aligned to individual strengths and interests, so that every student is prepared to choose the high school courses and experiences, postsecondary option, and career path that's right for them.**

**We pledge to continue to listen to our students** and improve our own middle school practices toward this vision. We call on education leaders nationwide to endorse this commitment, implement these principles, and join our effort to put every student on a path to economic and career success, starting with strong exploration opportunities in middle school.

Signed,



Tom Horne, State Superintendent  
Arizona Department of Education



Dr. Robbie Fletcher, Commissioner  
Kentucky Department of Education



Carrie Rowe, Ed.D., Acting Secretary  
Pennsylvania Department of Education



Chris Reykdal, Superintendent  
Washington Office of Public Instruction



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# MAKING THE CASE FOR OUR CALL TO ACTION

## Principle #1: Every middle school student deserves high-quality career exploration.

Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds and regions should have the opportunity to learn about the incredible array of career options available to them. Students deserve the time and space to explore careers regardless of their enrollment in honors or advanced academics, career and technical education, and/or after-school programming. Schools must not make assumptions about students' aspirations and should use student perspectives to drive quality career exploration.

### ● Why this matters

Today's students need career exploration integrated into their education. Although many states mandate career exploration, middle schoolers often miss out on meaningful experiences.<sup>[1]</sup> As a result, only 13% of Gen Z students feel prepared to plan their future.<sup>[2]</sup> Many lack awareness of career pathways, and parents, who are the primary source of guidance, are often uninformed about these options.<sup>[3],[4]</sup> Middle school is the best time to offer career awareness and guidance, as students are developmentally ready for exploration and planning.<sup>[5]</sup> Research shows this is when career exploration is most effective for academic achievement and future decision-making.<sup>[6]</sup> Middle schools should not only help students explore career options but also equip them with the skills to make informed decisions about selecting middle school courses aligned with desired pathways, subsequent high school selection and course enrollment, and future postsecondary options, increasing the likelihood they successfully complete these programs.

## Principle #2: States have a responsibility to provide a clear vision, expectations, and support for quality career exploration.

This includes career exploration as part of larger statewide efforts, with supporting policies for implementation. These expectations need to be outlined in codified definitions, policies and standards, and reflected in educator and counselor training programs.<sup>[7]</sup>

### ● Why this matters

Today's economy features an often-unpredictable job market that is growing more complex with the introduction of advancements such as AI. About half of employers struggle to find skilled workers for high-wage jobs, which largely require some level of postsecondary education.<sup>[8]</sup> Evidence shows that many students demonstrate the aptitude to thrive in these industries such as healthcare, technology, and finance; however, their interests largely do not align with these workforce needs because many students lack the awareness and exposure needed to consider these careers.<sup>[9]</sup>

Encouragingly, many governors' top education policy priority in 2025 includes finding ways to engage students in meaningful career opportunities.<sup>[10]</sup> To be effective, these efforts must extend into middle school, giving students more time to explore options and align their interests with workforce demands. States should develop a clear vision for how middle grades fit into broader workforce strategies and build the necessary policies and infrastructure to support it. Governors, cabinets, and executive branch leaders oversee agencies such as K-12, Higher Education, and Labor/Workforce Development, and as such are uniquely positioned to set a vision that integrates and blends these more seamlessly to reduce friction and barriers for students.

### **Principle #3: Career exploration experiences should be varied, personalized, real-world, and hands-on.**

Opportunities should be aligned to individual student interests, with clear connections to durable skills, careers that are aligned to the changing future of workforce needs and employers, and to upcoming high school transitions.<sup>[11]</sup> These experiences should be adapted for the different contexts of all students and schools and be bolstered by directed career coaching and planning, with resources and support for all students from both school and home, starting in kindergarten, extending through middle school, and deepening throughout high school.

#### ● **Why this matters**

As schools grapple with the residual impacts of pandemic-induced learning loss, it's increasingly important to engage students in ways that connect education to their interests and future goals.<sup>[12]</sup> Middle school is a critical period, as students are most at risk of disengagement—especially if they find coursework irrelevant. Students want not just a breadth of exposure, but also hands-on, immersive experiences that bring to life the day-to-day responsibilities of different careers and this type of thoughtful career exploration can boost engagement—a key element of a successful middle school<sup>[13]</sup>. Career-connected learning has also been shown to boost school satisfaction, confidence in future planning, academic performance, and attendance, creating opportunities for students to prepare for their futures, while boosting school outcomes.<sup>[14],[15]</sup>

While research supports career exploration, student perspectives are even more revealing. When you ask middle school students directly, they express a strong desire to learn about career fields that are in demand, especially those that may be new to them. Students are also hungry for depth through experiences that are engaging, hands-on, and immersive, extending beyond the typical presentations, speakers, or assessments that they may have already seen in the classroom. These desires point to a need among students for stronger guidance as they navigate their career and postsecondary paths and for a more compelling understanding of the connection between what they learn in the classroom and future careers.<sup>[16]</sup>

### **Principle #4: Career exploration must be a shared and coordinated effort between schools and the broader community.**

Helping middle schoolers discover careers and aligned pathways should not be limited to the work of school counselors, but integrated into classroom instruction in collaboration with teachers and community workforce partners. States should work to increase professional learning opportunities for educators, and consider deploying other support personnel such as career counselors. Career exploration efforts should be supported by community-based organizations and intermediaries to support school efforts and build capacity, as well as employers to provide more hands-on opportunities, such as in-school or on-site visits and work-based learning. Each of these roles should be clarified and outlined in state policy.

#### ● **Why this matters**

Students typically do not have access to school counselors for a significant portion of their time in school, as most schools do not meet the ASCA-recommended student-counselor ratios; thus need the guidance from other adults in the building to talk about their interests and aligned careers.<sup>[17]</sup> States need to clarify roles and responsibilities for educators, administrators, work-based learning coordinators, and other student-facing staff so that these individuals understand how they can play a part in student career

advising; these can include helping students through individual career and academic planning processes, talking about career opportunities relevant to curricular content, and providing high-quality, hands-on experiences to facilitate these conversations. Similarly, intermediaries can help build capacity by designing and delivering pathways programming and engaging employers to serve as a partner in facilitating career exploration activities.<sup>[18]</sup>

## **Principle #5: Career exploration's impact should be incentivized, captured, and rewarded.**

Students need documentation that captures their career exploration experiences in a formalized career and academic planning process. To ensure quality delivery and enable continuous improvement, there needs to be clear standards, requirements, and accountability metrics for what quality middle school career exploration looks like, which should be reflected in state processes for accountability and data collection.

### ● **Why this matters**

Schools should establish a process that allows students to document their education and career goals and equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to achieve them.<sup>[19]</sup> These and other career exploration efforts, such as dedicated curricula, represent an opportunity to incentivize and reward schools for offering these experiences, and research supports that establishing clear and transparent goals can drive these behaviors.<sup>[20]</sup> Including career readiness in accountability systems with clear metrics to measure quality signals a state's prioritization of preparing students for their futures, helping to dedicate resources and establish continuous improvement mechanisms to ensure success.<sup>[21]</sup>

#### **About the Middle School Career Exploration Learning & Impact Network**

Britebound and Education Strategy Group (ESG) have convened five leading states into a Middle School Career Exploration Impact and Learning Network to accelerate the work of individual states while producing strategies and resources to catalyze work across the field as a whole. The inaugural member states include Arizona, Arkansas, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Washington. State teams—composed of state education agency, workforce development, and intermediary leaders—have engaged in a robust series of monthly virtual cross-state network sessions to share learnings and best practices to continue to advance their career exploration efforts. Through these discussions, the network developed this vision for what quality career exploration should look like for every middle school student.

## ENDNOTES

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