



Accountability & Reporting

Accountability Mechanisms to Assess Middle School Career Exploration

Accountability is a means of determining a school or district's performance against a standard of quality and meaningfully differentiating between schools or districts to offer support, incentives, and rewards. Incorporating middle school career exploration into state and federal accountability mechanisms signals a statewide commitment to ensuring middle schools provide students with quality experiences that enhance their academic, postsecondary training, and career planning. The metrics included in these mechanisms must be thoughtfully designed alongside the statewide data collection and reporting processes and published in state report cards to provide information on school performance in this area.

Most states across the country would likely benefit from selecting one or both of the following approaches to incorporating middle school career exploration into accountability systems they already have in place, while some states may leverage existing authority for local boards of education to create a local accountability mechanism to monitor this type of programming:

- 1) **Federal Accountability Mechanisms:** Federal accountability systems provide avenues for states to include career exploration at the middle school level in their measures for school and program quality. While these systems typically prioritize student performance and achievement data on assessments or programs, states should take advantage of the other allowable quality indicators of performance to communicate the value the state places on these experiences. Examples of ways to incorporate measures of career exploration in federal plans are outlined below:

ESSA Plans: The Every Student Success Act (ESSA) created a broad framework to capture school quality and student success that goes beyond student performance on state academic assessments. States can include these metrics if they allow for meaningful differentiation in school performance and are valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide. Metrics that states could include to capture middle school career exploration include measuring a school's percentage of students completing career and academic planning requirements, percentage of students that complete career exploration coursework, or percentage of students who complete the state's required number of career exploration activities.

- **State Example - Pennsylvania:** To help ensure that all students in Pennsylvania (PA) are on track for meaningful postsecondary engagement and success, the Pennsylvania Department of Education included a measure of students' career exploration, preparation, and readiness as part of their [ESSA plan](#) and has codified this process in their [code](#). The *Career Readiness Indicator* recognizes efforts to ensure that all students have access to career exploration and preparation activities that are standards-aligned and evidence-based. For middle school, PA measures the percentage of students who create an individualized career plan by the end of grade 8 and participate in career preparation activities aligned to the [Career Education and Work standards](#).

Perkins Plans: The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V) requires states to establish an accountability system to assess the state and state recipients in achieving statewide progress in career and technical education. One of the allowable measures of program quality may include *any other measure of student success in career and technical education that is statewide, valid, and reliable, and comparable across the state*. This presents an opportunity to include an indicator for middle school career exploration as part of measuring program quality, thereby encouraging schools to ensure students participate in these activities.

- **State Example: Delaware:** Delaware's CTE Accountability Policy includes an optional program quality metric, 5S4- Program Quality - Middle Grades, which is a percentage of middle school youth participating in middle grades CTE coursework and student advisement programs.

- 2) **State Accountability Mechanisms:** While ESSA is the primary mechanism to ensure school quality at the federal level, some states institute a separate accountability system with associated state report cards and/or issue district or school letter grades to set state-specific standards for quality. Like federal indicators, the metrics included in these accountability systems provide clear guidelines for what constitutes quality in a state, encouraging schools and districts to adhere to these standards to achieve and maintain good performance.

State Accreditation Models: Some states have a system of accrediting schools to ensure they meet the standards of quality outlined in their policies, thereby ensuring schools are fit to educate students according to the criteria set by the state. This mechanism can also be a way to incorporate middle school career exploration in this kind of state accountability model.

- **State Example - Kansas:** established a new accreditation model, Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA), to assess system/district-level accreditation. One of the KESA criteria includes Career Awareness and Guidance, which evaluates districts' adherence to student IPS development.

Separate State Accountability System: In addition to ESSA at the federal level, some states have instituted their own accountability systems at the state level to ensure district, school, and program quality.

- **State Example - Missouri:** One of the indicators used to assess districts in Missouri's School Improvement Program includes a measure of Success-Ready Students. A metric included in this standard is a student Individual Career Academic Plan (ICAP) developed by the 8th grade and based on career exploration experiences.



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Middle School Career Exploration Data Collection

This model policy outlines data collection requirements for the state to ensure that they are capturing district and school efforts to facilitate the career exploration requirements outlined in state policy. Quality data collection goes hand in hand with accountability efforts to meaningfully differentiate between schools, identify schools that need additional support to meet state requirements, and create a culture of continuous improvement to ensure that middle schools meet the state’s vision for career development.

Be it enacted by the (governing body) of (State):

Section 1. Definitions

- (1) “Career development framework” means the state framework that outlines career development expectations for each grade band in grades K through 12 that include career awareness, exploration, and preparation.
- (2) “Career exploration activity” means any educational programming, activity, or event that provides early exposure to jobs and industries and creates links between what students learn in school and their emerging career interests.
 - (a) 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 or professional skills, careers that are aligned to the changing future of workforce needs, and to upcoming transitions to high school.
 - (b) Career exploration activities may include without limitation activities designed to immerse students in experiences that provide an understanding of various in-demand career fields including but not limited to field trips, guest speakers, community service, job-shadows, career fairs, interviews, research projects, project-based learning, internships, and work-based learning.
- (3) “Department” means the (State) Department of Education.

- (4) “Individual Career and Academic Plan” or “ICAP” means a plan that is developed by the student in collaboration with their parents/caregivers and school personnel that is reviewed and updated annually beginning in the fifth grade.¹ The plan should guide students’ educational and career pathway choices, such as course selection, activity participation, and postsecondary planning, to prepare students for success after high school, and should adapt to the student’s changing interests, goals or career aspirations, as needed.
- (5) “Middle school” means a school consisting of grades five through eight (5-8) or any combination that includes grades five through eight (5-8). Middle schools serve children who are approximately 10-14 years of age.²
- (6) “Middle school career exploration” means any activity that allows students to develop an awareness of all career fields as defined by (*national or state career frameworks*) and investigate their own interests and aptitudes related to careers.³ Students gain a deeper understanding of career interests and related occupations to obtain the information needed to make connections between their education and career aspirations in order to make a plan for reaching their future goals.
- (7) “Local Education Agency”, also referred to as “school district” means a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within (*State*) for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of (*State*).
- (8) “Postsecondary” means education, training, and career experiences beyond high school graduation, inclusive of 2- and 4-year colleges and universities, technical schools, bootcamps, programs that confer professional licenses, industry certifications or certificates, and short-term training programs as defined by (*state workforce agency*).

Section 2. Authority

- (1) The (*State Department of Education*) has the authority to collect data that measures district’s delivery of career awareness and exploration metrics aligned to the state’s Career Development Framework.
 - (a) The department shall issue guidance to districts on reporting methods and timelines to fulfill the requirements of this section.

¹ States can use the starting grade that best meets their definition for middle school.

² States can adjust this grade band to fit their middle grades definition

³ States can use the National Career Clusters[®] Framework or state-specific career cluster frameworks as a guideline to introduce students to a variety of career paths.

- (2) The department has the authority to share data with (*State Workforce Agency*) to inform implementation of the state's education to workforce strategies toward goals set by both agencies.

Section 3. Data Collection and Reporting

- (1) Data collection must include the following metrics:

(Note: This section is customizable based on the state's middle school career exploration policies.)

- (a) Percentage of middle school students enrolled in, and successfully completing, career exploration coursework.
 - (b) Percentage of middle school students who have completed milestones outlined in the state's Individualized Career and Academic Plan (ICAP).
 - (c) Number, date, length, and frequency of individual career advising conversations with a trained counselor.
 - (d) Number, date, length, and frequency of student participation in additional career exploration activities and events, as outlined in definition of career exploration above.
- (2) Districts shall report the state's metrics for middle school career exploration to the department no later than June 30th of every year.
- (3) Data collected shall be reported on the state's public reporting system to provide students, families, educators, and policymakers with an understanding of school performance related to career exploration.