

Methodology

Survey Overview

Findings in this report originate from an online survey of 2,552 U.S. high school students and young adults, funded and sponsored by Britebound™ and fielded online between 22 April and 29 May 2025. The survey was administered and conducted by Rival Technologies. The survey explored participants' reflections on middle school career exploration experiences, preparedness for life after high school, career-related stress, confidence, and future planning.

The study population included:

- current high school students in grades 9–12, ages 14–18; and
- young adults ages 18–25 who were no longer enrolled in high school.

Participants were recruited from all 50 states and Washington, DC. The full survey instrument is below.

Sample Sourcing

Respondents were drawn from a non-probability sample sourced through Voices of Gen Z survey panel, provided by DashMR. Participants were drawn from multiple panels and received incentives designed to be fair, motivating, and in line with industry standards to ensure strong engagement and quality responses. All respondents completed the survey through the Rival survey platform. The survey was administered in English.

Respondents were eligible to participate if they reported:

- residing in the United States;
- being between the ages of 14 and 25; and
- either currently enrolled in grades 9–12 or no longer enrolled in high school.

Eighteen-year-old respondents currently enrolled in high school were classified within the high school sample, while 18-year-olds no longer enrolled in high school were classified within the out-of-high-school young adult sample.

To support data integrity, DashMR's standard pre-survey processes included use of Imperium security, Research Defender security, real-time USPS validation, Geo-IP check, email validation, and SMS validation. Post-survey responses were screened using Rival's fraud-detection and duplicate-prevention procedures. Additional quality-control procedures were applied during data processing to identify inattentive or low-quality responses.

Quotas

Soft quotas were used during data collection to approximate national distributions across key demographic characteristics and analytic age groups.

The sample was structured into approximately equal analytic groups:

- one-third high school students ages 14–18 (N=859), with an even split between grades 9–10 and grades 11–12;
- one-third out-of-high-school young adults ages 18–21 (N=848); and
- one-third out-of-high-school young adults ages 22–25 (N=845).

Regional quotas were aligned to U.S. Census benchmarks:

- Northeast (17%)
- Midwest (21%)
- South (38%)
- West (24%)

Race and ethnicity quotas included:

- White (55%)
- Hispanic or Latino (20%)
- Black or African American (14%)
- Asian or Asian American (6%)
- Multiracial or other race/ethnicity (5%)

Gender quotas were balanced evenly between male and female respondents.

Data Quality Checks

Following data collection, responses were evaluated using multiple indicators of survey quality, including survey completion time, straight-lining behavior, and duplicate-response screening. Responses flagged were removed prior to analysis.

Weighting

No post-stratification weights were applied; results are based on quota-controlled unweighted data.

Analysis

Data cleaning and statistical analyses were conducted using R.

Descriptive analyses examined respondents' experiences and perceptions related to middle school career exploration, preparedness, stress, confidence, and postsecondary planning.

To account for demographic and regional variation, multilevel modeling techniques were used for selected analyses. Continuous outcomes, including confidence and stress measures, were analyzed using multilevel linear regression models. Ordered categorical outcomes, including

Likert-scale preparedness measures, were analyzed using multilevel ordinal logistic regression models.

Limitations

As with all survey research, these findings are subject to sources of error beyond those captured by statistical models. This survey relied on a non-probability online sample, meaning respondents may differ from individuals who did not participate in ways that cannot be fully measured or adjusted statistically. Because this survey used a non-probability sample, traditional margin-of-error calculations based on probability sampling theory do not apply, and no measures of sampling precision are reported.

Although quotas were used to align the sample with national demographic benchmarks, unobserved differences between respondents and non-respondents may remain. Coverage limitations may also exist because participation required internet access and membership in online survey panels.

In addition, all survey findings rely on self-reported data and retrospective reflections about middle school experiences, which may be affected by recall bias, interpretation differences, or social desirability effects.

These findings should therefore be interpreted as descriptive and directional rather than as precise population estimates.

Middle School Lookback Questionnaire

Middle School Lookback Questions

Block 1: Career Exploration Availability and Start Time

Q1. [Ask all, Multi-select, Force response] Adapted from Q4 Teen Exploratory ExploreActivites

Which of the following career exploration opportunities **were available to you in middle school?**

1. Career counseling
2. Career fairs
3. Field trips to learn about careers
4. Guest speakers talking about careers
5. Informational interviews with professionals
6. Workplace tours
7. Job shadowing
8. Speaking with mentors
9. Career-related competitions
10. Career-technical education courses (shop class, cosmetology, robotics, woodworking, auto mechanics, etc.)
11. Class led by teacher
12. Class led by counselor
13. Project-based learning
14. Quizzes or tools to match my interests with possible careers
15. Individualized learning plan
16. Something else (please specify)
17. None of these

Q1a. [Ask all, Multi-select, Force response]

Which of these career exploration opportunities **did you do in middle school?**

1. **[Carry-forward answers from Q1]**

Q1b. [Ask if Q1a is 1-16, Anchored Likert Scale Single-select Matrix Table, Force response]

Were your **middle school** career exploration experiences helpful in figuring out your personal interests, your skills, or your career interests?

1. **[Carry-forward answers from Q1a]**
 1. Not helpful
 2. ...
 3. ...

4. Very helpful

Q1c. [Ask if Q1a is 1-16, Single-select Matrix Table, Force response]

For each of your **middle school** career exploration opportunities, were they one-time experiences or done throughout the year?

1. **[Carry-forward answers from Q1a]**
 1. One-time experience
 2. Done throughout the year

Q2. [Ask if Q1a is 1-16, Single-select Matrix Table, Force response]

Overall, were your **middle school** career exploration experiences **primarily** listening to someone speak or actively working on something?

1. Listening to someone
2. Actively working
3. Both about the same

Q3. [Ask if Q1a is 1-16, Anchored Likert Scale Single-select Matrix Table, Force response, Randomize]

Thinking about your career exploration opportunities **in middle school**, how much do you agree with the following statements: My career experiences...

1. Made what I was learning in school more relevant
2. Made being in school more fun
3. Made me or my friends more motivated to do schoolwork
4. Felt like a waste of time
 1. Strongly disagree
 2. Somewhat disagree
 3. Neutral
 4. Somewhat agree
 5. Strongly agree

Q4. [Ask all, Single select, Force response]

When is it best to start seriously thinking about skills and personal interests?

1. Elementary school (1st to 5th grade)
2. Middle school (6th to 8th grade)
3. Early high school (9th & 10th grade)
4. Late high school (11th & 12th grade)
5. After high school

Q5. [Ask all, Single select, Force response]

When is it best to start seriously thinking about careers?

1. Elementary school (1st to 5th grade)
2. Middle school (6th to 8th grade)
3. Early high school (9th & 10th grade)
4. Late high school (11th & 12th grade)
5. After high school

Q6. [Ask all, Open End, Force response] Adapted from 2020 Lookback Q27

Thinking back to **your time in middle school**, did you have an impactful experience that helped you think more about your future career and interests? Please describe that experience.

Block 2: Past and Present Education Path and Career Interests

Q7a. [Ask if S2 GradeLevel is 3, 4, 5 or 6, Single select, Force response] Adapted from 2018 Lookback Q2 & Q4 Teen Exploratory AfterHS

Which of these things do you expect to do **immediately after high school**?

1. 4-year college/university
2. 2-year college/community college
3. Graduate or professional degree (e.g., master's degree, PhD, law school, medical school)
4. Vocational, trade or technical school (e.g., culinary school, automotive school, beauty school)
5. Apprenticeship program
6. Internship
7. Non-college technical certification or boot camp program
8. Join the military
9. Join the family business
10. Start my own business
11. Gap year from school with the intention of continuing my education
12. Get a part-time paying job (not the family business)
13. Get a full-time paying job (not the family business)
14. Start a family
15. Take time off to decide my next step
16. Something else (please specify)
17. I haven't thought about it [\[exclusive\]](#)

Q7b. [Ask if S2 GradeLevel is 7, Multi-select, Force response] Adapted from 2018 Lookback Q2 & Q4 Teen Exploratory AfterHS

Which of these things did you do **after high school**? Please select all that apply.

1. 4-year college/university
2. 2-year college/community college

3. Graduate or professional degree (e.g., master's degree, PhD, law school, medical school)
4. Vocational, trade or technical school (e.g., culinary school, automotive school, beauty school)
5. Apprenticeship program
6. Internship
7. Non-college technical certification or boot camp program
8. Joined the military
9. Joined the family business
10. Started my own business
11. Gap year from school with the intention of continuing my education
12. Got a part-time paying job (not the family business)
13. Got a full-time paying job (not the family business)
14. Started a family
15. Took time off to decide my next step
16. Something else (please specify)

Q8. [Ask all, Single-select, Force response]

How prepared do/did you feel for your next step **after high school**?

1. Not prepared
2. Somewhat prepared
3. Mostly prepared
4. Very prepared

Q9. [Ask all, Multi-select, Force response] Adapted from 2020 Lookback Q33 & Q4 Teen Exploratory CareerTop1

When you were in middle school what fields were you interested in?

1. Architecture and Engineering
2. Arts, Culture, and Entertainment
3. Business, Management, and Administration
4. Communications
5. Community and Social Services
6. Education
7. Science and Technology
8. Installation, Repair, and Maintenance
9. Farming, Fishing, and Forestry
10. Government
11. Health and Medicine
12. Law and Public Policy
13. Sales
14. None of these [exclusive]

Q9a. [Ask all, Single select, Force response] Adapted from 2020 Education Lookback Q33 & Q4 Teen Exploratory CareerTop1

When you were in middle school what field were you **most** interested in?

1. [Carry-forward answers from Q9]

Q10a. [Ask if S2 GradeLevel is 3, 4, 5 or 6, Single select, Force response] Adapted from 2020 Education Lookback Q33 & Q34, & Q4 Teen Exploratory CareerTop1

What field are you **currently** most interested in?

1. Architecture and Engineering
2. Arts, Culture, and Entertainment
3. Business, Management, and Administration
4. Communications
5. Community and Social Services
6. Education
7. Science and Technology
8. Installation, Repair, and Maintenance
9. Farming, Fishing, and Forestry
10. Government
11. Health and Medicine
12. Law and Public Policy
13. Sales
14. None of these

Q10b. [Ask if S2 GradeLevel is 7, Single select, Force response] Adapted from 2020 Education Lookback Q33 & Q 34, & Q4 Teen Exploratory CareerTop1

What field are you **currently** pursuing/working in?

1. Architecture and Engineering
2. Arts, Culture, and Entertainment
3. Business, Management, and Administration
4. Communications
5. Community and Social Services
6. Education
7. Science and Technology
8. Installation, Repair, and Maintenance
9. Farming, Fishing, and Forestry
10. Government
11. Health and Medicine
12. Law and Public Policy
13. Sales
14. None of these

Q11. [Ask all, Single select, Force response] Adapted from Q4 Teen Exploratory SchoolGrades

Which one of these best describes the grades you got in middle school?

1. Mostly As

2. Mostly Bs
3. Mostly Cs
4. Mostly Ds
5. I got high grades in some subjects but low grades in others
6. Unsure

Block 3: Career Exploration Knowledge and Opinions

Q12_1-4. [Ask all, Rank, Force response] Adapted from 2020 Education Lookback Q19 & 2018 College Lookback Q12

In what order do you believe people should decide the following?

- _1. Their interests/strengths
- _2. The careers/jobs they're interested in
- _3. The level/type of education they'd like to pursue
- _4. The educational institutions/programs they want to attend

Q13. [Ask all, Multi-select, Force response, Randomize] Adapted from 2020 Education Lookback Q28 & 2018 College Lookback Q7

When you were **in middle school**, which of the following did you know about?

1. 4-year college/university
2. 2-year college/community college
3. Vocational, trade or technical school (e.g., culinary school, automotive school, beauty school)
4. Apprenticeship program
5. Internship
6. Non-college technical certification or boot camp program
7. None of these [\[anchor, exclusive\]](#)

Q14. [Ask if selected Q13 choice 2-6, Multi-select, Force response, Randomize] Adapted from 2020 Education Lookback Q32

How did you learn about those education and training opportunities other than 4-year college?

1. Teacher
2. School counselor
3. Social media
4. Online search
5. Online quizzes or tools
6. Family members
7. Friends

8. Through a job
9. I always knew this is what I wanted to do
10. Something else (please specify) [\[anchor\]](#)
11. Unsure [\[anchor, exclusive\]](#)

Q15. [Ask all, Multi-select, Force response, Randomize]

Which of the following do you believe **should be taught in middle school**?

1. How to identify your skills and strengths
2. How to identify your interests
3. How to match your specific skills and strengths with potential careers
4. How to match your interests with potential careers
5. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills
6. Life skills (time management, financial literacy, organization)
7. Leadership skills
8. Social and emotional skills (self-awareness, self-management, social skills)
9. Career-readiness skills (resume-writing, interview skills, professional etiquette)
10. The education requirements for different careers
11. How what you're learning in school connects to different career paths
12. Career fields that are predicted to grow or decline
13. Salary and benefits for different careers
14. Something else (please specify) [\[anchor\]](#)

Q16. [Ask all, Multi-select, Force response, Randomize]

Which of the following **were you taught in middle school**?

1. How to identify your skills and strengths
2. How to identify your interests
3. How to match your specific skills and strengths with potential careers
4. How to match your interests with potential careers
5. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills
6. Life skills (time management, financial literacy, organization)
7. Leadership skills
8. Social and emotional skills (self-awareness, self-management, social skills)
9. Career-readiness skills (resume-writing, interview skills, professional etiquette)
10. The education requirements for different careers
11. How what you're learning in school connects to different career paths
12. Career fields that are predicted to grow or decline
13. Salary and benefits for different careers
14. Something else (please specify) [\[anchor\]](#)
15. None of these [\[anchor, exclusive\]](#)

Q16a. [Ask if Q16 is 1-14, Single-select, Force response]

What did you find **most helpful** to learn about?

1. **[Carry-forward answers from Q16]**

Block 4: Career Exploration Satisfaction and Beliefs

Q17_1-3. [Ask all, Single select Matrix Table, Force response] Adapted from Q4 Teen

Exploratory AgreeResources

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the statements below?

[illegible]

Q18. [Ask all, Likert Scale single select, Force response] Adapted from 2020 Education Lookback Q20 & 2018 College Lookback Q9

Overall, how satisfied are you with the education decisions you've made **after middle school**?

1. Very dissatisfied
2. Somewhat dissatisfied
3. Neutral
4. Somewhat satisfied
5. Very satisfied

Q19. [Ask all, Open end, Force response] Adapted from 2018 Lookback Q10

Please explain why you were [INSERT Q18 choice] with the education decisions you made **after middle school**. Please be as specific as possible.

Q20. [Ask all, Anchored Likert Scale Single-select Matrix Table, Force response, Randomize]

Thinking back to **your time in middle school**, how much do you agree with the following statements? [Some choices adapted from 2020 Lookback Writeup and 2018 Lookback Survey Q8]

1. I'd be more engaged in school if I understood how what we were learning was connected to the careers I was interested in
 2. Career exploration should take place in schools
 4. Every student should be given the tools and opportunities to explore their future
 5. Career exploration in middle school is more important for kids who don't plan on going to college
 6. Thinking about careers in middle school makes it less overwhelming later
 7. When I was in middle school, I felt pressure to go to a 4-year college
1. Strongly disagree
 2. ...
 3. ...
 4. ...
 5. Strongly agree

Q21. [Ask all, Rank, Force response]

Think about the following things that **middle school career exploration** can help students do. Please rank which of these you feel are most important **for middle schoolers**.

- _1. Understanding their skills and personal interests
- _2. Understanding their career interests
- _3. Gaining awareness of different career pathways
- _4. Understanding job pay range and availability of different jobs

Q22. [Ask all, Anchored Likert Scale Single-select Matrix Table, Force response, Randomize]

Adapted from 2020 Lookback Q24 & Q26, & 2018 Lookback Q23

Thinking back to choices you made or didn't make back **when you were in middle school**, how much do you agree with the following statements: I wish I had...

1. Taken academics more seriously
 2. Participated in more extra-curricular programs
 3. Let myself have more fun
 4. Considered more careers that might have interested me
 5. Thought more about how my skills and interests would fit with possible careers
 6. Had more career experiences where I was actively working on something
 7. Considered learning more about vocational or CTE-focused courses
 8. Thought more deeply about my education plans for after high school
 9. Learned more about non-college options for after high school
 10. Spent more time speaking with trusted adults in my life about my future career plans
1. Strongly disagree
 2. ...
 3. ...
 4. ...
 5. Strongly agree

Block 5: Influences and Stress

Q23. [Ask all, Multi-select, Force response] Adapted from 2018 Lookback Q19 & Q4 Teen Explore Influence

Which of these was a **significant influence** on your career and education planning **when you were in middle school**? Please select all that apply.

1. Parents/guardians
2. Family members besides your parents/guardians
3. Friends/classmates
4. School teachers
5. Coach/leader of an extracurricular activity
6. Media (news, TV/movies, video games, social media, etc.)
7. Boss or coworker
8. Community leader (religious leader, business owner, local role model, etc.)
9. Guidance/school/college counselor
10. Professional advisor not associated with a school or college
11. Other (please specify)
12. None of these [exclusive]

Q24. [Ask is selected Q23 choice 1-10, Anchored Likert Scale Single-select Matrix Table, Force response] Adapted from 2018 Lookback Q20 & Q4 Teen Explore Influence

How helpful would you say these significant influences were with respect to planning for your education and career?

1. [Carry-forward answers from Q23]

1. Not at all helpful
2. ...
3. ...
4. Very helpful

Q25. [Ask all, Slider, Force response] Adapted from Q4 Teen Explore Stress

Thinking back to **your time in middle school**, how much stress did you feel **about your future**.

0 = no stress at all, and... 10 = Almost more stress than I could bear

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Stress Level ()



Q26. [Ask all, Slider, Force response]

Currently, how much stress do you feel **about your future**?

0 = no stress at all, and... 10 = Almost more stress than I can bear

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Stress Level ()



Q27. [Ask if Q25 is >1, Multi-select, Force response, Randomize] Adapted from 2020 Lookback Q22, 2018 Lookback Q21, & Q4 Teen Explore WhyStress

Thinking back to **your time in middle school**, which of the following were major sources of stress? Please select all that apply.

1. Living up to my family's expectations
2. Living up to my own expectations
3. Picking the right career for me
4. Doing as well as my friends were doing
5. Being good enough to play in a sport at the high school level or beyond
6. Being among the best in performing arts
7. Getting/maintaining high grades in my classes
8. Social pressures (being popular/accepted by my peers)
9. Relationship pressures
10. Thinking about what I need to do to reach my future goals
11. Being able to afford to continue my education
12. Something else (please specify) [\[anchor\]](#)
13. None of these [\[anchor, exclusive\]](#)

Q28. [Ask if 26 is >1, Multi-select, Force response, Randomize]

Which of these **are now major sources of stress**? Please select all that apply. [Adapted from 2020 Lookback Q23 & 2018 Lookback Q22]

1. Living up to my family's expectations
2. Living up to my own expectations
3. Picking the right career for me
4. Doing as well as my friends were doing
5. Being good enough to play in a sport at the high school level or beyond
6. Being among the best in performing arts
7. Getting/maintaining high grades in my classes
8. Social pressures (being popular/accepted by my peers)
9. Relationship pressures
10. Thinking about what I need to do to reach my future goals
11. Being able to afford to continue my education after high school
12. Something else (please specify) [\[anchor\]](#)
13. None of these [\[anchor, exclusive\]](#)

Q29. [Ask all, Anchored Likert Scale Single-select Matrix Table, Force response, Randomize]
Adapted from 2018 College Lookback Survey Q25 & N Q4 Teen Exploratory WhySure

Thinking back to **your time in middle school**, how important were each of the following to you when thinking about your future after college?

1. Having a job you are good at
2. Having a job you love

3. Having a good work-life balance (time to enjoy your own interests and hobbies)
4. Having a high paying job
5. Having a reliable job
6. Having a job that impresses friends and family
7. Having a job that helps others or gives back to the community
 1. Not at all important
 2. ...
 3. ...
 4. ...
 5. Very important

Q30. [Ask all, Anchored Likert Scale Single-select Matrix Table), Force response]

Last question! **Think back to when you were graduating middle school**, how confident were you about the following? [Adapted from 2020 Lookback Q25]

1. Knowing the job/career options best for my future goals
2. Believing my education choices would lead to good career options
3. Planning for my life after school (e.g., continue my education, become certified in a trade, enter the workforce, go into the military, etc.)
4. Having a good understanding of my own skills
5. Having a good understanding of my own interests
 - a. Not confident
 - b.
 - c. ...
 - d. Very confident