



Guiding the Way:

School Counselors
on Career Readiness

Introduction

As the landscape of postsecondary education and the entry-level workforce continues to evolve, school counselors play a central role in guiding students through increasingly complex education-to-career pathways. Rising interest in alternatives to traditional four-year college degrees, growing participation in career and technical education (CTE), and emerging tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping how students plan for life after high school. At the same time, school counselors are responding to increasingly complex student needs while leveraging data-informed practices to deliver comprehensive programs and demonstrate their impact.

To better understand how school counselors navigate these realities, Britebound™, in partnership with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), conducted a national survey of school counselors across K-12 school settings, focusing on topics related to career readiness. This quantitative online survey was completed by 600 school counselors from September 25 to November 4, 2025. The full survey methodology can be found [here](#).

This survey is part of Britebound's Youth Career Readiness Outlook, a new research series exploring what it means to be ready for life after high school from the perspectives of young people and the adults who support them—parents, educators, school counselors, and employers. Drawing on primary research, each report examines key aspects of teen career readiness, including education plans, skill-building, and career aspirations. Together, the series offers a comprehensive look at how today's youth are navigating their paths toward a bright future.

Our findings from this research indicate differing measures and interpretations of career readiness success among school counselors, existing activities and needs, the role of career specialists in their schools, and how tools and emerging technologies are shaping their approach to career readiness.



Key Findings

The survey results point to several notable trends regarding school counselors' efforts to support student self-understanding, exploration of educational and career options, and postsecondary planning, amid structural constraints:

- * **Career readiness success is defined differently and is challenging to measure.** While K12 school and district level accountability measures tend to emphasize academic factors, graduation rates or college-going rates, 58% of high school counselors say the top indicator is student awareness of all available postsecondary options; about half (52%) of middle school counselors say it is student awareness of their skills and interests; and elementary school counselors say it is gaining knowledge and exploring possibilities for the future.
- * **School counselors emphasize a developmental progression in career readiness across grade levels.** Elementary counselors focus on fostering early curiosity and exploration via open-ended learning; middle school counselors prioritize building students' self-awareness of skills and interests; and high school counselors emphasize developing students' awareness of postsecondary options.
- * **Access to career readiness opportunities varies widely by geography and school level.** Middle school counselors seek more curricula on trades and technical careers (60%) and guidance for integrating career readiness (54%), while high school counselors prioritize improving support for local workforce information (61%), professional development (58%), and family communication about non-degree pathways (51%). Over 50% of both middle and high school counselors considered more career exploration

tools and experiential opportunities important improvements.

- * **Awareness of nondegree pathways is increasing across grade levels.** The majority of school counselors (90%) reported increased student interest in nondegree pathways, with 78% reporting parental support, yet only 47% of school counselors incorporate nondegree pathway awareness as a measure of career readiness.
- * **Career specialists are valued, but clearer roles and more collaboration time with school counselors would increase their impact.** Of the 45% of high school counselors with a dedicated career specialist, 87% reported effective collaboration. More time for school counselors to collaborate with career specialists would be valuable.
- * **School counselors seek better tools and increased time and staff for individualized support.** School counselors expressed a desire for student-centered metrics that track engagement, reflection, and learning over time, alongside a broader focus on diverse postsecondary outcomes such as the workforce, military service, apprenticeships, and trades. In addition, school counselors would like to have data systems designed to inform ongoing practice rather than generate one-time compliance reports.
- * **AI support of career readiness is emerging, largely through individual experimentation rather than coordinated strategy or policy.** A relatively small portion of high school (38%) and middle school (28%) counselors use AI for student-facing career readiness planning.



Defining and measuring success in career readiness

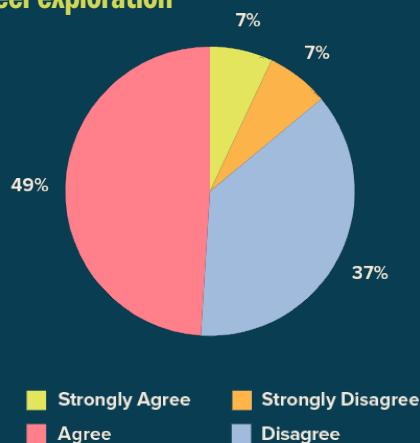
What school counselors see as “success”

School counselors most often described success as students building awareness of options and developing clarity about interests, skills, and next steps. Perceptions of appropriateness varied by grade level with respect to the leading indicator of successful career readiness. Among high school counselors, 58% cited awareness of all available postsecondary options as a top indicator of successful career readiness. Middle school counselors most often pointed to students’ awareness of skills and interests (52%), while elementary school counselors focused on early curiosity and exposure (reported in open-ended responses).

Where accountability measures help — and where they fall short

Overall, 56% of school counselors agree or strongly agree that their school/district measures success effectively.

Agreement Level: Overall, my school/district is effective in measuring students’ self-discovery and career exploration



When measurement felt effective, school counselors described structured activities and systems for capturing student learning or planning. Quotes from school counselors who agreed that their current measurement practices are effective include:

“I agree due to our state required lessons that cover career exploration, skills, post grad options as well as course planner.”

—Middle School Counselor, Suburban, Georgia

“I agree because the school district uses data from the campuses to measure career exploration and college opportunities. The campuses also offer many opportunities for students to visit with colleges, trade school reps, and military to find more options.”

—High School Counselor, Suburban, Texas

“My school has students fill out a packet that assesses their skills, knowledge, interests, goals, and strengths regarding academics and career development.”

—Elementary School Counselor, Rural, New York



Among the 44% of school counselors who feel that their school/district does not measure success effectively, respondents described common challenges: limited quantitative measures, lack of follow-through on collected data, metrics that are overly focused on college, and metrics that prioritize compliance over meaningful exploration. Quotes from school counselors who think their current measurement practices are not effective include:

“Data collection is more qualitative than quantitative, so actual provable data is limited.”

—High School Counselor, Urban, Connecticut

“Students complete an interest inventory... but no one ever looks at it.”

—High School Counselor, Suburban, Washington

“We only look at grad rates and college-bound; there needs to be a way to measure trades, workforce, military.”

—High School Counselor, Urban, Nebraska

“My school offers opportunities, but I am not confident that our data is always reflective of the opportunities available.”

—High School Counselor, Suburban, Kansas

“At the middle school level, it is minimal. At the high school level, the focus on this support is mostly on high-achieving students.”

—Middle School Counselor, Rural, Idaho

Key needs identified by school counselors

In open-ended comments, respondents consistently emphasized the need for measurements that capture student growth, rather than relying solely on participation data or completion rates. They called for student-centered metrics that capture engagement, reflection, and learning over time; a focus on broader postsecondary outcomes beyond the traditional degree, including the workforce, military service, apprenticeships, and trades; and data systems that inform ongoing practice, rather than serving as one-time compliance reports.

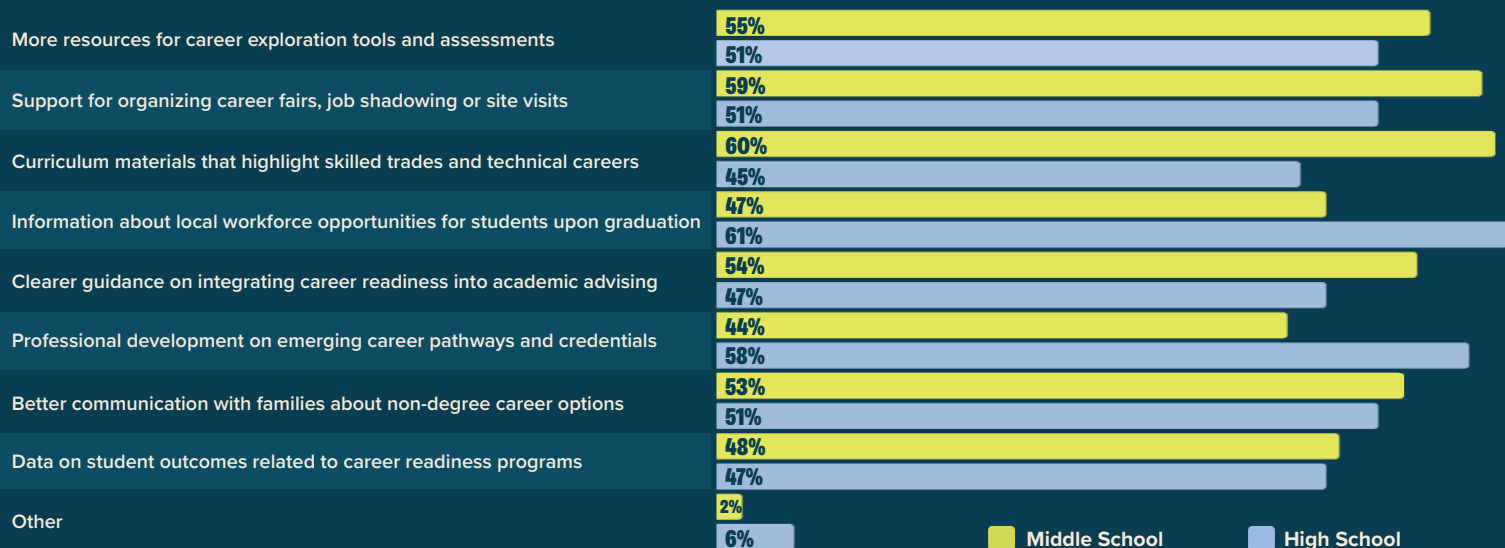
Exploration opportunities and resource needs

✶ High school: Wide variety of career readiness offerings, but uneven access

High school counselors described a wide range of career readiness programming in their schools, including CTE pathways, work-based learning opportunities, and (in some districts) dedicated career centers. Despite growing momentum around CTE, with 90% of school counselors reporting increased student interest in non-degree pathways and 78% noting that parents want their children to explore these pathways, only 47% of school counselors use CTE awareness as a measure of career readiness.



Middle School and High School Counselors: When thinking specifically about helping students with career readiness, what would be most helpful to you?



At the same time, many school counselors reported that access can be limited by capacity constraints, geographic barriers, or eligibility requirements—raising equity concerns. School counselors in rural schools, in particular, cited limited hands-on options and space constraints, as well as a need for better information about local opportunities for students after graduation.

High school counselors indicated that the following would be most helpful to support career readiness work with students: information about local workforce opportunities for students upon graduation (61%) and professional development on emerging career pathways and credentials (58%).

* Middle school: Inconsistent programming and pressure to select a career pathway early

While some middle schools offer career fairs, guest speakers, or short daily career-focused courses, many school counselors described these as inconsistent or lacking a coherent progression. Some expressed concern about structures and systems that increase pressure

for students to choose pathways prematurely, since interests and aspirations can shift significantly during adolescence. As one middle school counselor explained, “We are just trying to cultivate curiosity and hope.” Pathways work in the middle grades should be broad and not result in a student feeling “stuck” in any one path

At the middle school level, school counselors identified different priorities than high school counselors regarding the most helpful components to their work supporting student career readiness. They most often wanted curriculum materials that highlight skilled trades and technical careers (60%) and support for organizing career fairs, job shadowing, or site visits (59%).

* Elementary school: Robust interest but limited structures

Unsurprisingly, school counselors in elementary schools reported the least formalized approach to career readiness. School counselors at this level described career exploration as frequently overshadowed by academic and behavioral



priorities, with minimal—if any—time to work with students around developmentally appropriate career-related topics. Even so, elementary school counselors emphasized the importance of early exposure to strengths-based and curiosity-building curricula, paired with administrative support to allow meaningful implementation.

Taken together, while the emphasis of school counselors on priorities for improvement varied across school levels, a shared need for

the capacity and structural support required to deliver sustained, high-quality career exploration experiences was described by school counselors across grade levels.

“[We need] ways to help teachers integrate career into their curriculums and strategies for counselors to support after. It shouldn’t be seen as a separate issue—should be integrated throughout a student’s day”

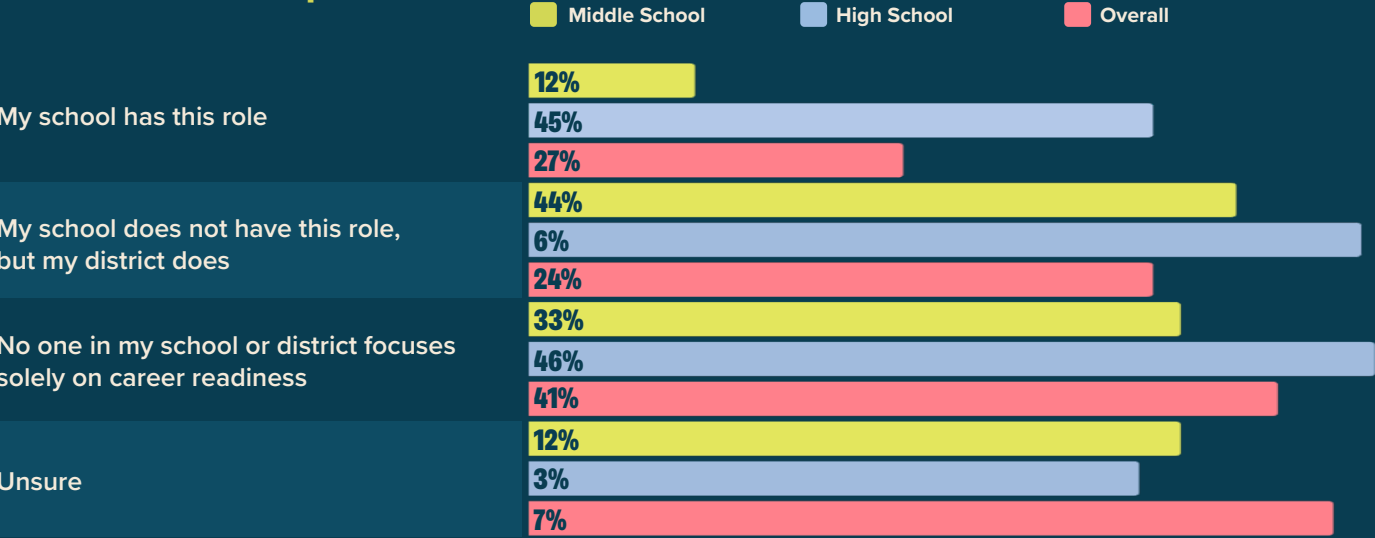
—Middle School Counselor, Suburban, Colorado

Career specialists

Presence and perceived value

Career specialists (professionals who specifically focus on helping students navigate their career development journey) are valued as collaborators with school counselors, when they are available. Nearly half (45%) of high school counselors reported having a dedicated career specialist at their school. Nearly all (84%) rated collaboration as effective—43% “very effective” and 41% “somewhat effective.” As described by school counselors, collaboration with career specialists benefits students

Does your school have a career coach/specialist role (in addition to the school counselor role) solely dedicated to career development, career readiness and self-discovery of skills, interests, and career placement?

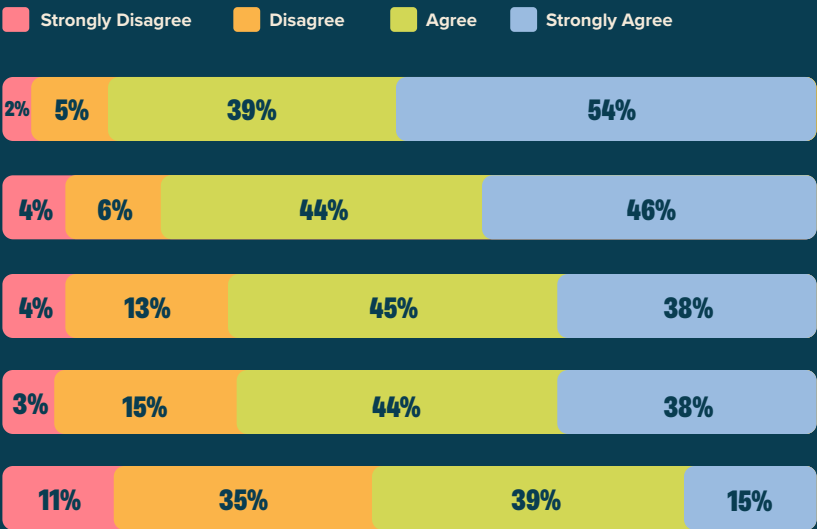


through experiential learning, mock interviews, and individualized planning.

Role clarity and collaboration

Nearly all school counselors (90%) agree that they share common goals for student success with career specialists and agree that collaboration between the career specialist and school counselor improves student career readiness (93%). However, many school counselors express a desire for more clearly defined roles, more time to collaborate effectively, and more explicit leadership support for collaborative efforts. While 82% of school counselors whose schools have a career specialist on staff say their school leadership supports collaboration, only 54% say that they have adequate time

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about working with career specialists



to collaborate effectively.

Examples of how school counselors work collaboratively with career specialists:

“We work together, along with teachers, to make sure every student has a purposeful plan when they leave us.”
—High School Counselor, Suburban, Arizona

“We created Blueprints aligned to the 16 career clusters and facilitated activities

ahead of course requests.”
—High School Counselor, Suburban, Wisconsin

“We then help our students apply for our local trade schools. It takes a lot of coordination working out applications, planning buses, and checking students’ grades and attendance together throughout the year.”
—High School Counselor, Rural, Arkansas

Tools, technology, and the emerging role of AI

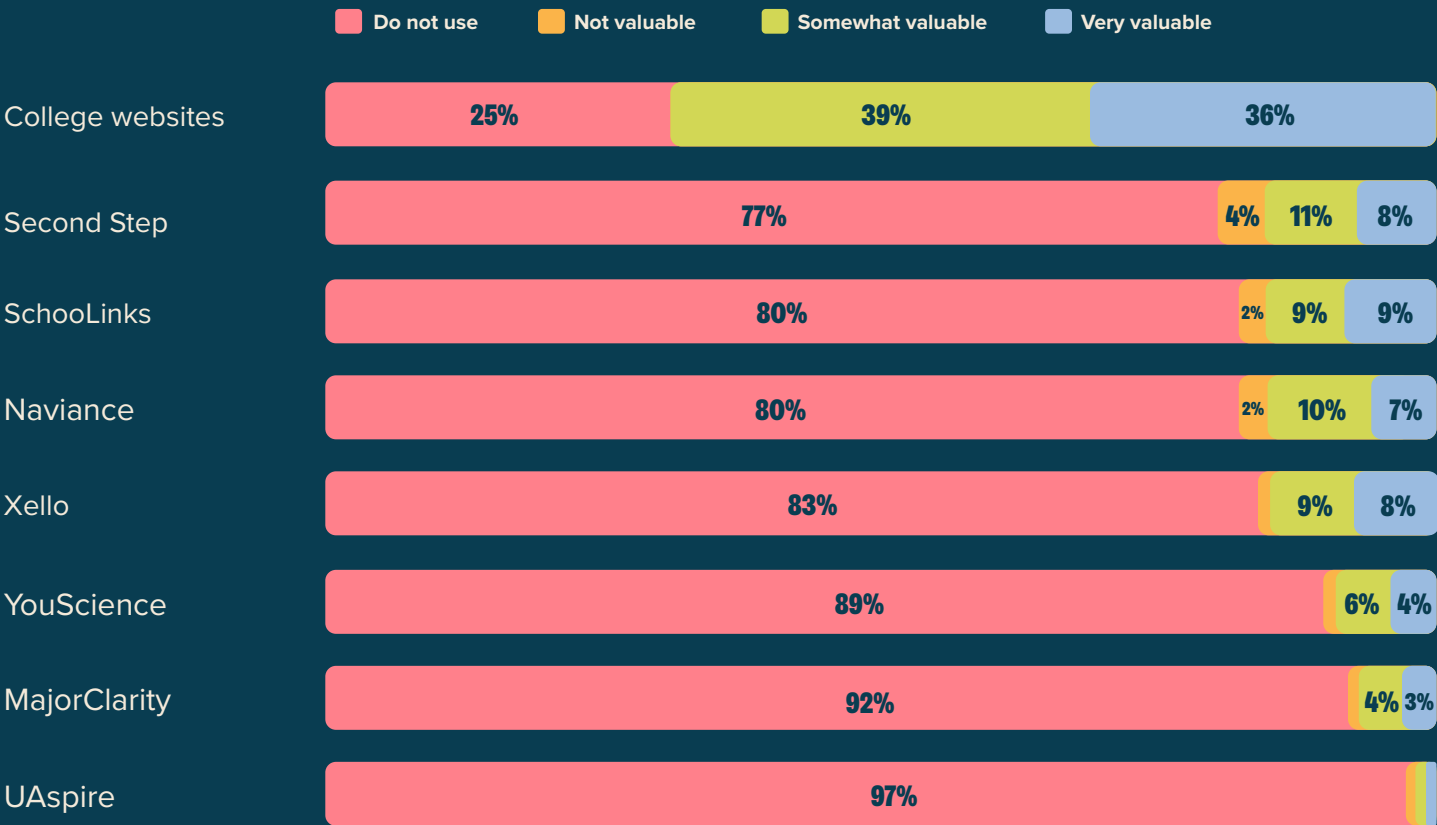
Tools counselors use

School counselors reported using a wide range of tools to support career exploration, though no resource was universally rated as “very valuable.” College websites were the most widely used, particularly at the high school level. Career research tools and state-specific platforms were frequently cited as valuable, though experiences varied based on usability and training.

AI use in career readiness

AI use to support career readiness is gradually increasing in school counseling practice, though adoption remains slow and is often driven by individual experimentation rather than coordinated planning. Among high school counselors, 38% reported using AI primarily for resume building and interview preparation (29%), recommending postsecondary programs aligned to career goals (14%), and analyzing student interests and matching them with potential career paths (12%). Among middle school counselors, 28% reported using AI, most often for analyzing interests and matching students with potential career paths (15%).

Which of the following tools do you use in your work and how valuable are they to you?



Conclusion

There is a strong desire among school counselors to support meaningful career exploration while addressing the systemic barriers that limit their impact. Across grade levels, school counselors called for more authentic, student-centered metrics that track growth over time, a unified system for measuring career readiness beyond high school graduation and college-going rates, and earlier, more consistent exposure to career exploration. School counselors also emphasized the need for engaging tools rather than compliance-focused systems, clearer roles and adequate time for collaboration with career specialists, reduced caseloads and non-counseling responsibilities, and guidance on the ethical use of AI to support career readiness.

School counselors occupy a pivotal position in helping students navigate an increasingly complex array of postsecondary options. The

2025 survey highlights both the commitment school counselors bring to this work and the structural challenges that constrain their effectiveness. While many schools have made progress in expanding career exploration opportunities, particularly at the high school level, gaps remain—especially in the early grades and in measuring meaningful outcomes.

Addressing these challenges will require coordinated efforts among districts, policymakers, and education partners to redesign systems, invest in school counselor capacity, and ensure that career exploration is treated not as a checklist, but as a developmental process that begins early and evolves over time. Doing so will better equip school counselors to help students discover their strengths, explore possibilities, and make informed decisions about what comes next after high school.

Citation Guide

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Teen Perspectives

In an online community of teens curated by Britebound called Project Waypoint, some youth offered these reflections on their school counselor experiences:

“She is very kind. She guides me down the right path and shows me options that will work for me.”

—Female, Grade 8, Urban, Missouri

“I do feel like I’m getting the information that I need. She answers all of my questions related to my courses and any other concerns about school that I have.”

—Female, Grade 12, Suburban, Alabama

“My counselor offers suggestions and possible options for whatever career I am looking into.”

—Male, Grade 10, Urban, Massachusetts

“I definitely feel I’m getting all the information I need. My counselor is very helpful in my future planning by telling me about different career paths I could take. We talk about the different jobs and how much college it takes.”

—Male, Grade 9, Suburban, Washington

“My school counselor is very helpful with getting me set up during high school to get into a college, but we have a different counselor that I would need to talk to help me figure out college plans.”

—Male, Grade 10, Suburban, Oregon

“My school counselor is very cool. She is not overbearing and pushy. She starts with priorities and then we make it fun to discuss. It’s a safe and fun zone. I do feel as though I am getting the information I need to compete.”

—Female, Grade 7, Rural, Louisiana

“My school counselor is very good with providing options and guidance. I myself always go with specific questions that I have in mind which may also be the reason our discussions are very productive.”

—Female, Grade 12, Urban, Texas

“She helps me with contacting the relevant people for things that I need and finding the information I need on certain programs and schools.”

—Female, Grade 11, Suburban, Illinois

“She helps me find scholarships and make sure I have everything I need in order to succeed. I do feel like I receive the information that I need.”

—Female, Grade 12, Suburban, Texas



About Britebound

Britebound™, formerly American Student Assistance (ASA), is a national nonprofit whose mission is to inspire young people to explore their passions, experiment with careers, and navigate a path to a meaningful and rewarding future, through access to career readiness information, resources, and experiences for all. Britebound helps middle and high school students to know themselves—their strengths and their interests—and understand their education and career options so that they can make informed decisions. Britebound fulfills its mission by providing free, digital experiences including Futurescape®, Future Network, and GoZig, directly to millions of students, and through advocacy, impact investing, research, thought leadership, and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others. Britebound fosters a generation of confident, crisis-proof young people who are ready for whatever path comes next after high school.

To learn more about Britebound, visit britebound.org

About the American School Counselor Association (ASCA)

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) professional organization based in Alexandria, Va. ASCA promotes student success by expanding the image and influence of school counseling through leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. ASCA helps school counselors guide their students toward academic achievement, career planning and social/emotional development to help today's students become tomorrow's productive, contributing members of society. Founded in 1952, ASCA has a network of 53 state and territory associations and a membership of more than 40,000 school counseling professionals.

For additional information on the American School Counselor Association, visit schoolcounselor.org





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