



YOUTH CAREER READINESS OUTLOOK

Looking Back, Moving Forward:

Middle Schoolers Turn Curiosity into
Career Direction

Introduction

Middle school is often framed as a transitional stage, an in-between space marked by rapid change and, at times, uncertainty. It is also a formative period when young people begin to make sense of who they are and what they might become. During these years, curiosity expands, interests start to take shape, and students become increasingly open to new ideas and possibilities. Middle school is not simply a bridge between childhood and adolescence—it is an exciting and critical point at which curiosity and exploration can begin to translate into direction.

The middle grades therefore represent a powerful opportunity to introduce students to experiences that help them understand their strengths, explore potential career pathways, and begin envisioning their futures. Early exposure to real-world applications of learning can build confidence, strengthen engagement, and support more informed decision-making as students enter high school. When implemented equitably, these experiences can also play an important role in reducing disparities in preparedness, ensuring that all young people, regardless of background, have the opportunity to imagine and pursue futures aligned with their skills, interests, and goals.

An essential question remains: to what extent have youth actually had access to these kinds of experiences during the middle grades? Britebound™, a national nonprofit at the forefront of helping young people navigate education and career pathways, sought to address this question through a nationwide survey of high school students and young adults. Drawing on recent experiences and the perspective of hindsight, respondents reflected on what opportunities were most impactful, what they felt was missing, and how their middle school experiences influenced their subsequent educational and career decisions.

This report is part of *Youth Career Readiness Outlook*, a new research series exploring what it means to be prepared for life after high school from the perspectives of young people and the adults who support them, including parents, educators, counselors, and employers. Drawing on primary research, each report examines key aspects of teen career readiness, such as education planning, skill development, and career aspirations. Together, the series offers a comprehensive view of how today's youth are navigating pathways toward their futures.

In this installment of the *Youth Career Readiness Outlook* series, we surveyed 2,552 young people ages 14–25 across the United States in spring 2025. The sample is balanced to reflect national demographics, providing a broad snapshot of how young people perceived and experienced career exploration during the middle school years. The full survey methodology and questionnaire can be found [here](#). Findings indicate that while most students who recently completed middle school view it as a critical time for career exploration, fewer than half report having access to the planning resources they needed. Gaps in early preparation may contribute to increased stress as students advance through school, particularly for those facing systemic barriers. These results underscore the need for more intentional, targeted approaches to delivering career exploration experiences during the middle grades.



Key Findings

The survey results highlight five key trends in middle school career exploration experiences:

- **Middle school sets the stage.** Young people consistently identify middle school as a critical period for exploring their skills and interests. Nearly 75% agree that career exploration should begin during the middle school years, and about 8 in 10 believe that every student should have opportunities to explore their future during this time.
- **Students want stronger connections to real-world relevance.** Students emphasize the importance of connecting learning to real-world applications, with 70% stating they would have been more engaged in school if they better understood how their education related to careers of interest, and over half agreeing that career exploration made school feel more enjoyable (54%) or relevant (52%).
- **Young people prioritize fulfillment and fit.** When asked what matters most in a job, respondents ranked “having a job you love” (71%) and “having a job you are good at” (70%) above pay, prestige, or external validation. They are seeking work that aligns with who they are.
- **Future-related stress rises with age.** Young people report significantly higher levels of stress about their futures compared to when they were in middle school. Only 54% feel confident in their ability to plan next steps or identify careers aligned with their goals.
- **Not all students feel equally prepared:** Confidence, preparedness, and stress levels vary across gender, academic performance, school type, pathway, language background, and disability status. A one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient; more targeted and responsive supports are needed to ensure all students benefit.



Middle School as a Foundation

Prior research identifies middle school as a crucial period for students to begin developing a sense of who they are and what they may want to pursue in the future¹. High school students and young adults, reflecting on their own experiences, reinforce this view, describing middle school as a foundational stage for building self-awareness, including understanding their skills and interests, that supports more effective career exploration in high school and beyond. Nearly 75% of survey respondents agreed that career exploration should take place during the middle school grades, and approximately 80% agreed that every student should have access to the tools and opportunities needed to explore their future at this stage.

“Middle school let my interests emerge and put me on a track that I’m still on and will be on for the rest of my life.”

—18 years old, Female, White, North Dakota

Recent middle school students also emphasized the importance of connecting learning to real-world applications. Seventy percent stated they would have been more engaged in school if they better understood how what they were learning related to careers of interest. More than half (54%) agreed that career exploration experiences made school more enjoyable, while 52% reported that it increased the relevance of what they were learning. However, the impact of these experiences depends on their quality. Sixty-three percent of recent middle school students expressed a desire for more “hands-on” opportunities, and nearly 30% felt that their middle school career exploration

“As a middle schooler, I still feel like I didn’t have enough experience or information going into high school. I wasn’t taught enough about career development, internships, professionalism... it wasn’t in-depth enough to prepare me for future endeavors.”

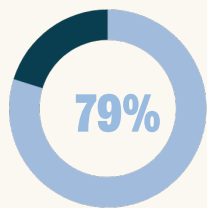
—22 years old, Male, Asian/Asian-American, California

experiences were not a good use of their time. Many also expressed regrets regarding missed opportunities for deeper exploration, with close to 70% wishing they had considered a wider range of careers and 67% wishing they had more clearly connected their skills and interests to potential career paths.

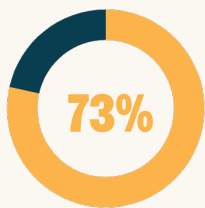
¹ Career Exploration in Middle School: Setting Students on the Path to Success, Association for Career and Technical Education and Extending the Runway: A National Analysis of Middle School Career Exploration, Education Strategy Group and Britebound



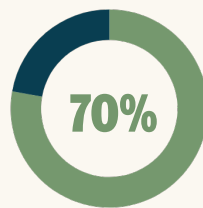
Career Exploration Enhances Engagement and Relevance in Middle School



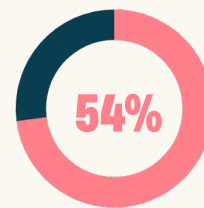
Students should have tools and opportunities to explore their future in middle school.



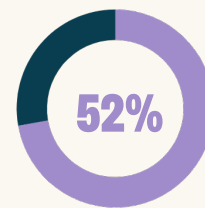
Career exploration should take place in middle schools



Would be more engaged if learning connected to careers



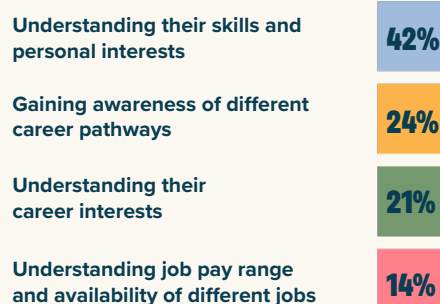
Middle school career exploration experiences made being in school more fun



Middle school career experiences made what I was learning in school more relevant

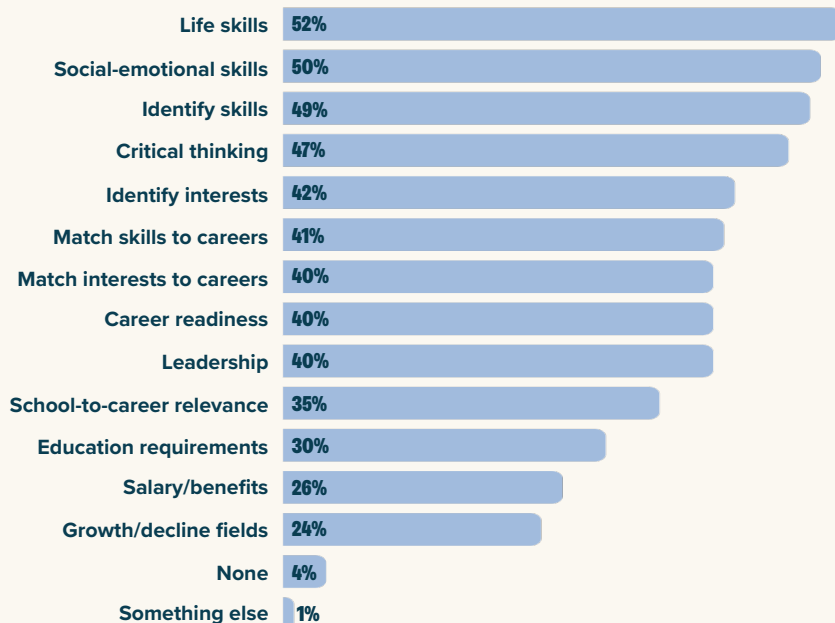
The views of recent middle school students and young adults align with prior research in emphasizing that career exploration at this stage should focus primarily on self-discovery, including understanding one's own skills and interests, rather than on detailed knowledge of specific careers². When asked to rank what matters most in middle school career exploration, 42% of respondents identified understanding their own skills and interests as the top priority. While “gaining awareness of career pathways” and “understanding job pay/availability” were also valued, they were ranked as secondary.

Ranking Middle School Career Exploration Priorities



Percentage of respondents ranking as most important.

Skills to be Taught in Middle School



This emphasis on self-discovery is further reflected in the skills young people believe should be taught during the middle grades. Respondents most frequently identified life skills (52%), social and emotional skills (50%), and the ability to identify skills and strengths (49%) as priorities. Together, these areas form the foundation for future career decision-making. In contrast, macro-level labor market information is less relevant at this stage.

² A Playbook for Career Exploration in the Middle Grades, Association for Middle Level Education and Britebound



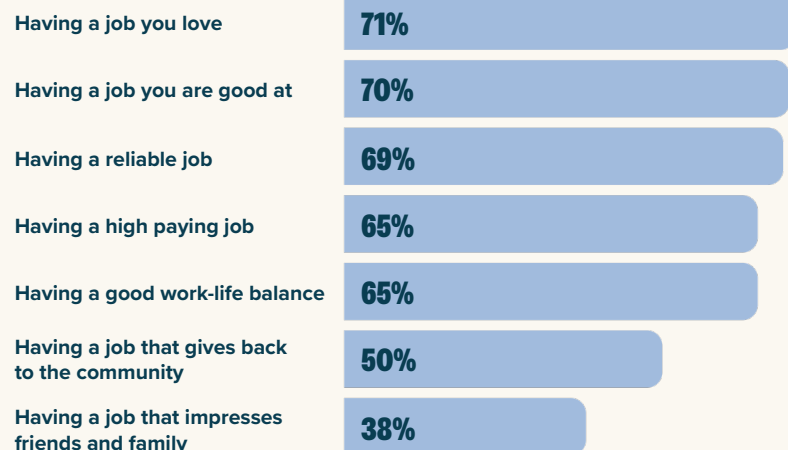
Job Values and Priorities for Teens and Young Adults

Young people are clear about what they value in a future career: alignment between personal interests and individual strengths. Survey respondents most frequently prioritized having a job they love (71%) and a job they are good at (70%). These were followed by having a reliable job (69%), a high-paying job (65%), and a job that supports work-life balance (65%). This emphasis on enjoyment and fit is reflected in respondents' own words; as one respondent shared, "I am in a career path that I love, and thriving very well" (Female, 18, White, Rural), while another echoed this sense of fulfillment, saying, "I love what I do now and I have a bright future ahead of me" (Female, 19, White, Urban).

At the lower end of priorities, respondents placed less emphasis on having a job that helps others or gives back to the community (50%) and on having a job that impresses friends or family (38%).

Top Job Priorities

Percentage of respondents ranking as top priority



Understanding these preferences provides important guidance for educators, counselors, and employers. Career exploration efforts that focus primarily on income or status may not resonate with middle school students. Instead, more effective approaches center on helping students reflect on questions such as:

What do I enjoy doing, and what am I good at?

How can I apply those strengths in a stable and balanced career?

What types of roles align with my skills, and what industries interest me?

Educators can further support this process by helping students distinguish between roles and industries. Roles (e.g., data analyst, marketing specialist, and teacher) should align with a student's skills and strengths, while industries (e.g., sports, healthcare, and entertainment) should reflect their interests and motivations. Aligning career exploration activities with both dimensions can help students identify pathways that are both personally meaningful and sustainable.



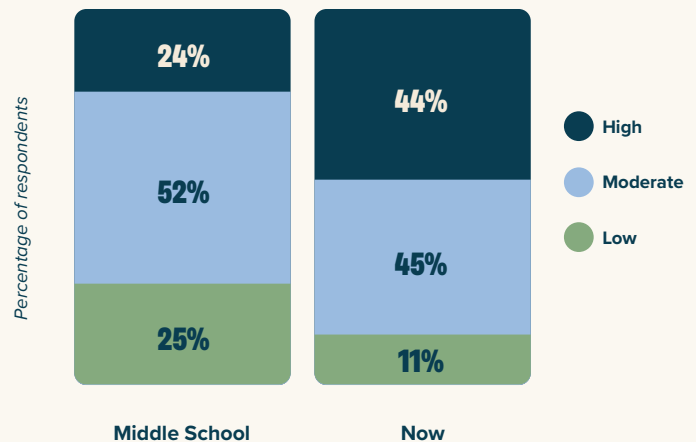
Looking Ahead to High School: Stress, Preparedness, and Confidence

Survey results generally indicated that stress related to future planning increases as students progress from middle school to high school and into early adulthood, with the proportion of respondents reporting “high stress” nearly doubling (24% to 44%). At the same time, most high school students and young adults report feeling under prepared for life after high school, and only about half felt confident in their ability to plan next steps or identify careers that aligned with their goals.

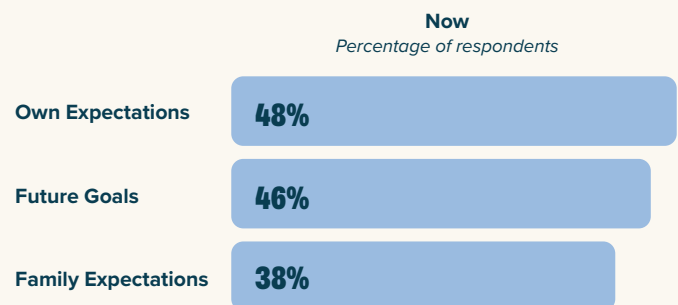
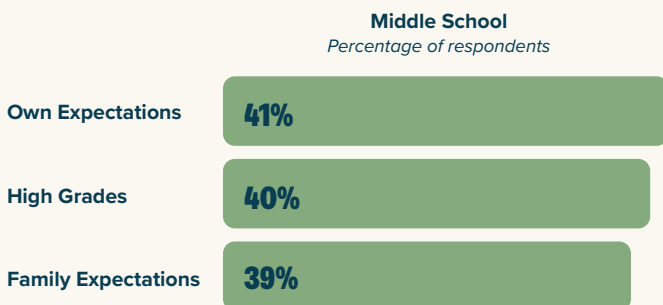
Sources of stress also shift over time. Pressure to meet personal expectations remains the leading stressor. However, as students get older, concerns move away from academic performance, such as grades in middle school, toward uncertainty about future plans in high school and early adulthood. Family expectations remain a consistent source of stress throughout.

Consistent with other national research, our survey found that about 6 in 10 students reported feeling under prepared for life after high school.³

Comparison of Recalled Middle School and Current Stress Levels



Top 3 Stressors



³ Walton Family Foundation Gen Z Research, Walton Family Foundation and Gallup



Preparedness for Life After High School



● Under-prepared ● Prepared

This lack of preparedness is reflected in low levels of confidence during the transition out of middle school, with only around half of high school students and young adults reporting confidence in their future plans or in identifying careers aligned with their goals. Notably, high school students and young adults reported higher confidence in understanding their own interests and strengths (approximately 61-65%) than in translating that self-

awareness into concrete plans (approximately 54%). This gap highlights a critical opportunity for educators, counselors, parents, and other caring adults in the education ecosystem to better support students in connecting self-knowledge to actionable next steps.

Self-Perceived Readiness for Post-Middle School Planning and Career Decisions

Having a good understanding of my own interests

65%

Believing my education choices would lead to good career options

61%

Having a good understanding of my own skills

61%

Planning for my life after school

54%

Knowing the job/career options best for my future goals

54%

Percentage of respondents



Unique Needs Require Targeted Supports

Students do not enter or experience career exploration on equal footing. While most young people agree that middle school career exploration was, or would have been, beneficial, access to meaningful experiences and outcomes varies widely. Confidence, preparedness, and stress levels differ based on factors such as student background, school context, and the extent of exposure to career exploration opportunities.

Student Characteristic or Experience	Confidence	Preparedness	Stress
More career exploration	↑	↑	↑
Boy gender	↑	↑	(If excessive exploration)
Girl gender			↑
In grades 11-12			↑
Post-high school	↓	↓	↑
Higher middle school grades	↑	↑	
Attended private school		↑	
Non-traditional career pathway		↓	
Has a disability	↓		
Primary language is English		↑	



Students with greater access to career exploration experiences in middle school generally report higher confidence and a stronger sense of preparedness for life after high school. However, this relationship is not strictly linear. At very high levels of exposure, potentially reflecting heightened pressure to make early or “correct” decisions, stress increases. This finding underscores the importance of balance. Career exploration should be designed to foster curiosity and self-discovery, rather than to accelerate premature decision-making.

Even when students reported access to similar career exploration opportunities in middle school, outcomes varied across key groups. Survey findings show that confidence, preparedness, and stress levels differ by gender, academic performance, school type, pathway, language, and disability status.

These differences highlight the need for targeted and responsive supports:

- **Gender:** Girls report lower confidence and preparedness, alongside higher levels of stress. Targeted mentoring and guidance that address gendered expectations and strengthen self-assurance may help reduce these gaps.
- **Age/grade level:** Confidence and preparedness tend to decline after high school, while stress peaks during grades 11 and 12 and the period immediately following graduation. This pattern underscores the importance of strengthening career navigation and transition supports in late high school and extending them into early adulthood.
- **Middle school academic performance:** Higher grades are associated with greater confidence and preparedness. Integrating academic support with career and self-exploration may help students better understand the connection between school and career preparation.
- **School type:** Students in private schools report higher levels of preparedness than those in public or home school settings. Expanding access to counseling and career exploration opportunities, especially in public schools, may help address these disparities.
- **Pathway:** Students pursuing traditional postsecondary pathways, such as direct enrollment in college, report greater preparedness than those entering the workforce, military, or non-degree training programs. Increasing awareness of and support for diverse pathways is critical to ensuring all students are equipped to make informed decisions.
- **Disability status:** Students with disabilities report lower confidence levels, indicating a need for more inclusive career exploration experiences that incorporate appropriate accommodations and supports.
- **Language:** Students whose primary language is English report higher levels of preparedness. Providing career exploration resources, experiences, and guidance in students’ home languages may help ensure more equitable access to information and support.



Conclusion

Middle school career exploration is foundational: Middle school is a critical period when students begin to develop a sense of identity and possibility. Opportunities to connect learning to real-world applications through exploration, reflection, and hands-on experiences can strengthen confidence and engagement. In contrast, students who lack those opportunities often report missed chances to connect their interests and strengths to future pathways.

Students are asking for more meaningful experiences: High school students and young adults consistently report wanting more time, greater relevance, increased access to hands-on opportunities, and stronger guidance during the middle grades. Beyond information, they are seeking experiences that help them understand how their learning connects to real-world possibilities and that affirm their potential.

Gaps in confidence and preparedness persist: Outcomes vary across student populations, with differences in confidence, preparedness, and stress linked to gender, academic performance, school context, language, disability status, and pathway. These disparities indicate that access to effective career exploration remains uneven and that more intentional, equitable approaches are needed to ensure that every student has the tools, support, and encouragement to explore their futures in the ways that suit them.

Implication: Middle school represents a key opportunity to build both curiosity and confidence about the future. Designing career exploration experiences that are accessible, inclusive, and engaging can help ensure that all students are better prepared to navigate their next steps. These findings point to a clear need for action: to expand access, strengthen supports, and align experiences with the needs and priorities expressed by young people themselves.





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