



Mind the Gap:

Opportunities, Participation,
and Alignment in Middle School
Career Exploration

Introduction

Middle school is a foundational period for career exploration. It is often the time when young people begin forming ideas about their interests, strengths, future pathways, and the connection between school and the world of work. Early exposure during these years can help students build self-awareness, confidence, and a clearer sense of what comes next after high school.

Despite the importance of this developmental window, access to meaningful career exploration experiences during the middle grades remains uneven. While many students report participating when opportunities are available, a substantial share indicate that such opportunities were never offered at all. Even when schools provide programming, the experiences available do not always align with what students say is most helpful.

As a national nonprofit focused on transforming how young people learn about careers and prepare for their futures, Britebound™ has launched the Youth Career Readiness Outlook series to explore what it means to be ready for life after high school from the perspectives of students and the adults who support them.

In this installment of the Youth Career Readiness Outlook series, we surveyed 2,552 young people, ages 14-25, across the United States in the Spring of 2025. The sample is balanced to reflect national demographics, providing a broad snapshot of how young people experienced career exploration during their middle school years. The full survey methodology and questionnaire can be found [here](#).

Drawing on respondents' recent experiences and the perspective of hindsight, this report focuses specifically on how former middle school students experienced career exploration and where gaps persist across access, participation, and perceived usefulness. The findings point to three interconnected challenges. First, opportunity gaps remain in whether students are offered meaningful career exploration experiences at all. Second, participation gaps reveal that access to available experiences varies across school settings, community contexts, and student groups. Third, alignment gaps suggest that the activities most commonly offered are often not the ones students find most valuable.

Across the findings, a consistent pattern emerges: students place the highest value on experiences that are hands-on, recurring, and connected to real-world careers. However, these opportunities are not distributed equitably and are generally less available than classroom-based or one-time events. Together, these findings highlight a clear opportunity to strengthen middle school career exploration by improving equitable access, expanding participation in high-impact experiences, and better aligning programming with student needs.



Key Findings

The survey results point to five notable trends in middle school career exploration access and effectiveness:

- **Opportunity gaps persist across all types of career exploration experiences.** The availability of classroom-based, conversation-based, and field-based career exploration activities is limited and uneven, with no single experience reaching a majority of students. Among those offered, classroom-based activities are most common, while immersive, real-world opportunities remain scarce.
- **Participation gaps vary across school type and community context.** Career exploration participation differs meaningfully by school type and geography, with suburban and private school students reporting the highest levels of engagement across activity types.
- **The largest participation gaps are generally concentrated in the most helpful experiences.** Field-based and conversation-based activities (e.g., workplace tours, job shadowing, mentor conversations, and professional interviews) are among the most helpful experiences reported by students. However, participation in these activities is lower among students with disabilities, non-English-primary speakers, and some racial and ethnic groups.
- **Alignment gaps remain between what schools offer and what students value.** Students consistently rate hands-on, immersive, and real-world experiences as more helpful than classroom-based or one-time events. However, the most commonly offered activities remain teacher-led classes, guest speakers, and other classroom-based formats, indicating a disconnect between availability and perceived usefulness.
- **Sustained, active experiences drive stronger perceived impact.** Career exploration activities that occur over time and involve active participation are substantially more likely to be viewed as helpful than one-time or passive listening-based experiences, reinforcing the importance of recurring and experiential learning opportunities.



Opportunity Gaps:

What career exploration opportunities are available?

A critical first question in understanding middle school career exploration is whether students are being offered meaningful opportunities in the first place. Students' own perceptions suggest that access is limited, as only 38% of young adults reported that their middle school provided adequate career and education planning resources, compared with 49% who credited outside sources and 62% who said their high school provided adequate support.

To better understand where these gaps emerge, the survey examined students' exposure to a range of specific career exploration activities. Respondents reported experiences across 15 major activity types, which fall into **three core categories**:

Classroom-Based

Structured, school-led learning experiences such as teacher-led classes, career and technical education, counselor sessions, individualized learning plans, project-based learning, and quizzes.

Conversation-Based

Activities centered on direct interactions with others, including guest speakers, career counseling, career fairs, mentor conversations, and professional interviews.

Field-Based

Experiential, real-world exposure, such as field trips, workplace tours, job shadowing, and career-related competitions.

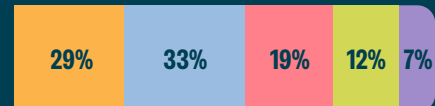
Across these categories, availability varies substantially, and no single type reaches a majority of students. Even the most commonly offered experience, teacher-led classes (47%), is reported by fewer than half of respondents. All other opportunities are available to even smaller

shares, with 11% of students even reporting no access to any of the listed experiences. These findings suggest that many middle school students are not consistently exposed to structured career exploration, and some receive little to no exposure at all.

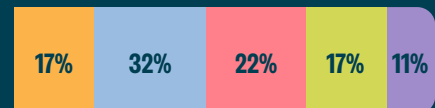
Career Exploration Beliefs

● Strongly agree
● Somewhat agree
● Neutral
● Somewhat disagree
● Strongly disagree

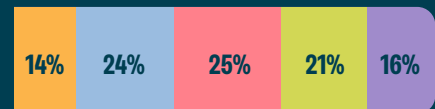
My high school provided me with the right resources to plan for my career and education



In middle school the resources I had outside of school helped me plan for my career and education



My middle school provided me with the right resources to plan for my career and education



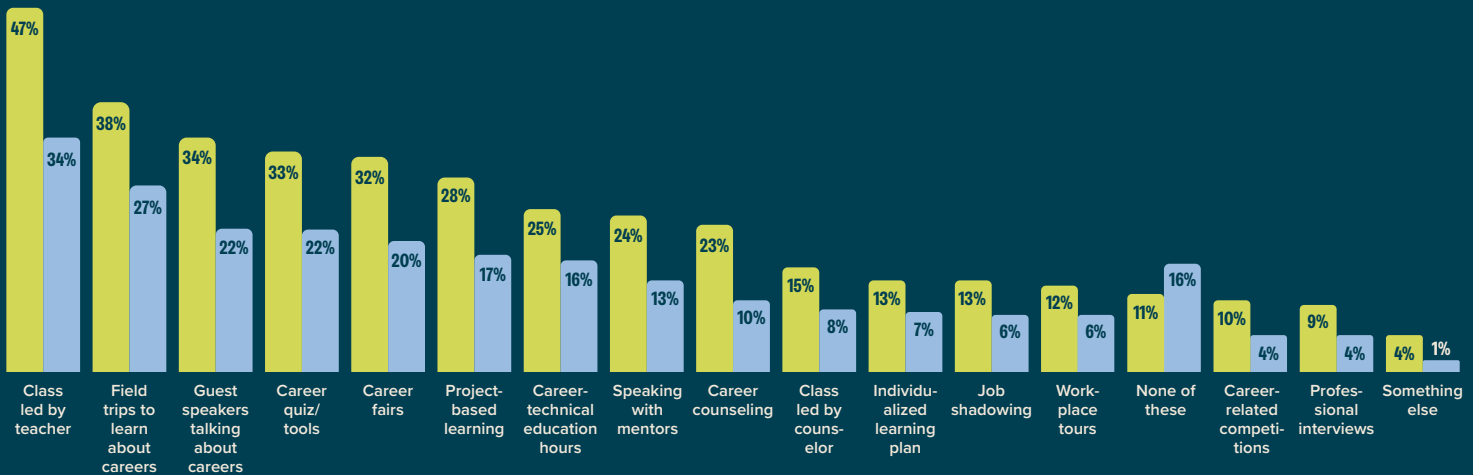
Percentage of Respondents



Middle School Career Exploration Opportunities vs. Participation

Which of the following career exploration opportunities were available to you (vs. did you do) in middle school?

- Available to Respondent
- Respondent Participated



Beyond overall availability, a clear hierarchy emerges in the types of experiences students are offered. More widely available opportunities tend to be introductory, classroom-based formats designed to build awareness, such as teacher-led classes (47%), guest speakers (34%), career quizzes or tools (33%), and career fairs (32%). A second tier of more interactive opportunities, including project-based learning (28%), career and technical education courses (25%), mentorship conversations (24%), and career counseling (23%), is available to fewer students.

The most immersive, workplace-connected experiences, such as job shadowing (13%), workplace tours (12%), career-related competitions (10%), and professional interviews (9%), are among the rarest opportunities reported.

Importantly, participation in most activities closely tracks availability, indicating that when opportunities are offered, students generally engage.

“The most immersive, workplace-connected experiences... are among the rarest opportunities reported.”

This suggests that the primary barrier is not lack of student interest, but limited access to meaningful opportunities.



Participation Gaps:

Who engages in available opportunities?

While availability shapes overall access, participation patterns reveal an additional layer of inequity. Even when opportunities exist, not all students engage equally. To better understand where disparities emerge, participation was examined at three levels: overall differences between participants and nonparticipants, variation across activity types by school and community context, and variation across activity types by student group.

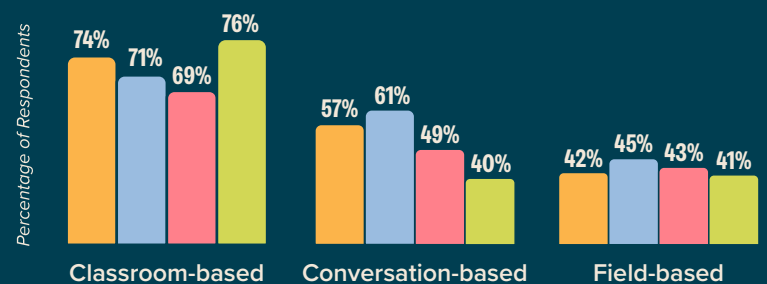
Participation varies by school and community context

Participation also differs within the types of experiences available to students. Across classroom-based, conversation-based, and field-based activities, engagement varies meaningfully by school setting and community context.

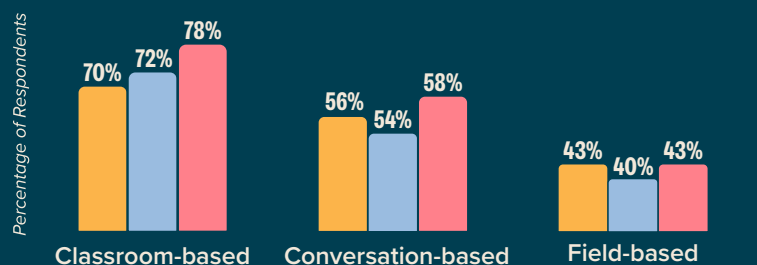
Students in private schools reported the highest participation in conversation-based activities (61%), followed by public (57%) and charter schools (49%), while homeschooled students reported the lowest levels (40%). Similar patterns emerged across community types, with suburban students reporting the highest participation across classroom-based (78%), conversation-based (58%), and field-based (43%) activities, compared with their urban (70%, 56%, and 43%) and rural (72%, 54%, and 40%) peers.

These findings suggest that access to participation is shaped not only by what is offered, but also by where students learn and live.

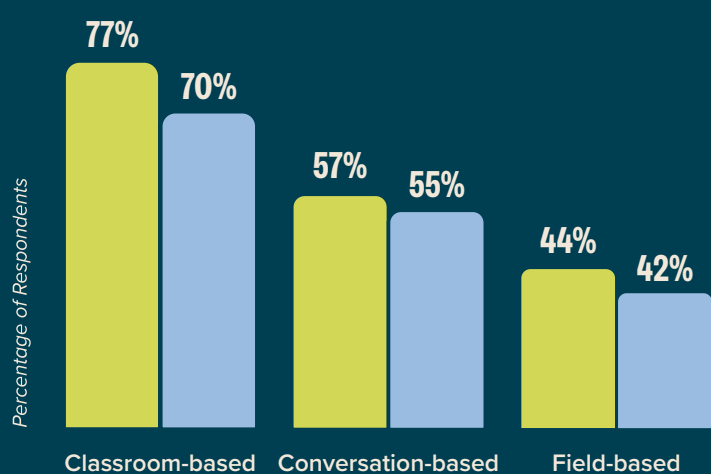
Student Participation in Career Exploration Activities by School Type



Student Participation in Career Exploration Activities by Community Setting



Student Participation in Career Exploration Activities by Gender



Participation varies by student group

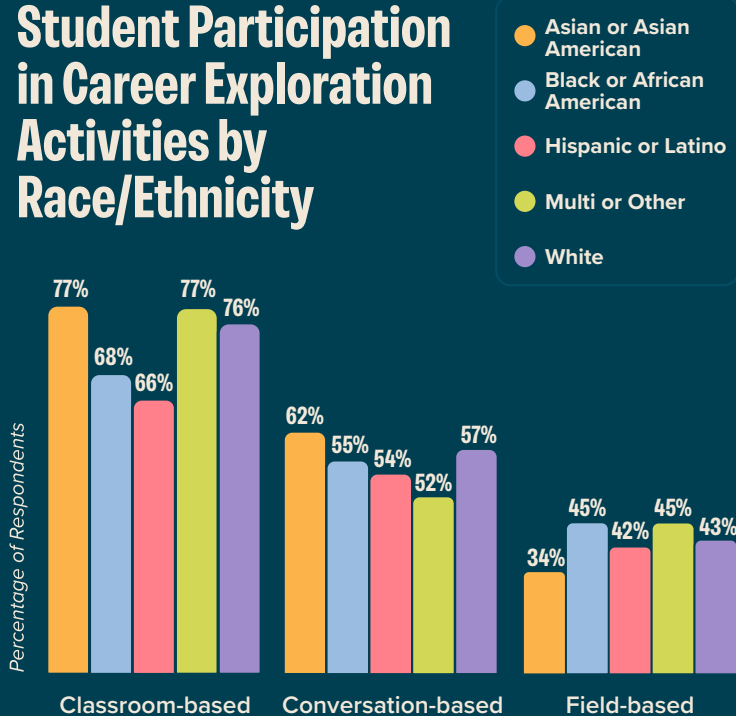
Across classroom-based, conversation-based, and field-based activities, engagement also varies by student group, with disparities tending to be more pronounced for the most immersive and career-connected experiences.

Females reported higher engagement than males, with participation rates of 77% vs. 70% for classroom-based activities, 57% vs. 55% for conversation-based experiences, and 44% vs. 42% for field-based opportunities.

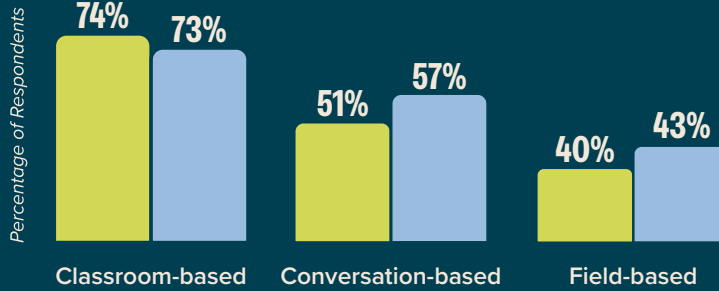
Differences are also evident across race and ethnicity. Asian students reported the highest participation in classroom-based (77%) and conversation-based (62%) activities, but the lowest in field-based experiences (34% vs. 42-45%). Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American students reported lower participation across experience types, particularly in classroom-based activities, where participation is 8-11 percentage points lower than other groups. Together with students who identify as more than one race or another race, these groups also reported lower participation in conversation-based activities (52-55%) compared with Asian and White students (57-61%).

Additional disparities emerge among students whose primary language is not English and among students with disabilities. Students whose primary language is English reported higher participation in both conversation-based (57% vs. 51%) and field-based (43% vs. 40%) activities. Similarly, students with disabilities participated less in conversation-based (51% vs. 57%) and field-based (37% vs. 44%) experiences than their peers without disabilities.

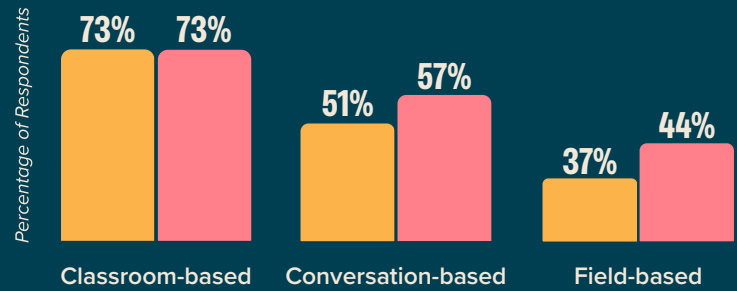
Student Participation in Career Exploration Activities by Race/Ethnicity



Student Participation in Career Exploration Activities by Primary Language



Student Participation in Career Exploration Activities by Disability



Notably, the largest disparities are generally concentrated in conversation-based and field-based activities—the experiences that tend to be considered the most immersive, workplace-connected, and helpful. In particular, participation among students with disabilities and non-English-primary speakers lags by approximately 6-7 percentage points, alongside additional disparities across race, ethnicity, and gender.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the central inequity is not only whether opportunities exist, but who has access to the most impactful ones. Addressing these gaps may require targeted access solutions, including transportation to field-based learning, employer partnerships, language-accessible outreach and materials, and disability-inclusive program design to ensure equitable participation in high-impact experiences.

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Alignment Gaps:

Bridging the gap between availability and impact.

Even when middle school career exploration opportunities are available and accessible, a clear alignment gap is observed when comparing the types of career exploration experiences students value most with the types they are most likely to receive.

Field-based experiences resonate more than classroom-based formats

Real-world, field-based opportunities stand out as especially meaningful. After accounting for background factors, field-based activities were associated with a substantially greater likelihood of being rated as helpful than classroom-based activities, with students about 1.5 times more likely to view these experiences positively.

These preferences are echoed in prior research, which found that students are seeking “career exploration experiences that go beyond ‘sit-and-get’ presentations or speakers” and provide “more active, hands-on, and fun” exposure to careers. Specifically, students have expressed a desire for opportunities to job shadow or participate in field trips that allow them to observe professionals in their work environments and better understand day-to-day responsibilities.¹

Relative Likelihood to Rate Activities as Helpful, by Activity Type

Controlling for background factors.



This suggests that experiences that move students beyond the classroom and into applied, career-connected environments resonate more strongly than those delivered through traditional instructional formats.

¹ Britebound & Education Strategy Group, *Extending the Runway: A National Analysis of Middle School Career Exploration*, *Extending-the-Runway.pdf*



What is offered does not reflect what students value most

Despite this clear preference for more immersive, field-based experiences, the opportunities most commonly available to students do not reflect these priorities, a disconnect that becomes clearer when comparing the availability of specific activities with how students rate their helpfulness.

The most commonly reported opportunities were teacher-led classes (47%), field trips to learn about careers (38%), guest speakers (34%), career quizzes or tools (33%), and career fairs (32%). However, the activities students rated as most helpful were not the most widely

available. Speaking with mentors received the highest helpfulness rating (3.11), followed by field trips (3.02), career-technical education courses (3.02), interviews with professionals (2.99), and individualized learning plans (2.99). Several of those higher-value experiences reach a relatively limited share of students, including mentorship conversations (24%), individualized learning plans (13%), and interviews with professionals (9%). Workplace tours (12%) and job shadowing (13%) also remain comparatively limited despite being closely aligned with the types of immersive, real-world exposure students tend to value. Career-focused field trips are a notable exception, appearing both relatively accessible and highly rated.

Availability of Career Exploration Activities

EXPLORATION ACTIVITY % OF RESPONDENTS

1	Class led by teacher	46.9
2	Field trips to learn about careers	38.0
3	Guest speakers talking about careers	34.3
4	Career quiz/tools	32.6
5	Career fairs	32.0
6	Project-based learning	27.6
7	Career-technical education courses	24.9
8	Speaking with mentors	24.3
9	Career counseling	22.7
10	Class led by counselor	14.9
11	Individualized learning plan	13.4
12	Job shadowing	12.9
13	Workplace tours	12.0
14	Career-related competitions	9.5
15	Interviews with Professionals	9.0

Top 5 by availability

Helpfulness of Career Exploration Activities

EXPLORATION ACTIVITY MEAN PERCEIVED HELPFULNESS SCORE

1	Speaking with mentors	3.11
2	Field trips to learn about careers	3.02
3	Career-technical education courses	3.02
4	Interviews with professionals	2.99
5	Individualized learning plan	2.99
6	Career counseling	2.96
7	Workplace tours	2.93
8	Career-related competitions	2.93
9	Project-based learning	2.88
10	Class led by teacher	2.87
11	Career fairs	2.81
12	Guest speakers talking about careers	2.80
13	Job shadowing	2.80
14	Career quiz/tools	2.72
15	Class led by counselor	2.66

Top 5 by perceived helpfulness

(Scores range from 1: not helpful to 4: very helpful)



The most commonly available activities are rated among the least helpful, while less common activities are perceived as more helpful.



Engagement and frequency help explain differences in perceived value

A more nuanced picture of why some activities resonate more than others emerges when helpfulness, availability, frequency, and mode of engagement are considered together. While the disconnect between what is offered and what is perceived as helpful is evident, examining how often experiences occur and how students engage with them helps explain these differences.

Mode of engagement emerges as a key differentiator. Activities that involve interactive or active participation (e.g., mentorship, career-technical education, project-based learning, and professional interviews) consistently rank among the most helpful. These experiences require students to engage directly, apply knowledge, or interact with professionals, often in more individualized, interest-driven ways, rather than passively receive generalized information in larger group settings. In contrast, activities that rely primarily on passive listening, including teacher-led classes, guest speakers, and career fairs, tend to fall lower in perceived helpfulness, even when they are more widely available.

This pattern suggests that engagement style is not simply a feature of information delivery but clearly linked to how meaningful students perceive an experience to be.

Frequency of activities further shapes this relationship. Experiences rated highly for perceived helpfulness, such as mentorship conversations, career-technical education courses, and individualized learning plans, tend to be activities that occurred more frequently throughout the school year. Experiences that are revisited over time may be linked to higher perceived helpfulness by allowing students to deepen their understanding, make connections, and engage more meaningfully with career concepts.

However, this pattern does not hold for all activities. Classroom-based formats, particularly teacher-led classes and project-based learning, are the most frequently occurring experiences yet are rated among the lowest for perceived helpfulness. At the same time, many of the activities that students find most meaningful (e.g., field trips to learn about careers, informational interviews with professionals, workplace tours, and career-related competitions) are among the least frequently experienced.

This contrast likely reflects underlying structural constraints. Activities that occur more often are typically those that can be embedded within the school environment or sustained through existing structures and relationships. By comparison, many of the least frequent activities depend on coordination beyond the classroom, including partnerships with employers, scheduling external visits, or access to professionals, which may limit how often they are offered.



Activity-Level Comparison of Engagement Mode Classification, Perceived Helpfulness, Availability, and Frequency

MODE OF ENGAGEMENT

I

 Interactive

A

 Active

P

 Passive

RELATIVE LEVEL

●●●

 Lower

●●●●

 Middle

●●●●●

 Higher

SOURCE RANGES

Helpfulness 2.6–3.11
Average perceived helpfulness score

Availability 9%–47%
Percent of students reporting as an offered activity

Frequency 39%–84%
Percent of students reporting as a longer-term activity rather than a one-time event

	HELPFULNESS	AVAILABILITY	FREQUENCY
I Speaking with mentors	●●●	●●●	●●●
A Field trips to learn about careers	●●●	●●●	●●●
A Career-technical education courses	●●●	●●●	●●●
I Individualized learning plan	●●●	●●●	●●●
I Informational interviews with professionals	●●●	●●●	●●●
A Career counseling	●●●	●●●	●●●
A Workplace tours	●●●	●●●	●●●
A Career-related competitions	●●●	●●●	●●●
A Project-based learning	●●●	●●●	●●●
P Class led by teacher	●●●	●●●	●●●
P Career fairs	●●●	●●●	●●●
P Guest speakers talking about careers	●●●	●●●	●●●
A Job shadowing	●●●	●●●	●●●
I Career quizzes or tools	●●●	●●●	●●●
P Class led by counselor	●●●	●●●	●●●

By comparison, many of the least frequent activities depend on coordination beyond the classroom, including partnerships with employers, scheduling external visits, or access to professionals, which may limit how often they are offered.

The importance of mode of engagement and frequency is further demonstrated by how strongly each is associated with perceived helpfulness when examined more directly. Activities centered on active participation are 1.46 times more likely to be rated as helpful than those based primarily on listening, while experiences that combine both listening and active engagement are 1.87 times more likely to be viewed as helpful. These findings suggest that the most effective experiences are not purely hands-on or informational but intentionally designed to integrate both.

Sustained exposure appears to be an even stronger driver of perceived value. Activities offered throughout the academic year are nearly twice as likely to be rated as helpful compared with one-time or occasional experiences, underscoring the importance of repeated exposure in helping students engage more meaningfully in career exploration experiences.

“The most effective experiences are not purely hands-on or informational but intentionally designed to integrate both.”



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Year-Round Activities Were Associated with Higher Helpfulness Ratings

One-time activities

Speaking with mentors, field trips to learn about careers, informational interviews with professionals

1.00x

Year-round activities

Class led by teacher, career quizzes or tools, project-based learning, individualized learning plan

1.98x

Likelihood



Conclusion

A clear pattern emerges across the findings: students' experiences with career exploration in the middle grades are shaped by gaps in opportunity, participation, and alignment. An opportunity gap persists in whether students are exposed to meaningful career exploration experiences at all. Many students reported limited or no access, and no single activity reaches a majority of learners. Even when opportunities are available, they are often concentrated in introductory, classroom-based formats. A participation gap further limits who engages in available experiences. Participation varies across school settings, community contexts, and student groups, with the largest disparities concentrated in field-based and conversation-based activities, the very experiences students find most helpful. While most students participate when opportunities are offered, a meaningful share report no exposure at all. An alignment gap highlights a disconnect between what is offered and what students value. Students consistently rate experiences that are hands-on, sustained, and connected to real-world careers as most helpful. However, the most commonly available activities remain classroom-based, intermittent, and centered on passive learning. At the same time, more immersive experiences are often less frequent, likely due, in part, to the additional coordination, resources, and external partnerships they require.

Importantly, classroom-based and one-time activities are not without value. They play a critical role in building awareness and introducing career concepts, but are most effective when positioned as entry points, as on-ramps that lead to more immersive, sustained, and career-connected learning.

Together, these findings suggest that strengthening middle school career exploration will require both better alignment and more equitable access. Expanding access to high-impact experiences, increasing their frequency over time, and intentionally connecting early exposure to deeper, applied learning opportunities are key to ensuring that career exploration in the middle grades is both meaningful and accessible for all students.





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