



NEXT STEPS

An Analysis of Teens'
Post-High School Plans

"What's next?"

For teens graduating from high school today, the answer to that question has never been so varied. As AI, automation and globalization continue to disrupt the US labor market, tomorrow's workers will need to constantly re-skill and skill up throughout their careers, taking a lifelong learning approach versus the traditional one-and-done degree attainment. As a result, teens' attitudes toward next steps after high school are shifting. Today's young adults want faster, cheaper routes to good jobs and the middle class. The marketplace is responding; out of 1,019,931 postsecondary credentials available in the US today, the majority – 656,505 – are badges, course completion certificates, licenses, certifications, and apprenticeships offered by non-academic providers— and that's not even counting the nondegree credentials offered by academic institutions.¹

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Today, life after high school could mean a conventional path, like a four- or two-year college. Or it could mean joining the military or directly entering the workforce. Or, increasingly, next steps after 12th grade may be trade school, an apprenticeship, or even starting up a business. Happily, more options often mean more opportunity to achieve the ultimate goal: a career aligned with an individual's passions and skills, that gives back to society and provides financial security.

But with wider options also come more chances for young people to fall through the cracks as they navigate the path from high school to the world beyond. As today's teens transition into the workforce of tomorrow, it's never been more important that they have concrete, next-step plans. These plans need not be a rigid or inflexible blueprint that doesn't allow for pathway shifts, but should be a well-thought-out strategy, with input from respected and trusted influencers, for taking those first steps toward securing a meaningful career. Simply put, no 18-year-old has to have it "all figured out" by the time they cross that graduation stage, but having a general idea of what's next – even if that changes down the road – better positions a young person for a long-term career that brings personal fulfillment, rather than a short-term job that meets immediate needs but offers little growth or advancement opportunity.

So how do today's teens approach making plans for life after high school? Britebound® (Britebound), a national nonprofit at the forefront of changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures, in 2024 continued to uncover evolving trends in teenagers' attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making about their post-high school pathways. The nationwide online survey of 3,000+ youth in grades 7-12, nationally representative across geography, age, gender, and race/ethnicity, analyzed teens' plans for their next step after high school, the impact of planning on their current lives, and key influences on their choices.² This latest round of research builds on prior national surveys conducted by Britebound in 2018 and 2021, and can therefore help to identify significant landscape shifts.

¹ "Counting Credentials," Credential Engine, <https://credentialengine.org/all-resources/counting-credentials/>

² Methodology statement: This report summarizes the results of a quantitative, online survey of U.S. youth ages 13-18 in the 7th-12th grades. The study was fielded in December 2024 with 3,057 total respondents. The sample was nationally-representative on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region of the U.S.

Key Findings

The 2024 survey results point to several notable trends with regard to teens' education and career planning:

Interest in two -or four- year college continues to decline, while nondegree education paths are gaining traction. Less than half (45%) of teens in 2024 see two- or four-year college as their most likely next step, down from 73% in 2018. Meanwhile, teens considering vocational schools, apprenticeships, and technical bootcamp programs more than tripled from 12% in 2018 to 38% in 2024.

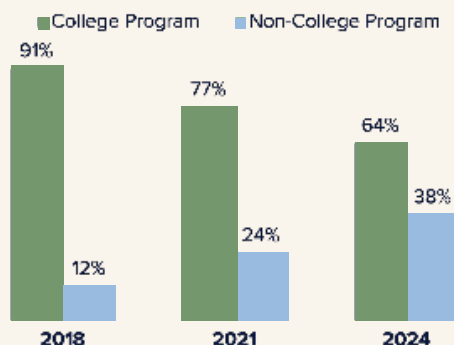
Among a large ecosystem of influencers, parents play an outsized role – and they are more skeptical of nondegree education plans. More than nine in 10 teens have discussed post-high school plans with their parents. But while teens are showing more willingness to consider nondegree education paths, their parents are less so. Eighty-two percent of teens in our survey said their parents agree with their plans to go to four-year college, while only 66% said parents supported plans to pursue a nondegree route. In fact, teens reported parents were more supportive (70%) of foregoing education altogether right after high school, vs. a nondegree program.

Teens feel more equipped to plan their future. In recent years, there has been a push by policymakers, employers, educators and other stakeholders to make career-connected learning a more prominent feature of the education-to-workforce system.³ Our survey results bear this out, with a dramatic increase in the percentage of teens who feel they have the right tools to make plans for the future: 82% said they are confident in future-planning resources, up from 63% in 2021 and 59% in 2018. Notably, middle schoolers saw the biggest jump – a 30-point increase – from the pre-pandemic 2018 survey.

Nondegree Paths on the Rise

In line with national statistics and findings that show college enrollment on the decline, one of the biggest shifts the Britebound survey found was a continued marked decrease in teens' appetite for the historic view of postsecondary education.⁴ Only 45% of teens in the 2024 survey saw two- or four-year college as their most likely next step, down from 50% in 2021 and 73% in 2018. Interestingly, consideration of attending four-year college is nine percentage points lower among 9th-10th graders than among juniors, seniors and middle schoolers, seemingly indicating that interest in traditional college wanes in the

Education Plans Teens Are Considering, by Year



Each year, fewer teens are considering 4-year college, and an increasing number are considering non-college programs.

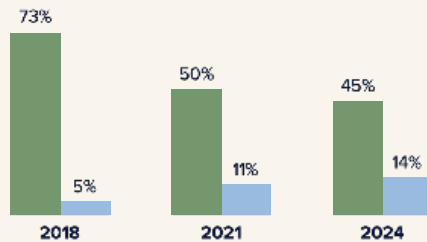
Considering	2018	2021	2024	Δ 2018-2024
4-Year College	68%	56%	43%	- 25%
2-Year College	23%	21%	21%	- 2%
Vocational/ Trade School	8%	13%	16%	+ 8%
Apprenticeship Program	2%	8%	12%	+ 10%
Tech Bootcamp/ Certification	1%	4%	9%	+ 8%

³ Robert Schwartz, Kerry McKittrick, "Bringing Career-Connected Learning to Scale," American Educator, AFT, https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2024/schwartz_mckittrick.

⁴ According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the overall college enrollment rate for 18- to 24-year-olds was lower in 2022 than a decade earlier in 2012 (39 vs. 41 percent). "College Enrollment Rates," National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpb>.

Education Plans Teens Are Most Likely to Choose, by Year

■ College Program ■ Non-College Program



The number of teens that believe they will **most likely attend 4-year college** right after high school **has dropped** by 25 percentage points since 2018.

Most Likely	2018	2021	2024	Δ 2018-2024
4-Year College	58%	36%	34%	- 25%
2-Year College	14%	13%	11%	- 3%
Vocational/Trade School	4%	8%	8%	+ 4%
Apprenticeship Program	1%	2%	4%	+ 3%
Tech Bootcamp/Certification	0%	1%	2%	+ 2%

Simultaneously, amid concerns over college costs,⁵ attitude shifts caused by the pandemic,⁶ a rise in middle-skill jobs that don't require a degree,⁷ and an emphasis on skills-based hiring over degree requirements,⁸ other types

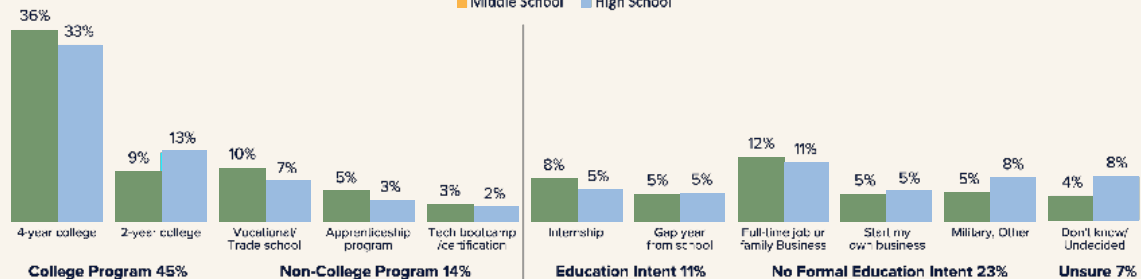
of education paths are gaining traction with teens. Survey respondents considering career training schools, apprenticeships, and bootcamps skyrocketed from 12% in 2018 to 38% in 2024. When asked what option they were most likely to pursue (as opposed to those they were just considering), the percentage of respondents indicating a nondegree path nearly tripled from 5% in 2018 to 14% in 2024.

Troubling Trend Away From Postsecondary Education or Training of Any Kind

Given the steady drumbeat of “is college worth it” in society today, it's not surprising that more teens are planning to skip (or at least delay) any postsecondary education immediately following high school.⁹ While over half (59%) of teens plan to continue their formal education immediately after high school in either a college (45%) or non-college (14%) program, almost one quarter (23%) have no immediate plans to continue a formal education – a 10-percentage-point increase since 2018. Estimates suggest, however, that 72 percent of jobs in the US by 2031 will require some postsecondary education and/or training, pointing to a potential workforce shortage in coming

Most Likely Education Plans, by Grade Level

■ Middle School ■ High School



Over half (59%) of teens plan to continue their formal education immediately after high school in either a college (45%) or non-college (14%) program. Almost one quarter (23%) have no immediate plans to continue a formal education.

⁵ Ashley Mowreader, “Students, Parents and Voters Agree—Higher Ed Costs Too Much,” *Inside Higher Ed*, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2024/05/29/cost-higher-education-not-worth-it-students>.

⁶ Stephanie Saul, “College Enrollment Drops, Even as the Pandemic’s Effects Ebb,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/us/college-enrollment.html>.

⁷ “Middle-Skill Workers Are in Demand,” *On the Economy Blog*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2018/january/middle-skill-workers-demand>.

⁸ Joseph Fuller, Christina Langer and Matt Sigelman, “Skills-Based Hiring Is on the Rise,” *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2022/02/skills-based-hiring-is-on-the-rise>.

⁹ “Only one-in-four U.S. adults say it’s extremely or very important to have a four-year college degree in order to get a well-paying job in today’s economy,” Richard Fry, Dana Braga and Kim Parker, “Is College Worth It?,” *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/05/23/is-college-worth-it-2/>.

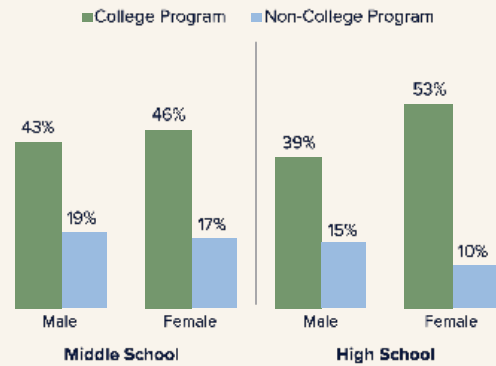
years should the trend toward no postsecondary education of any kind continue.¹⁰ Teens not planning to continue education post-high school indicated they were thinking of beginning full-time work, entering a family business, starting their own business, or joining the military.

Girls, Students of Color, and Suburban Teens All More Likely to Plan for College

In the analysis of teens' next step plans, demographic differences do appear. Girls and boys are equally interested in college in middle school, but by high school, girls (53%) are much more likely than boys (39%) to say they're likely to attend. The gender gap in intentions aligns with the trend in recent years of higher college enrollment among females.¹¹ A smaller gender gap exists in teens' intentions to pursue nondegree programs: by high school, 15% of boys say they will likely attend vocational/trade school, participate in an apprenticeship or take a certification program, vs just 10% of girls. This likely reflects societal biases that associate many trades not requiring a bachelor's degree, such as construction, plumbing and welding, with men. It may also indicate a general lack of student awareness of the variety of apprenticeships available today. While traditional apprenticeships were in the construction trades, in recent years apprenticeships have expanded to a multitude of different sectors, such as technology and cybersecurity, financial services, and healthcare.¹²

When it comes to the reasons behind teens' decision making, career interests are top of mind for all, regardless of whether they're headed to a four-year college or non-college program. Increased chances for employment, career requirements, and learning skills for a specific

Most Likely Education Plans, by Grade Level and Gender



By high school, girls are much more likely to plan to attend college than boys.

Most Likely	MS Male	MS Female	HS Male	HS Female
4-Year College	30%	40%	28%	37%
2-Year College	12%	6%	10%	15%
Vocational/Trade School	11%	8%	9%	6%
Apprenticeship Program	4%	6%	5%	2%
Tech Bootcamp/Certification	3%	2%	2%	2%
	n = 419	n = 563	n = 1081	n = 955

career were the most popular reasons chosen by survey respondents. This aligns with polls in recent years that show students today view postsecondary education primarily as the route to a good job.¹³

Gender differences in decision making are fewer but some are notable. Most teens planning to go on to four-year college indicated it was because their future career required it, with more girls (44%) agreeing with that statement than boys (30%). However, the second most popular reason, because "it's the most appropriate step after high school," produced a more dramatic 30-percentage point difference between the genders, with 50% of girls in agreement vs just 20% of boys. Additionally, boys seem to be slightly

¹⁰ "After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>.

¹¹ "Young women are more likely to be enrolled in college today than young men, and among those ages 25 and older, women are more likely than men to have a four-year college degree," Kim Parker, "What's behind the growing gap between men and women in college completion?," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/08/whats-behind-the-growing-gap-between-men-and-women-in-college-completion/>.

¹² "Apprenticeship," U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/apprenticeship?lang=en>.

¹³ "Workforce outcomes are, far and away, the driving motivation for pursuing post-secondary education across all ages, races, and degree types," Carol D'Amico, Ed.D., "Why Go to College? Student Perspectives on Higher Ed," Strada Education Foundation, <https://stradaeducation.org/value/why-go-to-college-student-perspectives-on-higher-ed/>.

Teen Perspectives: Expanding the Pathways to Success

Appreciation is growing for the multitude of routes to a fulfilling career with family-sustaining wages. Today's teens increasingly understand that the path to a high-quality credential does not have to be the same for all and are seeking out options that fit their personal interests and career goals, including nondegree education paths. In an online community of teens curated by Britebound (separate from our Next Steps survey), youth regularly express their plans for life after high school and their reasoning:

"Vocational school would give me the hands-on skills that I need in order to learn. I'm not a strong book learner or test taker but hands on I thrive with."

- Age 17, Trans, White, Indiana

"Because getting a trade means you always have an occupation."

- Age 14, Female, Black, Tennessee

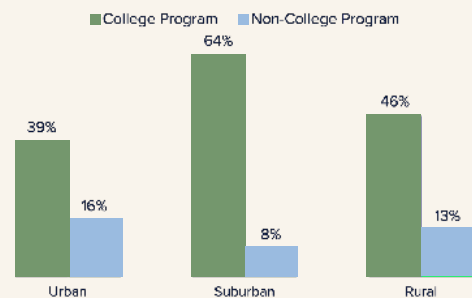
"I think this (technical bootcamp/certification) will be my next step because it lets me learn more about the job I want to go into.. And it helps me be prepared and I just think it's a good option for me."

- Age 18, Male, White/Hispanic/Latino, Arizona

more nudged toward the college route by outside influences, as the only reason for pursuing college cited more by boys (24%) than girls (18%) was "my teachers/school counselors recommend it."

While there are no significant differences in teens' next step plans across US regions (Northeast, South, Midwest and West), clear differences appear between geographic location types. Students living in suburban areas are much more likely to plan to attend a college program (64%)

Most Likely Education Plans, by Community Type



Those living in suburban areas are more likely to plan to attend college than those in rural or urban areas.

Most Likely	Urban	Suburban	Rural
4-Year College	28%	52%	32%
2-Year College	11%	11%	14%
Vocational/ Trade School	9%	5%	7%
Apprenticeship Program	5%	2%	3%
Tech Bootcamp/ Certification	3%	1%	3%

n = 2042

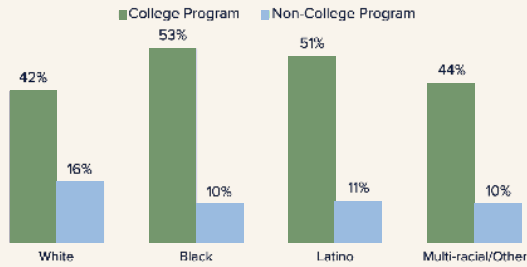
n = 673

n = 342

and least likely to plan to attend a non-college program (8%). Forty-six percent of rural students say they intend to go to college, while 13% are headed toward a nondegree program. Urban teens were least likely to indicate they were going on to college (39%) and most likely to plan on a nondegree program (16%).

Next step plans also differ along racial and ethnic lines. More students of color are planning to attend a college program than those who describe

Most Likely Education Plans, by Race/Ethnicity



Fewer teens that describe themselves as White are planning to attend a college program than Black or Latino.

Most Likely	White	Black	Hispanic/Latino	Multi-Racial/Other
4-Year College	32%	41%	35%	30%
2-Year College	10%	13%	16%	14%
Vocational/Trade School	9%	6%	6%	7%
Apprenticeship Program	5%	2%	3%	0%
Tech Bootcamp/Certification	2%	3%	2%	3%
	n = 1857	n = 390	n = 571	n = 220

themselves as White-only: 54% of Black teens and 51% of Hispanic/Latino teens are planning college, compared to 42% of White teens. A slightly higher percentage of White students (16%) plan to pursue a nondegree program, vs 10% of Black students and 11% of Hispanic/Latino.

Parents Stand Out Among A Wide Ecosystem of Influences

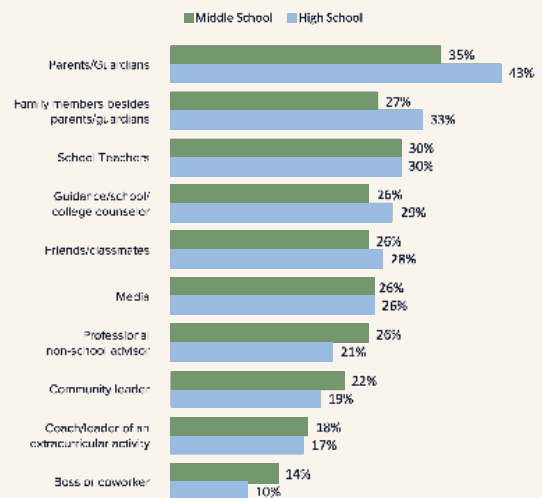
Teens' plans are influenced by a wide variety of sources, from parents and family members to teachers, school counselors, friends, the media and more. Parents are the biggest influence: More than nine in 10 teens have discussed post-high school plans with their parents. Further, parental influence grows as students come closer to graduation. High schoolers (43%) are more likely to cite parents as influencers than middle schoolers (35%), while parents' influence in future planning jumps nine percentage points from lower

high school (38%) to upper high school (47%). Still, it is important to note that while parents are the biggest influence for 40% of teens, three in five (60%) teens do not consider their parents an influence on the specific issue of planning their education and career after high school. In fact, teens in our survey cited an average of 2.6 influences in making these decisions. Other than parents, teens' biggest influences include other family members, teachers, counselors, friends and the media.

Parents Need More Education and Awareness Around Expanded Pathways

While teens in our survey have shown more willingness over the years to consider paths beyond four-year college, parents appear more dubious. Eighty-two percent of teens intending to go to four-year college said their parents were aware of and on board with their plans, and 74% said their parents approved of them attending a two-year college. Nearly a third of teens, however, said their parents outright disagreed with their plan to join a nondegree program. In fact, more

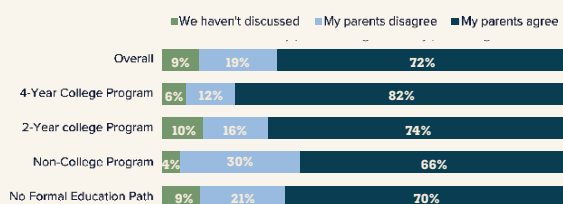
Planning Influences by Grade



As students come closer to graduation, their parents become more influential in planning their next steps.

teens said their parents disagreed with them pursuing a noncollege path (30%) than skipping a formal education path altogether after high school (21%). Additionally, 40% of teens who are influenced by their parents are planning on four-year college as their next step, compared to 29% of those whose parents are not an influence. As policymakers, educators, employers and other stakeholders continue to spread awareness of the expanded opportunity and viability of nondegree pathways as a route to career success, they must remember not to leave parents behind. They

Parent Agreement With Teens' Plans for After High School



Almost all (91%) are discussing their plan for after high school with their parents. About three quarters feel their parents agree with their plan. More teens planning on a non-college program feel their parents disagree compared with those choosing another option.

are a crucial audience whose guidance and encouragement will shape the next steps of our future workforce.

Teens' Confidence in Future-Planning Resources Has Grown – Especially in Middle School

Happily, teens are increasingly reporting they have the tools they need to confidently plan for their future. Overall, agreement with the statement “my school provides me with the right resources to plan for my next steps after high school” grew

Teen Perspectives: Parental Involvement

Many teens told Britebound* they appreciate their parents' help in planning their future but are also sometimes stressed by their parents' involvement:

“My parents help by discussing my interests, exploring education and career options, and guiding me through applications. They connect me with mentors, offer financial advice, and provide emotional support. Their involvement and understanding make a big difference in how helpful they are. I appreciate the ways they support my plans.”

- Age 16, Male,
Middle Eastern/North African, California

“I feel less involvement [from my parents] would be better because it can be overbearing when someone is constantly on your back about certain things.”

- Age 15, Female,
Black/African-American, Illinois

“My parents are not too involved in helping me plan for my future apart from giving me advice... I am pretty independent and like to figure things out on my own.”

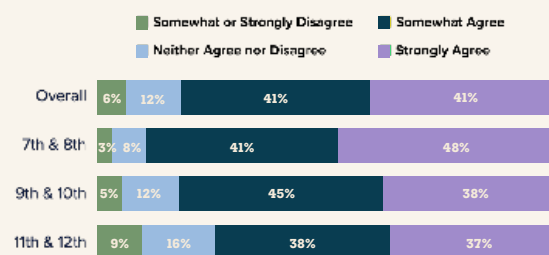
- Age 17, Female,
Hispanic/Latina, New Jersey

from just 59% in 2018, to 63% in 2021, to 82% in 2024. Notably, the largest increase occurred at the middle school level, where confidence in in-school planning resources jumped from 60% in 2018 to 90% in 2024. In recent years, federal funding has been opened up to middle grade career exploration, which has helped lay the groundwork for a broader push at the state and local district level to put career planning resources in the hands of younger students.¹⁴ While middle school career exploration is still in a nascent stage, there are clear signs it is growing nationwide and may be playing a role in younger teens feeling more confident in their available resources.¹⁵

But while we should feel optimistic that teens in general are feeling more prepared to plan their future, it is important to note that the confidence is not shared evenly. White students are still more likely (88%) to agree they have the right resources for planning their next step after high school than students of color (73%). Efforts to expand career-planning tools should be focused on under-resourced schools, as well as to low-income or rural students. Additionally, confidence in resources declines as teens get closer to graduation, from 90% in middle school to 75% in late high school. So while the movement to expand career readiness to younger students must continue, we must also prioritize providing additional support to juniors and seniors who are on the doorstep of the transition to adulthood.

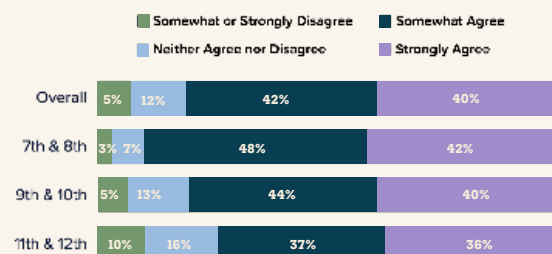
Survey results point to an increase in planning supports for teens outside of school as well. Community-based organizations, afterschool activities and out-of-school settings are offering more career-centric programming, and teens are also exploring on their own with new digital resources and platforms.¹⁶ Online tools like O*Net from the US Department of Labor offer students a set of self-directed career exploration/assessment tools to help consider and plan career options, preparation, and transitions from

Agreement Level: *My school* provides me with the right resources to plan for my next steps after high school.



In 2024, confidence in future-planning resources at school declines as students get closer to graduation.

Agreement Level: I have the right resources *outside of school* to prepare me for my next steps after high school.



Confidence in future planning resources outside of school is high, similar to the overall levels of confidence in future planning resources at school. Seventh and 8th graders are slightly more positive about their in-school resources than out-of-school resources.

school to work more effectively.¹⁷ Multiple states offer online databases about regional in-demand careers, quizzes to help match personal attributes and interests, and information about available postsecondary education and training. Private sector digital career exploration and planning resources directly targeted to teens also abound.

¹⁴ In 2018 the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) authorized the use of federal funds for the expansion of career and technical education and career exposure opportunities as early as the 5th grade, whereas previously funding was restricted to 7th grade and above. "Perkins V Opens Access to Middle Grades," Advance CTE, https://careertech.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PerkinsV_MiddleGrades_2021.pdf.

¹⁵ "Extending the Runway: A National Analysis of Middle School Career Exploration," Education Strategy Group and Britebound, <https://www.britebound.org/extending-the-runway/>.

¹⁶ Jillian Luchner, Christopher Neltzey, and Austin Estes, "Putting afterschool to work: Career exploration in out-of-school settings," https://www.afterschoolalliance.org/afterschoolsnack/Putting-afterschool-to-work-Career-exploration-in-out-of_06-25-2019.cfm Afterschool Alliance.

¹⁷ "O*NET Career Exploration Tools," U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/onet/tools..>

Conclusion

Our ever-changing economy and labor market demands our society evolve the way we help students sift through the complex landscape of education and career options in the 21st century. We can start by helping teens, as early as middle school, assess their own personal interests and strengths, and explore possible career options. As youth progress on their educational journey, hands-on work-based learning can give them the skills and expose them to the experiences they need to confirm – or rule out – potential career choices. We should provide data and transparency on workforce outcomes, so students can make the best decisions for their own personal situations. And we should employ the latest technology to make sure we're meeting students where they are, in the classroom and beyond, ensuring information and planning tools are easy-to-find, easy-to-use and accessible for all. Finally, the education and workforce community must commit to informing and educating the vast ecosystem of adult influencers who advise and guide the next generation. Working together, we can ensure that teens are confident, informed and empowered to transition successfully from high school to the next stage of life – wherever that may take them.

Who is Britebound?

Britebound® is changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures through access to career readiness information and experiences for all. We help 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 is fostering a generation of confident, crisis-proof young people who are ready for whatever path comes next after high school. Britebound fulfills its mission by providing free digital-first experiences, including Futurescape® and Next Voice™, and EvolveMe™, directly to millions of students, and through research, impact investing, thought leadership, advocacy and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others.

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