

# EXTENDING THE RUNWAY

A National Analysis Of  
Middle School  
Career Exploration

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## In order for students to be prepared for economic and career success, starting career exploration in middle school is a necessity.

The economy is evolving more rapidly than ever before, with new occupations taking shape at an unprecedented pace—the vast majority of which now require a postsecondary degree, credential, or some level of training. With the demand for skilled workers continuing to rise, coupled with the lingering educational effects of a global pandemic, it is no longer enough to start planning for career aspirations during a student's junior—or even freshman—year of high school. Students need better and earlier career exposure to increase their likelihood of successfully transitioning into the high-value postsecondary options increasingly required for good jobs, and schools must be positioned to offer this support to ensure equitable access for all students.

**Britebound®** and **Education Strategy Group (ESG)** set out to understand states' current approaches to defining, investing in, and supporting the implementation of middle school career exploration and, perhaps more importantly, how current students are experiencing these efforts. Through an in-depth national scan conducted by ESG, including student

and expert interviews, against 13 criteria across 3 categories, several key take-aways emerged.

Students participating in the study shared that they want to **dive more deeply into career options with hands-on experiences**, but they **don't get enough meaningful opportunities to do so in schools**, often relying on their families for information instead. They also communicated a disconnect between the activities they completed—like career interest inventories—and more meaningful, longer-term career planning.

State data painted a similar picture. **Most states have identified middle school career exploration as an important component of a student's education** (73 percent), dedicate funding to support activities (92 percent), **and have some sort of requirements in policy** (92 percent); but **few states measure and support the quality of these practices** by collecting data (20 percent), including in accountability plans (16 percent), or having a strong ecosystem of organizations supporting the work (8 percent).

Our analysis was driven by three broad research questions intended to unpack states' overall efforts to prioritize and facilitate quality middle school career exploration. We classified each state's current work using three descriptive indicators.

**STATE VISION:** How has the state defined and prioritized middle school career exploration?

**POLICY:** What state policies and practices are in place?

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** What supports does the state provide to guide schools?

**BUILDING:** States are just starting to establish the basic elements.

**EMERGING:** States are demonstrating development but have room to grow.

**ADVANCED:** States are at a high level of execution.

## A LOOK ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Bringing together student feedback with the landscape analysis, it's clear that states have a strong start in this relatively new space, but **without a unified state vision and commitment, a prioritization of students' need for more relevant and diverse experiences in a continuum throughout K-12, and sustained financial support and local capacity building, they risk making career exploration a series of paper-pencil activities that miss the opportunity to help shape students' path to a fulfilling career that pays a living wage.**

Overall, these findings shed light on the nascentcy of this work nationwide while providing focus areas correlated with scaling efforts systematically.

Why does this matter? Students who have a longer career exploration runway are better positioned to make more informed decisions along their education journey to put them on a path to life-long economic success and personal fulfillment. The federal government has opened up funding streams to support this work, and state leaders who are eager to improve their students' readiness should learn from the examples shared in this report, including:

- Creating a clear and coordinated vision for middle school career exploration;
- Supplementing state policies with hands-on activities and other resources;
- Investing in the capacity to support quality implementation;
- Braiding funding to drive scale and innovation; and
- Utilizing data collection and accountability systems to ensure programmatic quality.

Young learners should be empowered to dream big, but they may not yet be able to see the full picture of their future because of the limited access they have to career possibilities. Our schools should help them discover, build, evolve, and then realize those dreams, preparing all students for fulfilling careers that allow them to support themselves and their families, strengthening local communities and our country.

*"Because I don't know much about careers, I don't know what else I need to know. I don't know what responsibilities I need for a job in the future."*

EMMA, 7TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN MINNESOTA

# INTRODUCTION

Today, 45 percent of young Americans in Generation Z say that a high school diploma is all that is needed to “ensure financial security.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, data from the Georgetown Center for Education and Workforce estimates that demand for postsecondary education and training will only grow, with 72 percent of jobs in the U.S. requiring some sort of postsecondary training by 2031.<sup>2</sup> Those with a high school diploma or less will increasingly be excluded from family sustaining career roles that overwhelmingly demand this higher level education and training, yet students report feeling unprepared to make decisions about their future during high school.<sup>3</sup>

How do we bridge this widening gap between the shrinking pool of postsecondary-trained graduates and the ever-growing demand for skilled workers? How can schools better prepare students for the realities of today’s in-demand, high-wage work opportunities? Which strategies have proven to be successful?

**Career exploration—policies and practices that help students build self-awareness, learn about potential career paths, and develop plans for reaching future goals—can help young people plan for and navigate uncertainty.**

Career exploration—policies and practices that help students build self-awareness, learn about potential career paths, and develop plans for reaching future goals—can help young people plan for and navigate uncertainty. Middle school career exploration is often defined as a journey of self-discovery that helps students hone in on their strengths and interests and identify career possibilities that are both financially rewarding and personally meaningful. More generally, career exploration is a continuous process through which individuals learn about themselves and about the world of work in order to make informed decisions about their education and career path.

The timing of these types of career and postsecondary planning conversations matters. Research shows that middle school is a pivotal time to engage students to ensure they will be prepared for their chosen career path. In middle school, a student’s brain is developing in a way that allows for greater exploration and planning,<sup>4</sup> and they are not yet burdened with the pressure about future goals that high schoolers often face<sup>5</sup>—providing greater personal capacity and opportunity for exploration. Middle school is also a time when students are at the highest risk for disengaging from school and school activities, pointing to a need for personal relevance and connection.<sup>6</sup> Early and intentional career guidance is key. Kids begin to foreclose career opportunities for themselves if they don’t have intentional exposure by middle school,<sup>7</sup> and those who plan for college by 9th grade are more likely to attend, while those who develop college aspirations later are significantly less likely to enroll.<sup>8 9</sup>

Peer-reviewed studies show that career exploration helps students build their understanding of their career interests, expand their awareness and understanding of career opportunities, connect academic and career goals, improve academic performance and engagement, successfully transition from middle school to high school, and increase their self-efficacy related to education and career success.<sup>10</sup> Put simply, career exploration helps students enjoy and find relevance in their education.<sup>11</sup>

Outside of individual student outcomes, early exposure can have a longer-term impact in building the pipeline for in-demand careers and improving diversity of talent across industry fields. Increased and earlier career exploration is critical for all students, but especially for historically marginalized populations (e.g., students of color, students experiencing poverty, students in rural communities, and students with disabilities). Career-connected learning can help mitigate the impacts of racial, gender, and other biases and encourage students to pursue career pathways they might not have otherwise considered or even been aware of, provide them with early opportunities to build social capital and cultivate mentors, and practice real-world workplace skills.<sup>12</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Middle school career exploration has gained traction as a foundational element of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in recent years. The 2018 reauthorization of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (also known as Perkins V) provides nearly \$1.4 billion annually to support states in channeling federal funding into CTE initiatives.<sup>13</sup> A portion of those funds can be allocated to states and local providers that introduce and expand career exploration in middle schools. While CTE has traditionally catered to high school and postsecondary learners, the focus is now expanding. By granting middle school students greater access to exploratory CTE courses, Perkins V has provided greater opportunity for middle schoolers to seamlessly transition into CTE programs as they matriculate from middle school, laying the foundation for a more seamless and informed career development continuum. Many states have responded to the reauthorization of Perkins V by passing laws and updating policy to encourage the expansion of middle school career exploration; however, implementation quality and scale varies widely from state to state.

The stark disconnect between students' lack of preparation to make informed decisions about their future, increasing speed of job market shifts, and a rising demand for postsecondary-trained skilled workers creates a challenging, multi-faceted landscape for American students. The future landscape of work is ever-changing, but one thing remains clear: every young person deserves a compass to navigate it and

Early exposure to career possibilities has been shown to boost academic engagement and self-efficacy and to empower students, particularly from marginalized communities, to envision themselves in in-demand fields, break down biases, and chart their own paths to education and career success.

a longer runway to prepare for their journey. Early exposure to career possibilities has been shown to boost academic engagement and self-efficacy and to empower students, particularly from marginalized communities, to envision themselves in in-demand fields, break down biases, and chart their own paths to education and career success. It is within this context that Britebound® and ESG set out to answer the following questions:

- **HOW DO STATES VALUE MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION?**
- **WHAT RELATED POLICIES AND PRACTICES HAVE STATES PROMOTED?**
- **HOW HAVE STATES SUPPORTED THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION?**

# THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

## The Importance of Student Voice

As a core driver of our research, Britebound and ESG prioritized student voice and the user experience to better understand the direct outcomes of states' middle school career exploration vision, policies, and infrastructure and how they contributed to middle school career exploration practices meeting their intended outcomes. This report defines "student voice" as the authentic student input or leadership in instruction, school structures, or education policies that can promote meaningful change in education systems, practice, and/or policy by empowering students as change agents, often working in partnership with adult educators.<sup>14</sup>

Uplifting student voice is critical for moving students from being *objects of* to *full participants in* educational policy; it is particularly important for those student groups who have historically had limited and unequal

opportunities for engagement in education research and policy.<sup>15 16</sup> Amplifying student voice is especially important as it relates to addressing inequities and serving historically marginalized populations, including students from Black, Latine, Native American, and low-income communities as well as students with disabilities and English language learners.<sup>17</sup> For example, one study found that the use of interviews and focus groups to directly engage students allowed researchers to better understand what students experience in schools and how to better meet student needs.<sup>18</sup> Research has found that student engagement also directly benefits students by building student self-efficacy, capacity for leadership, and civic engagement.<sup>19</sup> Giving students greater ownership over their education is also linked to improved student outcomes,<sup>20</sup> such as increased graduation rates and motivation.<sup>21</sup>

## How We Engaged Middle School Students

ESG convened a group of middle school students, representing grades 6 through 8, to form a Student Advisory Council as a core informer of this report. The goal of the Student Advisory Council was to center student perspectives and inform policy change, identify barriers to career exploration that states can address, and expand students' own understandings of career exploration. The group of students came from five different states and represented different racial backgrounds, grade levels, and school types. The Student Advisory Council was intentionally kept small in size to increase familiarity, build trust, and encourage engagement across students to allow them to freely and comfortably share about their experiences.

We engaged students in two formats to discuss their educational journey and pathway experiences, with a specific emphasis on career awareness and exploration activities. The first format consisted of

virtual small group discussions in which we asked students to respond to direct questions regarding career exploration, as well as participate in reflection activities that were then shared with the group. We also conducted one-on-one interviews with a subset of students to dig deeper into their experiences with career exploration and better understand their career interests. Throughout these engagements, we also asked students to compare their experiences to their state's required career exploration activities, including developing a career and academic plan.

Though too limited in scale to draw nationally representative conclusions across all states or all student groups, the experiences shared by the Student Advisory Council provide important perspective to this report's data collection that is likely true across other communities and can help leaders consider implications for students in their own states.

## Student Voice Findings

**Students have different understandings of career exploration but want to dive deep into new and different career options through active, hands-on career exploration experiences.**

Students articulated different understandings of what exploration is depending on their unique personal experiences, but all expressed a desire to learn more about the new and different career options in our labor market—especially careers that may be less common or familiar to them. Students seek not only exposure to which careers are out there, but also a deeper understanding of what professionals in different careers do on a day-to-day basis. They expressed curiosity about more specific career elements, such as the pathways needed to get into certain careers or the full scope of responsibilities at a job, particularly those that may not seem obvious at the surface. Students also viewed career exploration as an opportunity for them to figure out what careers do *not* fit them or their interests.

*"I think I would want to see what they do there. What's the most important thing in the job? And what are the rules? What's important to me is trying to figure out what you'll actually do in the job."*

TRINITY, 6TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN MINNESOTA

Students we interviewed associated career exploration with extracurricular activities they may have participated in, either in or out of school, such as student council or theater, while expressing a desire for more academic opportunities to learn about different careers or dive deeper into content related to their career interests. Students also tended to mention college or awareness of postsecondary options when asked about career exploration, demonstrating they understand more education and training after high school would be a necessity in some future career paths. Several students shared that they discuss postsecondary options with their families or in school more than they discuss specific career options, which

could indicate that families view college enrollment as the destination rather than a step on a path to long-term career success. One student mentioned wanting more classes or formal opportunities to understand career options, while another student interested in a career related to zoology mentioned desiring time in her courses devoted to learning more about animal life to bring relevance between what she was learning and a possible career path.

Students are hungry for career exploration experiences that go beyond “sit-and-get” presentations or speakers. They want experiences that are more active, hands-on, and “fun.” Several students expressed a desire for opportunities to job shadow or go on a field trip to see firsthand what professionals do in their careers and experience for themselves how the work is done. Students saw these types of experiences as helpful ways to learn about careers, as well as effective and engaging forms of learning. When asked to describe previous high-quality experiences with career exploration, the students almost always named a hands-on experience or event in which they were experiencing some type of work or activity for themselves—most of which was related to personal or extracurricular experiences rather than school-provided opportunities.

*"I would like to tell them [adults] that maybe we should do something hands-on to explore the career and actually be in the career for a few days and experience what you would do with them to see if that's something you would want to do. [It would be helpful] if we had a chance to see what they did, what the people in the actual jobs do, maybe like shadowing them for a day, and learning what they actually do as a job."*

LEXI, 8TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN VIRGINIA

*"I think I would want to do something with the parents, because I know the students do a lot. But the parents are always a really good role model. So in my opinion, I would want to make sure that the mom, or the dad, or the grandparents know more about what you're gonna do and how they can help."*

*"There aren't a lot of classes in school to talk about [my interests]."*

TRINITY, 6TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN MINNESOTA

**Students want more parental engagement in career exploration and greater support in knowing where to start.**

Some students alluded to the additional opportunities that could be provided with further engagement of parents or family members in career exploration. These students highlighted the value that caregivers can bring by knowing what their student's career interests are, knowing how they can support their student's path, and engaging in an activity together.

Some students also want more support in knowing where to start in their career exploration journey. They shared that additional guidance would be helpful whether they are interested in multiple paths or are not yet sure where their interests lie. One theme that emerged was simply not knowing enough about career exploration or the available opportunities to be able to articulate their needs. Students pointed out that this can be a barrier in getting to the next step in learning about careers. For example, although one student took a career assessment at school, the activity was not as helpful as it could have been since the quiz required them to already have a sense of what their interests are.

**Rather than schools, students' primary source of information about careers is often their personal networks or family.**

Students often mentioned discussing or learning about career options through family members, friends, or other adults in their lives. These adults give students preliminary exposure to the careers that exist and an early sense of what students might look for in their

own careers, such as the level of education needed or the number of hours worked. However, even students who have conversations with their parents about their potential career interests shared that these were often limited to career interests as it relates to college planning. Some students also gained interest in potential careers through parents or family members who helped organize hands-on learning experiences outside of school, such as at the zoo or at an aviation museum. When asked to share their experiences, several students identified these out-of-school, family-initiated career exploration activities rather than any formal opportunities for career exploration in school.

Many of the students described not having many opportunities to discuss careers, or their career-related interests, in schools or with counselors. If they did have those opportunities in school, they were often limited to just one unit in a class (such as a Family Life Education course) or a career assessment as part of a course unit on careers. Although a few students did mention having speakers or presentations in class to discuss careers, they were not always related to specific jobs or careers of interest for the students.

Relying too heavily on family members and personal connections as the primary source for career exploration contributes to inequity in access to high-quality experiences as well as the depth and breadth of information available to individual students. Career exploration offered more systematically through schools will help reduce inequitable access to information and increase the likelihood that all students will receive quality opportunities to inform their decisions about education and training paths.

*"We don't really talk about careers and stuff in school very often. If we do it's more like a once in a while thing in school. I think I learn a lot more talking to people I know, like in my family, than in school."*

EMMA, 7TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN MINNESOTA

*"I feel like I learned more about careers outside of school when I do my own research."*

AYANNA, 7TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN FLORIDA

**State-required Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAP) or other forms of learning plans do not always support middle school students' career exploration.**

We asked students to reflect on career-related or academic planning requirements that exist in their state to better understand the extent to which students were meaningfully engaging in the planning process. Few students were aware of or had heard of their state

planning requirements; some of this lack of awareness was due to the fact that planning in some states begins in 9th grade. For students that had started the planning process in their school, most of the plans focused on academics, such as planning and sequencing their classes or tracking their grades, rather than career-related planning. Students also struggled to articulate how these plans might be related to their career exploration or career plans.

## Implications of Student Voice Research

Students were clear: they want hands-on career exploration experiences and think that their schools can do more to provide them. The Student Advisory Council members who informed the findings and recommendations of this report were reflective and thoughtful in their current assessment of both in-school and out-of-school experiences that helped shape their understanding of potential careers and were not shy in making suggestions aimed at the adults crafting the policies and requirements of their states. Combining these qualitative, on-the-ground perspectives of the work with the quantitative review of state policies and practices gives a more nuanced understanding of where the nation, as a whole, can continue to improve.

*"[I think adults should] focus more on career exploration instead of doing the same presentations over and over again. With career exploration, there are new fields, careers, and new opportunities, and we just don't explore those often enough... I feel like we should get to explore the careers and find out what you would do in the careers and how you need to get there... I feel like we don't really do that a lot. And we need more of that."*

LEXI, 8TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN VIRGINIA

# UNPACKING MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY

## The Findings of a National Scan

Leveraging an understanding of middle school career exploration grounded in available research and student voice, ESG conducted an analysis of the efforts of all 50 states and Washington, D.C. to examine the extent to which states effectively prioritize and facilitate meaningful career exploration experiences for middle school students. This analysis examines how state-level actors, such as governors, legislatures, and state education agencies, shape middle school career exploration policy and practices, but does not attempt to determine the quality of district- or school-level implementation of state policies and practices. Our findings, however, demonstrate the range of approaches that states have instituted to help districts and schools deliver quality middle school career exploration services.

Our analysis was driven by three broad research questions intended to unpack states' overall efforts to prioritize and facilitate quality middle school career exploration:

**STATE VISION:** How has the state defined and prioritized career exploration for middle school students?

**POLICY:** What policies and practices have states put into place to enable student access to meaningful career exploration experiences?

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** What supports have states put in place to help schools provide meaningful career exploration experiences for middle grades students?

To further refine our understanding of the depth and breadth of states' efforts in each of the research areas, we classified each state's current work using three descriptive indicators as shown in the following rubric:

**BUILDING:** States in this stage are beginning to establish the basic elements of vision, policy, and/or infrastructure.

**EMERGING:** States in this stage demonstrate noticeable growth and development, but still have room for meaningful growth in vision, policy, and/or infrastructure.

**ADVANCED:** States at this stage have reached a high level of execution in terms of their vision, policy, and/or infrastructure.

*Please refer to Appendix B for the full rubric and more detailed information on the research methodology.*

This report presents a high-level overview of the results of each research question, which is then unpacked in more detail in terms of the implications of, and overarching take-aways from, the aggregated findings.

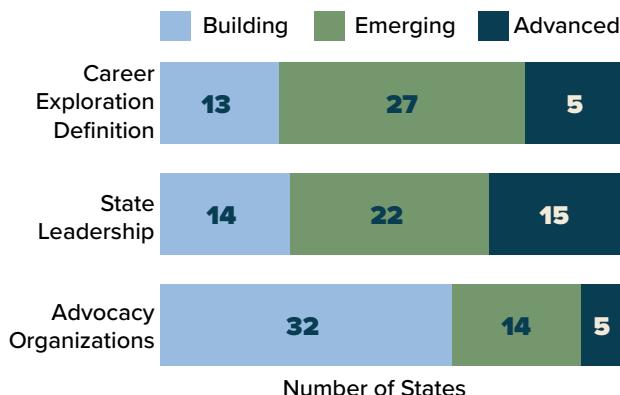
## UNPACKING MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY

### State Vision: How have states defined and prioritized career exploration for middle school students?

Our deep-dive into states' vision for middle school career exploration focused on three components:

1. Does the state formally define career exploration for middle school students?
2. Have state leaders articulated or included career exploration as a valued or prioritized component of students' middle school experience?
3. Are there organizations within the state that are advocating for middle school career exploration?

States have made substantial progress in defining middle school career exploration (75 percent) and prioritizing it as an important part of the middle school experience. However, as shown in the graphic below, fewer states include middle school career exploration as part of a larger strategic vision for student pathways (29 percent), and the broader ecosystem around state agencies that is key to supporting and facilitating a longer-term agenda is in the early stages of adopting middle school career exploration as a key priority of focus, with only 10 percent of states demonstrating more advanced supports.

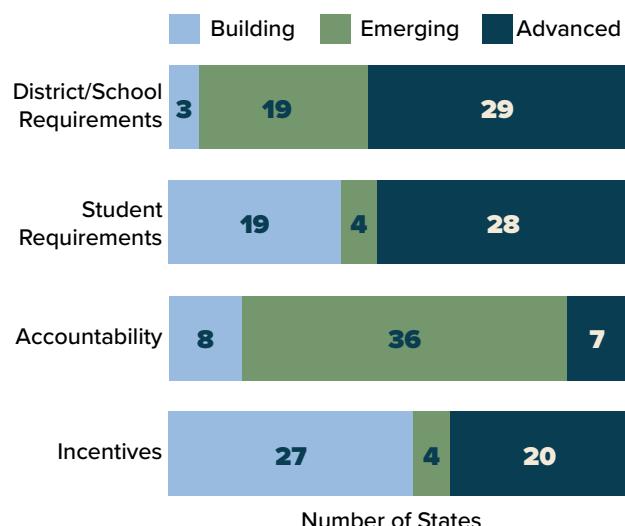


### Policy: What policies and practices have states put into place to ensure students have access to meaningful career exploration experiences?

Our examination of policy relied on four indicators of robust policy systems. These were assessed through four questions:

1. Does the state have policies that establish standard practices for career exploration in middle schools?
2. Does the state have policies that require middle school students to complete career exploration activities?
3. Does the state integrate career exploration into its accountability systems?
4. Does the state have policies incentivizing career exploration in middle schools?

Expectations for middle school career exploration activities are found in most states across the country, with 94 percent of them placing requirements for schools and districts to complete at least some activities with their students. Fewer states (63 percent) have specific expectations for student-level standards or offer incentives to drive these activities (47 percent). Very few states (14 percent) measure the quality of these programs by including them in their state or federal accountability systems.



## UNPACKING MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY

### Infrastructure: What supports have states put in place to help schools provide meaningful career exploration experiences for middle-grades students?

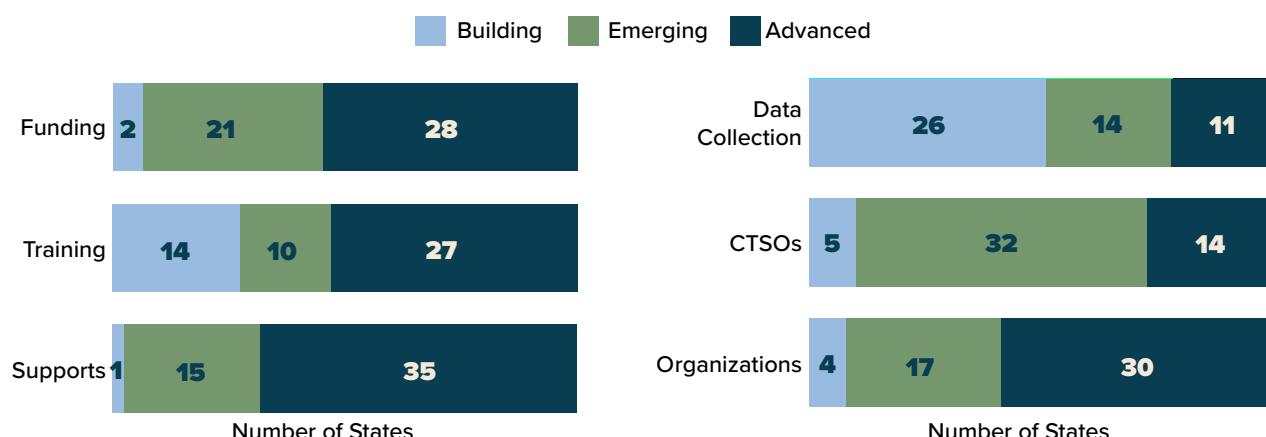
Our research on infrastructure was the most complex, relying on six unique indicators. These were:

1. Does the state use state and federal funding sources to support career exploration for middle school students?
2. Does the state support the training of school counselors (and other school staff) in career exploration?
3. Does the state provide material supports to districts on the implementation of middle school career exploration?
4. Does the state collect data on middle school career exploration opportunities in the state?
5. Does the state support student participation in career and technical student organizations?
6. Are there organizations within the state that support career exploration in middle schools?

In the strongest category by far, all but one state were shown to offer material supports for schools and districts to guide this work, most often coming in the form of templates, tools, lesson plans, and platforms. The majority of states provide funding earmarked for middle school career exploration—most often coming from federal sources, with state and philanthropic dollars utilized less often. Fewer states (22 percent) had an advanced capacity to collect and use data around these practices to monitor quality and improve implementation.

With this overall understanding of states' work in mind, we used the results of this research to draw aggregate conclusions that convey the breadth and depth of current efforts across the country to prioritize and drive quality middle school career exploration. Overall, a coherent, collaborative vision that is monitored with clear data and accountability is not yet a reality for most states. Many have some good infrastructure to build on to facilitate quality middle school career exploration, including federal and state funding, material supports (e.g., frameworks, lessons), Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs), and support from outside organizations, including intermediaries that operate as the connector between schools and employers and facilitate programming for students. However, the majority of states are not yet collecting data to gauge the quality of their middle school career exploration. More states are in need of consistent, quality training for counselors, advising staff, and other school staff. Together, these factors illustrate that, while the policies might be on paper to enable career exploration programming, many states are only in the beginning stages of implementing quality career exploration for all middle school students.

In order for states to move from the building blocks of career development services that most already have in place to more advanced, comprehensive practice with greater impact for students, it's important to understand their current work at a deeper level against impactful strategic priorities that were found to correlate with more advanced practices.



## A strong state vision sets middle school career exploration up for success.

Setting a vision at the state level for middle school career exploration can give states an important advantage in prioritizing their own efforts and providing solid infrastructure—including funding—to promote quality implementation at the local level. States are placing significant emphasis on career-connected education, and career exploration is a clear component of that priority focus. Perkins V has created a path for states to prioritize funds for career exploration through middle school career and technical education. The majority of states have demonstrated some focus on career development for middle school students, as evidenced by elevating its importance in official documents to include an explicit definition of career exploration. However, most states are not yet prioritizing this in a clear, coordinated fashion.

**Less than a quarter of states' policies can currently be classified as "advanced" in terms of designating career exploration as a high priority for state agencies, districts, and schools to address.**

"Advanced" states, on the other hand, demonstrate a commitment to cross-agency collaboration and alignment, dedicated funding streams, and long-term strategic planning for programs that include career exploration activities for the middle grades. These initiatives are typically part of broader efforts to align

education with workforce development in the state, and middle school career exploration is integrated into a comprehensive career preparation continuum—from classroom to workforce—that is described in long-term strategic plans, statutes, or some other official capacity.

Developing a strong state vision includes creating definitions for concepts that stakeholders can refer to so that there is a shared understanding of how to implement that vision. Only eleven states (22 percent) have codified a middle school career exploration definition in statute or rule to which districts and schools can collectively refer as they carry out state policies. Twenty-seven states (53 percent) have outlined definitions for career exploration in guidance documents or on department websites, which districts may use as a resource to guide middle school career exploration efforts. The remaining states (25 percent) do not yet have an explicit definition for career exploration broadly.

**Most states have not codified a definition in their statutes or rules.**



**What does advanced state leadership for quality middle school career exploration look like?**



Similar to establishing official definitions, cross-agency collaboration is helpful to ensure that decision makers at the local and state levels have a common understanding of how to approach career development in general, and how middle school career exploration fits within that approach. Each agency (K-12, Higher Education, Labor) can offer a different lens and distinct funding streams for strengthening workforce development in their state, so providing an opportunity for them to collaborate in a way that breaks down silos builds an essential and sustainable foundation for this work. States rated “advanced” in this category often had a shared vision outlined in strategic plans that detail how middle school career-connected learning and activities integrate into a statewide approach to workforce development. A dictionary or governance document that defines terms across agencies, such as the [Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary](#), can promote consistency and quality across programs for students and participants.

Similar to establishing official definitions, cross-agency collaboration is helpful to ensure that decision makers at the local and state levels have a common understanding of how to approach career development in general, and how middle school career exploration fits within that approach.

### STATE SPOTLIGHT: MISSOURI

#### Stakeholder collaboration in career exploration

Missouri’s Career Pathways Initiative is a statewide, collaborative project that supports the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Show-Me Success program. Partners include state agencies, key employers, employer organizations, secondary and postsecondary institutions, and community organizations, demonstrating cross-agency collaboration. The primary goal of the program is to promote the development and implementation of successful career pathways that meet communities’ needs. Districts receive support in providing career awareness, exploration, and preparation for all students. Career advisors are integral to this effort;

they focus on Missouri Connections, an online career program, and ensuring that all students have a rigorous and relevant ICAP. The department established guiding principles that describe their role in this initiative, and allocated dollars to help teachers integrate and connect workplace skills with current classroom curriculum and instruction. The career advisors, ICAP platform, and professional development illustrate the investment made by the state to ensure the cross-agency initiative’s success in preparing all students for the ever-changing Missouri economy.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

To make middle school career exploration a priority, state leadership must set clear goals and leverage existing policy tools to articulate the state's vision.

**STATES** should consider the following strategic actions:

1. **Clearly define middle school career exploration** for the state and ensure a unified definition is adopted across relevant agencies and partners, including K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and relevant community-based organizations. A quality definition clearly defines middle school career exploration as a strategy that will help students build their understanding of their career interests and expand their awareness and understanding of career opportunities, including through hands-on, applied experiences. Including the definition in strategic plans not only sets a vision for the state, but also supports alignment across and within agencies and serves as a reference for annual evaluation of programs and progress.
2. **Once a clear definition is established, coordinate related and supporting efforts** across state leadership, including departments driving academics and instruction, school counseling, career and technical education, and workforce training. Establish routines for collaboration between programmatic leaders who should be working together to support an overall vision for student success with elements from each of their programs.
3. **Set measurable goals** for middle school career exploration, integrating them into existing college and career readiness (CCR) targets. The last two years of high school are insufficient for dramatically increasing students' readiness for postsecondary and career opportunities. By intentionally linking middle school career

exploration to college and career readiness targets for high schools, states are increasing their chances of students meeting CCR goals, with the added benefit that students' postsecondary training plans will be better informed by their long-term career interests. States should establish expectations of their middle school students that build on elementary school standards and intentionally connect to high school requirements.

4. **Leverage the state Perkins V and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans**, as well as federal and state accountability systems, to support career exploration initiatives by defining career exploration consistently across state plans and allocating discretionary spending to support efforts. States are able to allocate state Perkins V leadership funds, for example, including providing training to educators. Including middle school career exploration as a requirement for local subgrant applications also allows states to set clear parameters around quality activities for districts.
5. **Assess and address state policies** that have the potential to limit students' ability to access different career exploration opportunities, including restricting CTE course enrollment by grade level or grade point average minimums. Perkins V has expanded the allowability of federal dollars down into the middle grades, yet some states have existing policies in place that block efforts to support middle school career exploration opportunities by grade level.

**LOCAL LEADERS** should consider the following actions to make middle school career exploration a priority within their schools:

1. **Determine if your state has an existing vision** for middle school career exploration and explicitly embed this vision into your district's or school's strategic plan, goals, and school improvement work.
2. **Ensure your district's or consortium's local Perkins V subgrant application is explicit** in its commitment to middle school career exploration.

## State policies alone don't always translate to quality student experiences.

The state policy environment can, and should, encourage, shape, and support districts' implementation of middle school career exploration. These policies are important for setting expectations for districts, schools, and students in how the state expects them to participate in this process. These expectations should be structured in such a way to facilitate a meaningful, continuous process that allows students to think deeply about their aptitudes and interests so they can explore a range of opportunities that can lead to a career they find fulfilling. They should not simply "check the box"; as one student noted, "It's once a year and you get a five-day unit about what you want to do. Okay, that's nice. Goodbye. We're moving on." (Lexi, 8th grade student in Virginia).

The vast majority of states have established policies outlined in statute, rule, or regulations that require districts and schools to implement basic middle school career exploration practices. These policies serve as the building blocks that help educators guide students' career and educational planning. Over half of states take this a step further and require students to meet certain requirements, such as completing a career exploration course or crafting an Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP), to ensure they participate in the necessary career exploration steps to plan for their future. "Advanced" states in both of these categories have extended district and student middle school requirements into the high school experience, demonstrating a long-term commitment to continually reviewing students' career plans as they progress in their personal and educational development and drawing preparation for high school decision-making down into earlier grades to increase time available to understand options and make informed choices.

Social capital—an essential component of exposing students to and preparing them for academic and career success—should be another key consideration for state leaders. Our Student Advisory Council listening sessions and interviews highlighted the fact that middle school students are finding greater value in the career conversations they have with their families than the career exploration activities that occur during the school day. Every student has a community that can expose them to new career opportunities; however,

without the ability to activate that network and build upon it, students may not be able to unlock the vast opportunities available to them. States are positioned to integrate social capital development within their college and career pathways to support students in not only cultivating relationships, but also leveraging them for important career learning.

### Most states have policies that require districts, schools, or students to engage in career exploration.

Our research shows that state policies allow several different approaches to middle school career exploration, including:

- **District or school facilitation of career advising/ICAP services.** Twenty-seven states require students to begin an ICAP in middle school. This process usually includes some sort of career interest inventory to inform students of options for a career direction and/or course selection for high school. Students have the opportunity to explore careers

### STATE SPOTLIGHT: IDAHO

#### Family involvement in the ICAP development process

Idaho statute requires every student in grades 7 or 8 develop a **career pathway plan** that must be approved by parents or guardians. The purpose of a parent-approved student career pathway plan is to outline a course of study and learning activities to help students become successful in life. School personnel are required to provide their advice and recommendations during this process. Students complete this plan in conjunction with one or more career exploration courses or workforce discovery activities. Every student's career pathway plan must be reviewed annually and can be revised at any time. To facilitate ongoing communication with parents, schools are also required to provide a personalized career pathway plan progress report to the student's parent or guardian.

## UNPACKING MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY

related to their interests and document this process to revisit as they progress through their secondary school experience and plan for appropriate postsecondary training. This individualized planning process provides a great opportunity for students to continue career planning in high school, as these states generally put parameters in place to ensure the plan follows the student and is reviewed by the school periodically.

- **Requirements to develop comprehensive counseling programs that deliver career advising services.** Eighteen states require districts and schools to establish a counseling program that includes career advising as a major component that is inclusive of middle school students. States with strong career exploration policies tend to couple this requirement with an ICAP process; this ensures that career advising is documented and contributes to an individual student's educational and career goals. Some states also put requirements in place to monitor student-to-counselor ratios and track the counseling services students receive throughout the year. Tennessee State Board of Education policy, for example, outlines requirements

for a Comprehensive School Counseling Model of Practice<sup>22</sup>, which includes college and career readiness standards to help middle school students understand the connection between school and the world of work and plan for a successful transition from school to postsecondary education and the workforce. The policy also clarifies that school counselors must spend the majority of their time in direct support services to students, rather than administrative tasks.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies that specify the mindsets and behaviors school counselors should adhere to as they develop their school counseling programs for preK-12 students. One of the competencies details ways to provide student advising in a variety of settings; this includes administering career and aptitude assessments, helping students identify and plan for career opportunities, and connecting students to workplace experiences to explore their career interests. Some states have incorporated these standards into their own counseling programs

### STATE SPOTLIGHT: NORTH DAKOTA

#### Building capacity through career advisors

North Dakota statute requires that schools' counselor-to-student ratios not exceed 300:1. The statute allows districts to meet this requirement with the use of career advisors. The state established this position in statute to help mitigate the shortage of school counselors. The Department of Career and Technical Education developed a program that leads to a certificate in career development facilitation. This includes dedicated training to use the state's

online career platform, RUReadyND. Career advisors provide sequential career development activities, current career information, and related career exploration opportunities to students in grades 7-12. These advisors work under the supervision of school district counseling staff, and are required to submit an outline or plan of work detailing how they meet the needs of students in career planning.

to ensure that school counselors are providing these services to middle school students.<sup>23</sup>

- **Career course or CTE program standards and requirements.** Thirty-three states facilitate career exploration via a course or set of courses that can serve as an on-ramp to a CTE pathway. These exploratory courses are not always required and the availability of courses can vary across and within districts, which limits their accessibility to all students. States that make this course a requirement in some cases allow districts to incorporate it into another major course, e.g. Civics. This likely results in great variability in the quality of the career exploration experience for students. Taking the course approach to middle school career exploration is strengthened when combined with counseling and ICAP requirements to ensure all middle school students have dedicated time for individualized career planning and advisement and that these are not one-and-done activities without needed context-building.

It is encouraging that most states have policies outlined in statute, rule, or regulations that require districts and schools to implement middle school career exploration activities. However, our conversations with the Student Advisory Council suggest that student experiences in school do not necessarily reflect these policies.

This disconnect between state requirements for, and student exposure to, career exploration demonstrates the importance of ensuring policies and practices are monitored for the purposes of assessing and improving career development services for students, and that other infrastructure pieces needed to set districts up for success are available to districts and schools.

### STATE SPOTLIGHT: UTAH

#### Creating a comprehensive course for career planning

Utah's College & Career Awareness Program requires a course for students in grades 7-8. The course is designed to increase awareness of college and career pathways. Students explore high school, college, and career options based on individual interests, abilities, and skills. A team of CTE teachers, school counselors, and work-based learning coordinators teach the course and provide instruction in career development.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

**To ensure that students have meaningful career exploration opportunities, states should create a policy environment that enables schools to implement a holistic career exploration experience for students starting in middle school.**

**STATES** should consider the following strategic actions:

- 1. Incorporate career advising into defined roles and responsibilities** of school staff—such as counselors, career coaches, or other identified personnel—and protect their time for student support services by setting clear limits on the percentage of time these positions spend on other administrative duties.
- 2. Ensure career exploration experiences help students prepare for and successfully transition** from elementary, through middle school, and into high school. Rather than setting middle school standards that operate in a silo, states should clearly build upon a foundation of elementary advising activities to connect the middle school career exploration requirements to the expectations and graduation requirements of high school.
- 3. Create opportunities for inclusive hands-on career exploration experiences** to engage middle school students outside of the classroom. Students want authentic career exploration experiences outside of career assessments and checklists. States should provide resources, incentives, and technical assistance to build the capacity of districts to partner with intermediaries and employers in their communities to create and offer these experiences.
- 4. Provide resources and training** to middle school educators to ensure that the career and

academic planning process extends beyond a checklist and is integrated throughout a student's day-to-day school experience. For students, career conversations can occur with anyone. States should capitalize on this and invest in providing basic materials and training for all middle school personnel to support these conversations with students. This could include sharing information about current in demand careers within their communities, guiding students to existing tools, and connecting students to the staff member who can assist them further. Similar to North Dakota, states can offer certifications and training in career development to educators and school staff who have regular touch-points with students.

- 5. Invest in integrating social capital development** into their overarching college and career pathways framework in a way that includes all school staff in building students' career awareness and personal networks. It is clear that students gain much of their understanding about careers and their interests outside of school. This has equity implications when considering students' differing levels of career exposure in their communities and drastic differences in extracurricular opportunities. Schools can help mitigate that gap.

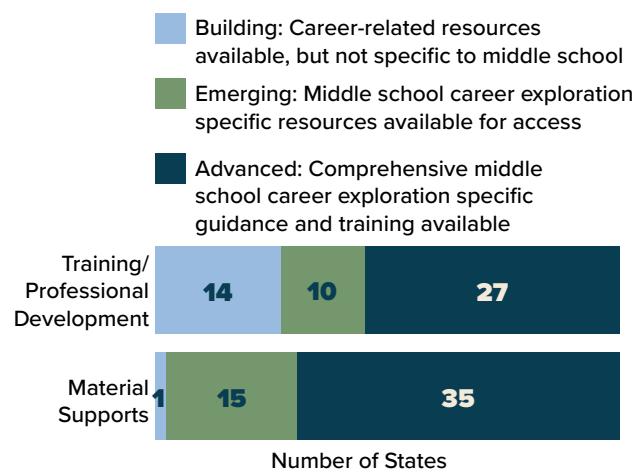
**LOCAL LEADERS** should take the following actions to ensure middle school students have access to meaningful career exploration opportunities:

- 1. Institute career development training opportunities** for school staff to build staff capacity to facilitate career conversations with middle school students.
- 2. Build partnerships** with local and regional employers or intermediaries that can facilitate connections to employers, to develop engaging, hands-on experiences for students.
- 3. Integrate social capital concepts** into the district's college and career readiness framework, including providing mentorship opportunities for students and engaging students' guardians in career exploration experiences.

## Districts need proper infrastructure to successfully implement career exploration.

While stated leadership priorities, adopted policies, and dedicated funding can lay important groundwork for districts to begin implementing their middle school career exploration programs, infrastructure—such as curriculum and materials, data collection and evaluation practices, training and professional development, and a network of supporting organizations—also needs to be established by states to assist districts as they usher students through the career planning process. Practitioners need guidance on how to conduct these activities and the capacity to implement them in a way that fulfills the intent of state policies and ensures students have meaningful career-connected learning experiences.

### Most states offer guidance and training to help districts implement their middle school career exploration initiatives.



Most states provide material support to help districts and schools implement career exploration and advising for middle school students, and a large majority of those states provide resources that guide quality implementation. These materials include frameworks, implementation guides, assessment tools, lesson plans, and student plan templates that school personnel can access to help carry out career-connected learning activities. While these materials are necessary and

a good first step in signaling states' focus on career exploration, hands-on training and communities of practice to help school-level professionals deepen their understanding of how to engage students in career planning in a meaningful way are also important. A little over half of states can be classified as “advanced” in this area, showing that they offer substantial professional development and training for school staff in career exploration, which is crucial for building capacity. Iowa, for example, has developed a College and Career Readiness Framework for K-12 schools that includes a focus on career exploration and development. The state supports districts by offering ICAP requirements, assessment tools, and guidance documents, in addition to pre-approved vendors districts are required to utilize.

Few states, however, offer conferences, convenings, or in-person training that help counselors, career coaches, or teachers learn how to provide quality career advising and instruction. Missouri supports clear expectations for counselors through a New School Counselor Institute designed for recent graduates of school counseling programs, counselors with alternate certification, and counselors changing positions, in addition to a statewide two-year mentoring program for counselors new to the profession. Most states have open access and self-paced resources and webinars linked on their department websites that counselors or other school staff may access, but it is difficult to know how widely accessed or effective those resources are. Finally, the hands-on experiences requested by members of the Student Advisory Council may require capacity from outside the school; while the scope of this national scan did not include research around the level of engagement and capacity of community-based organization, employers, and employer-facing organizations (such as workforce development boards or chambers of commerce), these partnerships could also be explored as part of the larger infrastructure a state provides for this work.

**STATE SPOTLIGHT: COLORADO**

## State leadership in providing resources and training to support career conversations

In 2022, Colorado's governor and state legislature made a big push to start meaningful career conversations across the state by appropriating nearly \$1 million for the Colorado Career Advising Training Grant Program. The program aims to deepen Colorado's career advising capacity by providing training for career advising professionals across sectors. The training strategies support advisors in honing their skills and ensuring that evidence-based practices and data-driven decisions are supported by labor market information. These trainings are encouraged to be for, and open to, anyone who works with students or adults who need career conversation training, not just school counselors or school-based personnel. Program evaluations from the first implementation of trainings in 2019 (which was then interrupted by COVID-19) demonstrated that the initiative led to a "statewide expansion of highly trained career advisors focused on high-need sectors of the economy and built increased capacity for a more consistent and sustainable approach to career advising in Colorado as a model for the nation."<sup>24</sup>

Another series of trainings will begin in 2024, with an expected 2,500 participants. Colorado is also expecting another \$1 million from the legislature in the 2024-25 fiscal year. The state is planning to develop two levels of training—an expert level and a more foundational level—for July 2024.

*"There was money from the legislature and a big push from the governor to start meaningful career conversations training. I think that everyone is beginning to imagine that at the center of ICAP are meaningful career conversations. Students ICAP; it's a verb. It is the process by which students can learn and demonstrate what they know and can do."*

ROBIN RUSSEL, GRADUATION  
GUIDELINES MANAGER, COLORADO  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

**To ensure district and school leaders have the capacity to access and use the material resources states have developed, states should invest in the necessary infrastructure to support implementation.**

**STATES** should consider the following strategic actions:

1. **Invest in dynamic and continuous professional development and training** for districts and schools that focuses on creating buy-in and understanding of career exploration among staff and building awareness of existing state-supported tools and resources with the aim of providing career exploration opportunities to students. States can partner with employers to design externship opportunities for educators, which can expose educators to diverse careers and provide important knowledge educators can then share with students.
2. **Consider if teacher and counselor preparation programs should be updated** to include training on career exploration support for students, aligning training with state licensure requirements and expectations of student standards in the middle grades.
3. **Provide capacity-building technical assistance and training** to local leaders and educators based on key performance indicators incorporated into state career exploration frameworks. Staff who operate as liaisons between the districts and the state can serve as state advocates of career exploration and inform the state on the challenges many districts are facing, giving agency staff opportunities for continuous improvement on guidance and resources to improve performance.
4. **Offer support at the state level** to coordinate across employers and employer-facing organizations—such as workforce boards and chambers of commerce—to provide capacity locally to take advantage of hands-on opportunities available in nearby businesses.
5. **Build the data infrastructure** needed to support the use of continuous monitoring and improvement. Data is a necessary tool to help ensure quality implementation, and without it, schools and districts are operating in the dark. States should invest in, or leverage, existing tools that already collect data on resource usage and staff and student submissions.
6. **Build evaluation metrics and key performance indicators** into any state-level contracts with platform vendors to incentivize support, training, and quality implementation at the district level in order to initially qualify for, or continue to receive, state funding.
7. **Develop a process for local school counselors, educators, families, and students to provide input** on their experiences to guide future changes and improvements. Local input is necessary to not only build buy-in and local champions but also to make resources more meaningful for the intended users and career exploration opportunities more impactful for the students.

**LOCAL LEADERS** should take the following actions to ensure school staff have the capacity to access and use the resources available to them:

1. **Diagnose staff's current utilization of available resources**, identifying strengths and opportunities of current employees to access and effectively use state-provided materials. Develop a plan to share and build upon successful practices and close gaps in awareness or fidelity of implementation.
2. **Set clear expectations** for school staff on how to incorporate career exploration best practices established by the state and experts in the field into their daily work with students.

## Utilizing diverse funding streams can sustain annual activities and spur innovation for quality career-connected learning.

A strong indicator of a state's commitment to middle school career exploration is dedicated funding allocated to support their policy priorities. For quality implementation, states should have dedicated funding streams to support the necessary components for agencies, districts, and schools to carry out this work, such as career planning platforms, professional training, and personnel responsible for assisting students with career development activities. Students also expressed a desire to engage in more experiential learning opportunities to get a better understanding of what various professionals do on a daily basis. These valuable experiences require some financial commitment from states to help schools provide these opportunities, including transportation and coordination efforts.

### Most states leverage one or more funding streams to support middle school career exploration efforts.



### 4% No Dedicated Funding

The majority of states (96 percent) are allocating some funds to support middle school career exploration, although funding amounts vary greatly. Just over half of the states, classified as “advanced,” are using multiple funding streams, providing the funding infrastructure needed for deeper implementation. Forty-one percent—our “emerging” states—only leverage federal funding sources, such as ESSA, Perkins V, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), for middle school career exploration. Most states leverage Perkins V dollars as the federal funding stream to support middle school career exploration, often to enhance CTE programming or to build capacity with additional professional development. The recent reauthorization of Perkins V expanded allowable use of these funds into middle grades, giving states an opportunity to bolster district efforts in delivering career exploration opportunities to middle

school students. States generally used these funds to establish competitive grants or to provide professional development to support CTE programming. However, some states place grade-level limitations on the use of Perkins V funds, which creates major barriers when funding middle school career exploration.

### STATE SPOTLIGHT: NEW JERSEY

#### Dedicating federal funding to middle school career exploration

New Jersey used Perkins V dollars to establish the Middle Grades Career Awareness and Exploration Grant to cultivate the development of innovative career awareness and exploration programs focused on engaging career-focused instruction and unique experiences for students in the middle grades. This three-year grant program allows middle schools to offer the hands-on career exploration opportunities that students would like to incorporate into their career planning journey.

State funding is not as commonly used as federal dollars to support middle school career exploration. The most frequent use of state funding includes investment in customized online platforms that facilitate students' career planning. Few states use resources to explicitly support career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) that have middle school chapters. These organizations offer local, regional, state, and national events and conferences, mentorship, and competitions and research opportunities aligned to the ever-changing career landscape associated with their content area (such as technology, business, or health care). Tennessee and Delaware, for example, dedicate state department of education staff members to oversee these types of student organizations statewide. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is also responsible for oversight of the state affiliate of nine CTSOs, six of which have middle school chapters. By using Perkins V funds,

## UNPACKING MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY

TEA requires organizations to report on performance measurements including website interactions, number of training sessions, and demographics of student participation in different activities.

Only three states also appropriate funds to build districts' capacity for career advising and counseling with career advisors/coaches. Alabama, for example, appropriated state funding toward CTE career coaches in 2024, providing career development guidance for students in grades K-12 that included administering career assessments, facilitating work-based learning, and implementing the state's Career Development

Model. Only one state has leveraged philanthropic dollars to support middle school career exploration; however, this could be a way to spur innovation and community engagement within the state. Philanthropy has the ability to engage populations and communities deeply impacted by this work and can add value to agency staff with often limited bandwidth. Advantages to philanthropic dollars include flexibility and more responsive deployment, as these funds are not tied to the prescriptive spending rules and annual allocation cycles associated with state budgets and federal grants.

### STATE SPOTLIGHT: DELAWARE

#### State and local collaboration and innovation through philanthropic funding

Grant funds and close collaboration between state and local partners have opened up opportunities for middle schools in Delaware to innovate around career exploration in the classroom. Delaware has a robust CTE system,<sup>25</sup> particularly through its Career Pathways programs, which allow high school students to specialize in any of two dozen occupational areas.<sup>26</sup> However, it became clear that the state also needed to start engaging students earlier in the pipeline to support career exploration and experiential learning prior to the transition to high school.<sup>27</sup>

Philanthropic partners, including Rodel and Britebound, businesses, and funds from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act came together with the Delaware Department of Education to set up Delaware's Rethinking Middle Grades initiative. This grant opportunity made available \$1 million to provide opportunities for teachers, school, and district leaders to innovate around creating strong supports and programming for middle-grade students to meaningfully connect exploration, learning, and a positive self-image to careers and their community. In 2023, the grant funded 10 schools at \$100,000 each—three charters and seven traditional public schools—to pilot programs. The initiative has also established a steering committee of 30 educators, parents, students, and business leaders that developed an implementation guide and identified career awareness standards and goals for

students to achieve before completing 8th grade. Rather than focusing on a prescriptive, common curriculum, the committee focuses on standards, with flexibility that allows teachers and schools to innovate around career exploration. Innovations at schools have included restructuring the entire school schedule to integrate career exploration schoolwide, beyond just one CTE course, or creating courses around career exploration that are embedded into the school day.

Through this public-private partnership across state and local leaders, Rodel's critical role as a statewide convener that brings practitioners together in communities of practice has further facilitated innovation and spurred creativity through the sharing of ideas. These partners have also made an effort to center grassroots voices in this work by thinking about incorporating student voices early on in the process. Moving forward, Rodel and the Delaware Department of Education are learning from these pilots to set up systems that scale this work across the state.

*"It is the responsibility of district leaders to empower school-based leaders to be creative and innovative without getting in trouble."*

CHANTALLE ASHFORD, FOUNDER AND ACADEMIC HEAD OF SCHOOL, THE BRYAN ALLEN STEVENSON SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE, INC.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

**States should braid federal, state, and philanthropic funds to spur innovation, expand implementation, and sustain programming.****STATES** should consider the following strategic actions:

1. **Create competitive grant programs** and partner with philanthropic organizations to incentivize local practice with the opportunity to learn from exemplary districts and find opportunities to scale. States are positioned to communicate available opportunities for funding and offer technical assistance to local districts and schools that may have limited bandwidth to research, compete for, and implement grant programs.
2. **Use Perkins V** to support career exploration implementation and sustainability at the middle school level by setting aside funds to support professional development among school staff and encouraging localities to prioritize funds for middle school career explorations in their grant application. If not already included, states can utilize upcoming state plan revisions to require local providers to explain how they are providing career exploration activities that are aligned with an existing career development framework in local grant applications. State plans can also commit Perkins V dollars to a grant program that is exclusive to supporting career exploration programming.
3. **Leverage other federal funds** available to support specific student populations, including Title 1, which can be targeted to students who

need additional support; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to support programming for students with disabilities; WIOA Title 1 Youth Activities, which targets in- and out-of-school youth; and Title 4, through which districts can allocate funds to create a “Well-Rounded Education” by offering “college and career guidance and counseling programs.”

4. **Find opportunities to maximize state investments** and scale access to meaningful career exploration resources. For example, a state can invest in effective tools that provide educators, school leaders, students, and their families access to the same information on career exploration. States should consider online platforms through which school staff are able to access course standards, frameworks, and relevant data on their school’s career exploration activities. Students and their families should be able to access online tools, the student’s current career and academic plan, and resources that will increase their understanding of career explorations and facilitate career conversations. Student and other users’ input should be at the center of requirement gathering and tool development to ensure that the tools are useful and relevant to this age group.

**LOCAL LEADERS** should take the following actions to braid funding to support middle school career exploration innovation and implementation:

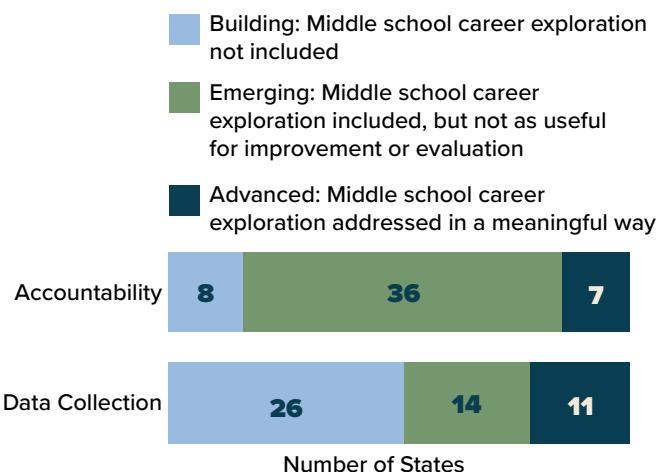
1. **Leverage federal grant programs** to implement and sustain middle school career exploration programming, including training for educators supporting hands-on experiences for students.
2. **Use state and federal grant programs** as opportunities to pilot career exploration opportunities, including innovative program models, data collection and evaluation components, and more staff capacity.

## Accountability and data collection can boost the effectiveness of middle school career exploration.

The outcomes included in state accountability systems drive district and school behavior by focusing their efforts on the indicators used to measure their performance.<sup>28</sup> Accountability frameworks require data collection at the state level, which is then used to assess the extent to which districts and schools are meeting certain benchmarks.

Our national scan demonstrates that most states are not taking advantage of their existing accountability systems and data collection mechanisms to ensure quality implementation of middle school career exploration programs. Very few states' efforts were described as "advanced," indicating that they have established these components in such a way that allows them to effectively evaluate the extent to which districts or schools deliver career exploration activities with fidelity. "Emerging" states include middle school career exploration in their accountability or data collection processes; however, those middle school career exploration data are not incorporated in such a way that can inform state administrators of how well these efforts are being implemented locally. "Building" states do not yet address middle school career exploration in their accountability or data systems.

**Few states incorporate middle school career exploration into their accountability and data collection systems.**



Seven states have distinguished themselves as "advanced" by instituting formal accountability mechanisms to influence district and school focus on meaningful career exploration. Although federal changes made through the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allowed states to exercise flexibility in the indicators used to assess districts and schools, only two states—Pennsylvania and Georgia—have used this flexibility to include career exploration as a component in their federal accountability systems. Five additional states—Missouri, Kansas, Utah, South Carolina, and Michigan—have incorporated middle school career exploration into their state accountability mechanisms to assess the quality of delivery of career advising services or activities.

**Although federal changes made through the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allowed states to exercise flexibility in the indicators used to assess districts and schools, only two states—Pennsylvania and Georgia—have used this flexibility to include career exploration as a component in their federal accountability systems.**

## Breakdown of States Incorporating Career Exploration into Accountability Systems

STATE	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM
Pennsylvania	<p><b>ESSA and Future Ready PA Index</b></p> <p>Pennsylvania's ESSA plan uses a Career Standards Benchmark as their School Quality or Student Success Indicator. The state calculates the percentage of students who, by the end of grade 8, have six pieces of evidence that they meet the Career Education and Work standards, including an individualized career plan, as an outcome measure. These are also reflected in the state's Future Ready PA Index, a collection of school progress measures related to school and student success.</p>
Georgia	<p><b>ESSA</b></p> <p>Georgia's ESSA Plan uses a measure called "Beyond the Core" as their School Quality or Student Success Indicator. This measures the percentage of students earning a passing score in specified enrichment courses, including career exploratory.</p>
Missouri	<p><b>Missouri School Improvement Program</b></p> <p>Missouri's School Improvement Program is the state's accountability program for reviewing and accrediting Local Education Agencies. One of the indicators used to assess districts includes a measure of Success-Ready Students. A metric included in this standard is a student Individual Career Academic Plan (ICAP) that is developed by the 8th grade and is based on career exploration experiences.</p>
Kansas	<p><b>State Accreditation Model</b></p> <p>Kansas's new accreditation model includes Career Awareness and Guidance criteria that are used to evaluate schools. One of the State Board Goals is reflected in this model, and includes a measure ensuring that every student has an Individual Plan of Study by the end of grade 8 that is reviewed annually.</p>
Utah	<p><b>District and School System of Accountability &amp; Evaluation of School Counseling Programs</b></p> <p>Utah's framework for accountability and evaluation of counseling programs looks at the establishment of plans for college and career readiness beginning in grade 7 and includes an annual evaluation for school counseling programs to ensure they align to the state's college and career readiness model.</p>
South Carolina	<p><b>Education and Economic Development Act Accountability</b></p> <p>As part of South Carolina's accountability system for their Education and Economic Development Act, the state collects district information to ensure that specified student-to-school counselor personnel ratios are met and to assess their facilitation of career awareness, exploration, and preparation opportunities for students throughout the academic year.</p>
Michigan	<p><b>Evaluation of School Counseling Programs</b></p> <p>Michigan annually evaluates their school counseling programs through a School Guidance and Counseling Program Audit to ensure they meet the standards outlined in the Michigan Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Program (MCGCP) and the ASCA Framework for School Counseling Programs. Additionally, the state analyzes student results data to see if they demonstrate a positive change in student behavior and student learning.</p>

## STATE SPOTLIGHT: PENNSYLVANIA

**Career exploration as a state accountability indicator**

Pennsylvania has committed to career exploration, preparation, and readiness as a priority across the state by choosing career-ready benchmarks as one of its ESSA School Quality and Student Success Indicators in the Consolidated State Plan. The career-ready indicators aim to highlight how well schools help students explore career opportunities and develop career goals throughout their schooling. Pennsylvania also incorporated it as a state accountability indicator through the Future Ready PA Index. The Future Ready PA Index, Pennsylvania's system of school and student accountability, includes new career-ready indicators as measures of school performance to ensure that all students have access to career exploration and preparation activities that are standards-aligned and evidence-based. State legislation requiring all school districts have a K-12 Guidance Plan that addresses career planning

and career readiness facilitated Pennsylvania's incorporation of career exploration into its state accountability system. State leadership also supported this integration, as Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera incorporated this into the ESSA plan for accountability standards. These accountability standards have increased energy around career readiness in communities across the state.

*"Pennsylvania chose career readiness as an accountability measure, which is pretty telling of what our priorities are for Pennsylvania."*

KAREN RUBICAN, SCHOOL COUNSELOR ADVISOR, PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Thirty-six “emerging” states have included middle school career exploration in some aspect of state-level plans governing their overall accountability systems, such as their state Perkins V Plan; however, these states are not using their state plan to gauge quality of their career exploration programming as an evaluative metric. While the inclusion of career exploration is an encouraging step in acknowledging the need to promote these activities across the state, there is room for improvement to ensure that these promote continuous improvement in districts and middle schools. Eight “building” states do not currently include middle school career exploration in their accountability or data collection processes.

Very few states collect data on middle school career exploration that is publicly available or able to be disaggregated by student populations. Data collection, often tied to accountability, ensures states have the information needed to measure how well their career exploration initiatives are being implemented. Ideally, these data should be accessible and usable with the purpose of driving continuous improvement. States should avoid burdensome data collection that does

not inform how districts can improve their delivery of middle school career exploration activities. For example, a simple collection of student enrollment in career courses (as opposed to a percentage of students receiving this instruction) does not tell a district much about the access students have to career exploration instruction or the types of career development services included. Taking a more thoughtful approach to data collection allows states to gauge how well a school district is providing career exploration services, and which areas could use improvement. As an example, Arkansas encourages their career coaches, who serve students in grades K through 12, to collect and use data, including student performance and advancement, graduation, services received, and postsecondary status, to measure progress toward the program’s goals.

Incorporating middle school career exploration into accountability and data collection processes provides a road map for what districts and schools should strive for to ensure that they are providing these experiences for students in an equitable and impactful way.

**STATE SPOTLIGHT: KENTUCKY**

## Evaluating, and leveraging data on, Individual Learning Plans

Kentucky requires districts to develop an evaluation method to assess the effectiveness of the state's Individual Learning Plan (ILP) process, which is a legislated requirement that includes the facilitation of career-related planning and exploration starting in grade 6. The evaluation method includes collecting data on indicators and plan-related input from students, parents/guardians, and school staff. The Kentucky Department of Education also collects information on ILP implementation within the state's digital readiness survey that is leveraged to inform current and future ILP strategies. This evaluation provides districts an opportunity to go beyond compliance by monitoring the data to ensure that students are meaningfully engaging in the planning

process, informing their support of students, and developing pathways of interest to students at the high school level.

*"We want meaningful work on this.  
We want [students] to really take  
time to process some of this stuff.  
So that's what we like about it.*

KENTUCKY MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

## States should use data collection and accountability systems to ensure all students can access quality career exploration opportunities.

### STATES should consider the following strategic actions:

1. **Leverage Perkins V program quality indicators** and the ESSA state plan, which creates data collection channels, to not only set middle school career exploration expectations, but also monitor quality.
2. **Conduct an asset map** to determine where career exploration data may already be collected, including course enrollment, school counseling program evaluation, and student-based software platforms, while also identifying existing data gaps.
3. **Make data pertaining to middle school career exploration available** to state and local leaders through dynamic dashboards and reports and provide secure, authorized access to existing data systems. Data on state and regional labor market needs should also be easily accessible.
4. **Provide annual training opportunities** to ensure that data users have the capacity to access, gain insights, and inform decisions using data and continually learn and improve. State contracts with software platforms and student information system providers should include available technical assistance, open office hours, and regional training that local districts can take advantage of for new or developing staff.
5. **Invest in state-level platforms and/or data systems** that allow for more seamless support of students who transfer between schools and districts to ensure all students have access to the same opportunities and activities and that results follow students from school-to-school to better inform long-term planning and decision making. Given that career exploration opportunities for students can vary even within states, it is vital that school staff are aware of what transferring students have already experienced and are proactive in mitigating any gaps or disparities in experiences that exist among the students in the building.
6. **Disaggregate data** collected on career exploration by school, district, student populations, and grade level, and create a process to review results periodically to ensure equitable access for students regardless of community or student demographics.

### LOCAL LEADERS should take the following actions to ensure all students have access to meaningful, quality middle school career exploration:

1. **Establish data collection processes** that allow school- and district-based staff to evaluate access, participation, and outcomes of career exploration programming, while leveraging the data to inform program improvements.
2. **Engage students and families** to evaluate the quality of career exploration programming offered and inform future opportunities.

# THE PATH AHEAD

## Strategic Priorities to Help States Extend the Runway

Offering students more and better opportunities to meaningfully explore potential careers *years earlier* in their educational journey increases the amount of time and experiences available to gain clarity on their professional ambitions and chart a clearer path for achieving them. States setting a clear vision for what this looks like in every school building, while supporting and capitalizing on innovations that are occurring already at the local level, will be necessary to ensure all students—regardless of their background or geographical location—have equal access to understand and prepare for the vast and ever-changing world of work.

Research shows that waiting until high school to discuss postsecondary education and career plans results in fewer students successfully completing them; and through our interviews, young people revealed their desire to begin these activities earlier and to dig in at a deeper level. Preparing students to successfully transition from K-12 to postsecondary education or training to high-value careers requires earlier investment into the experiences that allow students to consider their own potential, ensure they are not foreclosing opportunities for themselves too early, help them understand their career identity, build social capital, and map a pathway to their goals. These maps should include information that supports decision making in high school—decisions that often impact which postsecondary programs students will end up prepared for and qualified to pursue.

Students across the country without school-based experiences are relying on their own personal—and unequally distributed—networks for these learnings, resulting in inequities in access to important career knowledge and social capital skills. To set all students up for career success, state education systems must play a clear and coordinated role in providing career exploration earlier in a student's journey. With this north star vision of equity and success for all kids in mind, we used a comprehensive rubric to look across state practices, with the hopes of uncovering successes and identifying clear recommendations.

*"I feel like we should get to explore the careers and find out what you would do in the careers and how you need to get there... I feel like we don't really do that a lot. And we need more of that."*

LEXI, 8TH GRADE  
STUDENT IN VIRGINIA

**WHAT'S WORKING:** The federal government has taken steps to allow investments in career and technical education and student support and academic enrichment to be spent on career exploration activities in grades 5-8. The majority of states have a working definition of middle school career exploration that is supported by some dedicated funding, a set of policies to guide districts, and a suite of material supports for use by educators. Students shared their hunger for more, deeper experiences to navigate their futures.

**WHERE WE GO FROM HERE:** It is now up to the states to continue to innovate, scale, and improve the quality of these experiences for kids. States without definitions should create them, and states that already provide the expectations and requirements should add capacity to build hands-on experiences, data tools, and program evaluation to measure if they are happening across student groups in a quality way, and incentives, professional training, and technical assistance to further improve experiences at the local level.

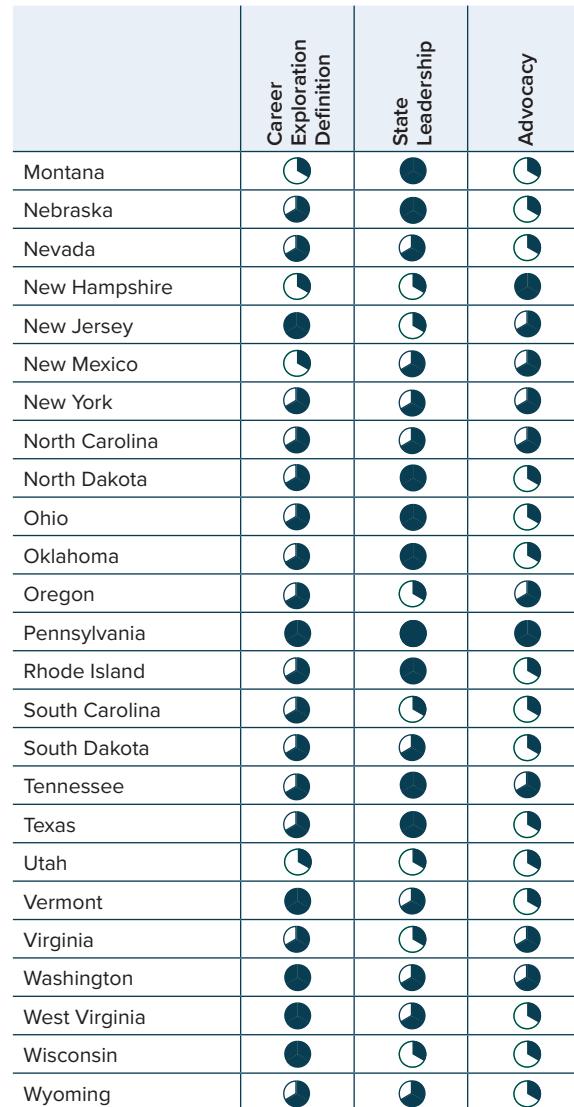
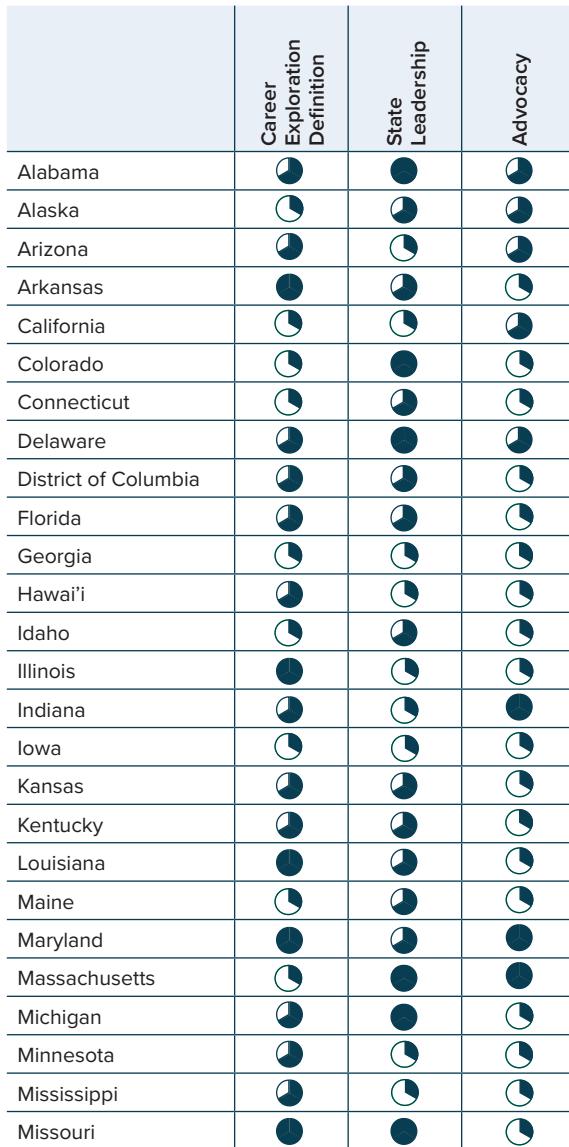
This report can serve as a guide for how states can build strong policy contexts to best support the on-the-ground efforts of schools and districts to increase career exploration opportunities for all students, starting in the middle grades. The corresponding state profiles and resources, found at [Britebound.org/extending-the-runway](https://Britebound.org/extending-the-runway), give individualized progress notes and highlight strong practices across the country. Together, we can extend the runway for every student, ensuring they are all prepared for takeoff and future success.

# APPENDIX A

## State-Level Findings

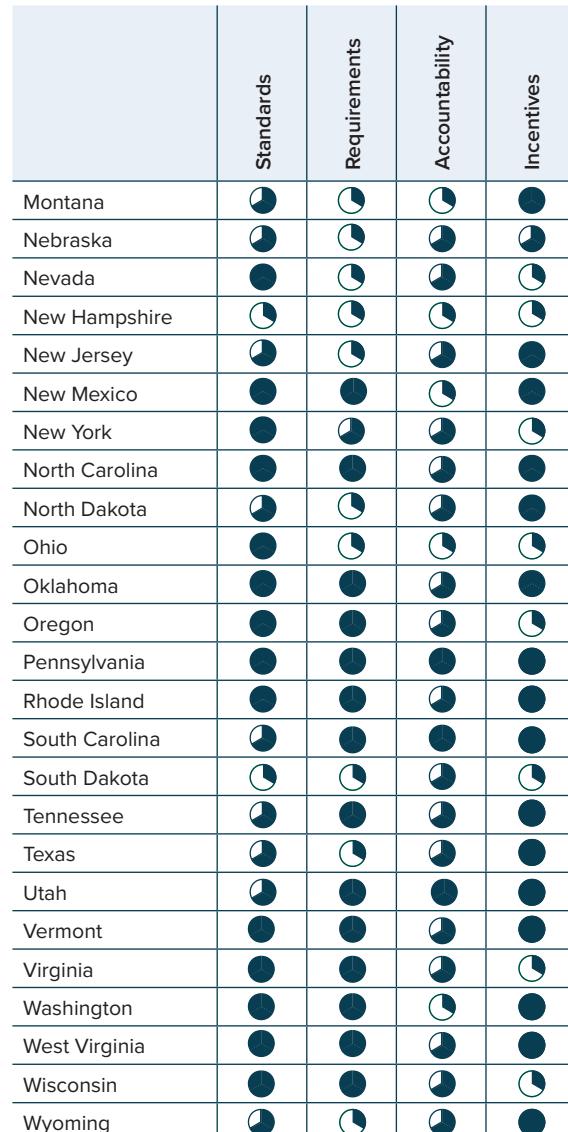
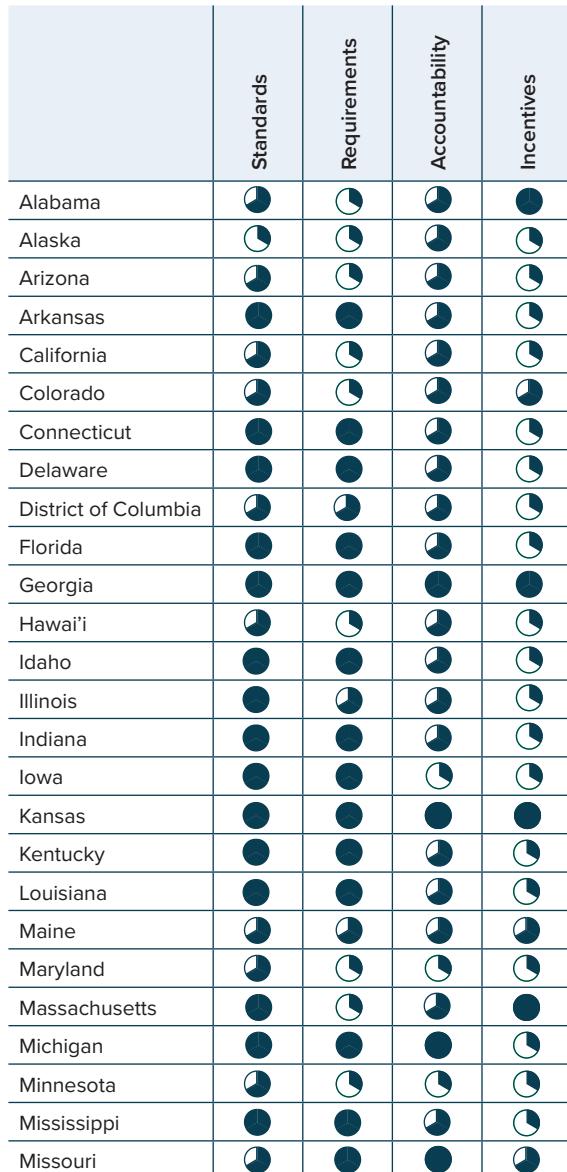
### STATE VISION

Building  Emerging  Advanced 



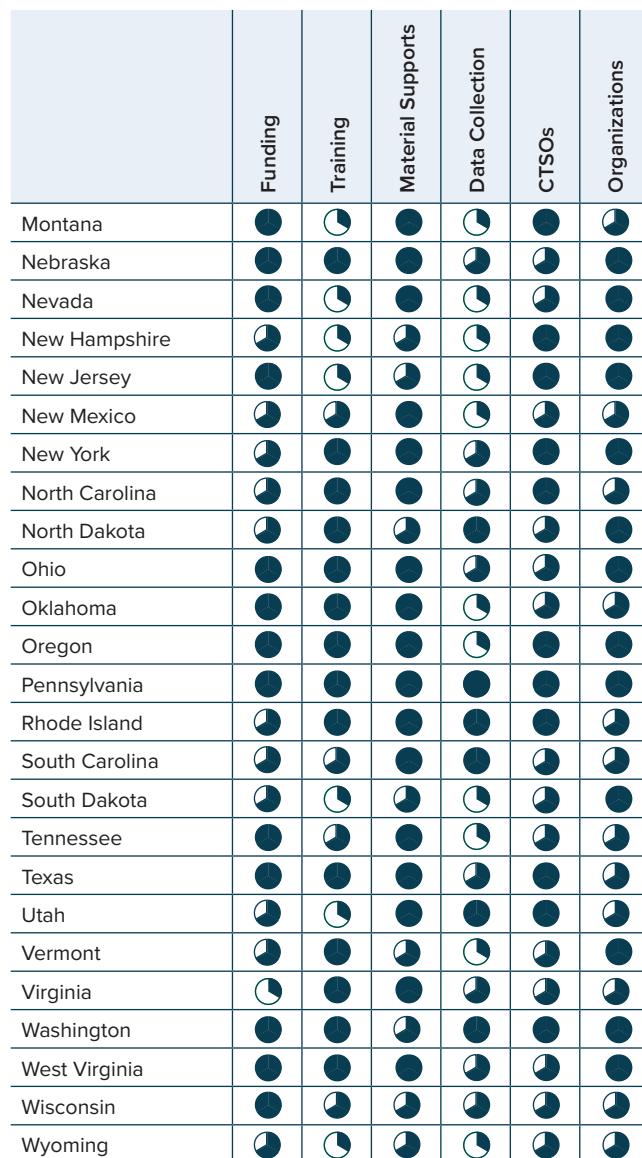
# STATE POLICY

Building Emerging Advanced



# STATE INFRASTRUCTURE

Building Emerging Advanced



# APPENDIX B

## Research Methods

The national scan of state policies and practices of middle school career exploration included a literature review, student and expert interviews, and a landscape scan of state policies and published guidance. The research questions, as described in the Evaluation Rubric on the following pages, established the scope of the data collection, including the landscape review, interviews, and Student Advisory Council convenings.

### Literature Review

A literature review was conducted of available research around middle school career exploration, including existing tools and frameworks and peer-reviewed studies. The background research identified peer-reviewed literature that revealed best practices in policy and programming, existing resources, including tools and frameworks, organizational champions that are operating at the national and regional levels, and a breadth of definitions. The findings from the literature review served as background research, which was used to inform the design of the landscape scan and the interview methodology for the Student Advisory Council and local experts across several states.

### Student Advisory Council

The ESG Career Exploration Project Team virtually convened a group of middle school students across several states: California, Florida, Michigan, Montana, and Virginia. The Student Advisory Council allowed the team to center student perspectives and inform policy analysis, identify barriers for states to address, and make recommendations on expanding career exploration opportunities for students.

In addition to multiple small-group virtual meetings, several virtual 1-on-1 interviews were conducted with select students within the SAC in order to dive deeper into some of the students' experiences with career exploration inside and outside of the classroom. All students who participated in the convenings and interviews had written permission given by their legal guardian.

### Expert Interviews

The project team interviewed state, local, and community-based organizations within chosen states, including Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The objectives of these conversations were to deepen and add context to our understanding of a state's progress on middle school career exploration found in publicly available information; emphasize the successes achieved and challenges overcome; identify key players and potential partners within the state that were pivotal in the current status of middle school career exploration and the sustainability of the progress that has been made; highlight the enabling conditions (leadership, champions, policy, and practice) that catalyzed the state's progress on middle school career exploration; and shine a light on local examples of state policy implementation.

### Landscape and Evaluation

#### *Data Collection*

Data sources included state policy documents, public statements, strategic plans, data dictionaries, guidance documents, and curriculum standards for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Interviews with state government employees, local leaders, and community advocates supplemented findings of the landscape review. The Student Advisory Council convenings provided student perspectives on the student experience of middle school career exploration.

#### *Analysis*

Data collected for each state's efforts to provide middle school career exploration was evaluated based on established and evidence-based best practices. The state's efforts were categorized as either Building, Emerging, or Advanced, as outlined in the following rubric. We conducted outreach to two state contacts, including the CTE Director and another official who managed the state's counseling, college and career readiness, or related program, for each state. Each contact was asked to review our landscape results for their state and provide feedback. Approximately 59 percent of states responded to our request for feedback. State feedback was incorporated into our evaluation of the states.

## APPENDIX B

	 <b>BUILDING</b>	 <b>EMERGING</b>	 <b>ADVANCED</b>
<b>VISION</b>			
<i>Does the state formally define career exploration for middle school students?</i>	The state has worked to define concepts that are related to career exploration.	The state has defined career exploration in public-facing resources, including frameworks, plans, etc.	The state has codified the definition of career exploration in policy documents.
<i>Does the state leadership include career exploration as a valued or prioritized component of students' middle school experience?</i>	The state has no explicit public commitments in support of middle school career exploration; however, the state's Department of Education does support career pathways for middle school students or high school students.	The state has stated that middle school career exploration is a priority in official government documents, and alignment exists across agencies and organizations.	Along with a stated commitment to middle school commitment, the state agencies have committed money, exhibited cross-agency coordination and alignment, and included it as a priority within official government documents.
<i>Are there organizations within the state that are advocating for middle school career exploration?</i>	The organization prioritizes career exploration, but not specifically for middle school students.	The organization champions middle school career exploration.	The organization partners with the State Education Agency to advocate for and progress middle school career exploration.
<b>POLICY</b>			
<i>Does the state have policies that establish standard practices for career exploration in middle schools?</i>	The state has policy standards and guidance related to career-connected learning, such as career and technical education, but not specifically for middle school career exploration.	The state has policy standards and guidance related to middle school career exploration; however, the state's policies aren't aligned with students' high school experiences.	The state's policy standards and guidance regarding middle school career exploration are connected to clear outcomes and aligned with students' high school experiences.
<i>Does the state integrate career exploration into its accountability systems?</i>	The state does not use accountability systems to evaluate schools on middle school career exploration, but career-connected learning is mentioned in an official accountability lever, i.e., Perkins V or WIOA.	The state formally includes middle school career exploration in its Perkins V or WIOA state plan.	Middle school career exploration is formally included in state or federal accountability systems.
<i>Does the state have policies that require middle school students to complete career exploration activities?</i>	The state has college and career readiness requirements (e.g., ACT, other activities) for high school students, but does not include middle school students.	Some middle school exploration is required, but not connected to high school graduation.	Student requirement begins in middle school and is connected to high school graduation.

## APPENDIX B

	 <b>BUILDING</b>	 <b>EMERGING</b>	 <b>ADVANCED</b>
<i>Does the state have policies that incentivize career exploration in middle schools?</i>	The state has incentive structures in place (e.g., recognition, financial incentives) but not specifically for middle school career exploration.	The state recognizes schools and districts that have done exemplary work on middle school career exploration.	The state has created financial incentives for middle schools to incorporate career exploration programming into their schools. This can include bonus funding for middle schools based on career exploration participation and outcomes, the number of teachers and counselors with career exploration certifications and training, and competitive grants.
<b>INFRASTRUCTURE</b>			
<i>Does the state use state and federal funding sources to support career exploration for middle school students?</i>	Funding is used for career-related activities, but not specifically for middle school career exploration.	Federal or state funds are leveraged for middle school career exploration.	The state uses a diverse portfolio of funds for middle school career exploration.
<i>Does the state support the training of school counselors (and other school staff) in career exploration?</i>	The state supports school personnel to pursue professional development in career-related areas.	The state encourages middle school staff to access professional development training around career exploration materials. The state provides at most training materials that can be accessed at the user's discretion and pace.	The state provides training/professional development opportunities to school staff related to middle school career exploration, including webinars, in-person training, conferences, etc.
<i>Does the state provide material support for the implementation of middle school career exploration?</i>	The state provides resources related to career activities (e.g., exploration, awareness, planning), but not specific to middle school exploration.	The state provides lists and links to middle school career exploration resources online for school leaders and educators (e.g., does not provide additional guidance on how to implement quality middle school career exploration, frameworks, etc).	The state provides material resources that emphasize best practices.
<i>Does the state collect data on middle school career exploration opportunities in the state?</i>	The state collects data around college and career readiness, but not necessarily related to middle school career exploration.	The state collects data on middle school career exploration programs/courses, however, the data is limited (e.g., does not speak to the quality of middle school career exploration).	The state has data collection mechanisms to ensure the quality of middle school career exploration programs.
<i>Does the state support student participation in career and technical student organizations?</i>	The state has CTSO chapters in its high schools.	The state encourages middle schools to provide CTSO opportunities.	The state supports and encourages student participation in CTSOs through policy or resources.
<i>Are there organizations within the state that support career exploration in middle schools?</i>	There are organizations within the state that support career development in schools generally.	There are organizations within the state that support career exploration in the district, but not specifically for middle school.	There are organizations within the state that support middle school career exploration in school districts.

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## About Britebound

Britebound® (Britebound) is changing the way kids learn about careers (in school and beyond the classroom) and prepare for their futures through equitable access to career readiness information and experiences. 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 impact investing and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others. To learn more about Britebound, visit <https://www.Britebound.org/about-Britebound/>.

## About Education Strategy Group

In today's economy, success largely depends on attainment of a credential beyond high school. Education Strategy Group (ESG) supports the preparation, entry, and success of individuals from K-12 through postsecondary education and into the workforce to build a more equitable system, open economic doors for all, and strengthen our democracy. We work with America's education leaders and employers to design, scale, and implement strategies that improve attainment. ESG specializes in strengthening the transition points that have the highest stakes for youth and adults and the highest benefit for states, communities, and economies. We are driven by the conviction that a robust education system aligned with workforce demands leads to a stronger, more equitable society. Learn more about ESG's work at [www.edstrategy.org](http://www.edstrategy.org).

## Acknowledgments

The authors of this report would like to extend a warm and heartfelt thank you to the individuals who invested time and offered their personal expertise and knowledge to contribute to, review, and support the development of this project. We are especially grateful to the voices of our Student Advisory Council, who provided a real and honest look at how state policies translate into the daily lives of our country's biggest asset: our kids. We are also thankful for the dozens of state and local practitioners who reviewed our data, participated in interviews, and provided feedback and insights on early versions of the research results. This report would not be possible without the dedicated and quality research design, program management, and coordination of project lead Kelia Washington. Special thanks to Casey Haugner Wrenn and Kathleen Mathers for vision and leadership review, Tina Young for data collection, analysis, and visualizations, Samantha Perez, Joyce Hwang, Kevin Chen, and Blayne Stone for their support in research and summarizing data into thoughtful conclusions, and Kelly Van Beveren and Dany Rossman for their editorial and communications leadership. Recognition is also due to Allesandra Lanza-Cosgrove for her leadership and coordination with Britebound colleagues and Next Chapter Communications for leading the layout and design of the final report.



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