



# From Vision to Practice

A Guide for Developing  
Middle Grades Career Exploration Systems  
That Work



A publication of the Arizona Business & Education Coalition

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## Acknowledgements

This is a publication of the Arizona Business & Education Coalition (ABEC). Since ABEC's founding as a statewide nonprofit organization in 2002, ABEC has been dedicated to bringing together business and education leaders to develop and advocate solutions to grow Arizona's future. In service to this mission, ABEC has taken a leadership role in advocating for early opportunities for career exploration and pathway planning and providing resources to support educators, school and district leaders in expanding access to this critically important strategy for supporting long-term student success.

Acknowledging that successful career exploration and pathway planning requires collaborative approaches, we thank the following organizations for their efforts and partnership, which have informed this publication: Center for the Future of Arizona, Pipeline Connects, Arizona Department of Education, Junior Achievement of Arizona, ACTEAz, ESG and Britebound (formerly ASA), and the many Arizona school leaders who have pioneered middle grades career exploration in Arizona.



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COALITION**

# 1. Using This Guide

## Key Takeaways

### Use the Guide Flexibly

This guide is intended to support ongoing planning, reflection, and decision making. Teams may move through it in order or return to sections as needs and priorities evolve.

### Ground the Work in Local Context

Effective career exploration systems reflect the unique strengths, goals, partnerships, and realities of each school and community rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

### Build Toward Sustainable Systems

The long-term goal is to move beyond isolated activities toward coordinated, student-centered systems that can grow, adapt, and strengthen over time.

This guide is designed to support you in building and strengthening a coordinated career exploration system that centers students while respecting the realities faced by schools and partners. It serves as a guidance document and reflection tool for moving beyond one-off programs or siloed opportunities in the middle grades toward a coordinated, coherent, and sustainable approach to systemic career exploration implementation that is built to last.

The guide will help you to:

- Identify your why.
- Set goals and consider how you will measure impact.
- Assess your readiness.
- Identify gaps, needs and resources.
- Plan your next steps.



**The guide can be used whether you are planning, expanding, or resetting your career exploration efforts.**

**The guide identifies conditions for successful implementation** of high-quality career exploration. It is aligned with “FutureME,” Arizona’s 3-year plan for expanding middle school career exploration (see Section 4).

**It spotlights processes, structures, and decision points** for effective systemic implementation of middle grades career exploration.

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## Using This Guide, continued

**The guide is a “working document” meant to be used by teams**, no matter their perceived stage of readiness. The guide can be moved through sequentially, engaged with as priorities dictate, and returned to as a resource as implementation progresses.

**Within each section, it provides opportunities to reflect on the local context.** Built-in prompts and planning spaces invite teams to pause, assess, and make intentional choices that align with their goals and resources.

**The guide does not prescribe a single model or solution.** To be effective, districts and communities will need to tailor their local context, capacity, and priorities while staying grounded in the core elements that support high quality career exploration.

### Reflection

**Who will make up the team that uses this guide?**

**How will we use it to move our efforts forward?**

**Are there tools or content within it that we need to share beyond our team?**

## 2. Powerful Whys for Middle Grades Career Exploration

### Key Takeaways

#### Middle School Matters

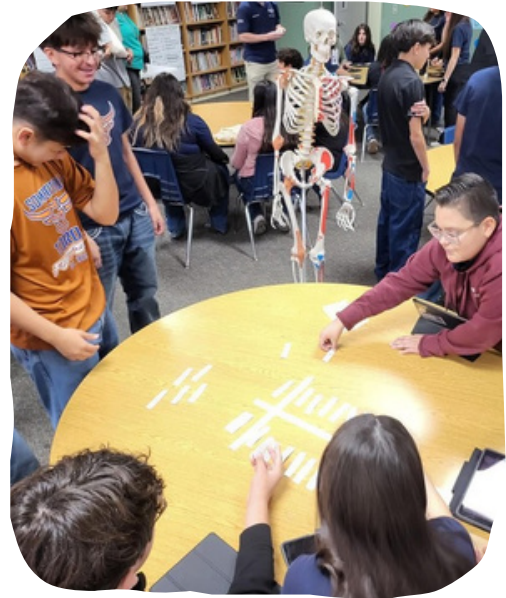
The middle grades are a critical window for helping students build awareness, confidence, and connections between their education and future possibilities.

#### Career Exploration Increases Relevance

Students are more engaged when learning feels meaningful, connected to real-world opportunities, and reflective of their interests, strengths, and goals.

#### Strong Systems Benefit Communities

High-quality career exploration strengthens not only student outcomes, but also the broader education-to-workforce ecosystem through deeper school, business, and community partnerships.



Career exploration in middle grades is increasingly recognized by education leaders as a contributor to student engagement and belonging, academic and skill development, greater student confidence and a sense of agency, and overall long-term success – in high school and beyond.

An analysis of research on middle school career exploration by the national nonprofit Britebound (formerly American Student Assistance), found that:

- Having career aspirations linked to an educational goal impacts the likelihood that a student will achieve his or her goals.
- Career exploration plays a key role in the process by allowing students to gain knowledge about their interests and skills as well as the career pathways available.
- Research finds that middle school is the most effective time for career guidance programs.
- Middle school students are already thinking about their futures and are open to career exploration. They want information that can help them match their specific skills and interests with potential careers.
- Career education works; career education is associated with positive educational and employment outcomes.

The case for middle school career exploration extends beyond the school system. In the business and community sectors, middle grades career exploration is gaining awareness and

## Powerful Whys for Middle Grades Career Exploration, continued

support as a critical element in strengthening the education-workforce ecosystem and a contributor to workforce readiness.

Additionally, the partnership between education, business and community that underpins the most successful career exploration efforts strengthens schools and communities through shared vision and leadership and collaborative effort.



### What Arizona Students Say

- They struggle to see the relevance of their education to real-world careers.
- They want relevant, meaningful learning tied to future career and education goals.
- They want agency and need tools and support to shape their own career path.
- They want hands-on experiences beyond traditional classroom curriculum.

### Reflection

**What student, school, workforce, or community needs are driving our interest in career exploration?**

**What do we hope will change for students as a result of this work?**

**How does career exploration align with our broader vision for student success, learner outcomes, or community priorities?**

# 3. The Path Forward: Arizona’s FutureME Plan

## Key Takeaways

### Arizona Has a Shared Vision

The Arizona FutureME Plan establishes a statewide commitment to ensuring all middle grades students have access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate career exploration and pathway planning.



### Career Exploration Requires Systems, Not Isolated Programs

FutureME emphasizes coordinated leadership, cross-sector partnerships, and aligned structures that support sustainable implementation across schools and communities.

### Students Need Earlier, More Meaningful Experiences

Research and student voice both reinforce the importance of starting career exploration earlier through relevant, hands-on experiences that connect learning to future opportunities.

## The FutureME Vision

All Arizona middle-school students will have access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate career exploration that sparks curiosity, broadens possibilities, and empowers students to discover unique future pathways to success. Through engaging, consistent experiences, family involvement, and a shared statewide language, students will be prepared to enter high school with clarity, confidence, and purpose.

If you are planning and moving toward middle grades career exploration opportunities for all students, you are a leader.

In 2025, “FutureME,” Arizona’s plan for expanding middle grades career exploration, was introduced. Grounded in shared principles and informed by research and practice, the Arizona FutureME Plan emphasizes coordinated systems, cross-sector partnerships, and sets forth a powerful vision for middle grades career exploration as a critical foundation for long-term student success. It also defines high-quality career exploration and its components. (See Addendum for a one-page overview of these.) And it provides a powerful call to action: Every Arizona middle grade student should have access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate career exploration and pathway planning to support their success in high school and beyond.

Driving the development of the FutureME plan was shared recognition among education, workforce, and community leaders that today’s students are navigating an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world without sufficient guidance or early exposure to career pathways. As

## The Path Forward: Arizona's FutureME Plan, continued

industries evolve and post-secondary options expand from two- and four-year degrees to certifications, apprenticeships and more, many students struggle to understand how their education connects to future opportunities or how to make informed decisions about their next steps.

The plan is the culmination of a year-long collaborative process that included the Arizona Department of Education, the Center for the Future of Arizona, the Arizona Business & Education Coalition, the Arizona Career & Technical Education Association of Arizona, and the Arizona Educational Foundation. The development of the plan was further strengthened by the involvement of practitioners from across the field, including school counselors, principals, and other education leaders who brought real-world insight into the plan's content and design.

Together, these partners engaged in ongoing learning, shared promising practices, examined research, and elevated student voice. This process reinforced a shared understanding: career

exploration must begin earlier, be more intentional, and extend beyond isolated activities or traditional planning tools. Students made it clear that they need more than occasional exposure or paper-based exercises; they want meaningful, hands-on experiences, opportunities to explore their interests, and stronger connections between classroom learning and real-world careers.

Today, as part of the Middle School Career Exploration Learning and Impact Network, convened by Britebound (formerly American Student Assistance) and the Education Strategy Group, Arizona stands as one of five states with a defined plan for systemically expanding middle grades career exploration. Arizona, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Washington all were selected to join the network based on their demonstrated commitment to strengthening the systems, structures, and partnerships necessary to support high-quality career exploration in the middle grades.

### FutureME Core Beliefs

- Increased awareness of and active engagement with multiple career pathways will enable students to connect their education to careers and make informed decisions about secondary and postsecondary education plans.
- Enabling policies, widely communicated best practices, and accessible high-quality resources ensure all schools can implement career exploration programs for all students.
- Key stakeholders are aligned around shared goals and are working together to support all schools, students, and families through coordinated communication, collaboration, and accountability.

# 4. High-Quality Career Exploration & Conditions for Success

## Key Takeaways

### High-Quality Career Exploration Is Intentional

Effective middle grades career exploration is thoughtfully designed to help students build self-awareness, explore possibilities, connect learning to future pathways, and develop confidence in navigating their future.

### Strong Systems Require More Than Student Activities

Successful implementation depends on the conditions surrounding the work, including leadership, educator support, coordination, partnerships, family engagement, and integration into instruction.

### Growth Happens Over Time

The conditions outlined in this section represent a long-term vision for high-quality implementation. Schools and communities are not expected to have every element fully in place, but to continuously strengthen and align their efforts over time.

## High-Quality Career Exploration

Arizona’s “FutureME” plan defines high-quality middle school career exploration as intentional and developmentally appropriate activities and experiences that help students in grades 6-8 to better understand themselves and the opportunities around them and build their confidence in getting there.

To do this, high-quality career exploration provides students with the opportunity to:

- Understand their interest, strengths, and values.
- Explore a wide range of career paths and secondary/postsecondary options.
- Connect classroom learning to real-world applications.
- Develop early planning and decision-making skills.
- Gain exposure to the world of work through direct and indirect experiences.
- Develop an eECAP (Early Education Career Action Plan) that is informed by their interests, strengths and values.



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# High-Quality Career Exploration & Conditions for Success, continued

## Conditions for Success

Delivering this opportunity to students requires that districts and schools be intentionally moving toward the conditions for successful implementation of high-quality middle school career exploration. Here we look at what they are and why they matter. (These conditions for success incorporate the components of high-quality career exploration identified in Arizona's FutureME plan.) As you review these conditions, be mindful that the descriptions presented here represent the optimal state, not where you should be now. You will have the opportunity in Section 7: Assessing Readiness to identify your own level of readiness in each of these areas and see what progress toward each looks like.

### 1) Leadership, Vision & Alignment

School or district leadership has established career exploration as a priority and aligned it with broader students' success goals, such as engagement and learner outcomes.

#### Why it matters:

Strong leadership ensures that career exploration is not treated as an add-on, but as part of the core educational experience. Alignment with school and district priorities creates the conditions for sustained focus, resource allocation, and long-term success.

### 2) Coordination & Structure

There is a defined structure to guide the work, including a designated coordinator, team, or intermediary responsible for organizing efforts, aligning partners, and maintaining momentum.

#### Why it matters:

Without coordination, efforts often remain fragmented or dependent on individual champions. A clear structure supports consistency, reduces duplication, and enables programs to grow in a manageable and sustainable way.

### 3) Educator Capacity & Support

Educators, counselors, and staff have the awareness, training, and support needed to integrate career exploration into their work.

#### Why it matters:

Career exploration is most effective when it is embedded across the student experience. Building educator capacity ensures that students encounter consistent messaging, meaningful connections, and supportive guidance throughout their day.

### 4) Student Experiences

Students are engaged in career exploration activities, ranging from initial exposure to more structured and consistent experiences across grade levels.

## High-Quality Career Exploration & Conditions for Success, continued

### Why it matters:

Student experiences are the foundation of career exploration. Even informal or early efforts provide a starting point that can be strengthened and expanded into a more coherent and impactful progression over time.

### 5) Integration into Curriculum & Instruction

Career exploration is intentionally connected to classroom learning, helping students understand how academic content relates to real-world applications and future pathways.

### Why it matters:

When career exploration is integrated into instruction, it increases relevance, strengthens engagement, and reinforces the connection between what students are learning and why it matters.

### 6) Exposure to a Range of Careers

Students are introduced to a broad range of careers, industries, and pathways through activities such as guest speakers, career exploration tools, projects, or real-world experiences.

### Why it matters:

Broad exposure expands students' awareness and helps them consider opportunities they may not encounter in their immediate environment. It also supports more informed decision-making as students begin to explore their interests.



## What Is the Difference Between Career Exploration and eCTE?

**Career Exploration** provides opportunities for middle school students to discover work environments, to understand and appreciate their strengths and interests, and to plan short- and long-term goals for high school, post-secondary education and training and beyond.

**Early Career and Technical Education (eCTE)** refers to classes and experiences that prepare middle school students for specific high school CTE programs and contain academic and employability skills. eCTE provides a way for students to explore specific career paths and industries in greater depth.

## High-Quality Career Exploration & Conditions for Success, continued

### 7) Data Reflection & eECAP Implementation

The school or district uses data, student reflection, and planning tools such as an early ECAP (eECAP) to guide career exploration efforts and support continuous improvement.

#### Why it matters:

Sustainable systems rely on student reflection and intentional planning. Using data and student insights helps schools refine their approach, ensure relevance, and support students in developing meaningful, personalized pathways.

### 8) Partnerships & Community Engagement

The school has established relationships with business, industry, postsecondary institutions, and community organizations that support career exploration.

#### Why it matters:

Partnerships bring career exploration to life by connecting students to real-world experiences and regional opportunities. They also strengthen alignment between education and workforce needs.

### 9) Family Engagement

Families are informed, engaged, and supported in helping students explore careers and plan for their future.

#### Why it matters:

Families play a critical role in shaping student aspirations and decisions. When families are engaged, career exploration becomes more meaningful, reinforced beyond the classroom, and better aligned with student goals.

## Reflection

**Which conditions for success are currently strongest in our school or community, and which may need more intentional attention or support?**

**To what extent are students consistently experiencing meaningful, relevant, and developmentally appropriate career exploration opportunities across grade levels?**

**Where do we see opportunities to strengthen alignment among leadership, instruction, partnerships, family engagement, and student planning to build a more cohesive system?**

# 5. Building Your System

## Key Takeaways

### **Career Exploration Is a System, not a Standalone Program**

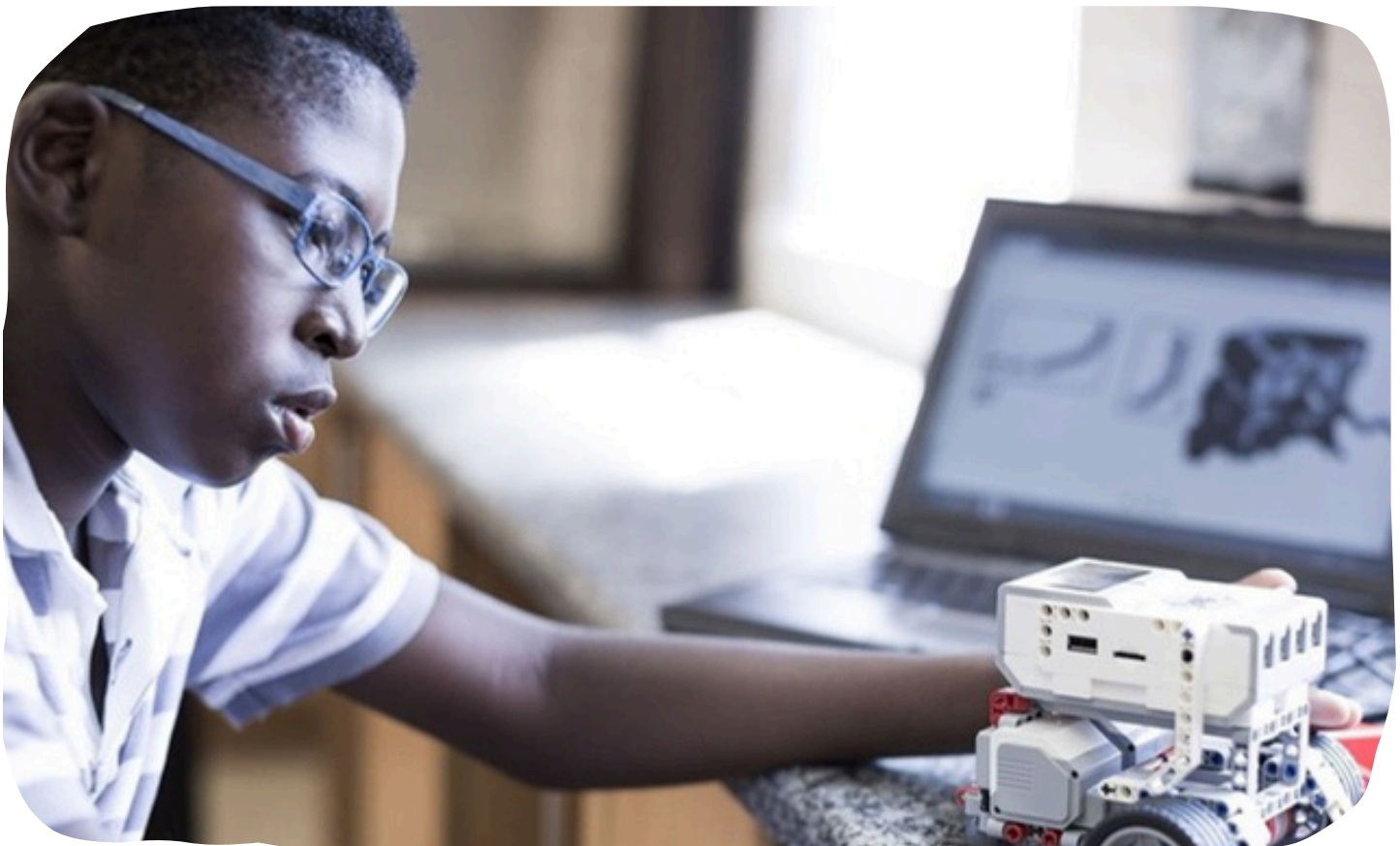
Sustainable impact comes from embedding career exploration into the broader student experience through aligned structures, partnerships, and shared goals rather than relying on isolated activities or one-time events.

### **Strong Systems Begin with Alignment**

Successful implementation starts with a clear purpose, shared understanding of desired student outcomes, and intentional coordination among schools, families, business and industry, and community partners.

### **Continuous Improvement Is Essential**

Effective systems evolve over time through reflection, measurement, feedback, and adaptation, allowing schools and communities to strengthen practices and expand impact in meaningful and sustainable ways.



## Building Your System, continued

Building system that can deliver career exploration to all middle grades students begins with an intention to embed career exploration as a strategy to enhance student success. Your efforts may be inspired and informed by activities that are currently underway or one-off student experiences that have been popular, but isolated activities and programs will not sustain or build meaningful and measurable outcomes for all students.

Instead, successful efforts to bring career exploration to all middle grades students – whether in a district or in a school - are grounded in a clear purpose and understanding of the “powerful whys” by all involved, shared understanding of the student experience, and agreement among partners about what the work is meant to both deliver and achieve. Before tools, curriculum, or events are introduced, time is spent listening to schools, students and families, understanding local assets, and identifying gaps. The Readiness Index in Section 8 will help you identify where you may have gaps. This early groundwork creates alignment and ensures the system you are developing responds to real needs rather than adding another layer of disconnected effort.

From there, effective system-level efforts focus on structure and coordination. Clear roles, predictable processes, and simple communication systems allow those involved – from educators to business and community partners - to contribute meaningfully without confusion or duplication. Schools are supported through ready-to-use resources, implementation plans, and technical guidance that respect their capacity. Business and community partners are engaged with purpose, knowing how their involvement fits into the larger system and how it benefits both students and the region.

Finally, strong systems are built to evolve. Measurement and reflection are embedded from the start, not as an afterthought. (See Section 8: Measuring Impact for more.) Data, feedback, and lived experience are used to refine practices, strengthen partnerships, and inform decisions about growth or replication. By documenting processes and tools along the way, the program becomes transferable, allowing other schools and communities to adapt the model while preserving the core elements that make it effective.

### Reflection

**What assets already exist in your district and community?**

**What gaps are most urgent to address?**

**What would success look like in one year?**

# 6. The eECAP: A Cornerstone for Exploration & Planning

## Key Takeaways

### **Middle School Is the Critical Window**

Students begin forming beliefs about themselves, their abilities, and their future during the middle grades. Early career exploration and planning help students see relevance, possibility, and purpose before disengagement patterns become entrenched.

### **An eECAP Creates Coherence, Not More Compliance**

An eECAP helps connect career exploration, academic planning, student reflection, family engagement, and transition planning into a more intentional and student-centered system rather than a collection of disconnected activities.

### **Earlier Planning Leads to Stronger Outcomes**

When students begin exploring career pathways earlier and learning how to plan for their futures, they enter high school better prepared to make informed decisions, engage in meaningful coursework, and keep a broader range of postsecondary and career options open.



Middle school is a critical period in which students begin forming beliefs about their abilities, interests, and future possibilities. It is also a time when many students begin questioning whether what they are learning in school feels relevant to their lives and goals. Without intentional guidance and exposure, students may prematurely rule out careers or postsecondary options based on limited information, stereotypes, or misconceptions. Early career exploration and planning help students make meaningful connections between their education and the opportunities available to them beyond school while ensuring that all students, not just those with access through family or community networks, receive support in navigating future pathways.

An Early Education Career Action Plan (eECAP) builds on the foundation of Arizona's high school requirement for an Education Career Action Plan (ECAP) by introducing students to the process of self-exploration, career awareness, and future planning before they enter high school. While the Arizona Department of Education formally requires ECAP development beginning in grade 9, the intent of an eECAP is to begin that process earlier in developmentally appropriate ways. At its core, the ECAP is both a process and a personalized

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## The eEcap, continued

plan that helps students align their interests, strengths, and values with potential education and career pathways, supported by educators, families, and community partners.

Within the Arizona FutureME Plan (see Section 3), the eECAP is a central tenet and serves as a cornerstone strategy for helping students connect career exploration experiences to intentional planning

over time. In the middle grades, an eECAP is not about asking students to make early decisions about their future. Rather, it provides a structured way for students to reflect on who they are, explore a wide range of possibilities, and begin connecting their learning to future opportunities in meaningful ways.

Core elements of an effective eECAP includes self-awareness and interest exploration tools; exposure to careers across multiple industry sectors; balanced information about postsecondary options including universities, community colleges, Career and Technical Education pathways, apprenticeships, military service, and direct workforce entry; intentional connections between classroom learning and real-world careers; age-appropriate goal setting and reflection activities; and the development of a personalized portfolio or plan that evolves with students as they transition into high school.

An eECAP also helps transform isolated career exploration activities into a more cohesive and connected system of support around each student. It can strengthen transitions from middle school to high school, support more informed course selection, reduce last-minute schedule changes, and help students keep a broad range of future opportunities open rather than prematurely limiting their options. Equally important, it provides a common framework for students, families, educators, and counselors to engage in ongoing conversations about interests, strengths, aspirations, and next steps.

While an eECAP is not currently a formal requirement in Arizona's middle grades, there is growing recognition that earlier career awareness and pathway planning strengthen student readiness for high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce. As statewide career exploration efforts continue to evolve, early career planning may play an increasingly important role in future policy and practice.

When introduced early and implemented thoughtfully, an eECAP helps students build confidence, develop agency, and enter high school better prepared to engage in a formal ECAP process with greater clarity, relevance, and purpose.

### Did You Know?

Currently, all students and schools throughout Arizona have access to a FREE middle school career exploration platform, making implementation of this important tool available to every student. Visit <https://myfutureaz.pipelineaz.com/>

## The eECAP, continued

### What an eECAP Is:

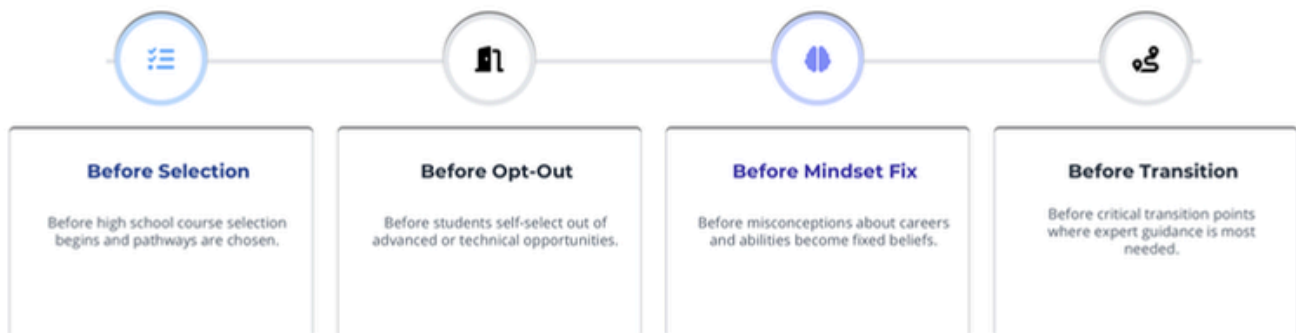
- A developmentally appropriate introduction to career and education planning
- Focused on exploration, self-reflection, discovering strengths and widening horizons rather than narrowing choices
- Woven into advisory, core classes, projects, and community activities
- Aligned with interests, skills, and emerging aspirations
- Leverages simple platforms like MyFutureAz to track growth

### What an eECAP Is Not:

- Does not lock students into a career choice
- Is not high stakes
- Is not overly complex or counselor dependent
- Is not separate from classroom learning
- Does not decide a student's future but ensures every student enters high school ready to shape it

### Timing Is Critical

An early ECAP must happen before critical decisions are locked in. These moments shape long-term trajectories.



# 7. Assessing Readiness

## Key Takeaways

### Start from Where You Are

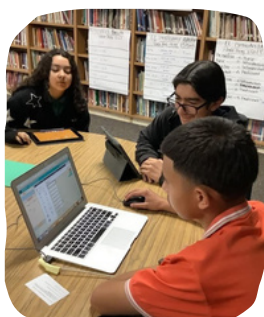
Readiness for systemic implementation of middle grades career exploration is not about perfection or having every element fully in place. It begins with understanding your current strengths, gaps, and opportunities for growth.

### Growth Happens Incrementally

Strong systems are built over time through intentional planning, coordinated effort, and continuous improvement rather than through large-scale implementation all at once.

### Use the Readiness Index as a Tool for Progress

The Readiness Index is designed to help schools and communities reflect, prioritize next steps, monitor growth, and strengthen alignment as their career exploration system evolves.



Building your system starts from where you are, not some optimal future point. Communities enter this work from various places. Some have individual schools offering strong career-related courses or activities, but with little coordination across grades. Others have motivated leadership teams but limited external partnerships. Still others benefit from active business engagement but lack a shared structure to guide implementation or measure impact. Understanding where you are starting helps ensure that early actions are realistic

and focused, that gaps are identified and addressed, and all efforts are aligned to a longer-term vision for growth.

Let us be clear: Readiness is not about being fully prepared. It is dynamic. And it begins with the intention to identify where you are and where you want to go and having the will to take the steps over time to get there. That begins with recognizing current assets, identifying gaps, and selecting the next logical step along the pathway from isolated activities to aligned and sustainable systems. Many schools begin by organizing existing efforts, then strengthening system-level foundations through intentional tools, professional learning, and coordinated planning. Over time, these efforts can expand within systems and ultimately align with regional workforce priorities, high school programs, and postsecondary pathways.

As communities move along this continuum, small wins build credibility and trust. Schools begin to see the relevance for students; partners recognize meaningful opportunities to engage; and leadership teams gain the confidence to scale the work. Over time, these incremental steps create the foundation for coordinated, sustainable career exploration systems that support students across grade levels and align education with regional workforce opportunities.

## Assessing Readiness, continued

### How Ready Are You?

Readiness for high-quality middle school career exploration is reflected in a set of foundational conditions for success that indicate whether a school or district is positioned to begin, strengthen, or scale its efforts. These indicators will help you understand your current capacity, recognize existing strengths, and identify areas for growth as you move along the career exploration continuum. The presence of several indicators signals momentum. The absence of others highlights opportunities for intentional planning and support.

The Career Exploration Readiness Index on the following pages serves as a tool for you to assess where you are related to the conditions for success. The tool incorporates the components of high-quality career exploration identified in Arizona's FutureME plan. We recommend reviewing and reassessing your progress using the Index periodically to assess where you are growing and going, as well as where work may have stalled.

### Reflection

**Where do you feel strongest in your current work?**

**Which needs more attention?**

**Where do you see misalignment?**

**Does the Career Exploration Readiness Index validate your reflections?**



# The Middle School Career Exploration Readiness Index

## Middle School Career Exploration Readiness Index

(Aligned to the Arizona State Plan - FutureMe  
7 Key Components for Middle School  
Career Exploration Implementation)

**Directions:** Select the number that best reflects your current overall system. **Vision:** ALL Arizona middle-school students will have access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate career exploration that sparks curiosity, broadens possibilities, and empowers students to discover unique future pathways to success...

Indicator	1	2	3	4
<b>1. Leadership, Vision, &amp; Alignment</b>  <i>Aligned to: Student-Centered &amp; Inclusive; Developmentally Appropriate; Integrated into Curriculum; Exposure to Careers</i>	<input type="radio"/> Informal and dependent on individual staff	<input type="radio"/> Leadership is supportive but lacks clear expectations	<input type="radio"/> Career exploration aligned to school or district priorities	<input type="radio"/> Embedded in strategy with clear alignment to student outcomes, pathways, and workforce priorities
<b>2. Coordination &amp; Structure</b>  <i>Aligned to: Families &amp; Communities; Educator/Counselor Support</i>	<input type="radio"/> Activities are uncoordinated	<input type="radio"/> Informal coordination by one individual	<input type="radio"/> Defined team or intermediary supports implementation	<input type="radio"/> Cross-sector structure guides strategy, partnerships, and long-term growth
<b>3. Educator Capacity &amp; Support</b>  <i>Aligned to: Educator/Counselor Support</i>	<input type="radio"/> Limited educator awareness or preparation	<input type="radio"/> Some informal integration by interested staff	<input type="radio"/> Professional learning and tools support implementation	<input type="radio"/> Educators and counselors are fully equipped and integrate career exploration into instruction and advising for all students
<b>4. Student Experiences (Developmentally Appropriate)</b>  <i>Aligned to: Developmentally Appropriate. Exposure to Careers</i>	<input type="radio"/> Occasional, activity-based exposure with limited reflection	<input type="radio"/> Every student has Multiple activities, but inconsistent across grades	<input type="radio"/> Coordinated, developmentally appropriate experiences across grades	<input type="radio"/> Coherent progression that builds self-awareness, confidence, and curiosity for all students
<b>5. Integration into Curriculum &amp; Instruction</b>  <i>Aligned to: Integrated into Curriculum</i>	<input type="radio"/> Career connections are not integrated into academic content	<input type="radio"/> Some informal connections to curriculum	<input type="radio"/> Intentional integration through lessons, projects, or units	<input type="radio"/> Fully embedded in instruction using real-world, project-based, or experiential learning

# Career Exploration Readiness Index

Indicator	1	2	3	4
<b>6. Exposure to a Range of Careers</b>  <i>Aligned to: Exposure to Careers</i>	<input type="radio"/> Limited or one-time exposure	<input type="radio"/> Some exposure through isolated activities	<input type="radio"/> Regular exposure to multiple careers and pathways	<input type="radio"/> Comprehensive exposure including traditional, emerging, and cross-cutting careers with real-world connections for all students
<b>7. Data, Reflection, &amp; ECAP Implementation</b>  <i>Aligned to: Data &amp; Reflection; Developmentally Appropriate</i>	<input type="radio"/> No structured reflection or planning	<input type="radio"/> Informal reflection without a system	<input type="radio"/> Structured reflection and ECAP-related activities	<input type="radio"/> ECAP is embedded; all students actively reflect, set goals, and connect learning to future pathways
<b>8. Partnerships &amp; Community Engagement</b>  <i>Aligned to: Families &amp; Communities; Exposure to Careers</i>	<input type="radio"/> Minimal external engagement	<input type="radio"/> A few informal partners	<input type="radio"/> Ongoing partnerships provide recurring experiences	<input type="radio"/> Strong regional partnerships aligned to workforce and community priorities
<b>9. Family Engagement</b>  <i>Aligned to: Families &amp; Communities</i>	<input type="radio"/> Families have little awareness	<input type="radio"/> Occasional communication about activities	<input type="radio"/> Families invited to participate in events or discussions	<input type="radio"/> Families actively support student exploration and planning

Total Score: \_\_\_\_\_ / 36

SCORE INTREPRETATION
9 - 16 Getting Started
17 - 23 Strengthen Current Efforts
24 - 30 Build a System
31 - 36 Sustain and Align

## Reflection Questions

- Which areas represent our strongest foundations for building a comprehensive career exploration system?
- What existing resources, partnerships, or initiatives could support improvement in these areas?
- What would meaningful progress look like for our students within the next year?

# 8. Measuring Impact:

## Start with the End in Mind

### Key Takeaways

#### Measure What Matters

High-quality career exploration is intended to influence meaningful student outcomes, not simply increase participation in activities or completion of planning tools like ECAP or eECAP.

#### Define Success Early

Schools and partners should identify shared goals and desired outcomes from the beginning so that implementation, partnerships, and measurement remain aligned and intentional.

#### Use Data to Strengthen the Work

Effective measurement combines quantitative and qualitative data to support reflection, continuous improvement, sustainability, and informed decision making over time.



Implementing systemic, high-quality middle grades career exploration is a strategy for achieving positive student outcomes. Measuring impact is essential to understanding whether career exploration efforts are doing more than generating activity. The number of students consistently engaging in career exploration and or completing an early ECAP is important to document, but it measures the process and products and not their impact, which can be profound.

From the outset, teams and partners should agree on what they are trying to impact. The following four broad areas\* are good starting points:

#### Student engagement and belonging

Examples include attendance, discipline, persistence, participation, and sense of purpose.

#### Academic and skill development

Examples include course completion, academic confidence, durable/employability skills, and readiness for high school pathways.

#### Career awareness and agency

Examples include knowledge of pathways, confidence in decision making, and alignment between interests and plans.

#### System and partnership strength

Examples include educator buy-in, business participation, and consistency of delivery across schools.

## Measuring Impact: Start with the End in Mind, continued

With goals set, specific efforts should support using data and feedback to inform decisions, strengthen practice, and demonstrate value to schools, partners, and funders. Measurement is not treated as a compliance exercise, but as a tool for learning and continuous improvement that helps the work stay focused on student outcomes.

Impact is captured through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. Participation data such as student reach, educator engagement, and use of career exploration tools provides insight into scale and access. Just as important are indicators of quality, including educator feedback, student reflections, and examples of how experiences influence awareness, confidence, and connection to future pathways. Together, these measures paint a more complete picture of how students are engaging with and benefiting from career exploration activities.

Equally important is how data is used. Findings are shared with partners to reinforce shared ownership, identify strengths, and surface areas for refinement. Measurement helps the collaborative adapt to changing conditions, prioritize resources, and make informed decisions about expansion or replication. By embedding measurement into the work from the beginning, the project builds credibility, supports sustainability, and ensures that impact remains at the center of program design and growth.

*\*The four broad outcome areas noted in this section are informed, in part, by a collaborative three-year data analysis project with the Crane Elementary School District (Yuma, Ariz.). This effort reinforced the importance of looking beyond participation numbers alone to include indicators related to engagement, pathway awareness, durable skills, academic readiness, and system alignment. See Addendum for examples of impact data.*

### Reflection

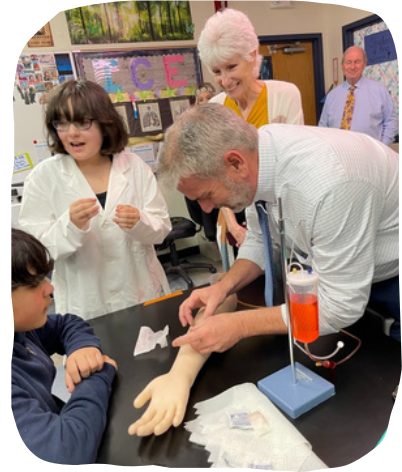
**What outcomes matter most to your schools?**

**What outcomes matter most to your community?**

**What outcomes matter most to students?**



## 9. Partnering for Long-Term Success



### Key Takeaways

#### **Strong Partnerships Expand Capacity**

Sustainable career exploration systems are strengthened through shared leadership and collaboration among schools, intermediaries, business and industry, and community partners.

#### **Intermediaries Help Connect the System**

Intermediaries play a vital role in coordinating efforts, aligning partners, filling gaps, and helping communities move from isolated activities to more coherent and sustainable systems.

#### **Business Engagement Should Go Beyond Funding**

The most impactful partnerships are relational and engage business and industry as collaborators in creating meaningful, real-world experiences that deepen student learning and strengthen connections between education and workforce opportunities.

Career exploration systems do not run on intent, will, and enthusiasm alone. Traditional resources needed include coordination time, professional development, career exploration tools and curriculum, and basic data systems. Funding may come from grants, district allocations, the CTED your district is part of, philanthropy, workforce boards, or braided funding across partners. Each system's mixture will be unique – and likely will not be enough to deliver high quality career exploration to its fullest.

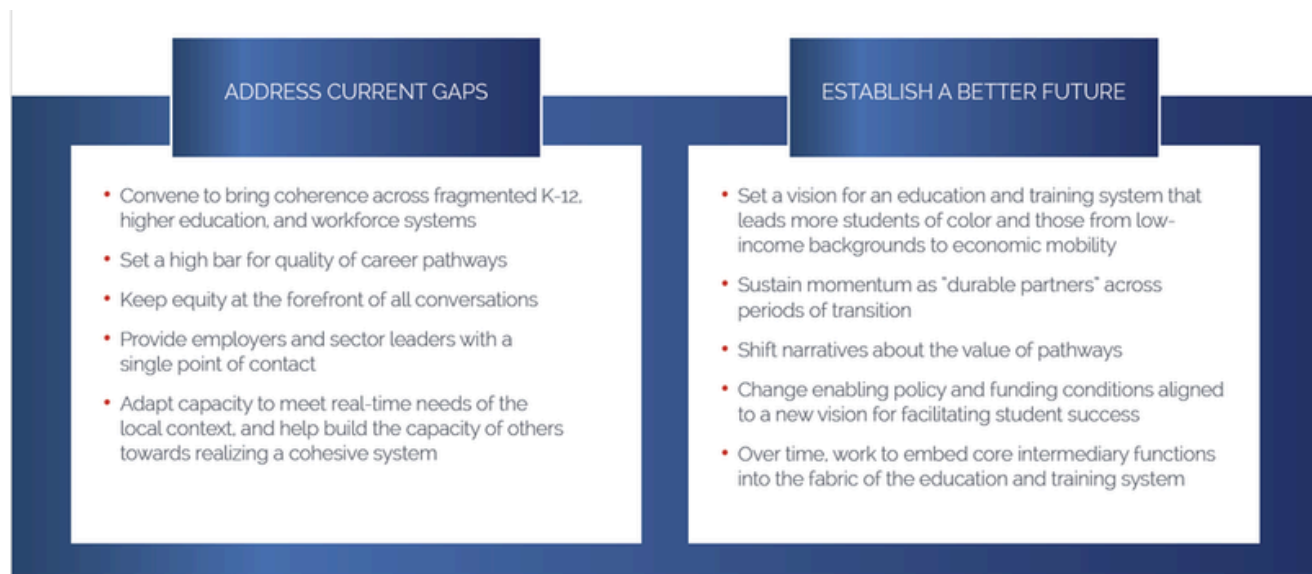
However, partnerships built on shared vision and shared leadership will extend your efforts and abilities beyond these traditional financial resources and contribute to the depth and sustainability of your career exploration efforts.

## Partnering for Long-Term Success, continued

### The Role of Intermediaries

Support from external organizations to address gaps, provide support and build a community vision for your efforts can strengthen your career exploration efforts. Organizations who serve this important role are called intermediaries. Think of them as part of the connective tissue needed to develop and implement your plans for implementation, coordinating partners, bridging education and industry, or managing logistics when capacity is limited. They can help move the work from isolated efforts to a coherent system, both within and outside the school system.

Intermediaries may take many forms, including a nonprofit organization, chamber of commerce, education service agency, college, or regional collaborative. What matters is not the structure or name of the organization, but its ability to be a committed partner in supporting coordination, alignment, and support, and help you fill gaps and build momentum to strengthen your efforts.



Source: "Keys to Scale: How to Grow the Impact of Education-to-Career Pathway Intermediaries," ESG

### Business and Industry Partners

Business and community partners are often asked to contribute dollars to district and school programs and initiatives but offered limited opportunities to engage more deeply. While funding is important to career exploration implementation, transactional relationships with business will not sustain or grow career exploration work. When business and industry is invited in as an essential partner in building and sustaining middle grades career exploration, their support can be sustained and multiplied – and have meaningful impact on the student experience.

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## Partnering for Long-Term Success, continued

When partners are invited into the work as collaborators contributing their expertise, perspective, and real-world context they become essential to building experiences that are relevant, engaging, and connected to the opportunities students will encounter beyond school. Strong partnerships shift the dynamic from “supporting programs” to co-creating a system that benefits students, schools, and the broader community.

Effective engagement with business and industry is not one-size-fits-all. It develops over time and can take many forms depending on a partner’s capacity, interest, and level of readiness. Some partners may begin by supporting awareness-level experiences that introduce students to careers and industries, while others may engage more deeply in helping students explore specific pathways or participate in more immersive, real-world learning opportunities. As trust builds and relationships strengthen, partners often move toward more sustained involvement, contributing to experiences that require greater collaboration and shared ownership. At the highest level of engagement, partners serve as leaders and champions by co-creating meaningful, real-world learning experiences such as job shadows, industry projects, work-based learning, and service-learning opportunities that bring relevance and application to classroom instruction. This progression creates multiple entry points for partners while allowing schools to intentionally expand opportunities for students across a continuum of experiences that build awareness, deepen exploration, and support preparation for future pathways.

# Business Engagement Matrix

## Ideas for Partnering on the Classroom to Career Journey

	AWARENESS	EXPLORATION & PLANNING	PREPARATION
SUPPORTER	<p><b>WORKPLACE TOUR</b> (1.5 - 2 hours) Host students in a tour of your workplace and discuss career options, required education, a typical day, etc.</p>	<p><b>INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW</b> (30-60 minutes) Answer student questions in person or via video call about a profession or industry-specific topic.</p>	<p><b>RESUME DEVELOPMENT/ MOCK INTERVIEW</b> (1 - 2 hours) Provide feedback to students on their resumes and on their responses to interview questions.</p>
PARTNER	<p><b>CAREER FAIR</b> (2 - 4 hours) Staff a booth to share advice on pursuing a career in your business/industry, skills and knowledge needed, and career roles and responsibilities.</p>	<p><b>ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM</b> (1 - 2+ hours) Answer student questions about careers, offer advice, share your experiences and otherwise support students virtually.</p>	<p><b>JOB SHADOW DAY</b> (3 - 6+ hours) Provide students a real-world glimpse into a typical day within your industry of interest, allowing them to observe workplace dynamics, job responsibilities and essential skills.</p>
LEADER	<p><b>SPEAKER</b> (4+ hours per semester) Provide valuable insights, encouragement and direction to students in the classroom as they navigate career options.</p>	<p><b>INDUSTRY TOUR</b> (3 - 5 hours) Provide students with a visit to industry or business in a group to interact with employees to understand the flow of operations and learn about various career paths within that industry.</p>	<p><b>INDUSTRY PROJECT</b> (6 - 12+ hours/semester) Collaborate with teachers to integrate authentic industry tasks into classroom activities.</p>
CHAMPION	<p><b>CLASSROOM PROJECT</b> (5+ hours/semester) Coach teacher(s) in developing a real-world, hands-on learning activity for the classroom.</p>	<p><b>WORK EXPERIENCE</b> (4 - 6+ hours) Provide age-appropriate exposure for students to career skills and workplace settings through observation, simulations and project-based learning that are age-appropriate.</p>	<p><b>SERVICE LEARNING</b> (12 - 40+ hours/semester) Support students in designing and implementing a real-world, hands-on project.</p>

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## Partnering for Long-Term Success, continued

### Reflection

Who in your community is best positioned to lead partnership-building and collaboration to support career exploration?

What gaps could be supported by intermediaries?

What gaps could be supported business and industry partners?

What structure or processes would strengthen collaboration among education, business and intermediaries?

What resources already support this work? What is missing?

Who could contribute time, funding, or tools?

# 10. Looking Ahead

## Key Takeaways

### Start with Purpose

Career exploration is most effective when it is connected to broader student, school, and community goals and not treated as an isolated initiative or program.

### Build Through Partnership

Sustainable systems are built through shared leadership and collaboration among schools, families, business and industry, community partners, and intermediaries.

### Focus on Long-Term Impact

The goal is not simply to provide activities, but to create meaningful experiences and lasting structures that help students build awareness, confidence, and readiness for future pathways.

The work of expanding high-quality career exploration in grades 6-8 – the “middle grades” between elementary and high school - is both an opportunity and a responsibility. As expectations for schools continue to grow, career exploration offers a practical way to strengthen relevance, engagement, and student confidence while supporting broader academic and community goals. The foundations outlined in this guide are designed to help schools and communities move from isolated efforts toward systems that are intentional, aligned, and responsive to changing student and workforce needs.

Sustained success will depend on the ability of schools and partners to remain adaptable. Student interests, labor markets, and educational priorities will continue to evolve, requiring career exploration systems that can learn, adjust, and improve over time. Ongoing reflection, data-informed decision making, and open communication across sectors will be essential to sustaining momentum and ensuring that experiences remain meaningful for students.

Equally important is the continued strengthening of partnerships. As trust deepens and roles become clearer, communities can expand opportunities, reach more students, and explore innovative approaches to engagement. By investing in shared leadership, intermediary support, and professional learning, schools and communities can build capacity that extends beyond individual programs or funding cycles.

Ultimately, looking ahead means keeping students at the center while building structures that last. When career exploration is thoughtfully integrated into the middle grades, it becomes a catalyst for stronger transitions, clearer pathways, and a more connected education to workforce continuum. This work is not about predicting a single future for students, but about equipping every student with awareness, skills, and confidence to navigate many possible futures with purpose and agency.

# 11. Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

## **Advisory Class**

A regular class period where students can get support and explore topics like careers, goals, or social skills.

## **Business or Community Partner**

An organization outside of the school system that collaborates with educators to support student learning and career exploration. These partners may include employers, nonprofits, higher education institutions, workforce organizations, local governments, or community groups. They contribute real world perspective, expertise, and experiences such as guest speakers, site visits, mentorship, internships, and resources that help students understand careers, build skills, and see how education connects to opportunities in their community.

## **Career and Technical Education (CTE) and eCTE**

Prepares students with the academic knowledge, technical skills, and real-world experiences needed for high demand careers. CTE programs combine classroom learning with hands-on training and career exploration to help students explore career pathways, earn industry relevant skills or credentials, and make informed decisions about education and employment. Similarly, eCTE provides middle grades students opportunities to explore specific industries or careers.

## **Career and Technical Education District (CTED)**

In 1990, the Arizona Legislature enacted statutes that allowed the State's public-school districts to form Career and Technical Education Districts (CTED's) for the purpose of improving career and technical education (CTE). Since then, 14 CTEDs have formed throughout the State, and 101 school districts have joined a CTED thereby becoming CTED member districts, leaving only five school districts that offered CTE in fiscal year 2016 not part of a CTED. CTE in Arizona is delivered through one of three models—at CTED central campuses, at CTED member districts' satellite campuses, and at school districts that are not part of a CTED (non-CTED districts). (Source: ACTEAz)

## **Career Exploration**

A structured process that helps students learn about themselves and the world of work. Through age-appropriate activities and experiences, students explore their interests, strengths, and values, learn about a wide range of careers and pathways and begin to understand how education connects to future opportunities.

## **Career-Connected Learning**

An approach to education that intentionally links classroom learning with real-world careers and experiences. It helps students understand how academic skills apply beyond school by connecting instruction to career pathways, workplace skills, and hands-on experiences such as projects, mentorship, work-based learning, and career exploration activities.

## Glossary of Terms and Acronyms, continued

### **Delivery Model**

Refers to the way a program or initiative is organized and implemented in practice. It describes who delivers the work, how services or learning experiences are provided, where they take place, and how partners coordinate to ensure consistent, effective implementation across schools or communities.

### **Durable Skills**

The core skills that help people succeed in many jobs, industries, and stages of life. They include abilities such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, adaptability, critical thinking, and self-management. These skills remain valuable even as specific jobs and technologies change, helping students and workers learn new roles, navigate challenges, and grow over time.

### **Education Career Action Plan (ECAP) and eECAP**

A personalized, student-driven plan that helps students identify their interests, strengths, and goals and connect them to education and career pathways. Required for all Arizona high school students, the ECAP is developed and updated over time and includes academic planning, career exploration, postsecondary options, and transition goals. The ECAP is designed to help students make informed decisions about high school coursework, postsecondary education, training, and careers.

### **Early Education Career Action Plan (eECAP)**

Builds on the foundation of Arizona's Education Career Action Plan by introducing students to the process of self-exploration, career awareness, and future planning before they enter high school. While the Arizona Department of Education requires ECAP development beginning in grade 9, the intent of an eECAP is to start that thinking earlier in developmentally appropriate ways.

### **Education Service Agency (ESA)**

A regional organization that helps school districts and schools by providing shared services, training, and technical support. ESAs help schools work more efficiently and effectively by offering expertise and resources that individual districts may not have on their own. In Arizona, each county has a county-based education service agency, often referred to as a County School Superintendent's Office or County Education Service Agency, which works in partnership with local districts and the Arizona Department of Education to support statewide priorities while responding to local needs.

## Glossary of Terms and Acronyms, continued

### **Exposure vs. Engagement**

**Exposure** refers to introducing students to careers, industries, or occupations in a broad, awareness building way. Exposure activities help students learn that careers exist and understand basic information about them, often through videos, presentations, career fairs, or guest speakers. **Engagement** goes deeper and involves active participation in career exploration experiences. Engagement activities allow students to interact, practice, reflect, or apply learning through hands-on projects, simulations, job shadowing, work based learning, or problem-solving activities tied to real world careers. In career exploration, exposure sparks curiosity, while engagement builds understanding, relevance, and connection.

### **FutureME**

Arizona's three-year, statewide framework for middle school career exploration, designed to align policy, practice, and partnerships around a shared vision. It provides a clear, coordinated approach to ensuring every middle school student has access to high quality, developmentally appropriate career exploration experiences that build self-awareness, connect learning to real world opportunities, and lay the foundation for informed education and career decisions.

### **Implementation Team**

A group of administrators, teachers and staff at the school who help plan and lead systemic career exploration planning and implementation.

### **Integrated Curriculum**

An approach to teaching that intentionally connects academic content with real world applications, career exploration, and cross subject learning. It helps students see how what they are learning in class relates to practical skills, careers, and everyday life by weaving concepts and experiences together rather than teaching subjects in isolation.

### **Intermediaries**

Organizations that connect schools, businesses, community partners, and state agencies to make career exploration and career-connected learning work effectively. They can help coordinate partners, translate between education and industry, manage logistics, and provide the capacity needed to turn shared goals into action. Intermediaries may take many forms, including a nonprofit organization, chamber of commerce, education service agency, college, or regional collaborative.

## Glossary of Terms and Acronyms, continued

### **MyFutureAZ**

A free statewide education and career planning platform that helps students explore careers, plan their education pathway, and connect learning to future goals. The platform provides tools for interest exploration, career research, postsecondary planning, and Education Career Action Plan development, allowing students to understand their options and make informed decisions about high school, college, training, and careers.

MyFutureAZ is designed to support students, families, educators, and counselors with a shared, easy to use system that aligns education planning with Arizona's workforce and post-secondary priorities. Available at <https://myfutureaz.pipelineaz.com/>.

### **Pathway**

A roadmap showing how to move through education into a specific field and then advance within it. Pathways identify necessary educational attainment and how different jobs connect and progress over time, helping students understand how entry level roles can lead to advanced positions through education, training, and experience.

### **Post-Secondary Education**

Education after high school to prepare students for careers. This includes 2- and 4-year degrees, apprenticeships, certifications, and licensure.

### **Regional Workforce Needs**

The skills, occupations, and talent required to support the current and future economy of a specific geographic area. These needs are shaped by local industries, employers, labor market trends, and community priorities, and they help inform education, training, and career exploration efforts so students are prepared for opportunities available in their region.

### **State 48 Skills**

An Arizona-based workforce and talent development initiative led out of Northern Arizona University, focused on aligning education, employers, and communities around the skills Arizona needs for its future economy. Proposed State 48 skills are the set of cross cutting, employer-informed skills identified as essential for success across industries in Arizona. These skills include durable skills such as communication, collaboration, problem solving, adaptability, and professionalism, along with foundational technical and digital skills needed in today's workforce.

### **Talent Pipeline**

The ongoing, intentional process of developing a supply of individuals with the skills and experiences needed by employers in a specific region or industry. It describes how students and job seekers are identified early, supported through education, training, and career exploration, and prepared over time to enter and advance in the workforce, ensuring employers have access to qualified talent now and in the future.

# 12. Addendum

In this section, you will find:



- State Standards & Teaching Strategies for Career Exploration  
(as of 7/9/2024; check for updates at <https://www.azed.gov/cte/ecte-career-exploration>)
- Future Me At-a-Glance: Definition and Components of High Quality Career Exploration
- Additional Planning & Implementation Resources
- Examples of Impact
- Delivery Models

## Reflection

**What other questions do you have or resources do you need to move your career exploration work forward?**

# State Standards & Teaching Strategies for Career Exploration

All Arizona state academic standards are updated periodically. The standards presented here were last updated on July 9, 2024, and are current as of publication. You are encouraged to check for updates at <https://www.azed.gov/cte/ecte-career-exploration>)



## CAREER EXPLORATION AND INTRODUCTION TO EARLY CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION GRADES 6-8

The Arizona Career Literacy Standards were created in 2019 and updated and renamed Career Exploration and Introduction to Early (eCTE) Career and Technical Education for Grades 6-8 in July 2024. This update includes the investigation of career clusters, occupations, jobs, employability skills, as well, the introduction to high school CTE programs.

Career-related terms used in this document are defined at the end of this document.  
*i.e. explains or clarifies the content and e.g. provides examples of the content that should be taught.*  
This content will be reviewed and updated as appropriate – the last update was July 9, 2024.

### 1.0 INVESTIGATE CAREERS AND CAREER PATHWAYS

- 1.1 Distinguish among occupations, jobs, careers, and career pathways
- 1.2 Identify nationally recognized career clusters and examples of occupations and jobs for each cluster (e.g., [careertech.org/career-clusters](http://careertech.org/career-clusters))
- 1.3 Research knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for employment in each career cluster
- 1.4 Evaluate personal values, aptitudes, and interests, and explain how they influence career decisions
- 1.5 Identify two or three career areas of interest using a career interest assessment platform
- 1.6 Acquire labor market information for jobs of interest including education and skills requirements, job responsibilities, and salaries
- 1.7 Evaluate academic studies and course planning for industry-specific training, certifications, and secondary/post-secondary education
- 1.8 Develop a career plan that includes academic studies and career-related education and training

### 2.0 DEMONSTRATE FINANCIAL LITERACY

- 2.1 Describe personal financial literacy with emphasis on financial management, budgeting, and investing
- 2.2 Describe business financial literacy with emphasis on accounting, finance, and conducting business
- 2.3 Discuss the effect of personal values and lifestyle expectations on career choices (i.e., personal health, work content, work environment, work-life balance, etc.)
- 2.4 Analyze the relationship among education, financial needs, and job opportunities (i.e., education/training needed, short- and long-term career goals, availability and location of jobs, salaries vs. wages, etc.)
- 2.5 Investigate financial benefits that come with having a job/career (i.e., life insurance, health insurance, retirement plans, career development opportunities, college assistance, better salaries, etc.)

### 3.0 APPLY CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

- 3.1 Give examples of critical thinking strategies/techniques (e.g., self-evaluation, self-reflection, asking questions, making informed decisions, using time wisely)
- 3.2 Identify the steps in problem-solving (e.g., define the problem; determine the cause of the problem; identify, prioritize, and select alternative solutions; and implement a solution)
- 3.3 Investigate problem-solving and critical-thinking processes and techniques to meet real-world challenges and personal decisions
- 3.4 Explain how problem-solving and critical-thinking skills are related to academic success (i.e., making good decisions, creative thinking, managing time and resources, etc.)
- 3.5 Determine the most effective personal problem-solving and critical thinking model and understand how this relates to career opportunities

# State Standards & Teaching Strategies for Career Exploration, continued

## 4.0 USE COLLABORATIVE AND TEAMBUILDING SKILLS

- 4.1 Identify collaborative skills needed to achieve a common goal (i.e., open-mindedness, conflict resolution, active listening, emotional intelligence, delegation, understanding a variety of perspectives, managing priorities, meeting expectations, and having a cooperative spirit and mutual respect, etc.)
- 4.2 Identify skills that promote teamwork (i.e., leadership, motivation, problem-solving, reliability, etc.)
- 4.3 Practice behaviors that facilitate collaboration with peers (i.e., active listening, providing feedback, respecting the differences of others, taking personal responsibility, etc.)
- 4.4 Compare and contrast tools and skills used for in-person, hybrid, and virtual collaborative team settings
- 4.5 Employ digital and in-person tools and strategies to collaborate with individuals from diverse populations, including peers, experts, and community members

## 5.0 PRACTICE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- 5.1 Differentiate between interpersonal skills and communication skills (e.g., Interpersonal skills include the ability to listen, interact, and build strong relationships, whereas communication skills cover the ability to transmit and articulate information.)
- 5.2 Identify and demonstrate various communication methods (i.e., verbal, nonverbal, written, visual, etc.)
- 5.3 Compare and contrast communication styles based on different audiences and purposes (i.e., talking to friends vs. adults, giving instructions or sharing a story, asking for help or giving information, etc.)
- 5.4 Discuss the impact of cultural, generational, and geographical differences on communication (i.e., preferences, misunderstandings, language barriers, etc.)
- 5.5 Use effective cross-cultural communication skills in person and virtually with diverse groups (i.e., avoid slang, speak slowly, keep it simple, write instructions, etc.)
- 5.6 Practice professional workplace communication across various mediums to embrace effectiveness and professionalism (e.g., emails, business letters, resumes, texts, and social media)

## 6.0 RECOGNIZE THE BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY TO CAREERS AND WORK

- 6.1 Explore the types and roles of technology in a variety of career clusters of interest
- 6.2 Examine how technology advancements have impacted the workplace (i.e., quicker and more efficient productivity, job flexibility in what workers can do, changes in how work gets done, etc.)
- 6.3 Demonstrate computer technology skills used in the workplace (i.e., emails, word processing to create a report, presentation software, and spreadsheet programs to gather data for analysis, etc.)
- 6.4 Utilize industry-recognized technology tools to complete a career-related project (i.e., Microsoft Office, Google, Canva, AI, TinkerCAD, Scratch, etc.)
- 6.5 Identify ethical issues in technology (i.e., misuse of data, misinformation, artificial intelligence, etc.)

## 7.0 EXPLORE ACCOUNTABILITY AND ETHICAL BEHAVIORS RELATIVE TO WORK

- 7.1 Define accountability and ethical behaviors and discuss their importance in the workplace
- 7.2 Explore the influence of personal behaviors and communication styles on workplace dynamics and outcomes
- 7.3 Identify ethical and unethical behavior in workplace scenarios (i.e., confidentiality, race and ethnicity, employment discrimination, etc.)
- 7.4 Demonstrate and describe appropriate work habits to obtain and retain employment (i.e., attendance, attitude, dress, performance, time management, cleanliness, etc.)
- 7.5 Engage in professional, positive, safe, legal, and ethical behavior when using technology including social media interactions (i.e., digital citizenship, commonsense.org, be internet awesome, etc.)

# State Standards & Teaching Strategies for Career Exploration, continued

## Career Exploration Teaching Strategies

### 1.0 INVESTIGATE CAREERS AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Investigation of career clusters and pathways through self-reflection, identification of interests and values, and exposure to the knowledge and skills required for careers.

- Use career conversation prompts - [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\) English ~ Spanish](#)
- Take personality inventories - before jumping into career exploration, take time out for students to do self-exploration and to learn that personality type can influence career selections. True Colors: [my-personality-test.com/true-colors](#) and/or 16 Personalities: [16personalities.com/free-personality-test](#)
- Create an "All About Me" collage with images that reflect personality inventory results
- Investigate Personality/Preferences Assessment to find matches to careers - Career Preferences Quiz: [Photo Career Quiz | Truity](#) and RIASEC Assessment: [Onlinepersonalitytests.org/riasec/](#)
- Investigate career literacy lessons and activities
- Research career interest assessment platforms
- Create a "My Future Career" collage using images that reflect top career selection as determined career interest assessments
- Develop an early ADE Education and Career Action Plan ([ECAP](#))
- Identify high school and CTE courses and programs that support career or occupational areas of interest

### 2.0 DEMONSTRATE FINANCIAL LITERACY

Investigate financial (money) skills needed to develop personal and business interactions.

- Create and examine the benefits of a budget (i.e., manage money wisely, avoid overspending, save money, and meet financial goals, etc.)
- Investigate Arizona cost of living and livable wages
- Investigate financial literacy lessons
- Encourage students to seek work for pay and save for the future (i.e., chores, babysitting, entry-level work, etc.)
- Check with local banks for financial literacy curriculum
- Investigate high school CTE classes that offer workplace learning credit

### 3.0 APPLY CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Develop and practice strategies for understanding, solving, and testing solutions.

- Use problem-solving and critical-thinking processes and techniques to meet real-world challenges and personal situations
- Apply problem-solving and critical-thinking models to find the best solution to real-world challenges (i.e., [schoolsup.org/solveit\\_etc](#))
- Engage students in project-based learning activities

### 4.0 USE COLLABORATIVE AND TEAMBUILDING SKILLS

Evaluate how collaboration and teamwork enable individuals or groups to achieve collective goals. Practice team roles including personal contributions to the team while developing leadership skills in virtual and in-person situations

- Practice collaborative skills (i.e., compromise, negotiation, and community-building strategies for carrying out tasks, assignments, and projects)
- Identify roles and responsibilities that facilitate collaboration in a variety of settings (i.e., leader, facilitator, team member, recorder, etc.)
- Evaluate student communication, collaboration, and leadership skills, and how they might be further developed in preparation for a future career through involvement in school, home, work, and extracurricular activities

### 5.0 PRACTICE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Differentiate between formal and informal communication styles and express themselves creatively according to the communication goal.

- Practice professional workplace communication across various mediums (i.e., emails, business letters, resumes, texts, and social media) to enhance effectiveness and professionalism
- Demonstrate receptive and expressive communication strategies
- Use the [professional skills](#) pre-assessment to determine current communication skills and resources to improve skills

# State Standards & Teaching Strategies for Career Exploration, continued

## 6.0 BUILD TECHNOLOGY SKILLS AS RELATED TO CAREERS

Develop and practice technology skills as related to career requirements, understand the impact of digital footprints, and safe internet usage.

- Develop and demonstrate typing speed and accuracy, and writing professional emails
- Investigate technology clubs (i.e., Code.org, Robotics, Girls Who Code, etc.)

## 7.0 EXPLORE PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND ETHICS

Individual accountability and ethical behaviors are expected in the workplace.

- Explore accountability and ethical behaviors expected in the workplace.
- Explore what it means to build a competitive advantage (i.e., academics, passions, professional skills, education level, experiences, etc.)
- Discuss standard entry-level hiring screening practices (application, references, resume, interviews, background check, testing for substance abuse, identification, etc.)
- Describe interpersonal skills needed to be successful in the workplace (i.e., verbal and nonverbal communication, cultural and gender awareness, kindness, compromise, etc.)

## eCTE DEFINITIONS

**Career Literacy**, Career education in the areas of Career Awareness (K-5), Career Exploration (6-8), and Career Preparation (9-12).

**Career Exploration Skills**, Opportunities for middle school students to discover work environments, to understand and appreciate their strengths and interests, and to plan short- and long-term goals.

**Career**, An occupation selected based on individual preferences that requires education, training, professional memberships, and volunteer work. A career is the history of work for a significant period of a person's life that often has growth opportunities.

- Occupation - a specific type of work or field (e.g., lawyer, musician, or contractor).
- Jobs - work done for pay that may or may not relate to a desired career.

**Career Clusters**, The national career clusters framework is an organizing tool for occupations. (e.g., [careertech.org/what-we-do/career-clusters](http://careertech.org/what-we-do/career-clusters))

**Career Pathways**, A smaller group of jobs within a career cluster that uses similar skills.

Teacher → curriculum coordinator → assistant principal → principal.

Retail Sales associate → cashier → assistant manager → store manager → regional manager

**Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSO)**, CTSO's are an integral requirement for high school CTE programs that encourage excellence in scholarship, build character, promote citizenship, volunteerism, and patriotism, endorse cooperation and cooperative attitudes and provide opportunities through internships, camps, and leadership conferences. The six Arizona CTOS are DECA, FBLA, FCCLA, FFA, HOSA, and SkillsUSA.

**Early Career and Technical Education (eCTE) K-8**, Preparation for high school CTE programs that contain academic and employability skills.

**Industry**, Businesses within a similar group that manufacture goods or share a business focus or service.

## Arizona FutureME:

### Definition and Components of High Quality Career Exploration



#### Defining High-Quality Career Exploration

Arizona defines high-quality middle school career exploration as intentional, developmentally appropriate activities and experiences that help students in grades 6–8:

- Understand their interests, strengths, and values
- Explore a wide range of career paths and secondary/postsecondary options
- Connect classroom learning to real-world applications
- Develop early planning and decision-making skills
- Gain exposure to the world of work through direct and indirect experiences
- Develop an Early Education Career Action Plan that is informed by their interests, strengths and values

#### Key Components

##### 1. Student-Centered & Inclusive

- \_\_\_ Tailored to all students
- \_\_\_ Promotes access for all learners

##### 2. Developmentally Appropriate

- \_\_\_ Focuses on exploration, not decision-making
- \_\_\_ Builds foundational self-awareness, confidence and curiosity

##### 3. Integrated into the Curriculum

- \_\_\_ Connects careers to academic subjects and real-world problems
- \_\_\_ Uses project-based or experiential learning methods

##### 4. Exposure to a Range of Careers

- \_\_\_ Includes activities like career days, guest speakers, job shadowing, or virtual tours
- \_\_\_ Highlights both traditional, emerging and crosscutting career paths

##### 5. Informed by Data and Reflection

- \_\_\_ Uses interest inventories, career assessments, and student reflections and goals
- \_\_\_ Helps students build early academic and career plans (e.g., individual learning plans)

##### 6. Involves Families and Communities

- \_\_\_ Engages parents/guardians in the exploration process
- \_\_\_ Leverages local industry and community partnerships

##### 7. Supported by Trained Educators and Counselors

- \_\_\_ Staff have access to training, tools, and resources to guide exploration effectively
- \_\_\_ Encourage K-12 CTE certification by career exploration educators
- \_\_\_ Promote K-12 school counselor certification and training

## Additional Arizona Resources for Middle Grades Career Exploration

### Arizona Department of Education

<https://www.azed.gov/cte/ecte-career-exploration>

- Arizona curricular standards
- Career exploration and eCTE tools
- Classroom resources
- Research

Planning and implementation support is available.

### Arizona GEAR UP

<https://in.nau.edu/gear-up/discover-guide/>

The “Discover Guide” provides middle-grade students with an interactive way to explore how their interests, passions, abilities, and cultural influences can influence life after high school. As students investigate these things, they will discover careers that fit their lifestyle and personality—and how to get there. The Discover Guide also helps students develop an Education and Career Action Plan (ECAP) by the time they reach the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. “Discover” guides are also available for parents and educators, to enable them to support student career exploration. The guides are available as downloadable pdfs.

### Center for the Future of Arizona

<https://www.arizonafuture.org/pathways-resources/career-exploration-resources/#>

Through its Pathways to Prosperity impact initiative, Center for the Future of Arizona offers free, research-based, easy-to-use resources for career connected learning, including curriculum lessons and tools to help middle grades students learn about many different career options. Planning and implementation support is available.

### Junior Achievement of Arizona

<https://www.jaaz.org/programs>

Junior Achievement of Arizona offers in-classroom, experiential and virtual programs that support middle grades career exploration. JA offers curriculum for volunteer- and teacher-led programs focused on business and economic concepts and financial literacy to help students connect what they’re learning in school to the real world. Students can put their skills to the test at JA’s student-sized “towns” – JA BizTown or JA Finance Park - or their mobile on-site simulation, JA Money in Motion. JA Inspire is an online career exploration program.

### MyFutureAZ / Pipeline Connects

<https://myfutureaz.pipelineaz.com/>

My Future AZ is a no-cost online tool where Arizona K-12 students connect their personal interests with possible career paths as they move to graduation. For middle grade students, it enables development early ECAP (eCAP). Planning and implementation support is available. The tools are offered at no cost to schools by Pipeline Connects, an Arizona nonprofit.

# Impact Examples: Three Arizona Schools



Empowering Schools.  
Transforming Futures.



**Tres Rios**  
**Service Academy**  
Grades K-8

Littleton ESD, Maricopa County

**Student Growth & Aspirations**

- 92% of students have set personal and career goals for their future.

**Inspired Educators**

- 92% of staff feel recognized, supported, and inspired to grow professionally.
- 93% expanded their positive influence by integrating career exploration.
- 100% trust the leadership team's commitment to staff development.

**Family & Community Trust**

- 93% of parents are satisfied with academic progress.
- 91% of parents say students feel safe and welcomed.



**Watch the Tres Rios Video:**  
Students with visions  
for their futures

## THE DATA



**Crane**  
**Middle School**

Grades 6-8

Crane ESD, Yuma County

**Recognized for Excellence**

- Named an Apple Distinguished School (2022-2025).
- Two ACED teachers recognized as Yuma County Rural Teachers of the Year.
- One was named Arizona Rural Teacher of the Year and National Runner-Up.
- Principal awarded ASA Middle School Distinguished Principal of the Year.

**Student Well-Being**

- 46% decrease in student referrals, indicating a stronger school culture.
- 78% of students report school as a positive place to learn and grow.

**Community Investment**

- 386% increase in partnerships.
- Over \$150,000 in community donations supporting student learning.



**M.C. Cash**  
**Elementary School**

Grades K-8

Laveen ESD, Maricopa County

**Academic Improvement**

- Students have achieved state average math scores for the first time.
- Students have nearly doubled their science proficiency.

**Improved Attendance**

- Chronic absenteeism among middle schoolers has decreased by 12%.

**Plans for Post-Secondary**

- The number of students planning to pursue higher education has tripled.

**Statewide Honors**

- Awarded the prestigious Golden Bell Promise Program Award from the Arizona School Boards Association in 2024.



**Watch the M.C. Cash Video:**  
A school transformed

## Career Exploration Delivery Models

Model Type & Description	When to Use	Strengths
<b>Elective Course</b> Delivered through a dedicated career exploration class	Schools with flexible electives	Depth of engagement, consistency
<b>After-School Program</b> Offered as clubs or enrichment sessions	Schools with strong enrichment culture	Flexible, partner access
<b>Integrated Curriculum</b> Embedded into core/elective subjects	Schools without electives	Contextual, relevant
<b>Pull-Out/Workshop</b> Students attend career sessions during school	Limited staffing or scheduling	Scalable, focused
<b>Grade-Level Advisory</b> Career topics during advisory or homeroom	Regular advisory or homeroom schedules	Supports ECAPs, schoolwide consistency
<b>Summer Camp/Intersession</b> Short-term intensive programming focused on exploration and skill-building	Schools with summer/intersession opportunities	High impact, hands-on, ideal for external partnerships