

CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION

How to determine the college- and career-readiness of your school system

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore February 28, 2024



Earlier, we discussed how state accountability systems are more broadly measuring the college- and career-readiness approaches of schools and district. In [our prior article](#), we highlighted the skills, partnerships, and strategies districts could use to build out their college and career readiness approach.

In this article, we will highlight how students become college and career ready and how system leaders can maximize resources.

While accountability is a good reason to improve your college- and career-readiness approach, the most important reason can be found in [a recent Gallup poll](#) that found students “are least positive about how well their school fosters excitement about learning, serves different learning styles, teaches about potential careers and provides mental health support.”

Students can experience college- and career-readiness across the K12 span, building on a developmental progression (*Callahan et al., 2019*). Below is a simple table system leaders can use when improving the intentionality of the college- and career-readiness:



Examples of Workforce Development Efforts					
Preschool and Elementary School Exposure and Awareness		Middle School Exploration and Engagement		High School Immersion, Participation, and Preparation	
Career days		Project-based learning		CTE and career development courses (e.g., identifying general SEL skills that are transferable across specific careers and jobs), leading to dual degrees, postsecondary credits, and certifications	
Guest classroom speakers		Community service and service-learning		Work-based learning	Career Pathway programs
Field trips	Exposure through literature	Job shadowing	Mock interviews	Internships	Externships
		Career mentoring		Simulated work-based experiences	Apprenticeships

5 elements that address this spectrum

1. Self-discovery. Students, especially those from under-resourced communities, will struggle to meaningfully engage with any planning about their future unless they understand their interests, skills and values. Programs such as AVID and Leader in Me and tools such CareerOne Stop provide opportunities for self-discovery.

The most important support for students’ self-discovery, though, is how adults—teachers, coaches and mentors—talk to them: Do students hear encouragement rather than just praise? Do students get actionable feedback? Are their successes celebrated? Do students get to talk about and share their experiences outside of school?

2. Academic foundation. Students need the academic skills to engage with college coursework and career training. Beyond literacy and math, this includes technology skills, reading comprehension and problem-solving.

Academic pathways from middle school through high school are filled with locked gates: early access to algebra, the disparate impact of screening processes for gifted or acceleration programs, intervention models that take place during Tier 1 instruction, and so on. You can begin to assess the equity of your academic program by measuring subgroup enrollment in every program or course from Advanced Placement courses to CTE pathways to remedial courses to disproportionate identification of students with disabilities.

You can start with small but effective changes. We recently saw a high school principal using a ‘principal permission’ exception to enroll students with a weak middle school math background in the core Algebra I course rather than the district ‘required’ remedial math course. Students and families approved this upgrade.

The principal distributed these students across all the Algebra sections and immediate tutorial support was available for all students. It put students on a path to success and effectively closed a math achievement gap!

3. Essential skills development. Students will need both self-management and teamwork skills to thrive in the workplace. They can learn these through project-based learning, service learning opportunities and simulations such as mock trials. Many schools include these skills



in their “portrait of a graduate” document. It is important to connect each of these skills to the school’s program and instructional expectations.

4. Real-world experience. It is never too early for students to visit college campuses, local industries and career fairs. Local business owners, tradespeople and leaders are usually willing to build connections with classrooms and schools, connecting academics to the real world.

Many high schools offer problem-solving opportunities for teams of students to work with local businesses on short-cycle problems. There are also examples such as the Homegrown Talent Initiative for providing real-world connections even in rural areas. And programs such as GripTape allow students to focus on their specific vision and interests in designing long-term projects.

5. College and career planning support. While some families have the resources to work with college admissions counselors, most students and families can benefit from a planning process beyond simple ‘college counseling’. This support can begin by matching student interests and skills to their academic accomplishments and then generating a menu of options—short and long term, low and high cost, local and distant—to test out.

The transition planning process already required for students with disabilities by IDEA offers a strong, personalized approach that could be scaled to include all students.

System leaders can reset on their federal and state financial resources to ensure they are highly aligned and responsive to local workforce needs. This affirms your local [Perkins V](#) plan. It also serves as robust compliance evidence in Perkins V, the local comprehensive needs assessment.

Finally, it can unlock additional streams of income from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Here are a few system check questions to pose with your teams:

- What industries are projected to grow the most in our local area? What occupations?
- Are our CTE program offerings broad enough to expose students to all the in-demand industry sectors or occupations in our region?
- How do our CTE program enrollments match projected job openings? Where are the biggest gaps?
- What opportunities exist in our local labor market for students with disabilities, English learners or other special populations?
- What are the emerging occupations in our area to which students should be exposed?
- What skill needs have industry partners identified as lacking in our programs?
- Which graduates of our programs are thriving in the labor market, and why?

As debate continues about how best to retool the high school, there are many proven models that address all five of these elements. They provide examples that can be adapted to your local context. These include Summit Public Schools, High Tech High, P-TECH, and Academies of Nashville.

Ready to move forward? Focus on the student experience. Keep aligning instructional expectations toward real-world application. Personalize. Build partnerships. And make data-based decisions based on outcome data.



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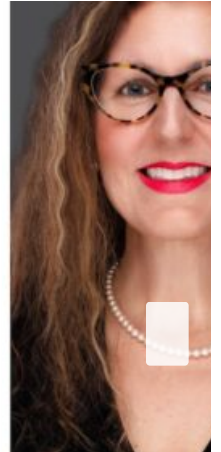
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