Expanding career exploration to middle schools state-by-state with Perkins V

Recent federal legislation can pave the way for much needed investment in career exploration at a younger age for students across the country. The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), signed into law in July 2018 as the reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, provides the framework for our nation’s career and technical education (CTE) system. For the first time, this legislation now permits Perkins funding to be used on career exploration programming as early as fifth grade.

But while Perkins V sets the stage for earlier career exploration at the federal level, it will be up to individual states to allocate specific funding for this purpose; review and revise state regulations and definitions that may restrict this expansion to younger grades; and ensure proper support structures are in place to carry it out successfully.

The need to explore earlier: aligning postsecondary decisions with career goals
The 21st century global economy demands better alignment between our nation’s education and workforce development priorities. Artificial intelligence, automation and globalization are reshaping the skills needed to thrive in the changing U.S. labor market. Never has it been more important for American youth to continue some form of education or training beyond 12th grade. Research during the Great Recession predicted that 65 percent of all jobs in the U.S. would require some post-secondary

Recommendations:

1. Develop a strategy to access Perkins V funding for Career Exploration Programming in the “middle grades”
2. Provide quality training and support for teachers and counselors
3. Increase funding and support for education and career counseling
4. Ensure all students have access to career exploration programs
education by the year 2020.¹ Current research finds that jobs requiring higher levels of education are projected to outpace occupations requiring other levels of education and training.² However, what is consistent in this research is that everyone will need some education beyond a high school degree.

Faced with these facts, American young people and their parents have been turning to post-secondary education in greater numbers than ever before. In 1960, just 45 percent of high school graduates went on to enroll in college, but by 2017 that number had grown to 67 percent.³ But while more students today are starting down the traditional higher education path, far too few successfully navigate it to completion and a successful career. In fact, nearly 40 percent of students who attempt a four-year college or university fail to complete in six years.⁴ Students pursuing an associate degree don’t fare better; only about 30 percent of students attending a two-year institution complete within three years.⁵ And overall, only 30 percent of all high school-age students will go on to complete a higher education degree or certificate.⁶

Often, this is because too many students and parents today are making ill-informed postsecondary choices, picking a college based on emotional factors or just because its “what’s next” — not because it aligns with their interests and aptitudes that will lead to long-term success. Students also frequently make hurried decisions: An ASA study found that a substantial percentage of parents waited until high school to broach the subject of post-high school plans and some didn’t discuss these issues at all—even with a child in high school.⁷ Such a late start in beginning the discussion can put students seriously behind when it comes to charting their path through the maze of post-secondary options. Students can begin to prepare for their futures by selecting the appropriate type of high school and accompanying curriculum, whether it be Honors courses, college preparatory, or career and technical education. For example, Baltimore has a unique model of magnet schools that each student must apply to, rather than neighborhood high schools. This model encourages middle school families and children to start thinking about their futures earlier, because their interests and their middle school performance drive their high school placement options, which, in turn, influences college decision-making. Starting the college and career conversation too late means all these options are already off the table.

Research shows that middle school is an ideal time to expose students to activities designed to help them explore their natural skills and talents, experiment in potential occupations, and start a plan that can evolve over time to reach their ultimate career goals. To help them stay engaged and plan for their future, middle schoolers need educational experiences that match their stage of intellectual and social-emotional development. According to the Association for Career and Technical Education, “research has identified middle school as a time when students can benefit the most from career exploration.”⁸ The National Career Development Association recommends that middle school students learn about themselves by developing awareness of their occupational interests, aptitudes, and career values; gain an understanding of the value concept of work; and make preliminary occupational choices that are open to change.⁹ However, many middle schools face a variety of barriers to implementing career exploration programming, such as cost, regulatory restrictions, and a lack of qualified personnel.

**States leading the way**

Some states are aggressively moving to eliminate these roadblocks and incorporate career exploration into the middle school experience, often using a combination of strategies ranging from legislation, to dedicated funding, to stronger partnerships between schools and industry. For example, Nebraska is leading the way in after school career exploration activities and work-based learning; Utah is a long-time leader in requiring middle school students to take a career awareness course and is now experimenting with a competency-based approach that would award academic credit for a variety of CTE experiences; and North Carolina is implementing an ambitious research program to analyze longitudinal outcomes.
for students after they participate in middle school CTE.¹⁰ Other states are focusing investments on early-stage career exploration programs that are aligned to local economic priorities and in-demand sectors or occupations, and that demonstrate clear educational paths to specific careers. Examples include Tennessee, which developed a middle school program that explores STEM careers; Virginia, where students are introduced to Career Clusters in the seventh grade and mandated to develop an Academic and Career Plan; or the Inspire Sheboygan County plan in Wisconsin, where local employers give middle schoolers opportunities for job shadowing, workplace tours and internships.¹¹ Such opportunities allow kids to explore their interests at a much younger age rather than waiting until college to test and try what may interest them.

As states develop their five-year “Perkins V” plans in fulfillment of the requirements of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, ASA recommends policymakers consider the following courses of action to expand career exploration to younger students.

**Policy recommendations**

**Develop a Strategy to Access Perkins V funding for Career Exploration Programming in the “Middle Grades”**

Historically there has been a prohibition on using Perkins federal funding below seventh grade. Thus, middle schools that begin in fifth or sixth grade may have opted not to introduce career exploration programming because it could not be offered to their entire student population. In fact, the majority of states today choose to allocate their allotment of Perkins federal funding at the secondary level to high schools, not middle schools.¹² Perkins V lifts this restriction and allows for the use of funds for career exploration programming in the “middle grades.”

To access this funding, ASA recommends state education officials: 1) include explicit language in their Perkins V plan to allow Local Education Agencies to access Perkins funding for career exploration as early as fifth grade; 2) include middle school CTE stakeholders in needs assessments and application for Perkins funding; and 3) make any needed administrative changes to the state definition of CTE to include “middle grades,” if it currently defines CTE as being for ninth grade and above. For example, the state of Maine has passed L.D. 1576, which redefined the state definition of CTE to include language about middle school.¹³

**Provide quality training and support for teachers and counselors**

High quality career exploration programming will only succeed if there are well-trained and resourced teachers and counselors to provide this exploration experience to students. For example, in Ohio, middle school CTE teachers must hold not only a standard teacher license but also the appropriate CTE credential in the specific career field.¹⁴ State education officials should ensure that teachers, counselors, and administrators—including those serving middle grade students—can access professional development opportunities that stress rigorous academic content and curricula development for career focused programs, and modern instructional strategies; increase chances to gain teacher certifications or licensing requirements; and provide access to current business and industry practices, as well as those of projected high-growth occupations. One state example of professional development opportunities is Texas OnCourse, a one-stop online resource for college and career planning that’s free for all Texas educators. Texas counselors, teachers, administrators, coaches and more can use the Texas OnCourse Academy on-demand modules to gain knowledge on all aspects of college and career advising, and earn up to 30 continuing professional education credits by completing badges.

**Increase funding and support for education and career counseling**

A comprehensive school counseling program, led by well-trained, highly competent professionals with appropriate workloads, has a positive impact on student achievement, attendance, discipline, graduation, college application, and attaining proficiency. Yet research has shown school counselors often lack the time, training and support to adequately inform students of the many viable pathways through education toward a fulfilling career. Heavy workloads limit time spent with each student, at both the middle and high school level. According to the report State-By-State Student-To-Counselor Ratio Report: 10-Year Trends, the national student-to-counselor ratio stands at 482:1, far
exceeding the recommended standard.\textsuperscript{55} ASA recommends state Perkins plans designate a portion of their Perkins administrative funding to ensure student-to-counselor ratios in line with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommendation of 250:1, as well as toward wider access to counselor professional development and training that increases knowledge and skills in higher education and career planning.

Ensure all students have access to career exploration programs

Finally, individual states must strive to ensure career exploration programming is open to all middle grade students. Career exploration programs are an opportunity for students to better understand their strengths and interests. Such programs should be open to all—they should not just be a reward for the high-achieving students, nor a way to set students on a specific career track. Every student should have the opportunity to explore their future, and state education officials must ensure that LEAs using career exploration funding are providing equal access to career exploration programming for all students.

Conclusion

Too often today, students aren’t being exposed to a wide enough variety of jobs and industries before leaving high school. Instead, they use college as a time for exploration—an expensive proposition when average annual college costs nationally range from $20,000 to $40,000. Aiding students as early as middle school to discover their skills, aptitudes and passions, and exposing them to the wide range of postsecondary education and career options will help them better align their high school learning with higher education and career objectives. This will help them make more intentional decisions about their education path, and develop a clear plan for their future that increases their chance of success in a fulfilling career.