

At the Crossroads of ‘I can,’ ‘I should’ and ‘I want’

Policy Recommendations

1 Make vital career exploration programs for young people a priority through authorizing legislation and robust funding.

Students can only find the intersection of their passions, skills and potential careers if they’re exposed to high-quality self-discovery and career exploration experiences that help them discover what they love. On the federal level, career readiness and self-exploration for middle- and high school-aged youth are carried out through numerous programs governed by multiple federal laws. Congress must prioritize and invest appropriately across all these laws to ensure funding for a robust U.S. education-to-workforce pipeline. Read more [here](#). At the state level, lawmakers must ensure laws and programs are in place to take full advantage of federal legislation aimed at expanding career exploration to younger students; read more [here](#).

2 Develop education frameworks and curricula that encourage exploratory learning and post-high school plans.

Curricula should be developed to help students build an occupational identity—to truly understand what they love to do and what they are good at. This means allowing students to experiment in a variety of academic, social, athletic and extracurricular activities geared toward helping them think more clearly about post-secondary plans. Additionally, Individualized Learning Plans (ILP), which help students align their post-secondary education path with career goals, should be expanded to more students across the country. While program names and specifics vary state to state, ILP core components generally consist of documentation of the student’s course-taking and post-secondary plans aligned to career goals, a record of the student’s development of college and career-readiness skills, and both in-school and out-of-school learning opportunities for self-discovery and career exploration. For

example, Massachusetts has adopted [MyCAP](#) (My Career and Academic Plan), a student-centered, multi-year planning tool, starting as early as sixth grade, that allows students to set attainable goals based on individual interests and strengths, develop personal social skills, and explore career opportunities. Read more [here](#).

3 Increase availability of regional labor market data so that teachers have access to up-to-date information for their students.

To truly achieve Ikigai, students must connect passion and talent to opportunity; they must link what they want to do with what the world needs—and what it will pay them for. Students need access to labor market data earlier in their educational journey so they can start to see linkages between their interests, potential careers and salaries. However, many educators may struggle with gathering, analyzing and translating complex statistical data for their students. To overcome these challenges, teachers and school administrators can turn to [resources](#) that provide best practices and examples from states that are leading the way in connecting education systems with labor market information. For example, the Nevada Department of Education works together with the [Governor’s Office of Workforce Innovation for a New Nevada](#) to convene Industry Sector Councils, where industry partners issue recommendations on the necessary skills, training and

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educational requirements for in-demand jobs based on labor market information. Such information is invaluable to teacher and counselors as they help kids navigate future workforce options.

4 Expand opportunities for experiential and work-based learning.

Hands-on learning, such as internships, apprenticeships and cooperative learning (co-ops), can help students explore their likes and dislikes, and better prepare them for the world of work. **But such opportunities are limited for some students, particularly those under the age of 18.** Limited availability of quality work, age restrictions, inability to earn school credit, lack of social connections, and no

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or limited pay can all curb the ability and/or inclination of students to pursue work-based learning (WBL). Public policy should support financial incentives for employers to expand WBL opportunities; establish centralized statewide internship coordination; encourage greater public-private partnerships; and

expand pre-apprenticeships programs. Read more at <https://www.asa.org/issue-brief/internship-challenges-and-policy-recommendations/>. Additionally, “pathways” programs at secondary schools, such as [Massachusetts Innovation Pathways](#), restructure school learning time to give students experience in a specific high-demand industry through contextualized and project-based learning, hands-on learning and internships at local employers prior to high school graduation. Such programs should be embraced and expanded.

5 Invest in recruitment, retention, training and support for teachers.

High-quality self-discovery and career exploration programming will only succeed if there are well-trained and resourced teachers to provide this experience to students. In the wake of COVID-19, however, K-12 school districts nationwide face an untenable combination of increased expenses and deep cuts to state revenue. Many school districts and administrators will resort to layoffs of teachers and licensed education professionals to balance budgets – as they did during the Great Recession, when more than 120,000 teaching positions [were cut](#) between 2008 and 2010. And once those cuts are made and jobs lost, history tells us they are slow to return. State spending on education after the recent recession took, on average, [six years](#) to rebound to pre-recession levels. More than 70 percent of school administrators [say](#) it took their district at least four to 10 years to recover financially from the Great Recession – and 20 percent say they haven’t yet fully recovered.

Regrettably, these pandemic-induced cuts will come just as we ought to be investing more heavily in teaching staff, both to alleviate recognized teaching shortages and respond to expanded remote learning needs. Hybrid learning that includes a mix of in-person and remote modalities may require additional personnel to assist teachers as they struggle to simultaneously deliver lessons to students both in the classroom and online. Added to that will be the need to increase the pipeline of teachers as the pandemic hastens the [early retirement](#) of many. At the same time, the racial and social justice movement of 2020 has brought sharply into focus the lack of diversity among our nation’s teachers. People of color represent [just 20 percent](#) of the teaching force, despite making up 40 percent of the U.S. population overall. It is essential to recruit more individuals from communities that have been marginalized within the U.S. within the profession.

Recruitment and retention strategies may also include opportunities to show students a career path that might be appropriate for them. Innovative initiatives like the [Boston Public Schools’ High School to Teacher Program](#) are leading the way in nurturing talented students interested in the education



profession through high school, on through college, and toward a successful career as an educator in the Boston Public Schools. Programs like these are vital to show high school students the path to becoming a teacher and fostering development of teachers as they enter the profession.

Federal, state and local lawmakers must not let the COVID crisis exacerbate cuts to education spending, but instead seize the opportunity to invest in our schools and our educators so that kids have the greatest chance of success in a world of growing unknowns and uncertainty. For specific suggestions on education investments, read more [here](#).

6 Increase funding and support for school counselors.

School counselors play an essential role in understanding students' triggers and motivators, helping students form a balanced view of self and future, and helping them explore their interests and themselves.

But there simply aren't enough counselors to meet demand. Over half of the counselors in an [ASA study](#) have a ratio of more than 300 students to one counselor at their schools. Proper funding and support to establish comprehensive school counseling programs in middle and high schools, led by well-trained, highly competent professionals with the recommended workload of 250 students per counselor, will help guide American youth toward more targeted education and career pathways. Read more [here](#).

7 Boost youth-serving nonprofits and community organizations.

Self-discovery and career exploration don't only happen during school hours. **After-school and summer programs, community-based organizations (CBOs), mentors and more can all play a role in helping kids learn what they can do, what they should do, and what they want to do.** Congress can provide economic support to these organizations through Title IV-B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act), which establishes "21st Century Community Learning Centers," or through any other available funding source. CBOs offer learning opportunities to school-aged children during non-school hours, including activities that build career competencies and career readiness, and can provide tutoring, accelerated learning and other academic supports to help students uncover passions and interests. ASA has been proud to support and collaborate with many CBOs over the years, and we know that their guidance for young people and their families are needed now more than ever. We urge federal, state and local leaders, as well as the private sector and philanthropists, to support these organizations as much as possible.

