



PATHWAY **2** CAREERS

Career Exploration in Middle School: Research, Standards, and State Models



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Executive Summary

Career exploration during the middle school years (grades 6–8) has become a critical strategy for engaging students and preparing them for future success. Research over the past decade consistently shows that early career guidance improves academic motivation, boosts high school and postsecondary outcomes, and helps young adolescents develop essential 21st-century skills. Middle school students who participate in career exploration programs often demonstrate higher grades, better attendance, and increased confidence in their ability to plan for the future. They also become more aware of the wide range of career options and the educational pathways needed to achieve their goals, which is especially important for preventing students from narrowing their career aspirations too early.

To ensure high quality, effective middle school career exploration programs align with proven frameworks and standards. Key national guidelines include the Common Career Technical Core (which covers all 16 career clusters and related pathways), the 12 Career Ready Practices (critical employability skills), and the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Mindsets & Behaviors for student success. The 2018 federal Perkins V legislation also emphasizes the importance of middle-grade career exploration by allowing the use of federal Career & Technical Education funds in grades 5–8. Alignment with these standards ensures that a career exploration curriculum covers essential content (from self-awareness and career knowledge to academic planning) and fosters the skills and mindsets students need for life after high school.

Many states have been national leaders in implementing middle school career exploration. This report highlights how six states – Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Utah, Missouri, and Kentucky – have developed innovative models for career exploration in the middle grades. These states typically combine career-focused courses or curricular modules with comprehensive counseling support and require every student to complete an individualized plan by the end of 8th grade. Common features include early and broad career exposure, integration of soft skills development, involvement of school counselors, and mechanisms to track program quality. Such initiatives have been credited with increasing student engagement and better preparing students to make informed decisions about high school and beyond.

This report is organized into three main sections. Section 1 provides a summary of the research and rationale for implementing career exploration in middle school, highlighting why early career guidance is needed and how it benefits students. Section 2 discusses the key national “anchor” standards and frameworks (including CCTC, Career Ready Practices, and ASCA,) that inform high-quality career exploration curricula, explaining how and why these standards matter. Section 3 offers a comparative overview of leading state models, describing how various states are implementing middle school career exploration through courses, counseling, and policy initiatives, and identifying common themes among these models.

Research and Rationale for Career Exploration in Middle School

Middle school is a pivotal time to begin career exploration, as students aged 11–14 are forming their identities, discovering new interests and talents, and starting to imagine their future roles in society. Research shows that *without guidance, young adolescents often begin to narrow their perceived career options prematurely* – sometimes ruling out paths due to stereotypes or limited exposure (“That job isn’t for people like me”).

Introducing structured career exploration by 6th–8th grade helps keep a wide range of education and career pathways open for all students by broadening their awareness before high school specialization begins. Multiple studies confirm that middle school is one of the most effective times for career development interventions. One analysis found that students who participated in



middle-grade career programs outperformed approximately 79% of their peers on measures of career interest and planning skills. In short, **early career exploration “pays off” in measurable ways.**

Student Demand

85%

Of middle schoolers want help connecting their skills and interests to potential careers

Nationwide Adoption

50

US states now provide middle-grade career exploration programs or require career planning by 8th grade

Planning Boost

79%

Career program participants were measured to outperform 79% of peers in career planning and interest assessments

There is also strong demand from students for career guidance at this age. In national surveys, **over 85% of middle schoolers** say they want to learn how their interests connect to potential careers and what education or training different jobs require. Many students feel anxious about the future; about half of middle schoolers worry about “picking the right career for me.” By offering **dedicated career exploration experiences in middle school, educators can address these needs and anxieties early**, providing information and reassurance about the breadth of opportunities available and the steps needed to pursue them. Middle school is also a low-stakes environment (students aren’t yet under pressure from college applications or high-stakes tests), so they can explore careers without fear of failure, which boosts their confidence and curiosity in learning.

Academic engagement and performance improve when students see the connection between school and their future. The middle school years are often marked by a dip in motivation. One large survey found student engagement drops from about 80% in elementary school to 60% by middle school. Career exploration can counteract this trend by making learning more relevant and motivating for young adolescents. When career examples and projects are integrated into the curriculum, students’ interest in school increases, and their academic performance benefits.

For example, a review of 45 school-based programs found that **roughly 60% of middle-grade career education interventions led to higher grades, better attendance, and improved high school graduation rates**, and none negatively impacted achievement. In one North Carolina study, introducing career-themed lessons in 7th grade science and social studies classes led to higher student engagement and significantly better end-of-grade test performance compared to a control group.

Many teachers also report qualitative improvements. In a recent multi-state pilot of a career-focused curriculum, **78% of middle school teachers observed increased student engagement and academic performance** after implementing the program. By



consistently highlighting real-world applications of academic content, career exploration gives students a practical answer to the common question, “Why do we need to learn this?”, which in turn fosters greater investment in their studies.

Early career exploration also builds students’ **self-confidence and planning skills**, setting them up for long-term success. With structured support in middle school, students gain awareness of a wide array of careers (often moving beyond traditional gender or cultural stereotypes) and develop stronger “career self-efficacy,” which is the confidence to pursue their interests and make informed decisions about their future. Middle-grade interventions have been shown to significantly improve students’ ability to set goals, understand the steps needed to achieve them, and believe in their capacity to succeed. Students who engage in interest assessments and create academic or career plans in middle school are better prepared to choose high school courses that align with their goals – whether that means enrolling in a relevant Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathway or taking college preparatory classes.

For example, in South Carolina, making completion of an **Individual Graduation Plan** a requirement for all 8th graders has led to students entering high school more purposeful about, and committed to, their course selections. Longitudinal evidence even suggests that early career exploration yields benefits that carry into adulthood; individuals who had multiple career-related learning experiences by age 14–15 later earned higher incomes and were more likely to work in careers aligned with their adolescent interests.

The benefits of middle-grade career exploration extend to postsecondary aspirations and workforce readiness. Numerous studies document that robust career programs in middle school make students more likely to graduate from high school and pursue college or other post-secondary training. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics found that students with strong career development activities in middle and high school had significantly higher rates of high school completion and college enrollment than their peers. A 2019 study by Harvard University reported that early exposure to career options was linked to **greater college persistence and a clearer sense of purpose** in students’ postsecondary studies. In a recent pilot of the Pathway2Careers middle school curriculum, 76% of students said they were now more likely to consider attending college, and 61% were more inclined to take Career & Technical Education courses in high school after participating – signs of more ambitious and informed planning.

Additionally, exposure to a variety of career options can be especially transformative for underrepresented groups. For instance, introducing girls to STEM careers in middle school (through clubs, mentorship, industry guest speakers, or hands-on STEM projects) has led to significant increases in the number of young women who plan to pursue advanced STEM courses and careers, helping to close gender gaps in those fields.

Beyond academic and career outcomes, middle-grade career exploration strengthens social-emotional learning and 21st-century skills. Many programs use project-based learning and collaborative activities to nurture skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and goal-setting – abilities that are crucial for success in any career path. Students often report improved self-confidence and a stronger sense of purpose after engaging in these programs, and teachers observe gains in maturity, leadership, and perseverance among their students. These benefits create a virtuous cycle; as students develop these soft skills and start seeing themselves as capable of future success, their engagement in school and academic achievement tend to improve as well. In summary, a well-designed middle school career exploration program addresses both the practical need for future planning and the holistic development of the student. It helps young adolescents see the relevance of their education, envision diverse possibilities for their future, and build the skills and mindset to pursue those possibilities.

All these research findings have spurred a national movement to expand career exploration in the middle grades. The 2018 federal Perkins V Act explicitly encourages the use of federal CTE funding for grades 5–8, prompting many states to invest in middle school career programs as part of their overall career and technical education systems. As of 2024, every U.S. state now has some

type of middle school career exploration policy or requirement in place. In most states, it's considered an educational priority — whether through required career exploration courses, mandates that each 8th grader develop an individualized academic or career plan, or the integration of career readiness standards into middle school curricula. A growing number of states (for example, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Georgia, Missouri, and Utah) even include middle school career readiness measures in their school accountability systems, underscoring the belief that these early interventions are essential for long-term student success. The consensus is clear: engaging students in career exploration during middle school is a high-impact practice that prepares them for high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce.

Anchor Standards and Frameworks: How and Why They Matter

Designing an effective middle school career exploration course requires anchoring the curriculum to nationally recognized standards and frameworks for career readiness. These “anchor standards” provide a clear, research-based blueprint of the knowledge, skills, and experiences students should gain through the program. Aligning a course to these frameworks ensures it meets high expectations for quality and addresses the competencies that education and industry leaders have deemed most critical for student success. Nearly all states now require or encourage career exploration in middle school, yet few states provide detailed quality guidelines for these programs. Tying the curriculum to proven national standards is therefore the best way to ensure the course delivers real value to students and holds up to public and policy-maker scrutiny. In short, anchor standards are the “guardrails” that keep a career exploration program on track; they help define what content to cover (for example, self-awareness activities, career research, and academic planning) and why those elements are important (because they are linked to better student outcomes and are supported by policy).

Several key national standards and frameworks are especially relevant for a middle grade career exploration course:

- **Common Career Technical Core (CCTC) & the 16 Career Clusters:** The Common Career Technical Core is a set of rigorous, state-developed standards for K-12 career and technical education. It includes detailed benchmarks for learning within each of the 16 Career Clusters (and their 79 associated pathways) that cover the major sectors of the economy. For middle school programs, this means providing students with broad exposure to all 16 career clusters. This principle is reflected in many best-practice models and state standards, which recommend that middle-grade courses introduce every career cluster to ensure students are aware of the full range of options before they begin narrowing their focus in high school. (For instance, Indiana’s 7th-grade course “Exploring College and Careers” takes students through an overview of all 16 clusters.) Aligning a curriculum to CCTC cluster and pathway standards guarantees that it systematically covers each major industry sector and related careers, rather than focusing only on a few familiar jobs.
- **Career Ready Practices (CRP):** Embedded within the CCTC are the 12 Career Ready Practices, which define the core career-ready skills all students should develop by the time they graduate from high school. These CRP standards are essentially descriptions of employability skills and work habits — the personal and interpersonal abilities that prepare students for success in any field. They include skills such as acting as a responsible employee and community member; applying academic knowledge to real-world situations; attending to personal health and financial well-being; communicating effectively; considering the environmental, social, and economic impacts of decisions; using creativity and innovation; employing research and critical-thinking strategies; modeling integrity, ethical leadership, and effective management; planning education and career paths aligned to personal goals; using technology wisely; and working productively in teams with cultural sensitivity. These practices are highly relevant to middle schoolers because they emphasize foundational transferable skills and behaviors that cut across

all careers. A career exploration curriculum can integrate the Career Ready Practices by engaging students in activities like team projects, oral presentations, problem-solving challenges, and personal goal-setting exercises. Many states have adopted the national Career Ready Practices (or very similar “future-ready” skill standards) as part of their middle school requirements. By emphasizing the CRPs, a course goes beyond basic career facts to also nurture well-rounded, employable learners who can communicate, collaborate, think critically, and adapt to new challenges.

- **ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success:** The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provides another set of important standards, focusing on attitudes, knowledge, and skills that support students’ academic, career, and social-emotional development. The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors include standards that specifically address career development in the middle grades. For example, they encourage developing a growth mindset and self-confidence in one’s ability to succeed (ASCA Mindset Standard M 2); recognizing the importance of education for achieving life and career goals (Mindset M 4); and building effective learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills for career and college readiness (Behavior Standards, categories B-LS, B-SMS, and B-SS). In practice, aligning to ASCA’s standards means a career exploration course would incorporate self-discovery activities, reflection exercises, and goal-setting tasks that parallel the work school counselors do. Middle school students might complete interest and aptitude inventories, identify how their personal strengths relate to various careers, develop study and time-management strategies, and practice interpersonal skills in group projects – all of which support the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors. Many states (including Tennessee, North Dakota, and Kentucky) explicitly require that middle school career guidance initiatives follow the ASCA standards, which ensures that career exploration is integrated with the broader school counseling program. By connecting to these standards, the career course reinforces students’ personal and social development alongside career awareness.
- **Perkins V and Other National Guidance:** Recent federal policy and national frameworks also stress the importance of middle-grade career exploration. The Strengthening Career & Technical Education Act of 2018 (Perkins V) was a watershed for the field, as it allowed, for the first time, federal CTE funding to be used for grades 5–8. Perkins V encourages districts to implement exploratory CTE courses and career guidance activities in middle school – effectively giving students a longer “runway” for career development before they make high school decisions. States receiving Perkins funds must describe how they will support career exploration in the middle grades. Aligning a course to the goals of Perkins V can help secure funding and ensure the program meets federal expectations (such as exposing students to high-demand industries, linking classroom learning to careers, and promoting equitable access to all career pathways from an early age). Additionally, established national frameworks like the National Career Development Guidelines and the National Career Clusters Framework highlight core competencies – including self-exploration, career research, decision-making, and planning – that students should develop by the end of middle school. For example, by eighth grade, students should be able to identify careers of interest in multiple clusters, understand the education required for those careers, and formulate an initial career or academic plan for high school. These objectives align with the components discussed above. National best-practice reports (such as ACTE’s “Career Exploration in Middle School: Setting Students on the Path to Success” and ASA/ESG’s “Extending the Runway”) further emphasize combining foundational career readiness skills and practical exposure to career pathways in middle-grade programs. For instance, a well-designed curriculum might include units on “Skills Across Careers” (to build employability skills) and “Exploring Careers” or “Educational Pathways” (to research specific occupations and their educational requirements), thus simultaneously teaching transferable skills and concrete knowledge of career options. By following federal guidance and these research-based frameworks, a middle school course will address all facets of career readiness – from understanding oneself, to understanding the world of work, to acquiring the skills needed for future success.



In summary, **anchor standards and national frameworks provide a foundation for quality and consistency in a career exploration program.** They clarify the essential content and skills that should be taught and help educators articulate the purpose behind each component of the curriculum. A middle school career exploration program aligned to the CCTC (Career Clusters), Career Ready Practices, ASCA standards, and Perkins V will be in step with both educational best practices and state/federal expectations. This alignment aids in curriculum design (ensuring that all important topics are included) and in defining student learning outcomes. Schools can also use these standards to assess program effectiveness – for example, tracking the completion of career research projects, presentations, or individual career plans as evidence that students are meeting the intended learning objectives.

Mapping Course Units to Key Standards and Competencies

To illustrate how a middle school career exploration curriculum can align with important standards, the chart below shows an example of how course units or themes might map to key national and state competencies:

Course Unit / Theme	Aligned Standards & Competencies	Highlights of Alignment
1. World of Work – What is a Career?	ASCA Mindset M4; CRP #1, #5	Introduces the concept of “career” and why people work, helping students see the value of various jobs and the connection between personal interests, education, and work.
2. Understanding Yourself	ASCA M1, M2, B-SMS 6; CRP #8, #10	Focuses on self-assessment (interests, aptitudes, values) and goal setting. Aligns with counseling standards on self-awareness and with career practices emphasizing planning.
3. Career Cluster Introductions	CCTC – Career Cluster & Pathway Standards; ASCA B-LS 7; CRP #7	Provides exposure to all 16 career clusters. Students learn about a broad range of industries, roles, and required skills/education, addressing standards for career awareness.
4. Skills Across Careers (Employability Skills)	CRP #1, #4, #6, #8, #9, #12; ASCA B-SS 9	Develops key employability skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, leadership, ethics). Uses projects and activities to practice these skills, as encouraged by career-ready standards.
5. Educational Pathways & Credentials	CRP #10; ASCA B-LS 4; Perkins V	Teaches students about different postsecondary options, high school courses, and credentials, and how these connect to various careers – addressing planning for future education and training.
6. Careers and Money (Financial Literacy)	CRP #3; ASCA B-SMS 10; JumpStart Financial Literacy Standards	Connects career choices to financial literacy (earnings, budgeting, personal finance), helping students understand how career decisions can impact their financial well-being.
7. Career Skills in Action (Project-Based Learning)	CRP #6, #8, #12 (creativity,	Engages students in simulations or projects (e.g., building a business plan or creating a product) to apply academic and career-related skills in real-world contexts, reinforcing CRP and teamwork standards.



	critical thinking, teamwork)	
8. Exploring Careers (Labor Market & Industry Insight)	CRP #7; ASCA B-LS 10; State-specific Career Exploration Guidelines	Involves researching specific occupations and industry trends, including local labor market information. Students learn how to use career information systems and labor data, building research and analysis skills.
9. Cross-Disciplinary Career Connections	CRP #5, #12; 21st Century Skills	Highlights how different subjects (STEM, arts, humanities) connect to various careers through interdisciplinary projects. Emphasizes systems thinking, collaboration, and the value of diverse academic skills.
10. Planning for the Future (High School and Beyond)	CRP #10; ASCA B-SMS 1; Individual Learning Plan (ILP) requirements	Culminates in each student developing a personalized academic and career plan for high school. Aligns with career planning standards and state requirements for 8th-grade students (e.g., completing an ILP or 4-year plan).

The above example demonstrates how a curriculum can be directly informed by standards every unit is tied to specific competencies (from career readiness, counseling, or state frameworks), ensuring that nothing is taught “just because”; each activity has a purpose linked to a larger goal.

State Models – Comparative Overview

Across the country, states have translated the national vision for middle school career exploration into various courses, programs, and policies. This section reviews six leading state models – Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Utah, Missouri, and Kentucky – which are frequently cited as exemplars of middle-grade career development. While each state’s approach is unique, all of them emphasize a blend of self-exploration, broad career awareness, employability skills development, and early academic/career planning. Many states also require at least one career assessment by 8th grade and an individualized academic or career plan, ensuring that every middle schooler maps out a tentative path for high school and beyond. Below is a comparative table summarizing key components of these six states’ middle school career exploration models:

Comparative Table: Middle School Career Exploration in Selected States

State	Course Structure (Grades 6–8)	Career Plan & Assessments	Notable Features
Tennessee	Offers a dedicated Career Exploration course (CTE course code C25X07) in middle school (often 7th or 8th grade, semester or full year). Strongly encouraged statewide, though not	Assessments: All students take a career interest inventory or aptitude test by 7 th or 8th grade (e.g., YouScience). Plan: By end of 8th grade, each student creates a personalized 4-year high school plan (choosing an elective focus	Emphasizes five domains: (1) Self-Awareness (personal interests and aptitudes – includes formal assessments and reflection); (2) Academic Alignment (connecting academic achievement to career goals); (3) Career Exploration (exposure to all 16 career clusters, including high-demand local careers, plus introduction to entrepreneurship and personal

	mandated for all students. Course covers self-awareness, career clusters, employability skills, etc.	area aligned with a career interest), typically with counselor guidance.	financial literacy); (4) Employability Skills (communication, teamwork, leadership, etc., often through participation in Career & Technical Student Organizations); and (5) Experiential Learning (at least one hands-on career experience such as a job shadow, guest speaker, or workplace visit). Tennessee’s school counseling model (aligned with ASCA standards) reinforces career exploration, and the state maintains favorable counselor-to-student ratios to support these efforts. Overall, Tennessee’s comprehensive approach is closely aligned with national standards and is viewed as a model for middle-grade career education.
Pennsylvania	Integrated into Curriculum: Pennsylvania embeds its Career Education and Work (CEW) standards into the general 6–8 curriculum. Rather than a standalone course, career exploration is delivered through units in existing classes, advisor/advisee programs, and school counseling activities.	Career Portfolio: By 8th grade, students must produce a multi-item evidence portfolio (at least 6 pieces) demonstrating career exploration (e.g., assessment results, career research projects, short-term and long-term goal statements, sample résumé, etc.). Plan: All students develop an Academic and Career Plan by the end of 8th grade, outlining tentative career goals and a high school course plan; these are revisited in 9th grade. The Future Ready PA Index (state school accountability system) measures the percentage of students who meet the 8th-grade career exploration benchmarks.	CEW standards cover four strands: <i>Career Awareness & Preparation; Career Acquisition (Getting a Job); Career Retention & Advancement; and Entrepreneurship.</i> Pennsylvania’s strong accountability framework treats middle school career exploration as a school performance indicator, which has driven widespread implementation. Many schools use online career portfolio platforms (like Smart Futures) to help students save their artifacts and track progress. Pennsylvania’s approach ensures that all students experience broad career exposure (multiple clusters and occupations), practice job-seeking and workplace skills (through simulations and class projects), and engage in early college/career planning.
Virginia	Requires all middle schools to implement a Career Investigations module, typically in 7th or 8th grade. Many schools offer a stand-alone Career Investigations	Academic and Career Plan (ACP): Every student must complete an ACP by fall of 8th grade. This plan outlines the student’s tentative high school courses (a “program of study” aligned with a career pathway)	Virginia closely links career exploration with academic planning. The state’s Standards of Accreditation make completion of the 8th-grade ACP a requirement for school accreditation, ensuring every middle schooler’s plan is taken seriously. School counselors, teachers, and parents are all

	<p>elective (often one semester in 7th grade), while others integrate the content into another course or counselor-led unit. The curriculum introduces all career clusters, basic workplace skills, and decision-making strategies.</p>	<p>and a postsecondary goal. The plan is developed during the Career Investigations unit (as a capstone project) and is signed by the student, parent, and school official.</p> <p>Assessments: Students use state-provided career information systems (such as Virginia Career VIEW or vendor platforms like Naviance) to take interest inventories, research career options, and inform their ACP choices.</p>	<p>involved in the planning process. The Career Investigations curriculum is hands-on and often project-based, giving students opportunities to practice communication, presentation, and teamwork skills (reinforcing the state’s Workplace Readiness Skills standards) while they explore careers. Virginia’s model is considered a best practice for connecting middle school exploration with concrete high school decisions.</p>
Utah	<p>Mandates the full-year College and Career Awareness (CCA) course for all 7th graders (some districts offer in 8th). CCA is a stand-alone course co-taught by CTE and core academic teachers. It provides a comprehensive, cross-curricular introduction to careers through hands-on projects.</p>	<p>Plan for College and Career Readiness (PCCR): As part of CCA, each student develops a personalized education and career plan by the end of 7th or 8th grade. This plan, similar to an ILP, outlines the student’s goals and a tentative high school course schedule; it is revisited annually in grades 9–12. Assessments: The CCA curriculum integrates formal interest and aptitude assessments, and students use an online career information system to explore occupations, required education, and labor market information as they work on their plans.</p>	<p>Utah’s CCA is often cited as a gold standard for middle-grade career exploration. The course is highly project-driven: students rotate through modules that simulate tasks in various careers (e.g., designing a mobile app for an IT module, conducting a science experiment for a STEM module, writing a business plan for an entrepreneurship module, investigating a medical case in a health science module, etc.). Throughout CCA, students also learn and apply employability skills (like teamwork, problem-solving, and communication) in context. The program frequently features guest speakers, field trips, and mini job-shadowing experiences to make careers tangible. By the end of the course, every student has been exposed to all 16 career clusters and begun formal high school planning. The collaboration between CTE and academic teachers (and the involvement of school counselors) is a notable strength of Utah’s model.</p>
Missouri	<p>Uses a flexible implementation model. No single course is mandated statewide; instead, districts incorporate career exploration through local units or electives (often in 8th grade, with titles</p>	<p>Individual Career & Academic Plan (ICAP): Every student creates an ICAP by the end of 8th grade, mapping out their high school coursework and postsecondary goals with respect to a chosen career path. Missouri’s school accountability system (MSIP 6)</p>	<p>Missouri emphasizes local flexibility coupled with state support. Schools often deliver career exploration through interdisciplinary projects that connect academic subjects with real-world careers. Students are introduced to Missouri’s high-opportunity industries (like advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and IT) as examples. Many schools use the Missouri Connections online system for career research</p>

	<p>like “Career Pathways” or “Life & Career Planning”). The state provides curriculum resources, including a Career Pathways framework and a Comprehensive Guidance Program, to support schools in embedding career development in grades 6–8.</p>	<p>monitors the completion of these plans. Assessments: Students take career interest inventories and complete career cluster surveys; they also explore high-demand careers in Missouri’s economy as part of their ICAP development process.</p>	<p>and portfolio building, and school counselors facilitate the ICAP process as part of a comprehensive guidance program. Missouri also encourages middle school participation in junior-level Career & Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs) and programs like Junior Achievement to build leadership and entrepreneurial skills. By requiring an ICAP and integrating career topics across the curriculum, Missouri ensures every student gains both awareness of careers and practical planning experience by the end of middle school.</p>
<p>Kentucky</p>	<p>Embeds Career Studies throughout the curriculum. Kentucky’s academic standards include career education for every grade, so middle schools integrate career exploration into various subjects and advisory periods (often with CTE teacher and counselor collaboration). There is no required standalone course, but all 16 career clusters and basic financial literacy are addressed within grades 6–8.</p>	<p>Individual Learning Plan (ILP): Every student begins an ILP in 6th grade. The ILP is an online tool where students record their interests, career goals, planned courses, extracurricular activities, etc. Students update their ILPs yearly, with guidance from school counselors and periodic parent review. The state tracks ILP completion and even evaluates the quality of ILP implementation to ensure it’s a meaningful process (not just a checkbox). Assessments: From 6th grade onward, students take formal interest inventories and skills assessments, and they explore all 16 career clusters through class activities and digital career planning tools.</p>	<p>Kentucky’s approach is characterized by an early start and continuous development. By embedding career studies in the curriculum from elementary through high school and mandating ILPs at the start of middle school, Kentucky makes career exploration a developmental process rather than a one-time event. The ILP system is closely tied to the school counseling program (which is aligned with ASCA standards), ensuring that career exploration is supported by guidance counselors and integrated with students’ personal and social development. Kentucky’s model also puts strong emphasis on employability skills: middle schoolers practice decision-making, teamwork, and leadership as part of state career studies standards (paralleling the Career Ready Practices on collaboration and responsibility). A notable innovation is Kentucky’s commitment to quality control – the state gathers feedback and conducts audits on ILP implementation, focusing not just on whether schools have ILPs, but how effectively they are used to support student success.</p>

Common Themes and Innovations

Despite differences in implementation, these leading state models have much in common:

- **Early Self-Discovery and Planning:** Every featured state requires students to engage in structured career exploration by 7th or 8th grade, and all six states mandate that students develop an individualized academic or career plan (ILP, ACP, etc.) by the end of 8th grade. This ensures each student makes a concrete plan for high school aligned with personal interests and goals.
- **Comprehensive Career Exposure:** All models ensure that students are exposed to all 16 career clusters and a wide variety of jobs in middle school, preventing tunnel vision and expanding students' awareness of potential careers. Many include specific activities to highlight high-demand or locally relevant industries alongside the full spectrum of options.
- **Employability & Life Skills:** Each state's approach integrates the development of 21st-century skills—such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time management, and self-management—into career exploration activities. Students practice these skills through project-based learning, participation in student organizations, or other hands-on experiences, aligning with Career Ready Practices.
- **Counselor and Community Involvement:** School counselors play a central role in all these models, from helping students interpret assessment results to guiding them in writing their plans. Some states also involve parents (e.g., requiring parent/guardian sign-off on 8th-grade plans) and encourage partnerships with local businesses and community members (such as guest speakers, career fairs, and job shadowing) to enrich the program.
- **Accountability and Continuous Improvement:** Several states hold schools accountable for implementing career exploration. Pennsylvania and Missouri, for example, include career readiness indicators in their school performance measures, and Kentucky monitors the quality of schools' ILP processes. This accountability ensures that programs are not just offered in name only, but are continuously improved and taken seriously by educators.

Conclusion

Together, these research findings, national standards, and state-level initiatives send a powerful message: career exploration in the middle grades works, and it is increasingly essential. Schools that implement strong middle school career exploration programs see more engaged students, better academic outcomes, and more purposeful decision-making as students enter high school. By aligning a middle school curriculum with proven standards and learning from successful state models, educators can ensure that their programs meet young adolescents' developmental needs, incorporate evidence-based practices, and satisfy policy requirements. Ultimately, high-quality career exploration in middle school empowers every student to discover their interests and strengths, connect those to real future opportunities, and begin charting a path toward a fulfilling career and life.

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About the Author

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Dr. Joseph L. Goins is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Pathway2Careers (P2C), a national research-based education company advancing Career-Connected Learning (CCL) systems across K-12 education. His work focuses on aligning academic learning with workforce relevance, integrating labor market data into instructional design, and developing scalable middle and high school career exploration models adopted across multiple states.

Dr. Goins has led large-scale partnerships with state departments of education, intermediate units, and school districts to implement comprehensive career readiness frameworks, including:

- Middle school career exploration systems
- Individual Learning Plan (ILP) implementation models
- Early College High School (ECHS) technical assistance
- Career & Technical Education (CTE) hubs
- Workforce-aligned mathematics curriculum integration

His research and implementation efforts center on increasing student engagement, improving postsecondary outcomes, and ensuring equitable access to high-demand career pathways.

Dr. Goins holds a Doctorate in Education and has dedicated his career to ensuring that every learner understands the relevance of education and is empowered to chart a purposeful pathway toward future success.

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About P2C Research

At Pathway2Careers, we believe that when education becomes relevant, learners fully engage. Our mission is straightforward: revolutionize education by challenging the current approach and motivating student learning through career-connected relevance. This mission drives our vision of improving students' prospects by connecting the time and energy they spend in the classroom with meaningful career paths. In doing so, we aim to transform not just the future prosperity of individual students, but the economies of entire communities.

What sets P2C apart is our commitment to evidence-based solutions. Every product, resource, and strategy we design is grounded in rigorous research. By uncovering, exploring, and sharing the most timely and relevant findings—and through the insights generated by our in-house research team—we tackle the biggest challenges facing education today. Our approach ensures that the career-connected learning experiences we create are not only innovative but also effective.

Learn more at p2c.org