



The School Improvement Coach Playbook:

CHAMPIONING CAREER-READY
MIDDLE SCHOOLS



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ALLready’s mission is to make career readiness for ALL the first priority of American education across the lifespan. Founded by thought leaders from more than 50 organizations in industry, workforce development, education, and government, ALLready informs, connects, and empowers partners across the career pathway ecosystem to ensure that all individuals in every community have viable opportunities to pursue pathways to economic mobility, social mobility, and wealth generation. We’re working to transform education, career, and workforce development systems to accelerate efficient and cost-effective outcomes—all by leveraging our five pillars of career planning, advising, learning, technology, and accountability. All individuals and communities are on self-determined pathways to economic and social mobility. This is our vision, and we invite you to join our pursuit.

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Introduction



Welcome! This playbook offers practical guidance for preparing young students for future careers by supporting exploration, curiosity, and early skill development. If you are or will be cultivating the talents of young people (in grades 5–9), this playbook is for you.

This playbook is one of a connected series of Career-Ready Playbooks for Middle Schools.

ALLready developed a connected series of playbooks for partners to contribute to the career readiness of young people. The series includes playbooks for:

- Industry, including corporate leaders, employers, industry associations, industry credentialing bodies, and local business groups and chambers.
- Education, including school leaders, teachers, school improvement coaches, district leaders, superintendents, and higher education.
- Government, including local agency leaders such as workforce boards, elected officials, and school boards.
- Community leaders, including those responsible for guiding and coaching young people, out-of-school-time organizations, community-based non-profits, and student-led organizations.

ALLready Playbooks fill a gap in the available resources on developing career readiness.

They incorporate ALLready's **five career readiness pillars: self- and career-exploration, planning, advising, work-based learning, technologies and tools, and accountability.** In keeping with our organizational strategy, this series:

- Informs leaders across the career-connected ecosystem of the value of career-centered learning approaches in the middle grades;
- Connects leaders through common language and frameworks; and,
- Empowers leaders with practical tools and guidance to expand and deepen career and workforce readiness among those they work with now and in the future.



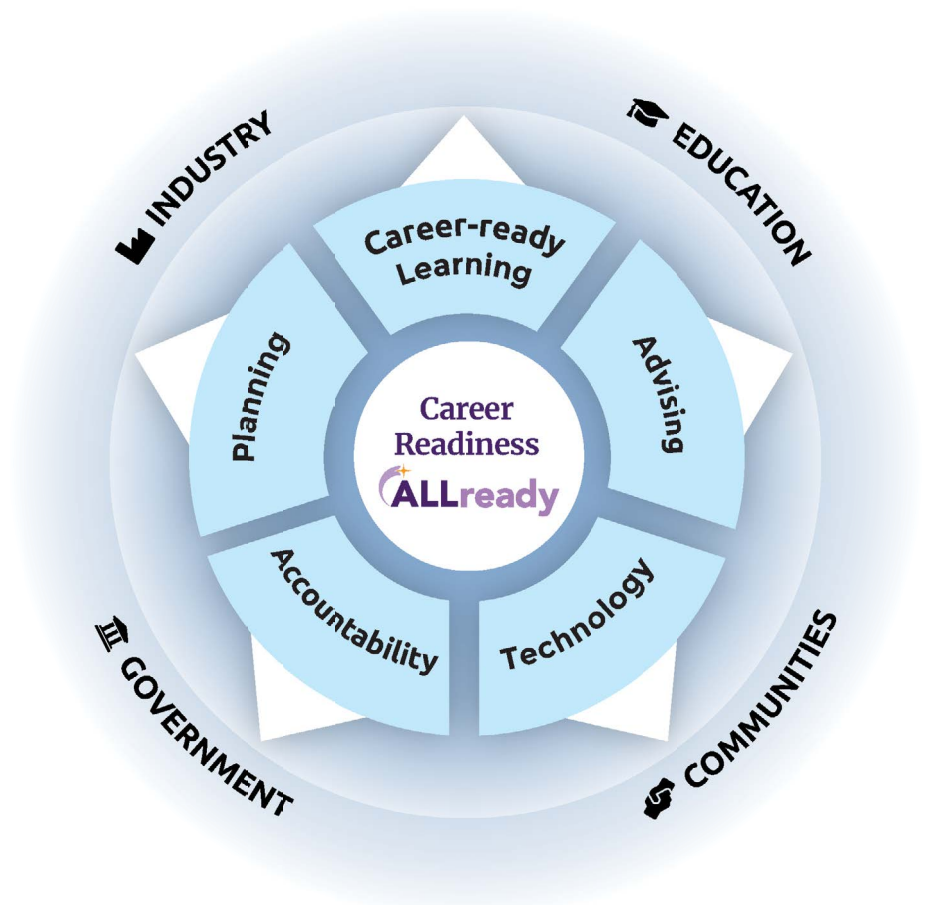
Visit our website at **[ALLready.org/playbooks](https://www.allready.org/playbooks)** to find and share others addressed to those you work with so they can be prepared to support your career-readiness efforts.

Curious about how middle-grade students can meaningfully engage in real-world work environments and how this early exposure can foster future engagement and equity? This playbook invites you to explore strategies that honor the unique developmental needs and gifts of young people while introducing them to career pathways.

What is a Career Readiness Ecosystem?

A career-ready ecosystem is a cross-sector approach to collaborative action resulting in collective impact. It includes the following:

- **Career-ready students** who are **individuals** gaining experiences, knowledge and skills that allow them to navigate a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous future with confidence and autonomy.
- **Career-ready partners** who actively support learners to be career ready. They include schools, families, employers, workforce boards, and community based organizations who invest time, talent, and treasure to prioritize career readiness.
- **Career-ready programs and initiatives** support the ecosystem by supporting one or more of the five pillars.



Why a Career-Ready Ecosystem for Young People?

Learning and career exploration should feel connected and meaningful—especially for young people 10–15 years old whose sense of identity is forming alongside their learning experiences.

Renowned Harvard School of Education Professor Richard Elmore once warned of an increasing “dissociation between learning and schooling” (Elmore, 2012). With learning happening increasingly outside of schools, partners across sectors have the opportunity and responsibility to provide learning experiences—especially those that will help young people explore and discover pathways into the adult world of work.

Career-ready learning exposes young people to real-world experiences. It helps answer the common middle-grade question: “Why am I learning this?”

Further, young people can “master tremendously large amounts of information with minimal coercion, aid, or teaching from adults” under the right conditions, in the right environment, and with more agency and choice, Elmore noted. But to provide this flexibility schools have to be more flexibly structured, supportive of student agency, focused on relevant content selected in part by the interest of the learner; and, high-quality student-adult interactions that emphasize guiding and coaching rather than hierarchy and compliance.

“Why am I learning this?” is clearer to young people when they can make a direct connection between what they are studying and what they might choose to do later in their lives. Studies confirm students are more engaged and satisfied with their learning experience than those without a career in mind (AIR, 2024). Students with a career and academic plan are more likely to graduate and achieve their goals (Solberg, 2019).

Career-building conversations in the middle grades set the stage for agency, choice, and self-advocacy—long before high-stakes decisions like college applications.

The average American spends over 12 years in school but 45 years of working across their lifetimes. Yet about half of graduates feel unprepared for their working lives (Sliwinski, 2023) and less than half of working adults can say they are very satisfied with their jobs. Career satisfaction is linked to health, wealth, happiness, and life expectancy (Lin et al., 2024).

The middle grades are a key developmental window for identity formation, curiosity, and early exposure to career possibilities. This is the time to build self-awareness, confidence, and early social capital.

People’s identity and sense of efficacy develop more deeply (during the middle grades) than at any other time (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2018; Godbey & Gordon, 2019; Porfeli & Lee, 2012, 11–22; Super, 1957; Covacevich et al., 2021). Starting the conversation about interests, pathways, and career-ready skills earlier in the middle school years could help all students by (Mann et al., 2020; AdvanceCTE et al., 2021):

- Developing a healthier, resilient, affirming, strengths-based identity
- Improving self-awareness and interpersonal skills
- Strengthening critical thinking and planning skills
- Increasing relevance of academic content and student engagement
- Making real-life connections with family, community, government, and professionals across various enterprises
- Valuing decisions and making better choices with the future in mind
- Fostering access to economic and social mobility

Career awareness and readiness starts early. Waiting until high school misses the chance to support middle grade students' natural curiosity and their readiness to imagine themselves in the future. Career preparation should therefore not be relegated to career technical programs or postsecondary institutions. This leaves far too many young people without the opportunities, tools, or experiences to begin developing a sense of who they might become, what work they might enjoy, and how to take steps towards adulthood in a way that is personally meaningful to them.

Now is the time for everyone to focus on career readiness.

Waiting until high school to connect learning to careers ignores a critical opportunity to build the habits and mindsets of future-ready learners. This age represents an extraordinary period of mental and emotional growth, during which career-ready leaders have tremendous opportunity to tap into and grow students' strengths and skills, and provide security and hope for the future. Students are less engaged in school, and workers are less engaged with work than ever (Hrynowski, 2024). The social and economic future of the United States depends on a collective approach to the workforce centered around individualized, interest-based career development starting as early as possible.

Why Are School Improvement Coaches Critical to a Career-Ready School?

Coaches play an essential role in a school's efforts to advance career-ready learners and leaders. Career readiness for middle-grade students is a student-centered, future-facing approach to schooling. This requires a human-centered coaching approach rooted in a shared vision, guiding support, and sustainable systems change. So, in order to effectively shift the educational approach in middle grades toward an individualized experience that prepares students for life beyond the classroom, schools can enlist coaches to identify catalysts, build sustainable systems, navigate barriers, and empower a team to implement their vision independently.

The role of school coaches can encompass varied responsibilities and activities. Some coaching roles are more specialized, while others are generalists. In either case, coaches may work with one school or with many schools in a district, or with the district as an entity. Coaches can be instructional and curriculum specialists, mentors to teachers and classroom supporters, or guides for school leaders and the school community in decision-making, change management, and school system and partner navigation. The [Ten Roles of Coaches](#) by Joellen Killion provides helpful descriptions of these different roles. This ALLready playbook includes references and resources for the many roles played by the different types of school coaches.

A coach might be a school counselor, a district official, or an external consultant. Each of these positions comes with benefits and potential drawbacks. For example, while a school counselor may have the trust and relationships necessary to develop buy-in from individuals in the school community, they may not have the authority to make decisions about curriculum or change master schedules. An external consultant may have a clear scope and perspective from prior coaching experiences, but building relational trust or identifying entry points in a new environment may be difficult and take time. Ultimately, change moves at the speed of trust (Covey, 2006).

A coach's role in the change management process is to actively support individuals and teams through the transition by providing guidance, encouragement, and personalized development so they can adapt to and embrace the change. The coach can identify connections to existing systems, craft proposals that speak to interests and strengths across stakeholders, identify resources, and address challenges before they become roadblocks.

For transformative change to occur, a significant shift in mindsets, behaviors, and systems is necessary. The capacity to lead such change is not built into any one role in a school setting. Thus, the coach's role is to offer crucial support to individuals navigating these shifts while identifying entry points to effectively address resistance, ultimately increasing the likelihood of successful implementation by building the capacity of those responsible for instituting the change. The coach's sphere of influence will depend on their position within the ecosystem and contextual factors regarding resources, scale, and key drivers. Nonetheless, a school coach can serve as the connective tissue, channeling catalysts, encouraging successes, and facilitating opportunities focused on the young people they serve.

This playbook is focused on the role of the coach in the overall need for career-readiness programming for middle grades students.



Transformational Practice Dimensions

This playbook is divided into seven core dimensions of adult practices designed to support career-ready learning for young people ages 10-15 (in the middle grades). We will discuss ways to lead school career-ready practices through each dimension.

- 1 [Leadership Levers](#) - How to create and achieve the vision together**
This includes vision, influence, communication, strategy, authority, and planning.
- 2 [Learning Landscape](#) - What young people need to know and be able to do**
This includes career-connected content, pedagogical approaches, instructional strategies, learning standards, student assessment, and guided practice.
- 3 [Professional Preparation](#) - What educators, mentors, and supervisors of young people need to know**
This includes human capital, professional development, training, and collegial learning communities.
- 4 [Everyone Engaged](#) - Whom to engage to effect change and sustain effort**
This includes identifying and recruiting partners, managing organizational partnerships, and sustaining partnerships with families and students.
- 5 [Student Support](#) - How to make sure each young person gets what they need**
This includes developmentally appropriate strategies to scaffold learning for students and accommodations for students with different learning styles.
- 6 [Resource Readiness](#) - What schools need to succeed and what partners, systems, and communities can provide**
This includes ensuring adequate resources are in place, such as funding, time, talent, technology, assets, materials, facilities, and transportation.
- 7 [Compliance Concerns](#) - How to navigate the system**
This includes compliance with federal, state, and local policy, regulations, civil rights and access, insurance and liability, and assurances of safety.





Leadership Levers

How to create and achieve the vision together

A coach is a champion who can support career readiness by building a relationship and trust with the school leader and teachers. There are many roles coaches can play, from a resource provider to a catalyst for change, and successful coaches understand the needs of school leaders, teachers, and students alike. As a coach embarks on this journey, they might ask themselves:

- What are possible incentives for the leader and staff to implement career-readiness initiatives?
- How might I position my work to help them achieve those incentives?
- Are there others engaged in this work to whom I can refer them?

A coach must be able to explain the concept of career readiness for middle school students, support school-wide alignment, build networks, accelerate momentum, and access potential resources. It is essential to acknowledge where career readiness is already underway in the school community. Below are factors school coaches need to consider in relation to starting, growing, or maintaining career readiness efforts in the middle grades.

MANAGE BY INFLUENCE

All key influencers have a different entry point to a student's career readiness journey. Coaches need to form alliances with other members of the school and district community, including district or school leaders, directors, counselors, teachers, and staff—and tune into their wants and needs. For example, career readiness may feel meaningful to a school leader because absenteeism is top of mind and they are looking for students to feel that school is relevant enough to warrant their attendance. Family members may be interested in career readiness because they are invested in their students' high school options or career plans. And middle grades teachers are actively supporting the transition of middle grades students into high school at that critical transition. So, career readiness can be a lever for all these influencers to help prepare students and give them purpose as they transition to high school and beyond. The skill of a good coach is to determine the best entry point and influence of each player, which takes time and trust.

Once initial systems are in place, managing them is a constant process requiring relationship and trust building. This means on-the-ground conversations early and often that are uniform enough for quality and accountability but flexible and adaptable enough to allow for the school community to feel ownership. If the coach is school-based, the positionality is critical in the management process; the leader must empower a coach with the authority to facilitate change. If the coach is not school-based, how might they build the capacity of school staff to support and train each other? See below for some suggestions.



START WITH THE WHY

When taking steps to becoming a career-ready school, the vision must be co-created and will evolve. The school leader ultimately must own and lead the vision, and active but guided co-creation is ideal. When school coaches have a school leadership role, the coach can play an important role in helping to facilitate the process of visioning and ensuring engagement by appropriate stakeholders in the school community, including teachers, staff, students, alumni, and community members. The coach can provide guidance and a change process by making connections to the vision for each of these constituents.

One way to co-create a vision for career readiness in a school community is to develop a Portrait of a Graduate (POG), also called a Portrait of a Learner or Profile of a Graduate/Learner. To do this well, it is critical to engage constituents, including staff, students, families, and community members. Start with communicating what you're trying to do, and some data gathering about what constituents think students in their community should know and be able to do to be prepared for college, career, and civic readiness. This can be as basic as holding a forum or as comprehensive as initiating a full-scale review, including surveys, focus groups, and a review of research. The latter approach usually involves hiring a third-party organization to facilitate it. There are often local philanthropic organizations or community foundations that will provide funding to engage in this effort.



Try This!

For a POG process map, check out the following resources:

[A Comprehensive Guide to a Portrait of a Graduate from Panorama](#)

[7 Steps to creating a Portrait of a Graduate from the Council on Aid to Education](#)

[Portrait of a Graduate Process from Great Schools Partnership](#)

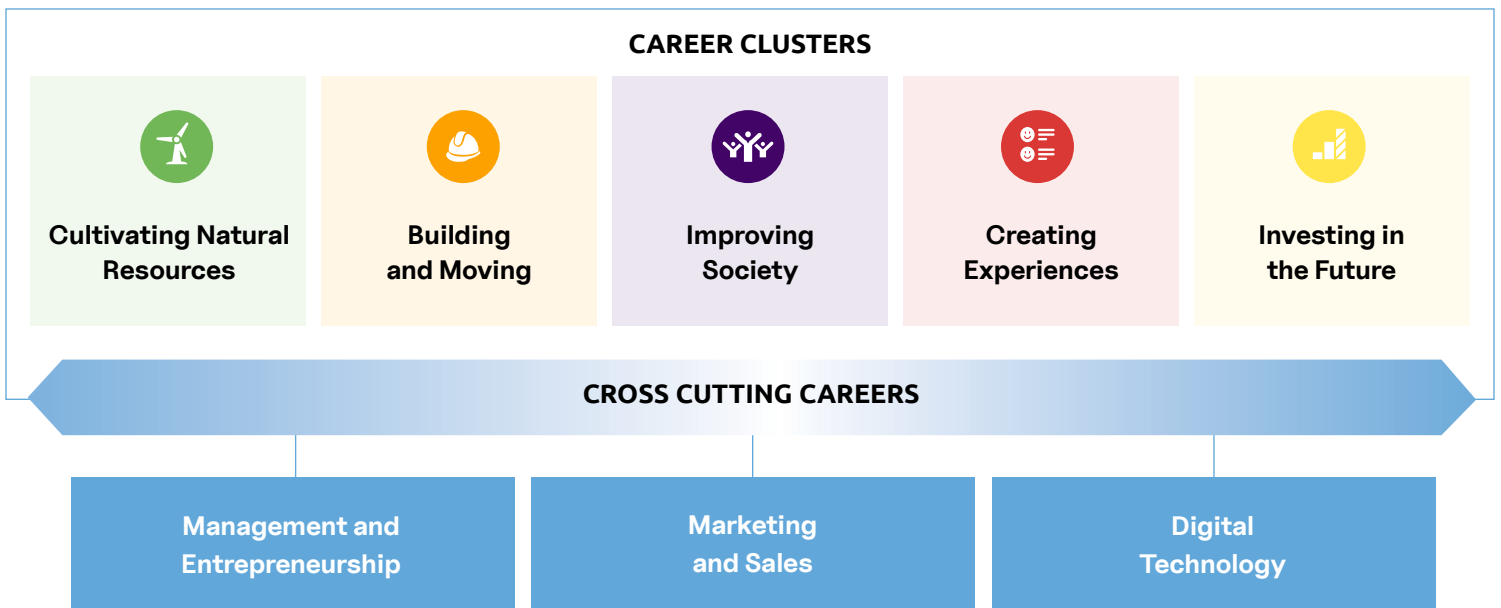
To learn more from examples of regional and district POGs and the processes that got them there, see [Berkshire County's Portrait of a Graduate](#) and [Fairfax Public Schools Portrait of a Graduate](#).

Coaches as curriculum and instructional specialists can help create strategies and provide resources that are aligned with the vision of the career-ready school plan. Career-ready curricula ideally include exposure to learning tasks and contexts across all the career clusters described in [The Modernized National Career Clusters Framework Guidebook](#). Advance CTE describes five specific and three cross-cutting career cluster groups: Cultivating Resources, Building and Moving, Creating & Experiencing, Investing in the Future, and Caring for



Communities. Cross-cutting career cluster groups are: Management and Entrepreneurship, Marketing and Sales, and Digital Technology.

Coaches' ideas and resources for class projects, experiences, and activities across all these areas not only make learning more relevant, but enable young people to expand knowledge of the working world and the types of skills one can develop. Once educators are familiar with these clusters, connecting them to their academic planning and instruction will help make their classes more relevant, and thus more engaging, for their students.



LEVERAGE YOUR POSITION

To be most effective in the role, the school coach should be removed from power dynamics, whether they are deployed by the district or hired directly by the school. An internal coach can invest time in schools, collaborating with staff to develop one-on-one relationships that allow them to provide support and influence without relying on positional authority to accomplish goals. Consider the following questions as you position yourself to navigate the politics of your school or district:

- What are the current career-readiness practices and activities in the school? How can I leverage these?
- What are the potential barriers to implementing career-readiness initiatives? Am I in a position to help remove some of these barriers?
- How can I be most prepared to mitigate concerns and limitations?



Competing priorities of those within or external to the school can often distract staff from career readiness, including external entities. To mitigate this issue, some districts secure grant funding and contract with organizations to bring in external coaches. These coaches have the benefit of being completely removed from district politics. They can focus on implementation of career-ready practices or coach the district or school facilitators to lead the career-ready work.



It Worked!

Many districts, such as Boston Public Schools (BPS), have a coach dedicated to the implementation of a college, career, and life-readiness curriculum. Though the coach is district-based, BPS operates under school autonomy, so the coach helps each school team develop career-readiness curricula that are aligned with that school's mission and context. Read the [BPS position description](#).

Frederick County Public Schools (FCPS) in Maryland have implemented [a Career Coach Program](#) in partnership with local workforce services and community colleges. This initiative assigns career coaches to middle and high schools to assist students in identifying their interests, exploring career options, and developing essential job-readiness skills such as résumé writing and interview techniques.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR LEADERSHIP LEVELS

- ✓ Leverage influencers, champions, and your own position as a coach across the school community, district, and partners.
- ✓ See the school leader as a partner, and be mindful of their challenges and the context in which they are leading.
- ✓ Be a change maker. Make a point of celebrating examples of progress and success, especially early wins and activities that are already part of the school culture.



Learning Landscape

What young people need to know and be able to do

“Curriculum that is exploratory has potential career value yet also leads to healthy recreational pursuits that enrich and carry over into adulthood. Exploratory curriculum is a fundamental component of a school serving young adolescents.”

Bishop & Harrison,
2021, 29-30

While the evidence behind career readiness for middle-grade students is clear, transformative change requires a committed team with the time and capacity to institute both systems-level and individual-level evolutionary change. In this process, roles and titles do not dictate progress; it’s the approach to the work that must drive transformation. You can’t do everything at once; start by setting the table with opportunities for career learning.

Starting with the following questions can help jumpstart the process.

- Does the state have an Individualized or Personal Career Planning Program (I/PCAP)?
- Does the state or district/community have an agreed upon POG?
- Is there a scope and sequence for career and academic planning?
- Is there a system of tracking student activities in career and academic planning?

PROMOTE CAREER-READY LEARNING STANDARDS

If teachers are planning instruction that is based on academic standards, they are already in the habit of asking themselves, “what do I want students to know and be able to do at the end of this lesson/unit/course.” With support from a school coach and collaboration with the school team, it is much easier to build upon that practice and weave career-ready standards into their lessons. The relationship between academic standards and career readiness needs to be the starting point. The leadership, coach, and career-ready team needs to convey—at the kick-off of the initiative—that career readiness is how they do business at this school; that it bolsters core content learning and vice versa. As such, the message is that they provide career readiness BOTH as stand-alone lessons and activities AND as an integration into academic content. As mentioned in the previous section, having a clearly defined POG, whether statewide or community based, can help determine the district or school’s career-ready standards.

Many states have existing career-readiness programs and plans, which we will refer to generally as an Individualized Career and Academic Plan (ICAP). Depending on the state, the name varies from ICAP to P (Personalized) CAP to MyCAP, as in the case of Massachusetts. Some states, such as Arizona, mandate implementation as a graduation requirement while others, such as Pennsylvania, mandate it as a contingency of funding. Others, like Massachusetts, provide it as guidance or best practice.

A few examples of well-known ICAPs are [Colorado’s ICAP](#) and its [Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness \(PWR\)](#) guides. [Ohio’s Career Connections Framework](#) provides a developmental map for college and career-readiness development, with a focus on career exploration at the middle school level. Texas’s College and Career Readiness System is supported by [Texas OnCourse](#) and includes [Middle](#)



[Galaxy](#), a career exploration platform designed specifically for Texas middle school students. (Find more on career platforms below.)

Familiarizing yourself with your state's ICAP is the first step to developing a career- readiness scope and sequence in your school or district. Check out our [interactive state map](#) to find your state and the resources associated with it.



It Worked!

The community of Northern Cass School District 97 in North Dakota developed its Portrait of a Learner based on “A CALL to Greatness” with five attributes: Accountability, Communication, Adaptability, Leadership, and Learner’s Mindset. The leadership at Northern Cass recognized that there were important life skills for their graduates that were not represented in their curriculum. [The video](#) of students describing what that means and how it shows up in the classroom is a great example of what it looks like when it’s done well.

MAP A SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Having a career-readiness scope and sequence is key to determining WHEN and WHERE the activities will be implemented as well as WHO will do it. It’s likely that career-readiness skills and learning goals exist within existing curricula but can be improved, expanded, or given additional resources to bolster the impact. A first step might be to identify academic standards and landscape existing practices across classrooms, which will require engagement from academic teachers as well as someone to analyze and map out existing systems.



It Worked!

Cleveland Metropolitan School District offers [career pathway exploration](#) at the middle school level, encouraging students to check out careers in 13 areas aligned with Advance CTE’s wheel, as well as associated high school coursework available to them in the district.

Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia provides a [career guide](#) with a step-by-step process for exploring career pathways, including choosing the high school in the district that is the best fit.



SUPPORT BUY-IN FOR CAREER-READINESS TOOLS

The coach can play an important role in facilitating the adoption of career planning tools. Many states and districts have procurement agreements with career management systems and consequently, mandate district use of them. Others allow complete autonomy. As with anything, there are pros and cons to each approach. While not always in a position to choose the system, the coach is often in the position to vet possible resources, put them all in one place, maintain and update them, and provide training around using them. This presents a set of additional needs and a great deal of conversation and coordination, which translates to time.

The most important thing for the coach is to facilitate the inclusion of staff and student feedback before adopting a platform. The key question to ask is, “what are the goals of the platform and how will each platform best facilitate that?” If coaches are included in the decision, ask leadership the following questions:

- Is the intention to build a student portfolio that will follow the student?
- Do we want to generate reports? If so, what is the nature of those reports?
- Do we want parents to access the platform?
- Is it important for the platform to “talk to” other systems we use, e.g., Clever?

There are many career platforms available; sometimes your state or district decides which to use for you. In other cases, you might have the opportunity to pilot some options and choose.





Even if you don't have the resources to purchase a career planning platform, you can help to create opportunities for career learning. [Junior Achievement USA](#), [SkillsUSA](#), [Career and Technical Student Organizations](#), [National Society of Black Engineers' MATHCOUNTS](#), and [First Robotics](#) offer valuable opportunities for students to gain enriching first-hand exposure to various career pathways. These experiences, which mostly take place beyond the school day, along with guest speakers and career-centered field trips, offer students a chance to see a vision of their future that they may not otherwise be able to imagine. As the school coach, be sure to create clear pathways that encourage and facilitate your staff to seize these learning opportunities for students. Walk the talk by promoting opportunities for collaboration and showcasing career-centered opportunities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR LEARNING LANDSCAPE

- ✓ Map career-ready learning expectations to current academic standards to show alignment.
- ✓ Develop a scope and sequence to provide clarity.
- ✓ Consider career planning platforms to effectively catalogue activities and student progress.
- ✓ Facilitate and promote use of tools adopted by the school and district to maximize available resources.
- ✓ Launch career exploration programs to bolster students' academic learning.



Professional Preparation

What educators, mentors, and supervisors of young people need to know

If you can inspire a crew of career-readiness believers in your school, your students are likely to follow suit. Start with a coalition of the willing, and others will join as they are inspired. Consider the following questions to pose to and with the school community as you think about professional preparation for the staff to engage in career readiness:

- To what extent is there a culture of collaboration in the school?
- Are teachers accustomed to integrating career exploration and planning into their academic standards? Is there a willingness to do so?
- How can we highlight and build upon current efforts to integrate career exploration and planning?

PROVIDE CLEAR MESSAGING ABOUT MIDDLE-GRADE CAREER DEVELOPMENT

A formalized expectation for career readiness as part (or all) of someone's job description is helpful and eventually necessary to maintain a sustainable system. Shared leadership from the coach and other school staff is critical. Alignment to roles, existing priorities, and support—human and fiscal—for staff to change their practice are also necessary. If there is a scope and sequence available, e.g., from the state or the district, use it. Above all else, be aware of the messaging that staff are conveying to students. Annual, recurring professional learning communities (PLCs), including coaching and collaborative lesson planning, help solidify the message and build a culture of collaboration and an expectation that the work is here to stay.

MAKE CAREER-READINESS EXPECTATIONS CLEAR FOR TEACHERS

The most effective way to prepare students with the durable, career-ready skills they need is to integrate them into the fabric of their school day, from the moment they walk into the building to the moment they leave on the bus. This means not only modeling and having them demonstrate presentation and communication skills, for example, but also being explicit about the demonstration and development of those skills and why they matter. Research shows that students' metacognitive awareness of student learning is key to internalization of their learning (Hattie, 2008). Stand-alone lessons that serve as "ICAP time" or "advisory time," while valuable, are less effective than the integration of these skills and lessons into academic content as it demonstrates that content, skills, and competencies are all connected. It also takes time, trust, and professional learning opportunities.

Teaching is deeply personal, and changing instructional practice is hard. Educators need to see a shared and clear school-wide plan that shows tiers of engagement: everyone is responsible for the overall implementation of the



scope and sequence. However, the coach can help develop a clear outline of roles and responsibilities to clarify who is integrating key objectives, who is planning/scheduling events, and who is integrating additional curriculum. The coach can use the scope and sequence to work with the team of leaders and teachers to identify where a stand-alone ICAP activity or lesson is appropriate, where integration into the academic curriculum is appropriate, and if and where a separate curriculum makes sense.



Consider This...

OneGoal offers programs and leadership networks to expand support for school-wide career and education advising.

What is most important is to ensure that any new work is additive, not duplicative, and that there is awareness, communication, and collaboration among connected roles. This can potentially be mitigated through common planning time or teaming structures but can run the risk of it being seen as an initiative of a specific department or person rather than as a whole school strategy.

LEVERAGE THE POWER OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

To signal the importance of career readiness, start by providing professional learning for everyone, as in a full school professional development, ideally at the start of the school year or second semester. This sends the message that “this is the way we do business here.” Then focus on small groups, such as grade level teams and/or content area teams, with demonstrated skill and deeper interest. If you are coaching multiple schools, consider pairing and peer coaching and organize a community of practice for staff at a few schools to share best practices and problems of practice through facilitated protocols. There are many protocols available through the [National School Reform Faculty](#).



It Worked!

In a regional district in central Massachusetts, a career-readiness coach worked with two middle school leads who were provided a stipend to lead the team to embed career-readiness domains into content instruction. Using an “I do, we do, you do” gradual release model, the coach showed the middle school leads, and then the entire MyCAP team, what it can look like to integrate MyCAP into instruction. The MyCAP team then facilitated the process with the staff in their schools.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

- ✓ Build a critical mass of educators who are ready, willing, and/or excited to move toward more career-ready practices.
- ✓ Convey clear and consistent messaging in the school community.
- ✓ Clarify expectations and roles of teachers.
- ✓ Provide professional development opportunities, including PLCs.
- ✓ Employ the power of protocols.





Everyone Engaged

Whom to engage to effect change and sustain effort

The work of educating career-ready students in middle school is a team sport. It requires deep relationships with multiple facets of a community to be authentic, substantive, relevant, and sustainable. This community includes teachers, partner organizations, high schools, policymakers, and families. Consider the following questions as you begin to engage others:

- Who are the school or district's current partners? How are they already engaged?
- How can you leverage your own personal and professional network?
- How can you leverage the connections and networks of the school staff?
- To what extent are families engaged in the school community? How can they be integrated into the career exploration activities?

LEVERAGE YOUR OWN NETWORKS AND THOSE OF COLLEAGUES AND COMMUNITY

While the school leader's role is central to the success of the partnerships, they alone cannot cultivate and manage every partnership needed for a career-ready model school. A percentage of staff time needs to be dedicated to forging and fostering partnerships. This might be one full time equivalent (FTE) or some percentage of time for several staff. In either case, the key is clarity of roles and responsibilities and consistent and ongoing communication structures. This is where the coach can help.

Beyond the dedicated delegate(s), it is important to ensure that all staff have the tools, capacity, and support they need to form partnerships themselves. School coaches can support teacher-driven partnership with communication materials, flexibility in time or responsibilities, professional learning opportunities, and tangible or intangible recognition for partnership cultivation. Any expectations for partnership development and management should be clarified in staff contracts or scopes of work, as well as any special benefits or flexibilities that come along with the responsibility. The coach can help mediate those conversations.

BUILD CONSENSUS AND BUY-IN

As individuals begin to see impact, there is almost always a natural desire to improve and expand. A coach can nurture and provide space for a separation between the necessary navigation and the staff responsible for carrying out the work, alleviating tension and stress points to protect the vision. In this space, buy-in and consensus builds. This gives room for community ownership, and the growth and agility required to weather the inevitable difficulties that arise when the "plane" must maintain near-constant flight for the sake of the young people whose futures it carries.



Consider This...

Conduct a training to build shared language around career-ready schools.

Identify early adopters, highlight the early adopters, and make space for their leadership.

Monitor, motivate, and work to remove barriers for each stakeholder.

INVITE THE COMMUNITY TO SHARE WITH STUDENTS

Inviting guest speakers is an easy, low-cost way to start to expose young middle school students to a variety of career opportunities. Use blocks of time that already exist in the schedule, such as a grade level assembly or advisory periods. Access members of your community and families of students to come in and talk about their career, including the trajectory, and decisions they made along the way. Outside partners can add capacity and resources at every stage of development from launching the initiative to evaluating its impact. Partnership landscaping and then mapping is a great way to start.



It Worked!

[Citizen Schools](#) partners with middle schools to expand the learning day through apprenticeships led by volunteers from various sectors. These apprenticeships culminate in public demonstrations called WOW!s, fostering community involvement and real-world learning experiences. Citizen Schools provide highly tailored educator and leadership coaching in experience-based learning. They operate in California, Massachusetts, and New York.

ENGAGE FAMILIES AS VIPS (VERY IMPORTANT PARTNERS)

The families of students can be a powerful influence on the journey toward a career-ready school. Parents and caregivers understand their student's strengths and hesitations, can articulate their interests and hobbies, can be strong influencers of their decisions, and are the continuous bridge for the students once they go onto high school. They can also build on the connection between career and academic content by offering personal anecdotes about the



usefulness of particular skills in their work and life. They are an essential part of an individualized approach to career-readiness.

Beyond being a champion for the individual student, the families of the student body can be conduits of connection to employers and potential partners throughout the community and should be invited into the discussion as thought leaders about the working world. School coaches can help create formal and informal venues for families to be involved and incentivize teachers to include families as much as possible. Identifying a family liaison requires resources but is a great use of grant money. Lower cost strategies include utilizing the parent/teacher group and hosting events and presentations to parent councils, including targeting specific populations, such as the Special Education Parent Advisory Council.



Consider This...

[WestEd's Essential Playbook for Family Engagement in Middle School](#) provides evidence and rationale for increasing family engagement at the middle school level and provides professional learning suggestions for supporting middle school staff to implement them.

[This toolkit from Movement Strategy](#) (Gonzalez, 2020), based on the “Community Engagement to Ownership Spectrum” provides shared language as it pertains to family engagement in school planning and decision making.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR EVERYONE ENGAGED

- ✓ Use the networks and partners in your own network, those of staff and families, and community members and organizations.
- ✓ Empower all staff with the tools and supports they need to cultivate partnerships.
- ✓ Consider parents and families as partners in both their own child's developmental journey and the school's journey toward a career-readiness model.



Student Support

How to make sure each young person gets what they need

The middle grades hold more change in nearly every respect than any other grade band. During this phase, young people often transition into new schools, sometimes multiple times, have opportunities for choice and after-school experiences for the first time, and must navigate puberty and identity development. Consequently, students in the middle grades are at a high risk of disengagement, impacting high school completion and preparation for post-secondary success (Caskey & Ankara, 2014).

Questions to ask yourself as you consider appropriate support strategies:

- Is there a school-wide approach to individualized student support?
- Do all adults in the school building have a role in supporting student planning and meeting student needs?
- How are students' Individualized Career and Academic Plans integrated into other student plans, such as an Individualized Educational Plans (IEP)?
- Do school staff consider the historical biases of career fields and find ways to help students feel more confident and welcome in each professional environment?

MATCH LEARNING STRATEGIES TO THE DEVELOPMENTAL AGE

Positioned between elementary and high school career development, middle-grade career development is uniquely able to leverage the developmentally appropriate stage of early adolescence through career exploration (Torre Gibney et al., 2024). This creates opportunities to leverage the self-exploration and independence that students are beginning to develop at this stage. Obviously, career development looks very different at the early middle school level than it does at the high school level, so strategies for engaging students also need to be different.



Try This!

Provide students the opportunity to job shadow or meet with career professionals through a career day or fair.

Encourage students to practice self-reflection on their own progress as a core skill of the work world.



“No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.”

– Dr. James Comer

As mentioned in the Learning Landscape section, mentors and job shadowing opportunities are both developmentally appropriate and practical for middle school students. Supporting students through embedded and stand-alone curriculum to help them develop durable skills and social capital creates a strong foundation for a future job search as a young adult, as well as a network of support as they grow and develop. More importantly, it is critical that every student be known and connected to at least one adult they see regularly in the school community (Comer, 2001). It doesn't matter if it is the bus driver, the school administrative assistant, the principal, the cafeteria staff, the custodian, or their teacher. School coaches and counselors can help to ensure these connections are made and sustained.



Try This!

The community connections heat index tool highlighted in [Tapping into Community Connections to Improve CTE](#) shares ideas for mild, medium, and spicy connections to bolster relevancy in career and technical education (Williams, 2024).

ACCOMMODATE ALL STUDENTS FROM THE START

Coaches need to be aware of students who have Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) as well as 504 Plans (based on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973), which are designed to support students with disabilities in a general education setting. As well, coaches and teachers need to be familiar with the student plans and the required services and service minutes, according to IEPs and 504s. Collaborating with special education teachers, including Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) teachers who provide individualized learning programs for students with unique learning needs, and teachers of English learners, will increase the likelihood of engagement and success for their students. This needs to be part of the initial conversations when launching a career-readiness program. Otherwise, it becomes an afterthought and adequate time and resources are tougher to coordinate. If the content provided doesn't utilize full [UDL best practices](#), it is important to acknowledge where the resource falls short and plan for filling in the gaps.



The Association of Middle Level Educators (AMLE) provides many [resources and strategies for college and career planning with middle school students with special needs](#). As well, [Partners for Youth with Disabilities](#) provides a comprehensive [career-readiness curriculum](#). Though it was developed for Boston schools, it can be used and tailored for any school or district.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT

- ✓ Adopt a school-wide approach to individualized student support as essential to maintaining equitable access and outcomes for career-readiness objectives.
- ✓ Encourage all adults in the school building to have a role in supporting student planning and meeting student needs.
- ✓ Drive student support using the student's Individualized Career and Academic Plan, with consideration of other student plans, e.g., an IEP.
- ✓ Consider the historical biases of career fields and find ways to help students feel more confident and welcome in each professional environment.
- ✓ Learn about the students, develop relationships, and find/plan developmentally appropriate career-readiness experiences.



Resource Readiness

What schools need to succeed and what partners, systems, and communities can provide

As the school evolves, school leaders must reconsider whether and how existing resources of time, talent, tools, technology, funds, and energy support the school's progress towards career-readiness. The coach's role is to help the leader realign resources to help demonstrate a commitment to the ideal career-centered model.

LEVERAGE STATE AND SEEK CORPORATE GRANTS TO SUPPORT THE CAREER-READINESS MISSION

There are many sources of funding—including state, corporate, and philanthropic—to support college and career-readiness and/or workforce development. The [Xcel Energy Foundation's Community Impact Grants](#) support programs that promote workforce development, workforce readiness, specific job skills training, job placement, and job creation. Education grants support organizations that improve science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education. [American Student Assistance](#) provides strategic investments and grants as an organization whose mission it is to help prepare young people for the future.

Examples of state funding include:

Through state funding, Massachusetts provides [MyCAP](#) planning and implementation grants every year to schools and districts that apply and qualify. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has provided additional funding to focus career and academic planning at the middle school level. The state is able to foster networks, share best practices, and create resources that are usable across the state, which helps to create an awareness at the state, district, and school level.

As part of Tennessee's ongoing commitment to bring [Innovative School Models](#) (ISMs) to every public middle and high school in Tennessee, the Tennessee Department of Education has awarded over \$560 million across 137 public school districts and 45 public charter schools to invest in students and their postsecondary success. The goal of the Innovative School Models initiative is to encourage strong, strategic, and innovative partnerships between Tennessee public school districts, public charter schools, postsecondary education institutions, and local employers to prepare students with real-world, in-demand skills, credentials, and knowledge.

LEVERAGE OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

The Learning Landscape section of this playbook provides information about some of the free online curricular and ICAP resources that schools have found useful. Look for other open education resources related to career readiness from your state department of education and professional associations or local



colleges. As well, libraries, museums, employers, student-serving non-profits, clubs, and foundations may also provide support for learning experiences, materials, and volunteers who can support your school or students.

BUILD A RESOURCE LIBRARY OF CAREER-READINESS PROGRAMS

A school coach can reflect on current resources (use what you have) and ask in what ways they may be used. With that inventory of existing resources, the coach can build on and establish a library of additional opportunities for the school leader and teachers to leverage for activating a career-ready plan. By researching programs and aligning them to the school's prioritized areas, school coaches guide principals and teachers to enrich curricula with career-focused activities. The resource library can also serve the students pursuing programs outside of school. Coaches can add resources on local out-of-school programs related to career interests.

A school coach can research, recommend, and help in the adoption of technology platforms to support students' engagement in career exploration and skill building. Many of these technology platforms exist and more are hitting the market regularly. For example, the American Student Assistance (ASA) offers [EvolveMe](#), a free online tool with games, lessons, activities, and rewards, as well as [ImBlaze](#), which is a platform to help schools manage real-world learning. [YouScience](#) provides career exploration while ensuring compliance with high school readiness requirements.

Teacher and student participation in local or national competitions provide skill-building projects often with practical applications. Examples include:

Math:

- [MATHCOUNTS](#): A national mathematics competition for middle school students that offers a series of challenging math problems.
- [American Mathematics Competitions \(AMC\)](#): A national mathematics competition for middle school students designed to promote problem-solving skills.

Science:

- [National Science Bowl](#): A team-based science competition focusing on various scientific disciplines.
- [Thermo Fisher Scientific Junior Innovators Challenge](#): A national science competition for middle school students that highlights innovative solutions to real-world problems.
- [Society for Science competitions](#): Various science competitions and programs for middle and high school students, including the Regeneron Science Talent Search for high school students.



STEM & Technology:

- [Future City](#): A national middle school STEM program through which students design and build models of future cities, addressing sustainability and urban challenges.
- [Technology Student Association \(TSA\) Competitions](#): A variety of competitions in fields such as engineering, coding, and 3D design that provides hands-on learning experiences.
- [FIRST Robotics](#): An organization that hosts various robotics league competitions for middle and high school students, fostering teamwork and problem-solving skills.
- [CyberPatriot National Youth Cyber Defense Competition](#): A national cyber security competition for middle and high school students that encourages them to learn about cyber defense.
- [Congressional App Challenge](#): A competition hosted by members of Congress for middle and high school students that encourages them to learn to code and explore computer science.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR RESOURCE READINESS

- ✓ Research and maximize use of school, district, city, state, and open educational resources.
- ✓ Build a library of career-connected resources for teachers, leaders, and counselors.
- ✓ Tap into national competitions to supplement curricula and highlight schools in national forums.



Compliance Concerns

How to follow the rules and navigate the system

The safety of students, staff, partners, and communities is the most important aspect of any endeavor in a school. In a career-centered learning model, school staff need to maintain assurance of physically safe environments and an understanding of liability responsibilities for students and staff during school hours, both inside and outside the building. Background checks and written acknowledgment of behavior may be required for visitors, speakers, or partners. Check your school's handbook for off-campus activities and as always, ensure that your school leader is aware of any new arrangements.

BUILD A SYSTEM TO EFFICIENTLY MAINTAIN LEGAL COMPLIANCE

To support the school's compliance efforts, coaches can work with leadership and legal counsel to put together a checklist or decision tree that will guide a legal compliance check for each new opportunity. Ideally, an upfront investment in these tools will expedite permissions for opportunities and help expand opportunities quickly.

A school's opportunity checklist should include, but is not limited to:

- Compliance with [child labor laws](#)
- Assurance of necessary parental permissions
- Consideration of school, district, and partner insurance and liability requirements
- Compliance with district, city, or county background check requirements
- Assurance of requirements of associated funding sources
- Consideration for student civil rights and access, inclusive of access rights for English language learners and students with disabilities

MANAGE LEGAL ISSUES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS AND PROCESSES

While partnerships and contracts are likely not the direct responsibility of the coach, it is important for the coach to help identify who needs to be at the table to complete this part of the work. Thinking about this early will go a long way towards mitigating barriers so that the partnerships and contracts enhance the student experience—and that of the adults who work with them—rather than impede it. Most states now have some sort of expectation for career-readiness, though it takes many forms. Aligning programs to existing governance systems and job descriptions can prevent this from becoming an issue.



Consider This...

Philadelphia Public Schools created a [process map](#) for ensuring that each new partnership is compliant with internal and external requirements and regulations.

AdvanceCTE offers a resource for checking on legal requirements for student work-based learning; [Connecting the Classroom to Careers: Removing Legal Barriers around Work-based Learning](#).

The Vermont Agency of Education created a [Flexible Pathways Toolkit](#) and a Pathway Tool designed to guide informed decisions about whether a particular learning opportunity is effective, equitable, compliant, and safe. The toolkit outlines processes and provides guidance documents to facilitate student participation in flexible pathways, including internships, work-based learning, and CTE.

CONSIDER STUDENTS' PRIVACY

Student privacy must be properly maintained when establishing partnerships and engaging in internships, volunteering, or work-based learning. When working with students, it is critical to ensure that student information is protected and that students' personally identifiable information is disclosed only for authorized purposes and under the circumstances permitted by law. The U.S. Department of Education established the [Privacy Technical Assistance Center](#) (PTAC) as a "one-stop" resource for education stakeholders to learn about data privacy, confidentiality, and security practices related to student-level longitudinal data systems and other uses of student data. Check with your district's student data privacy regulations and know the state and local policies around protection of student data. (See Appendix for more information.)

CONSIDER PROPER USE OF TIME

Before adding or changing the use of student learning time, make sure you are familiar with state and local requirements for time in learning. Many schools use advisory or "What I Need" (WIN) time to enable students to access career exposure and exploration. Many use college and career platforms and work through a scope and sequence in the platform. This can be done in conjunction with guest speakers, job shadowing, field trips, and/or an annual career fair. [The American School Counselors' Association](#) provides templates and tools for implementation of a full scale counseling program, including use of time.

In 2023, Brookline Public Schools in Massachusetts contracted for a [study](#) of the use of time, including core and non-core instruction, WIN time, and advisory in their eight middle schools. While this study is not specific to career readiness,



it provides methodology for engaging community members in the use of time in their middle schools. One finding points to the need for personalized pathways and the opportunity for more voice and choice for students.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR COMPLIANCE CONCERNS

- ✓ Develop a process, system, checklist, or decision matrix to help leaders and staff navigate each legal layer for a new learning initiative.
- ✓ Consider carefully any regulations related to the use of student and staff time and be in ongoing communication with school leadership.
- ✓ Access the resources and studies of the organizations mentioned above; don't reinvent the wheel!

Conclusion

In the many roles school coaches take on, they can ultimately help achieve successful implementation of a career-ready school plan by building capacity, providing critical leadership and curricular resources, guiding leaders, leveraging influence, and navigating systems.

Coaches build buy-in and momentum by connecting to other key priorities. Those in this role often understand the context of the school or district and troubleshoot with those leading the work, identifying easy entry points and pressure testing ideas where the connection makes sense. Coaches recognize these initiatives as an iterative process and guide through cycles of continuous improvement. Put simply, a school coach can serve as the connective tissue in a school community, facilitating opportunities focused on the young people they serve.

To effectively support career-ready middle schools, school coaches can look to all of the examples across the country, take the best practices, and create a practical and usable toolkit with clear goals and expectations.

This work is deeply relational. People want to be seen for the work they're already doing, recognized for the progress they make, to feel at ease through potential challenges and barriers, and feel like part of a team or collective with a clear shared vision. The coach's role is often to provide that space and guide them through. The ultimate measure of success for a coach is when school staff are able to clearly speak to the why, how, and future vision of their own programming and proudly represent the work for others.

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