



The Industry Leaders Playbook:

LEADING EARLY CAREER READINESS



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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! If you are a current or aspiring industry leader or a member of a business leadership team interested in cultivating the talents of young people (in grades 5–9), this playbook is for you. It offers practical guidance for preparing young students for future careers by supporting exploration, curiosity, and early skill development. It also provides a framework for evaluating how ready your workplace is to engage younger students in meaningful career-connected learning experiences.

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

ALLready developed the series for partners to contribute to the career readiness of young people. It 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.



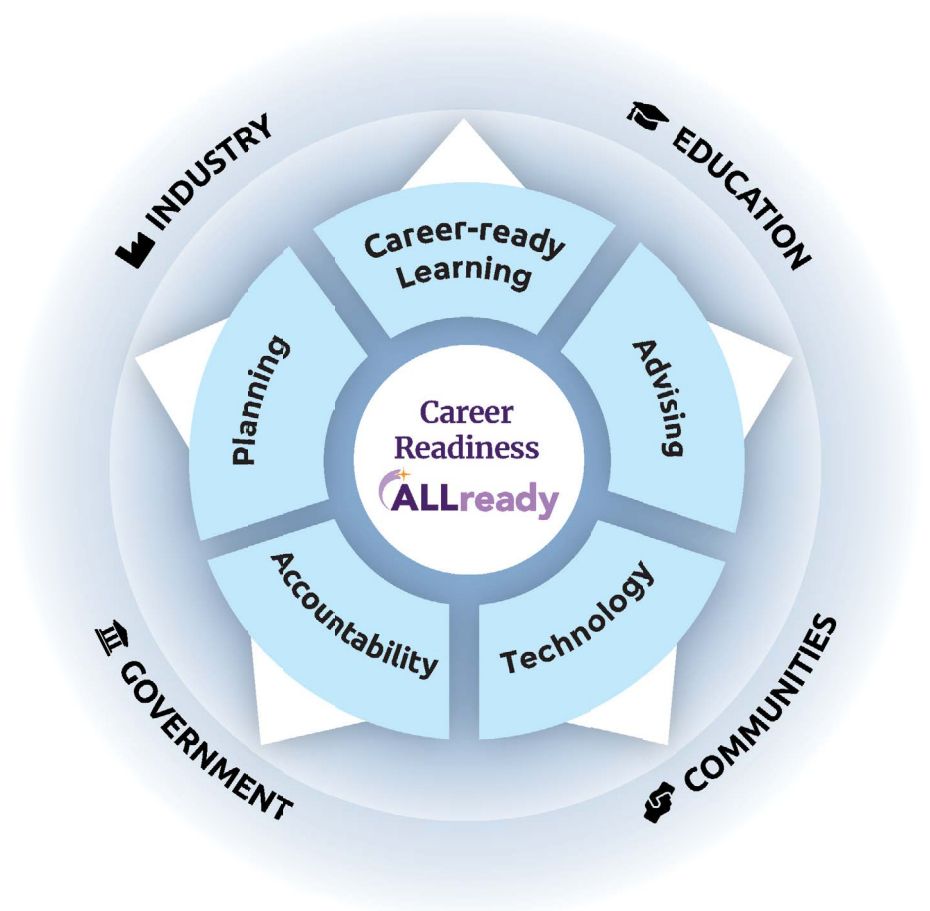
Visit our website at **[ALLready.org/playbooks](https://allready.org/playbooks)** to find and share others addressed to those you work with so they can be prepared to support your career-readiness efforts.

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.

Why Are Industry Leaders Critical to Making the Change?

Businesses are struggling to find employees ready to engage in the modern workforce and must now figure out how to partner more deeply with education systems by providing younger students with exposure to real-world work and skill-building opportunities. A robust collaboration between education and industry could give ALL students what they need to be career ready. Career-focused learning at ages 10-15 is early enough for students to have the time and developmental support to build the understanding, confidence, and skill sets they will need when they enter the workforce.

Far more businesses must actively offer what ALLready calls “career-readiness partnerships” to ensure school leaders, educators, and students have distinct types of knowledge, tools, and learning experiences. ALLready is committed to demonstrating benefits for employers and communicating strategies to overcome barriers to cultivating career-readiness partnerships with young people. Career-readiness partnerships designed with intention are a win-win proposition for industry leaders, young people, and those who support them.

Who Are the Industry Leaders Critical to Making the Change?

We are calling on **ALL types of industry leaders**—employers, industry associations, professional associations, workforce boards, chambers of commerce, and industry credentialing and certification organizations.

We are calling on leaders from ALL sectors of industry. We call on those cultivating and managing our natural resources; on those making, building, fixing, or transporting across the nation; on those improving human lives, health, and services; on those leading financial and real estate investments; on those creating experiences that bring people joy; and, on those who provide or support business leadership and growth, marketing and sales, and technology.

All sectors need **ALL young people ready** to become industry leaders of the future. This is critical for America to maintain global competitiveness, for communities to be good places to live and work, for cities and towns to have sufficient revenue for growth, and for businesses to thrive.

How are industry leaders investing in a career-ready ecosystem

Industry leaders' investment in talent development—starting as early as possible—will yield high returns: a high-quality, productive, and eager workforce poised for innovation. The time is now for a deeper investment in educating and supporting young people, in partnership with other leaders in education, government, and communities.

Imagine a seamless and authentic working relationship between industry and education in which a vast array of career and technical knowledge and skills are integrated into academic learning experiences from early ages. Imagine if young people experienced their teachers and work supervisors as their career and learning guides on a continuum of growth.

This imagined scenario is becoming a reality in some places. Leaders in different business environments have figured out new and better ways to provide robust partnerships resulting in transformative career-readiness experiences for young people under the age of 15. In this playbook, we will explore how these leaders make this happen through seven transformational practice dimensions described below.

As an industry leader—regardless of sector or type—you can become an equal contributor in the development of young people who will become your future experts, productive professionals, and collegial peers in their chosen field of work.



Transformational Practice Dimensions

This playbook is divided into seven distinct dimensions of adult practices required to nurture career-ready young people. 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

THINK LONG-TERM RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Commit to purpose in your organization. The Business Roundtable, an association of more than 200 chief executive officers (CEOs) of America's leading companies, redefined the purpose of a corporation to include more than shareholder and consumer benefits. Industry leaders redefined the purpose to promote "an economy that serves all Americans," committing to "investing in our employees" and "supporting the communities in which we work," among other commitments. This includes supporting employees "through training and education that help develop new skills for a rapidly changing world" and a commitment to "respect the people in our communities." These purpose statements can guide a company's priorities in the long-term, strategic investment in our youth, both as members of our communities and as our future workforce.

Jamie Dimon, Chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase & Company, declared that "the American dream is alive, but fraying. Major employers are investing in their workers and communities because they know it is the only way to be successful over the long term. These modernized principles reflect the business community's unwavering commitment to continue to push for an economy that serves all Americans" ([Business Roundtable](#), 2019).



It Worked!

JP Morgan invested \$350 million over 5 years in six cities to build a career-ready infrastructure to support public education, higher education, local government, and industry partnerships. These cities more rapidly accelerated the pace of schools transforming and expanding career pathways, work-based learning, career planning, and advising for students as young as those in elementary school. Learn more about the success stories and next steps planned for Boston, MA, Columbus, OH, Dallas, TX, Denver, CO, Indianapolis, IN, and Nashville, TN from the [New Skills Ready Network](#).

Reframe ROI. Few organizations have the name recognition of the Business Roundtable, and few leaders have the financial power of Jamie Dimon. However, you can still lead others in your industry to reframe Return on Investment (ROI).

Reframe ROI to consider impact over a 3- to 5-year time frame, not just quarterly profit benchmarks. Investing in youth talent can create industry awareness, build brand recognition and loyalty in your community, augment leadership and supervisory capabilities, and start preparing the future workforce with more career-centered learning. Such activities can have an immediate and future impact on the bottom line.



Reframing ROI for your organization could mean making “ROI” stand for “Responsibility for Investment”—calling on others in your organization, industry, or your members to contribute their time, talent, and treasure in a more meaningful way. Perhaps they already make contributions to causes and volunteer for organizations. They can compound their investment of time together, and accelerate their impact by concentrating on the place where they are uniquely positioned to create the most value—offering their skills and talents to train the next generation.

Reframing ROI with an investment in youth career-readiness programs in mind may include the following:

- Prioritize talent development strategies to reduce turnover and increase performance.
- Consider employee participation in youth career initiatives as an aspect of training and employee engagement to increase job satisfaction and employee loyalty.
- Strengthen community relations in local schools to build brand awareness, stronger ties, and partnerships for sustained business growth.
- Incorporate youth career-ready activities into other business initiatives, such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), volunteer days, and community engagement initiatives to get two-for-ones.
- Consider money saved in lieu of taxes—using workforce development funds to develop your future workforce, and/or writing off time spent by your staff and materials provided by your organization on taxes.

Although change may take time, prioritizing the highest leverage, lowest cost, and lowest-effort changes are good places to start when enlisting support for change. Even small actions to align operations with vision can signal a commitment to career-ready vision and help set the stage for changing hearts, minds, and behaviors across the organization.

Attract top talent. Promoting an inclusive and purpose-driven culture is a business imperative in cultivating talent. By committing to people in the company and in the community as part of the mission, a company creates an environment that values the current and future workforce.

Incorporating employees’ engagement in youth career-readiness initiatives into company practice demonstrates a commitment to these values. After all, top talent tends to be attracted to mission-focused workplaces because they improve the employee experience overall ([Gallup](#)). Purpose-driven and mission-aligned strategy improves performance and quality of work. [Gallup](#) found that:

- One-third of global employees strongly agree with the statement, “The mission or purpose of my organization makes me feel my job is important”; and,



- By doubling that ratio, business units have realized a 34% reduction in absenteeism, a 41% drop in safety incidents, and a 19% improvement in quality. (Additional information can be found in [Gallup's Perspective Paper on Employee Experience](#)).

Focus on strategic retention. Employee retention is critically important for many businesses with clear costs and benefits. For example, a Gallup report demonstrates why “proactive retention efforts” are not only a strategic advantage but also a financial necessity (Tatel et al., 2024). Gallup’s report suggests that organizations must proactively mitigate the financial and operational risks of turnover by engaging in strategic retention to safeguard profitability and stability.

A company’s commitment to serving youth in the community can be an intentional strategy to support opportunities for growth and development, healthy work-life balance, and an inclusive and supportive culture that contributes to increased retention.

Organizations must treat strategic retention as a business imperative, according to [Work Institute's 2025 retention report](#). The report shares key findings that include:

- Preventable turnover driven by career stagnation, work-life balance issues, and management failures, accounted for 63% of all exits in 2024.
- The financial impact of turnover is conservatively estimated at 33% of an employee’s base pay.
- To replace an employee who earns \$50,000 annually could cost \$16,500 or more assuming wage growth in 2025 (Nelms et al, 2025).

Skill development is important for employee retention. Organizations that offer transparent career pathways, growth opportunities, and role alignment are better positioned to retain talent according to [Work Institute's 2025 retention report](#) (Nelms et al, 2025).

A study on retaining millennials, specifically, found that millennials look to companies to help make an impact inside and outside the office. The study found that 83% would be more loyal to a company that helps them contribute to social and environmental issues (vs. the U.S. average of 70 %) and 84% want their company to help them identify ways to get more involved in their communities (vs. the U.S. average of 65%), according to a [Sustainable Brands study](#).

Strategies for attracting and retaining the Gen Z workforce are similar. [Forbes](#) and [HR Executive](#) recommend promoting opportunities for career growth and development, emphasizing corporate citizenship and social responsibility, and highlighting impact and purpose (McCollum, 2024; Parikh, 2023).



Consider This...

An additional perspective on a company's investment in youth career programs is considering employee participation as **skills-based volunteering**. Investment in career-ready programs is a commitment of its employees' time and talent. Employees' participation in youth career-readiness initiatives requires their skills in managing a school partnership, program implementation, youth engagement, teaching, industry and company promotion, and contributing content.

[Studies highlighted by Moving Worlds](#) show that skills-based volunteering impacts retention, recruitment, and loyalty. Benevity's [engagement study](#) found turnover dropped 57% in employee groups deeply involved in volunteering and giving.

Company engagement with youth career-readiness programs are purpose programs. [A 2022 study](#) found 52% lower turnover among new hires who participate in company "purpose" programs. Purpose-driven companies experience retention rates up to 40% higher than peers.

Bolster marketing and communications. Activities benefiting young people in the middle grades can not only bring support from families, educators, and community-based organizations, but also the media. Indeed, a company's community involvement with youth career-readiness initiatives can generate positive public relations and company morale. Consider searching for ways to highlight your company's involvement in career-readiness activities, as well as individuals at your organization who choose to volunteer with young people. Then, work with your communications department to showcase and leverage those success stories to bolster brand awareness and shape consumer views. See [BBR Partner's example](#) of a promotional video that highlights their internship program.

Involvement with youth can also be considered a form of market research. Learning more about the younger generation's interests can provide valuable input for marketing. Depending on your industry, engaging young people can also help inform the development of future products and services.

Align with other business priorities. As leaders who identify cost-efficiencies to produce excellent outcomes, you know how to develop "two-fors"—ways of accomplishing two goals for the cost of one investment. Aligning your youth career-readiness partnerships with other business priorities can help make the case for investment of time and resources. In addition to your talent attraction and retention efforts, think about how this type of partnership can enhance, complement, and support other current business initiatives which may include:

- Corporate social responsibility
- Leadership development
- Learning and development



- Community engagement
- Public relations and marketing

See the [Professional Preparation](#) section of this playbook for more about cultivating leaders and learning and development alignment.

Make the business case. Identify goals, success metrics, and cost-benefits to make the case for any talent development initiative. Strong metrics and cost-benefit analyses can persuade the board, leadership, membership, or investors that the case is strategically aligned to organizational goals.

To align goals with your business strategy, options include the following:

- Build brand awareness and loyalty
- Bolster public and community relations, communications, and media
- Improve employee experience and engagement
- Increase employee recruitment and retention
- Support supervisor training and development
- Align with corporate social responsibility

Metrics might include:

- 360 degree evaluation items or surveys pertaining to the employee experience
- Number of publications or other forms of publicity from and with partners, such as the school, chamber of commerce, local government agency, or media
- Number of employees or participants in youth career-readiness programs who say they would recommend others to your organization or industry
- Supervisor ratings on employee performance and growth, particularly participants in youth career-readiness activities



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR LEADERSHIP LEVELS

- ✓ Define corporate purpose to include commitment to employees and community.
- ✓ Incorporate talent development strategies in Return on Investment (ROI) calculations.
- ✓ Prioritize the integration of youth career-ready programs as part of other business initiatives related to talent development and community engagement.
- ✓ Make a business case for youth career-ready programs to involve employee talent attraction, job satisfaction and retention, and brand awareness.





Learning Landscape

What young people need to know and be able to do

ALLready encourages industry partners to embrace the role of “career educator and ambassador”—someone who helps young people begin to apply skills they are learning in school to discover what makes working in a particular field compelling. As an industry partner, you are in a position to exercise leadership in career-connected learning for your industry.

In order to prepare the next generation of workers who have both the skills and dispositions to contribute meaningfully, we must go beyond developing more skilled laborers. Rather, we need to build an infrastructure that allows them to think critically about the work they are doing in relation to the skills needed to accomplish the tasks.

MAP WHAT PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW AND DO

We define your industry’s learning landscape as *what people need to know and be able to do* to succeed in the field. Knowledge about the industry from business leaders is essential for linking learning in school **with** workplace requirements. Career-readiness programs need industry knowledge to be specific in ways educators can adapt for the middle grades.

What knowledge, skills, and abilities are essential to businesses in your industry?

Focus on durable skills as essential. We all recognize the challenges in planning our future workforce in today’s fast-paced world of work. The reality is that a large percentage of young people today will end up working in a specific job that doesn’t yet exist. Ideally, we help young people prepare for this new reality by providing opportunities for developing their durable skills. Durable skills include technical, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving skills that are in high demand now and will be in the future. “Analytical thinking remains the most sought-after core skill among employers, with seven out of 10 companies considering it as essential in 2025. This is followed by resilience, flexibility, and agility, along with leadership and social influence,” according to the [World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report 2025](#).

Provide application and context. Neither young people nor seasoned adults learn by listening alone, but rather by seeing, touching, experiencing, interacting, and experimenting. When guiding young people through the learning landscape, it is not just the content (or curriculum) that matters, it is the learning experience.

Developmental, applied learning is so important in a career-readiness program. Using methods of learning by applying skills and knowledge in real-world situations, both in the classroom and in career activities led by industry partners, can have a huge impact on student learning outcomes.

Successful programs that articulate industry knowledge, skills, and abilities for application in academic settings provide ideas and inspiration.



- The National Consortium of Construction and Education and Research (NCCER) found that prospective workers lacked conceptual understanding of math and developed [Applied Construction Math - NCCER](#). Not only has it helped youth and adults entering the construction industry, but students as young as middle school learn applied math in this way. [NCCER](#) accredits the [If I Had A Hammer](#) program offering approaches using “construction math,” for example. Students learn how to use a tape measure and apply fractions for accurate measurement required in construction jobs. ALLready stands behind this approach as transformative not only for math for prospective entrants in the construction industry, but for ALL math students entering numerous types of fields.
- [The Manufacturing Institute](#) creates, promotes, and distributes youth-focused content about manufacturing careers, activities, and programs through a variety of partnerships. Through the Innovators Quest, MFG Day, and Creators Wanted programs, the Manufacturing Institute aims to excite America’s youth about modern manufacturing career pathways, increase awareness, and change misperceptions about the industry through exposure to hands-on experiences and engaging content.
- [NC3](#) is an organization that involves industry partners to provide insight into the workforce with innovative curriculum and guidance. NC3 industry partner certifications are built to be integrated into existing technical programs to enhance what is already being taught.
- Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME) offers [Tooling U-SME](#) which provides high schools with competency-based, industry-driven programs for more hands-on instruction time and enables individualized education plans for students with different knowledge, skills, and abilities. The training is designed to create a real-world learning environment and enhance classroom training with work-based learning programs, while preparing students for in-demand manufacturing jobs, continuing education, certifications, and degrees.
- Project Lead the Way has identified the skills necessary for future-ready careers in its [PLTW Gateway Middle School STEM Curriculum Grades 6-8](#). The program uses activity-, project-, and problem-based learning to engage students in hands-on experiences and exploration of STEM fields while developing essential skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration.

SHARE YOUR INDUSTRY AND WORKPLACE KNOWLEDGE

We define the learning landscape of your business to also include what young people—and prospective employees—need to know in order to get excited about your workplace. The answers to the questions comprise the content of the learning landscape for your industry, organization, workplace, and profession.



WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW?

Workplace Function

- a What is the purpose of the workplace(s)?
- b What industry (ies) are you in, and what other industries do you work with?
- c Who benefits from what you do, and how?
- d What problems do you need to solve?
- e How do you produce your result, from beginning to end?

Note: Illustrating how you produce a result may require some thought, especially for work that does not lead to a tangible result that resonates with young people. Examples include how people and businesses in your field might educate or recruit people to work in these workplaces or how they engage in business-to-business activities that may provide services or products to the business, such as estate or financing technologies.

Workplace Skills

- a How does student learning connect to employee skills in the workplace?
- b How are classes preparing students for work?
- c What are the skills and knowledge needed to succeed?
- d What are the most important skills that apply to most jobs?
- e What are the technical skills needed?
- f How are skills or different career pathways differentiated?

Work Environment

- a Where do people work?
- b What do the workplaces look like, and the people within it?
- c What do people enjoy about their workplace and work?
- d How do they work independently and with each other?
- e When is the work the most intense, fun, or rewarding?

Workplace Roles

- a What do people do directly related to the industry (industry-specific roles)?
- b What do people do related to the workplace outside of the industry (e.g., managerial, technological, sales, human resources, legal, communications, financial management) ?
- c What do the entry level folks do and how do they advance to other roles?

Workplace Credentials

- a What credentials or degrees do people need to work here?
- b How can I begin learning how to do what people do in this workplace?
- c Are there introductory activities, classes, workshops, contests, showcase sessions, certifications, mentors, programs, clubs, or jobs I can start?

Workplace Culture

- a Who are the people and what are the people like here?
- b How do people communicate and work together most of the time?
- a How do people dress?

Work Schedules and Types

- a What is a typical work day? What are the hours?
- b Are there opportunities for different types of work schedules (weekly, monthly, annually)?
- c Do people have full time, part time, or contract work?

Workplace Opportunities

- a Is training available? Required?
- b What do the pay and benefits look like?
- c Do people have a lot of control over their work? Are there a lot of rules?
- d Are there advancement opportunities? What does this look like?

Getting Started

- a What would it be like for me to work here?
- b What are the stories and experiences of young people in this kind of work?
- c How will I need to prepare to join this industry or workplace?
- d Who can point me to the next steps?



PLAN YOUR ENGAGEMENTS

Your engagement with young people can take on many forms. Below are some ways that industry professionals provide experiences in a career-ready program for ages 10–15. The time and resource commitment varies greatly depending on the engagement and the partnering school or organization.

Single-day engagements →

- Visit schools to talk about work and profession
- Invite students to interview you in a virtual meeting about your profession
- Host a workplace tour or workplace talk
- Support interview practice with students

Short-term engagements →

- Host a series of introductory classes around a specific practice or technology used in your profession (for example, segments of learning from an industry-recognized credential, or using software like Salesforce, Google, and Autodesk)
- Support a class project or a student competition
- Offer to be a pen-pal to share your career and answer questions
- Provide educators with a particular question or issue facing workers in your industry so they can task their students with doing the research and coming up with a solution to present; then give feedback about those solutions

Long-term engagements →

- Work with a teacher or teacher team to provide work-based learning activities
- Sponsor a teacher externship to learn how to apply classroom learning
- Develop a spring break, summer, or school day program (teacher externs can design these, for example)
- Employ younger interns over the summer (like the [Apprentice Learning](#) model)
- Serve as a career mentor to a young person



Planned activities and events →

- Participate in a career day
- Participate in an industry, business, or profession-based association-sponsored event (for example, [Youth Engagement | The Manufacturing Institute](#), [SME PRIME Schools Initiative](#), and [NSBE Summer Engineering Experience for Kids](#))
- Plan your own event, perhaps coupling youth awareness and worker recruitment activities, inviting others to bring their own children

Competitions →

- Judge at a competition
- Support a local competition
- Host a competition

Resource provision →

- Provide equipment, tools, or supplies to schools or programs serving students interested in careers

See the [Everyone Engaged](#) section below for resources and ideas for partnership.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR LEARNING LANDSCAPE

- ✓ Articulate and share workplace skills, knowledge, environment, roles, and culture to inform youth career-readiness initiatives.
- ✓ Recognize that every engagement between industry professionals and youth can make a big impact on their learning about your industry.
- ✓ Make career-readiness curriculum meaningful by offering real-world, applied learning activities.
- ✓ Design engagement opportunities that fit middle-grade developmental stages (short-term, curiosity-driven, relevant, and interactive).



Professional Preparation

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

Industry partners win when their own employees take a “learn, earn, and return” position. The model is motivating: first, focusing on learning and gaining skills; second, earning and applying the skills; and third, using skills to give back to society and contribute to others. It recognizes their own professionalism and growth, and provides the satisfaction of being in a community of aspiring as well as current professionals like themselves. Employees who demonstrate enthusiasm for being responsible for the growth of another—even a young person—are the ones with a proclivity to develop the supervisory skills needed to grow others in your industry.

IDENTIFY CHAMPIONS AND EARLY ADOPTERS

Identify potential tour guides, class visitors, educator partners, student mentors, trainers, and current or aspiring supervisors who are excited to work with young people. If they are willing to learn youth development best practices and are committed to consistent engagement for middle-grade students, these are your ambassadors and champions. When launching longer-term youth programs, secure commitment from employees and their managers to get involved and manage the partnership, and to be the liaison between internal employees and external partner organizations.

To ensure sustainability, creating a departmental level assignment for managing the program is essential. Turnover is a reality at any organization, and placing responsibility for program support at a department or unit mitigates the risk of the partnership ending when the lead person leaves the organization.

Help champions and early adopters be ambassadors for the initiative. Provide talking points to showcase benefits and ROI and highlight the company’s participation in the youth career-centered programs. What are the benefits for our organization? Communicate that a commitment to this initiative can yield the following outcomes:

- Increases brand awareness
- Gains consumer insight from youth (market research)
- Grooms our future workforce
- Excites youth about our company
- Encourages employees to contribute in their own communities
- Provides opportunities for volunteering with youth
- Reduces employee turnover with positive employee experience
- Exposes youth to our industry

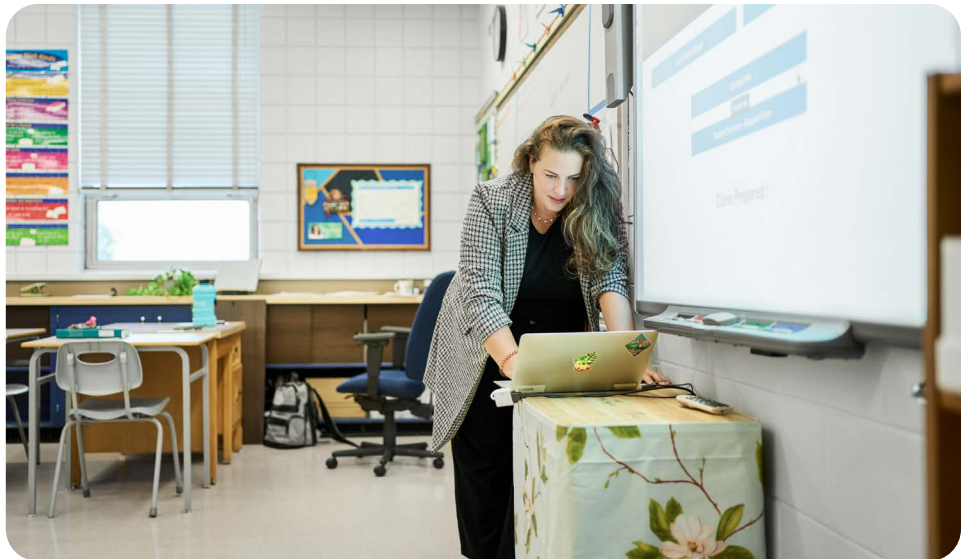


- Allows employees to share their own career story
- Allows employees to gain transferable communication and training skills

PREPARE STAFF TO ENGAGE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Preparing to engage with middle school students, in particular, requires learning about their developmental stages and strategies for successful interaction. Middle school is a time of change and incredible development, and maturity varies greatly; there can be a big difference between a sixth grader and an eighth grader, or even between two eighth graders! Be mindful of this transitional point in their development and try to meet the 10- to 15-year-olds where they are.

Make sure staff have insights and training to understand young people and check that the social activities are appropriate. Employees engaging in these career-centered learning activities should plan for ways to build trust with the students, especially in longer term engagements.





Make a Plan

- Plan for developmentally appropriate engagement
- Be prepared and willing to learn FROM the middle-grade youth as well
- Stay open to the idea that the students are more than just a vessel to be filled and be open to learn and be inspired by them
- Do not underestimate the 10- to 15-year-olds—they may know and be able to do more than you think
- Your words matter! (as an adult)
- Practice patience
- Provide engaging visual or hands-on materials
- Plan no more than 10-15 minutes of whole-class instruction
- Talk less, keep students working and interacting with others
- Give guidance on the norms and expectations
- Keep students moving, physically
- Give students choice
- Offer different levels of access to conversations and activities



Start Off Strong

- Start with inclusive and benign questions such as, “Did you see the moon last night? How about the Red Sox?”
- Tell your story
- Be authentic
- Engage with families when appropriate and available
- Lay out the plan for students, i.e., what comes when
- Make directions explicit, early and often
- Avoid any comment that is perceived as judgement
- Remind students to stay curious



DEEPEN EMPLOYEE SKILLS AND ABILITIES

There are many ways to prepare staff to be more valuable team members while preparing them to engage with young people. You can develop new supervisors and trainers, deepen staff program and project management skills, expand staff understanding of the industry or business, develop industry or brand ambassadors, and promote a positive workplace culture.

Consider your employees' engagement with youth career programs as contributing to their own professional growth and development as leaders in your company. Employees' experience involves interacting with youth, sharing their own career story, teaching workplace skills, and talking about your company.

Cultivate internal leaders. The experience allows employees to demonstrate decision-making and problem-solving skills, practice using motivation and inspiration with young people, and develop interpersonal communication skills—the durable skills we want to build in our youth. These leadership capacities can be demonstrated, tested, and assessed while employees engage in programs for young people. As participants in youth career activities outside of the workplace, they become leaders for the industry and for your company.

Advance supervisory capabilities. You can leverage employees' work with young people to cultivate their supervisory potential and help them gain supervisory experience. Supervising young people and adults requires some of the same human skills (also known as durable or “soft” skills): communication skills, interpersonal skills, empathy, and task management.

Develop training and presentation skills. As employees teach and lead activities with youth, they develop skills in training others, verbal communication, using visual aids, and in audience engagement. In doing so, they speak for your company and for the industry.

Practice project management. You can have professionals learn by working with other organizations to gain project management experience, such as when partnering with an educator, school, or organization to plan and implement activities or programs.

Build workplace knowledge. Preparing for engagement requires building knowledge about the company, about the industry, about the careers and jobs, and about the work environment to share and inspire young people.



Try This!

Your professionals providing program management and training can also deepen their program management and training skills by partnering with other organizations. Consider partnering with schools to co-plan and manage student programs and activities or with local youth-serving organizations to co-facilitate training. This practice can also ease the lift of those working in your organization.

You can develop a leadership program for your industry by tailoring a (broader) program such as the [NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship](#). The NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship focuses on empowering and equipping leaders with the skills, knowledge, and tools needed to excel in their leadership role. This one-year fellowship provides institutional leaders with mentoring, exposure to best practices, a network of similarly minded growth-seeking professionals and an institutional improvement plan designed to grow institution specific needs and CTE programs.

Blend learning with social activities. Work-adjacent activities—such as youth career-readiness activities—can promote employee wellbeing, work-life balance, and new ways to socialize with peers and engage in community. Staff participation can demonstrate and model a commitment to flexibility, healthy work-life balance, employees pursuing interests in helping their communities, and positive experiences working with colleagues in settings outside of the workplace.

Some employees, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, value more flexibility and a good work experience and may choose a balanced schedule over pay. Given that “unmanaged turnover isn’t just a human resources challenge; it’s a financial and operational risk,” a positive work culture, balance, and meaningful connections are more important to the bottom line than ever ([Gallup](#)). And younger workers—like those students who you will one day hire—are demonstrating that they value these aspects more than past generations.



Consider This...

[Bake for Good](#) is King Arthur Baking Company’s free outreach program for students in grades 4-12. The program has three goals: learn, bake, and share. Students learn the math and science of making bread from scratch. Students watch the instructional video, and the teacher or group leader guides the lesson. Students receive supplies to bake together.

Center ambassadorship for staff and youth. Employees participating in youth career-readiness initiatives are ambassadors for your company, for your industry, and for the profession. When workers and students learn how to explain and celebrate the work people do in your industry or business, they nurture



important work skills—in marketing, sales, communication, and recruiting. It is a public relations win, recruiting win, and a sales win. Further, it is a win when your internal brand is positively viewed by staff and those with whom they work; your bottom line is improved due to customer *and* staff loyalty.

Expand staff understanding of the industry or business as preparation. Employees that guide or educate young people about the industry, roles, and the way things work will also expand their own capacities as they prepare for this work. They might just be training their successor!

MEASURE AND RECOGNIZE PARTICIPATION

You can evaluate the outcomes of professional preparation for both your participating staff as well as the students with whom they work. Measures could include self-perception of their experience before and after: knowledge, skills, confidence, opinions, feelings, and plans. For longer engagements that involve tangible skill development, you might assess progress with observations, performance tests, skill demonstration, knowledge tests, or badge or credential attainment. Measurement of performance in these areas also links to the success metrics outlined in the business case in the Leadership Levers section of this playbook.

Employee recognition is a key benchmark of job satisfaction. Find ways to recognize employee preparation for learning gained, skills practiced, and commitment to participation in the youth career programs. Highlighting employees' contributions in internal communications, meetings, and direct communication also makes an impact.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

- ✓ Gain traction by engaging employees who are willing to be ambassadors and champions for the work.
- ✓ Recognize and value employees' own skill development in participation with youth career initiatives.
- ✓ Prepare to engage with middle school students by recognizing 10- to 15-year-old developmental stages and planning activities accordingly.
- ✓ Commit to time and resources for professional preparation, training, recognition, and tracking progress.



Everyone Engaged

Whom to engage to effect change and sustain effort

A career-readiness ecosystem for young people involves many stakeholder groups to ensure success. An “everyone engaged” approach is holistic, can multiply industry leaders’ impact, and also make your participation easier because others are taking responsibility.

ENGAGE ALL LEVELS OF THE INDUSTRY

Industry leaders are representatives from companies, associations, workforce boards, chamber of commerce, organizations, government, and any other type of employer. Industry leaders represent all career clusters. Youth career-readiness initiatives benefit from engagement from any and all types of entities.

Your organization’s level of involvement can engage staff at many levels of commitment. Consider all levels of participation as meaningful and part of making a positive impact on youth. Although full, long-term partnerships with schools are ideal in creating greater impact for students over time, participation in shorter-term career activities is also valuable.

Recognize, measure, and celebrate all commitments to youth career readiness. A non-exhaustive list of examples include:

Employees’ individual contributions:

- Use their volunteer days at career-focused youth events
- Guest lecture at their child’s classroom about their career path
- Teach career planning at a school with an organization like Junior Achievement
- Judge a national competition
- Coach a team in a technical competition

Departments provision of resources and engagement:

- C-suite tells their career path story
- Department head contributes expertise from their area of work
- Technical managers share workplace skills and knowledge for curriculum development
- Human resources attend career fairs for recruitment
- Marketing department distributes swag and presents on career opportunities



Company commits to partnerships:

- Establish long-term partnerships with a school/district to provide ongoing work-based learning opportunities
- Join national organizations dedicated to career readiness for youth
- Sponsor school with supplies, such as lab kits or software subscriptions
- Launch a grant program for youth pursuing certain fields
- Employ interns and apprentices

Engaging multiple levels in companies is ideal when working with middle-grade youth. Each level can play an important role; recommendations for each follow.

C-Suite

- Emphasize approachable interactions with youth (Consider “CEO Career Chats,” welcome visits, or video greetings since visibility from leadership feels affirming and exciting to young people)
- Create buy-in and secure resources

Mid-career professionals

- Demonstrate to youth what it’s like to have some years of experience and show where they can go within the industry
- Organize and manage program logistics, act as the company liaison for the program, and share expertise on skills and knowledge

Early-career professionals

- Provide connections to new learning opportunities and relate to youth in figuring out their way in this new world of work
- Participate in events, teach youth, and host activities

LEVERAGE EXPERTISE OF PARTNERS

Partnerships with schools take initiative, time for development and management, funding, dedication of staff, clear roles, and a strong recognition of the value of partnership. In any partnership, clearly defined roles and expectations for each constituent make the operation function more effectively.

Partner with organizations serving youth. Schools, school districts, or community-based organizations are often the intermediaries or lead partner in program implementation. Organizations acting as lead partners are experts in their field, have the infrastructure in place for working with youth, and often handle much of the logistical management. Industry partners can take on roles



leveraging their expertise and providing relevant resources critical to any career-centered initiative.

Serving as an intermediary between the industry partner and the students' families is a key role for the school/lead partner. Given students and their families are critical partners in these career-focused activities, program managers must connect, communicate, and relate to students and families/caregivers. It's important to support family understanding and participation through orientations, flyers, and invitations to student showcases.



Consider This...

An initiative powered by the CAPS Network and American Student Assistance (ASA) demonstrates how [profession-based learning](#) (Pro-BL) offers a unique opportunity for businesses to connect with the next generation of talent while addressing real needs within the organization. Consider examining [profession-based learning through the stories](#) of industry partners, educators, and students who have collaborated.

For example, you can launch a "Career Curiosity Kickoff" event where students meet workplace mentors through an engaging activity (e.g., industry scavenger hunt, team-building challenge). Close with a family showcase where students share what they've learned. For example, [Apprentice Learning](#) has a one-day Career Extravaganza. You can host your own showcasing all the roles in your organization. If you are not ready to host students, start by hosting educators!

Partnership opportunities for industry leaders often surface with government, community organizations, industry associations, and higher education to develop career exploration resources designed to engage, inform, and attract young people. These entities are most often the intermediaries who call upon industry experts to contribute time, career and job details, and leadership.



Try This!

A collaboration between JP Morgan Chase, New York City Employment & Training Coalition, CUNY, and CAEL developed the [Banking on My Career](#) career exploration platform.

Cleveland Metropolitan School District partnered with businesses from multiple career cluster industries to offer career [pathway exploration](#) at the middle school level, encouraging students to check out careers in 13 areas, as well as associated high school coursework available to them in the district.



Get involved in career-focused youth organizations. Many organizations make it easy for industry professionals and workplaces to provide career awareness, exploration, and activities for young people. Out-of-school organizations in your area may offer career-adjacent programs and look for professional support, from STEM-based programs, to arts-based programs, to activities related to farming, policy debate, education, and so on.



Try This!

Partner with your local chamber of commerce or [United Way's youth programs](#).

Tap into [Career Technical Student Organizations](#) to contribute industry expertise as judges, coaches, and team managers.

Access [CAPS Network](#), where network schools invite businesses to provide an actual business problem for classrooms to consider, and students present their proposed solution.

Volunteer with [Junior Achievement](#), a national program that offers career pathway learning in many areas. The program invites businesses to sponsor individuals or groups from industry to visit, teach in the classroom, and facilitate sessions at Junior Achievement locations.

Become a part of [SkillsUSA](#), which hosts national and local competitions in all career technical areas of work and facilitates company support for students before and during the events.

Teach with [BUILD](#), an organization that supports and fosters youth innovation of new products using knowledge learned from professionals.

Note that there are also national networks of schools that engage students in career-based learning such as [NAF Academies](#), [Big Picture Network](#), and [Cristo Rey Network](#).

Anticipate potential barriers. In its report, [Building Bridges Between Education and Industry: Youth Work-Based Learning as Talent Development Strategy](#), American Student Assistance found that many businesses had to problem-solve perceived challenges and barriers. More challenges often arise with longer-term, more involved programs such as internships, work-study, and other work-based learning programs. Planning shorter-term, single-day events and school visits for middle school students likely results in fewer of these potential challenges for students and organizers. School and organizational partners often plan for and provide solutions to many of these issues. Finding partner organizations to



support students and help remove these barriers may also be a viable solution for more complex or lengthy engagements with students.

STAY ENGAGED

Sustained engagement ensures young people stay motivated and connected to career-readiness programs. Businesses that foster strong relationships, collaborate with community partners, and adapt to students' interests create a vibrant, supportive environment where students feel valued and inspired to participate. For middle-grade learners, sustained engagement might mean recurring short-term activities (e.g., monthly career chats, mini-project series). Allow flexibility in the partnership between industry and educators to co-design activities that meet youth where they are developmentally.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR EVERYONE ENGAGED

- ✓ Create buy-in at the company for youth workforce development from top leadership, and provide entry points for all levels of employee.
- ✓ Value and recognize all levels of involvement.
- ✓ Prioritize whole eco-systems engagement in school partnerships: students, families, educators, mentors, supervisors, and leadership.
- ✓ Lean on intermediaries and lead organizations to play vital roles, especially with students' families.
- ✓ Leverage the opportunities at well-established national and local organizations that make it easy for businesses to participate in career-related youth programs.



Student Support

How to make sure each young person gets what they need

Effective student support ensures that all young people have the guidance, tools, and confidence they need to navigate career pathways. This means being prepared to deliver services to young people from a range of experiences, knowledge, backgrounds, and abilities, and proactively anticipating that some of the young people you serve may require specific accommodations in order to have a meaningful career coaching experience. To provide effective student support, industry partners also need to provide holistic guidance, recognize and celebrate progress, and foster student agency.

MAKE PERSONAL CONNECTIONS WITH CAREER CONVERSATIONS

At the core of student support—like support for all people—is understanding the individual’s interests, goals, and needs. Many young people begin career and academic planning in middle school because these individualized, personalized, academic, and career plans are a part of a statewide, district, or schoolwide strategy to engage youth thinking about their future earlier in the process. The most important thing to learn—whether you are working with students or the young people in your own lives—is how to have career conversations with young people. An excellent guidance document was developed by the American School Counselors’ Association, titled [Business and Industry-Partner Career Conversations](#).

CONSIDER ADJUSTMENTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS AS MUTUAL

Understanding ANY person in your workplace as a complete person means being able to tailor support to specific needs without reducing the person to those aspects of their identity that require specialized attention. This is also true for young people. It’s a balance to be responsive to a young person’s history, culture, and strengths while being sensitive to potential trauma and setbacks. We are all shaped by our experiences, but none of us is defined by a single characteristic, especially not our greatest challenge. Ideas for supporting students include:

- Starting with scaffolded, exploratory tasks and adding complexity over time.
- Using developmentally appropriate language and feedback.
- Anticipating and planning for accommodations and diverse learning needs.
- Measuring success through engagement, reflection, and relationship quality—not just task completion.
- Clarifying adult roles (career speaker, tour guide, mentor, supervisor, teacher, trainer, etc.) for students from the beginning in order to set the stage for expectations.

**BE EXPLICIT, REPEAT, REMIND**

Engaging with middle school students requires adults to recognize their stage of development, and 10- to 15-year-old maturity levels can vary greatly from child to child. Below are some practical tips for supporting students this age: (See more tips in the Professional Preparation section).

- Learn about the communities and context of the young people you engage
- Be authentic and intentional in interactions with young people
- Give an ear to listen
- Encourage self-reflection
- Promote their ability to work in new ways when necessary
- Maintain patience
- Give frequent reminders and repeat often
- Provide consistency and structure
- Prepare engaging visual or hands-on materials
- Give guidance on the norms and expectations
- Offer meaningful relationships with adults

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT

- ✓ Engage about careers to make connections with youth.
- ✓ Consider a student's circumstances, background, and interests as much as possible.
- ✓ Remember the developmental stage of middle school students and communicate accordingly.



Resource Readiness

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

When engaging in middle-grade partnerships, industry leaders should anticipate that schools and younger students may need additional support. Early career exposure isn't "plug and play"—thoughtful resource planning is needed for success. Industry partners can support resource readiness for youth career programs by sharing in-kind donations, funds for purchasing resources, student stipends, or grant-making, in addition to employee time.

Reframe ROI as "Responsibility of Investment" to provide resources; an opportunity to build social capital, long-term brand awareness, and meaningful community connections with emerging talent. Early exposure plants seeds that bloom later.

COORDINATE TO DETERMINE RESOURCE NEEDS

School leaders and community organizations are on the ground implementing career-focused learning every day. For the resources to remain useful and relevant for the students' career-centered learning, coordination is key. Work collaboratively with program leads, educators, and families to map available resources and identify gaps. Engage in resource-sharing conversations early to avoid misunderstandings and build trust. Additionally, you should commit to ongoing resource assessment by creating shared checklists, hold quarterly partner meetings, and invite student feedback on whether materials and environments feel welcoming and supportive.

SHARE PROFESSIONAL GEAR, SUPPLIES, AND TOOLS

One way to think about ROI is as an investment in brand awareness and loyalty that—with the proper cultivation—can lead to a more well-informed consumer base. Businesses can be the source of supplies, tools, equipment, and materials related to specific career exploration initiatives and course activities. Companies can dedicate a budget line item for providing in-kind donations or discounted products and services. Think about:

- Donating anything from calculators, rulers, to sound systems and computers. (Take time to ensure any equipment is up-to-date and relevant).
- Providing materials like drafting kits and lab equipment for project-based engagements with middle-grade students.
- Offering snack stipends or travel support to students.
- Sponsoring schools with subscriptions or memberships that can expand access to current industry news and developments, software used on the job, or career-centered tools.



In-kind donations, funding, and stipends for the classroom activities offset the school budget and allow schools to provide more hands-on and industry-relevant skill development.

Schools will likely welcome appropriate company-branded swag (bags, water bottles, t-shirts, hats, etc.) with students. Providing branded tools and equipment serves to provide needed learning resources—and build brand awareness. Businesses often have useful products relevant to career-related projects and skill-building to share with schools.



It Worked!

Companies bolster brand awareness while providing free or reduced-cost tools and technologies to students. [Snap-on](#) offers tools at a discount for students in its Student Excellence Program. Harbor Freight's [Skilled Trades Education](#) donates tools and employee volunteer time to education programs. [Autodesk](#) provides student and educator software resources. [Microsoft's Student Hub](#) offers ways to engage and prepare students with student certifications, free software for students, self-paced training, and applied skills. [IBM's SkillsBuild](#) provides job skills, courses, and credentials for students. In any one of these examples, students and teachers who use their tools can become lifelong loyal consumers and users.



Consider This...

The Manufacturing Institute and Toyota teamed up to provide the [High School Internship Toolkit for Manufacturers](#). It is designed as a resource for employers implementing high-quality internship programs that prepare students for success in postsecondary education, workforce development programs, or careers in manufacturing. While the toolkit is geared towards high school, it provides some useful templates that can be duplicated for middle grade aged students. As well, organizations like [Apprentice Learning](#) have designed programs specifically for middle school.

PROVIDE LOW- AND NO-COST RESOURCES

When it comes to career-readiness programming, much of what you might offer may already be developed. If not, it is likely to be low-cost. Student visit days will take a little staff time, and can be planned during down time periods. They can use equipment, tools, software or training without taking anything away from the business. In addition, offering company swag is an easy way to supply the program.



Prepare for supplemental services as well. Implementing a career program with middle school students requires consideration of student transportation and supervision (e.g., school vans, caregiver accompaniment). School partners most often can arrange for transportation and age-appropriate supervision for events. Community organizations that provide out-of-school programs for youth can also partner with you to take on these types of services. Supporting them costs relatively little but can make or break career activities.

GRANT PROGRAM FUNDS FOR YOUTH CAREER EXPLORATION

Industry leaders can also support resource readiness for career-centered learning initiatives by offering grant funding. Companies, corporate foundations, industry associations, workforce organizations, government, and other entities provide direct or matching grants for starting or growing youth programs at non-profit organizations and schools. In-kind grants offer non-cash donations of supplies or services to support program operations and activities. Grant funding most often requires a clear articulation of program impact and alignment with the grantor's priorities, as well as the program's partnership-building capacity with industry representatives. (See the **Leadership Levers** section of this playbook for more on building a business case).





LEVERAGE TAX BENEFITS

In-kind donations and direct funding can qualify for tax deductions or tax credits. These donations can be written off as in-kind gifts (ask your tax accountant first—this is not tax advice). Look for the many tax credits, such as the [U.S. Department of Labor Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#), for business contributions to career-connected or work-based learning that are not well-known or are under-utilized.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR RESOURCE READINESS

- ✓ Use resource mapping and shared planning between schools, families, and partners.
- ✓ Reframe ROI as long-term investment in resources for community and future workforce readiness.
- ✓ Plan for logistical needs unique to middle-grade learners with partners (transport, materials, youth-friendly communication).
- ✓ Maximize your gear, tools, and resources to share with middle school students.
- ✓ Budget for snacks, stipends, supplies, supervision, and other needed resources.



Compliance Concerns

How to follow the rules and navigate the system

Given that this work involves minors (for whom parents or other legal guardians are legally responsible), industry partners need to understand the legal and professional boundaries between industry partners and students. For the school or non-profit agency brokering the training/education, having families on board is key, and relaying that buy-in to the private industry is absolutely necessary. Often, legal documentation is required.

ENSURE PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND INFORMATIONAL SAFETY

Businesses prioritize safety in the workplace. When hosting middle school students at a place of business, emphasize the importance of following safety and health standards, avoiding hazards, using safety gear, and other physical safety precautions just as with employees. Often, companies have policies that dictate a minimum age to visit a company's facilities or certain areas of the facilities. Note that these policies can limit the ability to host middle school students and adequately demonstrate to them the company's inner workings. When employees are engaging with middle school students, it is often required to conduct background checks, and written acknowledgment of behavior may be required for visitors, speakers, and partners.

Company policies are also designed to maintain appropriate boundaries, prevent conflicts of interest, and ensure a safe and ethical learning environment. Be sure to know your company's policies when planning career activities with this age group.



Try This!

Create a visually engaging and curiosity-stoked "Know Your Rights and Responsibilities" handout for middle-grade students and their families. This handout should briefly describe your business and/or industry, outline what the students can expect, whom to contact with concerns, and how safety is ensured. If there are different offerings from your business, add a corresponding handout.

CONSIDER LEGALITIES IN WORKING WITH YOUNGER STUDENTS

Design middle-grade engagements as exploratory learning experiences (career talks, site visits, project-based challenges) that comply with child labor laws. From the industry side, more robust youth career programs defined as "internships" or "jobs" have more regulation and compliance requirements. For the middle school age group, programs that are less involved, defined as "career exploration" or "career-connected learning opportunities" are more appropriate.



Each state has regulations concerning what is permitted, so it's an imperative to check your states' laws for your company to plan the appropriate activities with youth programs.



It Worked!

The Texas Education Agency provides Career and Technical Education (CTE) administrative resources, and related law, industry, and career awareness and exploration resources. Resources vary from a Student Attendance Accounting Handbook to a Training Plan Agreement for Paid Work-Based Instruction. This can be a useful starting point for your own counsel.

Compliance concerns mostly arise from implementing work-based learning experiences—such as apprenticeships, internships, or job shadowing. While some programs may offer work-based learning experiences for middle-grade students, industry partners need to be aware that youth employment laws and policies often preclude young people in middle school from participating in them. In addition, young people must be a certain age to get a work permit; this varies by state, but many states' minimum age requirement excludes most middle school students. Ensure accessibility by working with schools and families to navigate paperwork where needed. Translate materials, simplify forms, and offer in-person support for families unfamiliar with documentation processes.

Regularly review compliance practices with legal advisors, school partners, and program staff. Schedule annual safety audits and require refresher training for mentors and supervisors on working with minors, including mandatory reporting laws.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR COMPLIANCE CONCERNS

- ✓ Understand age restrictions; design middle-grade experiences as learning, not work.
- ✓ Ensure partners secure family permissions and include language access for all communications.
- ✓ Research any state regulations and company policies that may limit or confine your company to certain activities with youth.
- ✓ Design experiences that are safe, accessible, engaging, and educationally focused.
- ✓ Ask the partner school or district to provide guidance and training on child safety, legal boundaries, and reporting requirements.

Conclusion

“When we plant seeds of possibility in young people, we cultivate not only their futures—we transform our shared world.”

Championing career readiness for young people begins with an **understanding of youth as our talent source**. These young people are our nation’s future workers, leaders, and creators. They are especially eager, curious, and insightful during these formative years of age 10 to 15.

Investing in the next generation of talent is one of the most impactful moves an industry leader can make, whether they lead an industry association, group of businesses, a company, or a unit within a larger organization.

The **tangible benefits** of supporting a commitment to career-readiness youth programs are persuasive, employing talent development, brand recognition, and community engagement strategies. This work provides ways to improve the employee experience by cultivating a culture of learning. Growing a company into a “learning organization” highlights the benefits of a learn, earn, and return perspective through which people are eager to learn new skills on the job and guide or teach others.

Inspired by purpose and guided by a mission, industry leaders can make a tremendous impact on young people today. Begin by **reaching out** to local schools, community-based organizations, and program leads to explore partnership opportunities. Identify ways your organization can offer developmentally appropriate career exposure—whether through hosting a site visit, facilitating a career talk, designing a hands-on challenge, or mentoring a small group of students. Tap into helpful resources from entities dedicated to supporting youth career readiness, including industry associations, regional workforce boards, government, and leading organizations in the field. ALLready also provides playbooks for educators, municipal leaders, out-of-school time organizations, and families to ensure everyone in the ecosystem is aligned.

To create **sustained career-readiness opportunities for ALL**, industry partners are encouraged to **connect across sectors**: business, education, government, and nonprofit organizations. Sharing resources, collaborating on projects, and participating in cross-sector advisory groups can amplify the impact of your efforts. Together, we can transform learning from isolated career-ready experiences into an integrated, community-wide practice that fosters economic mobility and lifelong curiosity—beginning as early as the middle grades.

This playbook was made possible by funding from American Student Assistance and the Palmer Foundation, as well as the collective expertise of ALLready.org and its partners across industries, education, and workforce development. We extend gratitude to the educators, career mentors, industry leaders, and families who join us in our shared mission.

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