



The Community-based Coaches Playbook:

PARTNERING FOR EARLY CAREER
READINESS

Published on
July 1, 2025

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.

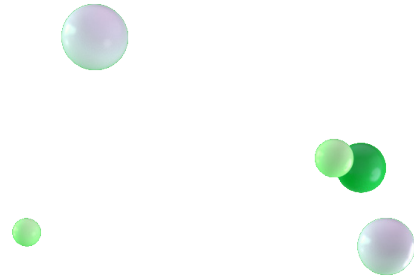
This publication was made possible with the support of American Student Assistance's leadership, insights and support. We also thank the Liberty Mutual Foundation For their investment in community based coaching, on which much of this Playbook is based. We thank our Board, Advisors, partners, editors, staff, and contributors for your encouragement, expertise, input, feedback, and ongoing dedication.

Suggested Citation: ALLready.org. (2025). The Community-based Coaches Playbook: Partnering for Early Career Readiness.

What's Inside

Introduction	4
Transformational Practice Dimensions	11
Leadership Levers	13
Learning Landscape	19
Professional Preparation	25
Everyone Engaged	33
Student Support	35
Resource Readiness	37
Compliance Concerns	45
Conclusion	49
References	50

Introduction



Welcome! Do you work at a community-based organization and provide career advice to middle school age youth, whether informally or as a part of your official responsibilities? Perhaps you mentor a middle schooler in a volunteer capacity through a community group or your place of worship. Or maybe you are a middle grades after-school teacher who wants to start a group or program tailored to helping your students plan for the future. If you can relate to such roles, this playbook is for you.

Like many other staff, volunteers, and educators in mission-driven spaces serving youth, you are likely to have strong relationships with young people already. As part of that, you may want to do more to support their career aspirations and other hopes they may have for their future. And that makes you a **community-based career coach**.

While you might not necessarily identify by that title, your work is vitally important. Community-based career coaches play a critical role in expanding a collective sense of what is possible for young people and, in doing so, help them—and, by extension, their families and the community at large—move toward thriving, now and in the future.

What Is a Community-based Career Coach?

As the name suggests, community-based career coaches are members of a young person's community who work with them to develop a personalized plan to meet their life goals through self-reflection, financial and life planning, career decision-making, preparation, community-building, and other foundations for success.

They can produce several unique outcomes: (1) avenues to meet short-term needs; (2) co-creation of achievable steps; (3) holistic supports including encouragement, resources, and tools for success; (4) connections to people, groups, and institutions; and (5) advocacy for the cultivation of career-readiness systems that are accessible and meaningful for the specific community and individuals they serve.

This playbook, which is part of a connected series designed for adults supporting young people in the middle grades to become career ready, was designed specifically for current or aspiring community-based career coaches working with young people in grades 5-9 (ages 10-15). It offers practical guidance to ensure the young people you serve are ALLready for college, career, and life.

ALLready developed this playbook series to provide aligned support for a range of people in roles responsible for career readiness among young people in their community. This includes school leaders, teachers, school coaches, district leaders, superintendents, municipal leaders, industry and corporate leaders, employers, out-of-school-time organizations, and community members. Together, these constituents make up a career development ecosystem that, when working together, has the power to effectively and equitably support meaningful career exploration and future planning opportunities for ALL young people. 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.

By informing, connecting, and empowering individuals across the career development ecosystem, ALLready Playbooks bridge gaps in existing career-readiness initiatives and offer a frame for alignment. In turn, this can increase collaboration, encourage resource sharing, and—perhaps most importantly—equip involved adults with the tools they need to navigate the system for the young people it's meant to support.

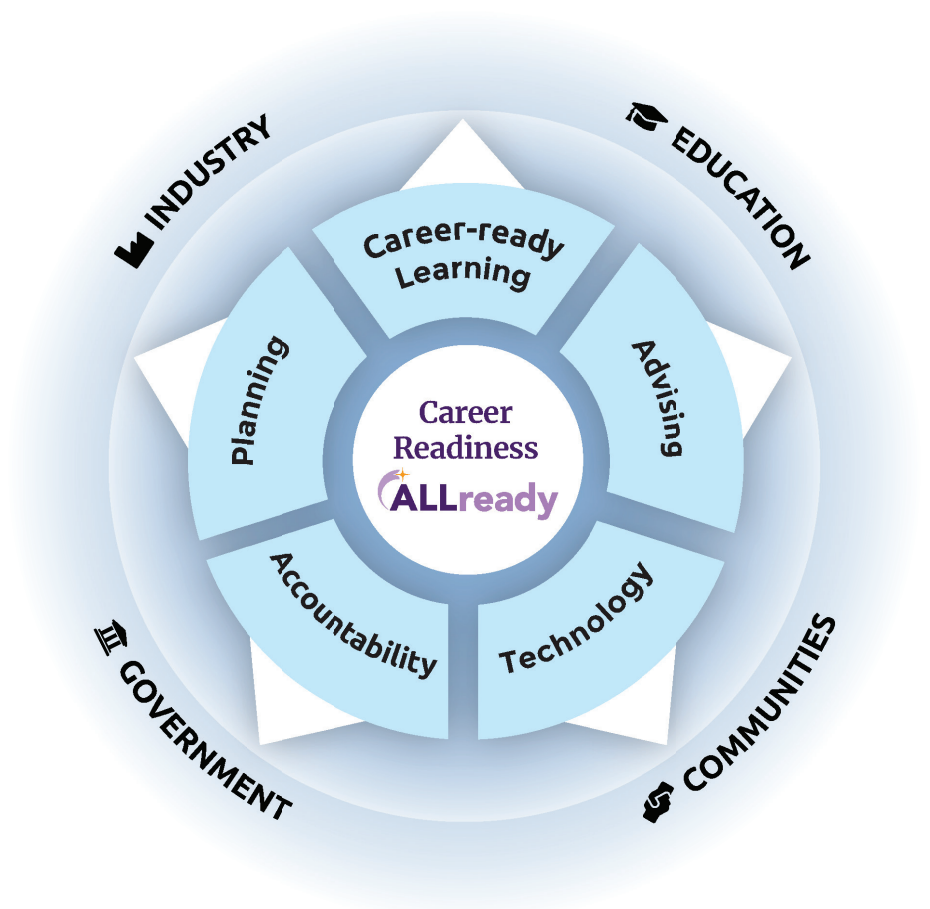
Visit our website at [ALLready.org/playbooks](https://allready.org/playbooks) to view the full series.

Interested in how you can help your community transform into a hub of career-centered learning and curiosity-fueled engagement for its middle schoolers? Read on! We're glad you are here.

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 Career Readiness in the Middle Grades?

MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS ARE THE FOUNDATIONAL YEARS TO BUILD CAREER IDENTITY AND EFFICACY.

The majority of career preparation in the United States occurs in high school career technical programs and postsecondary institutions. However, research shows that young people's sense of identity and efficacy (their belief in their ability to achieve a specific outcome) develop more deeply during the middle grades than at any other time (Godbey & Gordon, 2019), making this an opportune time to introduce meaningful career readiness experiences. While it is almost certainly not the first time young people will have thought about their futures, providing structured, intentional space for conversation about interests, pathways, and career-ready skills in the middle school years aligns with and supports the developmental emergence of a resilient, affirming, strengths-based identity; self-awareness and interpersonal skills; and critical thinking and planning skills. Further, the middle school years are an important inflection point that can influence later academic and career readiness (Advance CTE, 2018). Quality career-related initiatives can increase student engagement and lead to several benefits for middle school aged youth:

- Deeper understanding of the relevance of academic content;
- Increased access to real-life connections with invested adults, role models, and mentors across various career sectors;
- Informed choices with the future in mind; and
- Fostering access to economic and social mobility.

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. The middle-grade years are an extraordinary period of mental and emotional growth; invested, caring adults can support young people as they cultivate their sense of self, strengths, and skills, which in turn can foster a sense of purpose and hope for the future. Further, emerging changes to the workforce and its norms—including shifting ideologies and economic realities shaped largely by the impacts of COVID—suggest that young people have an extraordinary opportunity to influence the future of work. U.S. middle- and high school students understand this and are optimistic (Walton Family Foundation, 2024); at the same time, current trends demonstrate that students are less engaged in school—and workers are less engaged with work—than ever (Mann et al., 2020). Adopting a collective approach to the workforce centered around an individualized, interest-based career development strategy as early as possible could alleviate this disconnect and prove crucial to the social and economic future of not only today's young people, but the nation at large.

Individualized Career and Academic Plans (ICAPs)

are a key piece of connected career advising that align learners' career and life goals with academic, postsecondary, and career pathway options. ICAPs have different names in different states, including Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and Individual Graduation Plans (IGPs). They refer to both the process of engaging in individualized academic and career development activities as well as the product: a living, usually online, portfolio that is created by each learner and regularly updated as they advance through school and transition into the workforce. (Source: Advance CTE, 2021)

CAREER-BUILDING GOALS ARE RELEVANT, ENGAGING, AND CRITICAL TO LIFE SUCCESS.

The typical person spends over 12 years in school but 45 years working across their lifetimes. Yet about half of graduates feel unprepared for their working lives (Sliwinski, 2023), and less than half of working adults say they are “very satisfied” with their jobs (Lin et al., 2024). Unsurprisingly given the outsized role careers play in our lives, our satisfaction with them is linked to health, wealth, happiness, and life expectancy outcomes. Knowing this, caring adults in the lives of young people must give them the best chance at careers that are aligned with their sense of self, purpose, and broader life goals.

YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN MORE WITH A GOAL IN MIND.

From pre-adolescence to adulthood, young people with a career and academic plan are more likely to graduate and achieve their goals (Solberg, 2019). Research also demonstrates that students in career technical education (CTE) programs, which integrate academic and technical skills related to a specific career cluster or occupation, are more engaged and satisfied with their learning experience than those without a career in mind.

SCHOOLS ARE NOT NECESSARILY THE ONLY PLACE YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN.

Despite the compelling evidence that young people engaged in career readiness are more engaged and experience improved academic outcomes, schools are not the only—and sometimes not the best—places for learning to happen, including lessons about careers. Young people consistently indicate that they are not receiving adequate career guidance in school; the *State of Career Exploration in Middle School* report notes that “Student feedback collected through focus groups in our study illustrated that policy, while well-intentioned, may not always translate to quality on-the-ground experiences. Students shared that they want to dive deeper into career options with hands-on activities, but they don’t get enough meaningful opportunities to do so in schools” (Lammers & Mathers, 2024). Gallup’s *Voices of Gen Z Study* found that “Gen Z middle and high school students lack information and experiences related to their post-graduation futures—especially those that do not involve college,” and that “Only 35% of K-12 students feel they are learning skills relevant to their future careers and just 23% have opportunities to work on projects related to jobs they want” (Gallup & Walton Family Foundation, 2024). Communities are rich with opportunities for young people to learn and practice skills and engage in experiences that can promote career readiness.

Who Are Community-based Career Coaches and Why Are They Critical to Career Readiness?

As noted earlier in this section, many people doing the work of community-based career coaching may not understand their work in these terms. Caring, trusted adults who support young people in their communities—including community-based career coaches—may more commonly identify as “youth workers.” Despite youth workers having a range of backgrounds—from lived experience only to advanced education and professional training—their role in the educational ecosystem is often given less importance than practitioners connected to traditional school settings, such as teachers and guidance counselors. Yet community-based youth workers have historically served as important role models, alternative sources of education, and inspirational figures for young people, especially in communities that lack school-based career-readiness programming or where engagement in those activities is low.

The [Council of Europe](#) (2025) defines youth work as “a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational, or political nature both by, with, and for young people... Youth work belongs to the area of ‘out-of-school’ (OST) education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation.” While they can sometimes be dismissed or delegitimized due to the informal nature of their work, skilled youth workers are important players in the educational ecosystem broadly, and can play a crucial role in career and future readiness—particularly for youth who are not connected to or engaged in traditional school spaces. As formalized community-based career coaching is an emerging concept, in this document, we will sometimes refer to community-based career coaches as youth workers, refer to their work taking place in OST settings, and extrapolate research on roles that function in similar ways, such as mentors and advisors.

In addition to youth workers, community-based career coaches may hold other roles: counselor, sports coach, mentor, church member, or tutor, for example. They may work in schools, non-profit organizations, youth facilities, or for city agencies. What connects them is their work to affirm and uplift young people while serving as guides, advocates, and bridges across opportunities presented by schools, community organizations, government programs, and workforce agencies. In this way, community-based career coaches act as ambassadors for a collective and expanded understanding of what is possible for young people.

In this playbook, we will explore the ways in which community-based career coaches can leverage their **experience**, develop the most essential **skills**, and acquire the prerequisite **knowledge** to do this work effectively. We will aim to shift the commonly held mindset that community-based coaching is something one can “just do” to the notion that it is a carefully constructed approach with the potential to have an enormous impact on outcomes for young people, particularly those who have not historically had access to personalized career coaching. We will also describe the **work tactics** community-based career coaches utilize, how they set **goals**, and how they achieve each of the **outcomes** embedded in their role.



Transformational Practice Dimensions

This playbook is organized into seven key Transformational Practice Dimensions that can leverage the role of community career ambassadors to go beyond their career coaching practices, while also driving social and economic mobility for the young people in one's community.

- 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

Building a collective and expanded understanding of possibility: Inspire others to action through authentic commitment to equitable career readiness

In well-resourced communities, young people have a web of support with guidance from multiple caring, trusted adults and systems designed to ease their transition to adulthood, including creating pathways to meaningful careers. Planning for a future career can be a daunting enterprise for young people, who often feel like they need to “figure everything out” at a young age and who might not have robust resources to explore a broad range of options. It’s also important to note that the workforce landscape is constantly shifting—industries can grow and shrink rapidly, and new technologies can explode the need for certain roles or make other functions obsolete, seemingly overnight. Too many communities do not have access to the tools they need to stay abreast of these changes and, while well-meaning, many nonprofit staff, volunteers, and other community-based mentors are not adequately prepared to serve as career coaches or advisors. Even those who are trained to be career counselors do not have extensive preparation or ongoing professional development (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

Community-based career coaches are often individuals who witness these gaps and are determined to close them. While community coaches can have profound influence on individual young people, even greater impact is possible by activating key leadership levers.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE AND FROM EXPERIENCE

Many people find their way to community-based career coaching out of a sense of responsibility to the people and places that helped them grow into the person they are today. They often express a desire to “give back” to their communities, and support young people the way a youth worker, mentor, or teacher once supported them. This kind of earnest, authentic engagement can be particularly effective when career coaches share aspects of their identity or lived experience with the young people they serve. Coaches in this context understand from first-hand experience that everyone has a role in ensuring young people are positioned for success. In this respect, community-based career coaches can not only provide leadership through acting as role models, advocates, and mentors, but by championing a culture of career preparedness within the community.



A key way community-based coaches demonstrate leadership is by acting as role models. This is important since young people begin to rule out unfamiliar career opportunities in middle school. As the saying goes, “you can’t be what you don’t see.” This phrase is attributed to Marian Wright Edelman, a Black American activist who founded the Children’s Defense Fund. Edelman, who grew up in South Carolina during segregation, graduated at the top of her class at Spelman, a historically Black college, before going on to Yale Law School and, later, becoming the first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar. The expression emphasizes the importance of people who share aspects of a young person’s identity or lived experience—i.e., role models—as a factor that can expand their sense of possibility.

While community-based coaches who have a long-standing relationship with people and institutions within their community may enjoy a level of credibility, even coaches who are not established can build trust by showing up consistently with authenticity, modeling vulnerability as a strength, and leading with curiosity. We will talk more about this in the section below, as well as the Student Support section of this playbook.

EXAMINE YOUR “WHY”

Community-based career coaches have an opportunity to provide leadership in their communities by intentionally showing up in a way that demonstrates their commitment to preparing young people for the futures they desire and deserve. Part of establishing their influence and credibility, however, will rely on their ability to communicate not only a compelling need for the work, but their personal motivation. As their work progresses and they must make decisions about their approach, actions, resources, and partnerships, a good touchstone for community-based career coaches is the question, “Whom does this serve?” If the answer is not the young people they coach, they should examine that decision more closely to determine if there may be a better, more youth-centered course.



Note About Accountability: Kelly Hayes, co-author of “Let This Radicalize You,” shares these Self-Reflections for Organizers/Leadership Inquiry. While these were written for community organizers participating in mass movements (and your work may not currently feel of this scale), the spirit of these questions apply to the work of community-based career coaches.

- 1 Whom am I accountable to?
- 2 What community consents to my leadership when I assume it?
- 3 How do those interactions function?
- 4 Am I sure the people I’m accountable to have a traversable path to intervention/interruption/dialogue, when they feel differently than I do?
- 5 Who helps me reel myself in when I assume harmful attitudes, or replicate structural oppressions, internally or externally?
- 6 Whom do I turn to for counsel/support in holding myself accountable when I have caused harm?
- 7 Do I acknowledge that we all both experience and cause harm?
- 8 Do I believe that mass movements are grounded in relationships, and if so, am I working to build those relationships, or simply attempting to enforce ideas?

In addition to exploring their “why,” community-based career coaches should understand their own relationship to the idea of “career.” You might consider the following:

- What does it mean to you to have a career? How did you learn this? What messages did you get when you were the age of the young people you work with about careers and what it means to be “successful”?
- Were any of these messages rooted in deficit thinking because of an aspect of your identity? In other words, did you understand that some things were possible while others were not, based on who you were?
- What narratives are you carrying about the young people with whom you work? Do they convey limiting or deficit-based messages to young people (whether you intend them to or not)? If so, what can you do to disrupt that?



“Narratives” are the stories we tell and share, often as a way of recounting or making sense of an experience. They can be our own stories (i.e., personal narratives) or stories we have heard from or about others. When we hear a similar story over and over, we may start to internalize messages—both positive and negative, and implicit or explicit—the story sends. For example, a young person who hears a deficit-based narrative about themselves, their school, or their community may start to develop a sense that there is something inherently wrong with them or the communities they are a part of, which can have a limiting effect on what they think is possible for their futures. Conversely, students who are exposed to positive narratives about these same things may feel a sense of community or personal pride and confidence, which can boost academic, career, and life outcomes.

Once you’ve reflected on your own journey, it’s time to craft the personal narrative that you will share as a way of building engagement from other members of the community—particularly young people. This exercise is not so much about modeling an ideal career path, but sharing your experience with others in a way that might encourage, inspire, or motivate them. Importantly, your story is an opportunity to connect more deeply with the young people you serve by demonstrating vulnerability and authenticity. In addition, there may be parts of your story that are particularly resonant with young people who share elements of your identity or lived experience.

While it might be tempting to only share the high points of your story, it’s important to share how you navigated the harder times. Research shows that talking about overcoming setbacks can be one of the most important things adults share about their career journeys, as it can cultivate a growth mindset—the belief that [“intelligence and abilities can be developed over time”](#) (Dweck & Yeager, 2020)—and mitigate young people’s fear of failure as well as have positive academic effects. We will discuss how community-based coaches can locate a mentor mindset, and the relationship between mentoring and cultivating a growth mindset in young people in the Professional Preparation section of this playbook.

LEAD WITH CURIOSITY

Skillfully weaving the internal work of leadership to a community-level impact takes time and requires trust; it also must eventually engage in a meaningful way with input from members of the community, especially young people. As reflected in Kelly Hayes’ questions for organizers, this work must be rooted in relationships, not simply about advancing a personal agenda. Community-based career coaches must lead with wonder: What does “community-based coaching” mean to their *community*? Who is included in that community?



What are *their* concerns and aspirations? One way to collect answers to these questions is to hold a focus group or one-on-one interviews with young people you work with.



Try This!

There are many ways to collect community input as you are building your community-based coaching narrative and practice. If you are planning to introduce career coaching in an existing community group, school, or organizational space, you may be able to collect feedback through one-on-one conversations or surveys during regular meeting times. If you do not have this kind of existing space, you may consider holding focus groups. Focus groups are not without challenges, however; successful focus groups can entail conducting robust recruitment, offering participant incentives like food or small gift cards, careful scheduling, and developing an effective protocol. For additional insight, see the [“Best Practices in Research & Evaluation: Focus Groups”](#) protocol from Education Training Research (ETR), the evidence brief, [“Best Practices for Planning & Facilitating Anti-Oppressive Focus Groups”](#) from YouthREX, and this [sample focus group format](#) from You for Youth.

Be prepared for and willing to embrace the answers to these questions to be different from what you expect. A useful response for those moments is one of the Center for Courage & Renewal Circle of Trust Touchstones: “When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.”

Wonder also plays another role here: Middle school aged youth are in a stage of brain development that allows for greater exploration and planning, which make this an optimal time for broad career exploration and purpose development (Lammers & Mathers, 2024). Tap into their natural sense of curiosity and elevate their aspirations and wonderings about the future. This can help develop a youth-driven vision that both appeals to young people and inspires hope across your community and among the broader career development ecosystem. A successful community-based career coach listens to and incorporates the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, but should always return to an approach that centers relationships and young people.

ADVANCE A SHARED VISION

In addition to young people and, where possible, their families, community-based career coaches should seek to connect and organize with other individuals who already serve or are interested in serving as coaches (or other roles within the career-readiness ecosystem, like school and nonprofit teams, elected officials, or workforce partners). Such an approach is known as a Public Narrative model, which is a powerful tool to build a collective narrative of why career readiness is important in your community.



([EcoFaith Recovery](#))

While drafting the narrative, community-based career coaches and their collaborators should be reflecting on the earlier questions of who is served and centered in the story, and whether it responds to their self-identified needs and aspirations. This work is iterative and ongoing; as noted above, be prepared for and receptive to having to adapt this vision based on feedback you receive at any point along the way.



Learning Landscape

What young people need to know and be able to do

Exploring diverse ways of being and ways of knowing: Identify tools, resources, and ways to align with other partners that support young people in the development of an individualized plan for their future.

If the various partners—schools, community-based orgs, and workforce and public agencies—engaged in middle school career-readiness initiatives make up an “ecosystem,” bringing all of their work into view provides us with a Learning Landscape. Taking stock of this landscape will allow you to understand what kinds of experiences youth are having, what other activities are happening and where, and what the anticipated or hoped-for outcomes may be. What may be harder to glean is *how* these initiatives are constructed, the approach used to carry them out, and the values and vision that underscore the work. Especially for coaches not connected to an organization or without a background in education, this landscape can seem unfamiliar and intimidating. At the same time, an engaged and curious Community-based Career coach has an opportunity to explore these activities to identify tools, resources, and ways to collaborate with aligned career-readiness practitioners to better support young people.

One way of thinking about this exploration is uncovering the “ways of being” (what are the behavioral norms and expectations that inform practices) and “ways of knowing” (what are the ideas or knowledge that are valued and taught) that exist across members of the landscape: in other words, what is the *culture* of career readiness like in these sites?

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ALREADY HAVE SKILLS

Before embarking on this expedition, remember this: while all of the systems working toward career-readiness outcomes seek to teach young people something or help them grow in some way, none of them are starting from scratch. Young people already have their own ways of being and knowing—about themselves, about careers, and about the world around them—often rooted in their families, communities, and culture. While this is sometimes referred to as “social capital,” Tara Yosso (2005) argues that views of social capital “place value on a very narrow range of assets and characteristics” and overemphasize “one’s accumulated assets and resources” (p. 77). Often, this results in privileged communities and their youth being seen as having “high” social capital, while poorer communities, often predominantly communities of color and/or those in rural areas, are seen as having “low” social capital.

Yosso offers identifying and celebrating “cultural wealth” as an alternative to this deficit thinking about communities of color in particular, noting that there is an “array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (p. 69). Yosso continues, “Centering the research lens on the experiences of People of Color in critical historical context reveals accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color” and describes “at least 6 forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and



resistant” that communities of color have in abundance and use to “survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression.”

In urban settings in particular, community-based coaches and other youth workers can be key partners in the educational landscape in part because they embody these forms of cultural wealth and tend to reflect the young people they serve better than educators and other adults in traditional school spaces.¹ Youth workers can be particularly supportive for young people who have experienced disengagement and/or pushout from their school communities (Baldridge, 2019, p. 10), and they can provide opportunities for youth of color to be mentored by someone with a shared identity and lived experience. In these instances, identity development experiences can support healing, affirmation, and cultural pride (which is tied to increased “academic resourcefulness” and career aspirations; Lee et al., 2022). We will revisit this in the Student Support section of this playbook.

LEVERAGE COMMON SCHOOL-BASED TOOLS

As mentioned in the Introduction (Why Career Readiness in the Middle Grades?), most career preparation for young people in the U.S. takes place in schools. While the extent to which career development is taking place and the manner in which these activities are happening in a given school varies greatly—even within school districts, let alone from community to community or state to state—there are a few key similarities and common tools.

→ [Advance CTE’s career cluster framework](#); this [Guidebook](#) may be a helpful place to start.

ICAPs are one of the most used tools. Many states require ICAPs as a high school graduation requirement, while they are encouraged but not required in others. At least 38 states have implemented ICAPs, and 21 states have mandated them, according to Advance CTE’s [Implementing ICAPs at Scale](#). As described in the Principal Playbook of this series, ICAPs guide students, advisors, and families in exploring career, academic, and postsecondary opportunities. They typically focus on:

- **Self-Awareness:** Understanding personal strengths, interests, and values
- **College and Career Awareness:** Exploring different career paths and post-secondary options
- **Academic Planning:** Developing a plan for out-of-school learning and future (high school) coursework and beyond

¹ Precise data on the racial demographic of youth workers is hard to come by for several reasons, including high turnover at nonprofit organizations (where youth work often takes place) and high regional variation. Youth work is also generally understudied (Baldridge, 2019), and workforce studies typically include youth workers in the broad category of “childcare,” making isolation of youth worker data challenging.



- **Financial Literacy:** Understanding the financial aspects of education and careers
- At the middle school level, ICAPs are particularly useful to help students understand the relevance of school by connecting to interests, skills, self-exploration, and high school plans. As students further develop their ICAPs, they can make more informed decisions about high school and postsecondary education in pursuit of career and life goals. This makes them more likely to graduate high school, complete post-secondary education, and pursue careers meaningful to them (Solberg et al., 2022). See more in the [2022 Condition of Career Readiness Report](#), including an interactive tool you can use to see if your state uses an individualized planning tool.



Try This!

Now that you've read a bit about ICAPs, you might be interested in trying to adapt the tool to use in a community-based setting. This [template](#) from the State of Vermont Agency of Education may be a good starting point. While this [checklist from](#) the U.S. Department of Labor outlines the features of a common high school ICAP (it uses the term Individualized Learning Plan), this could help you support students who are in or preparing to transition to high school.



It Worked!

In Boston Public Schools, students begin engaging in career readiness as early as the 6th grade using an Individualized Learning Plan called MyCAP (My Career & Academic Plan). One of the activities in the 8th grade MyCAP is [High School 101](#), which helps students plan for the transition. You can view the [full MyCAP scope and sequence](#) for the 2024-25 school year, with links to lessons and other resources for middle grades (6th, 7th, and 8th) and high school students. The U.S. Department of Education's National Blue Ribbon Schools highlights a [middle school ICAP in Oklahoma](#) and in [Missouri](#).

Most schools refer to college and career readiness as "CCR" or sometimes college, career, and life readiness (CCLR). To get a sense of what career preparation is happening at schools in your community, you can search your local district and/or school's websites for these terms. Many schools, particularly those that use ICAPs, use CCLR platforms, such as Naviance and Xello. In some cases, your local district or school may have an option for a community account on these platforms, which is worth exploring.

Another common tool schools, districts, and state education agencies often have is what's called a "Portrait of a Graduate" (also sometimes called "Portrait of a Learner," "Profile of a Learner," or "Vision of a Graduate") that advances



a shared vision for “the skills and competencies that a community agrees its young people need to thrive in learning, work, and life.” Check district/state websites to see if there are existing metrics with which you can align your practice. For more on these tools, check out the School-based Coach and Nonprofit Leader playbook of this series.

FIND OUT WHO ELSE IN YOUR COMMUNITY IS DOING CAREER-READINESS WORK

In addition to schools, do some research to find out what other career-readiness initiatives are happening in your community. How might you partner with them to increase your access to youth-facing career development resources and/or professional learning opportunities? How might you pool resources, provide peer support, and plan advocacy efforts? Consider a community relationship mapping exercise. These can range from simple sketches to more complex diagrams constructed through online platforms (e.g., [EDraw](#), [Visible Network Labs](#)) and they can be done collaboratively with other stakeholders (including young people). This resource from Palm Beach County Office of Community Revitalization provides guidance on [asset and neighborhood mapping](#), as well as a few examples of different ways to map community assets that you may find helpful.



Try This!

In the community mapping model shown below, originated by the City School, participants draw a set of five concentric circles. At the center are the young people you serve. The next closest circle are your current/existing allies and supporters, i.e., your “inner circle.” The next level are organizations, people, and programs that support the young people you serve, but are not quite in the inner circle. They may need more time and relationship building to move closer, or you may not have vetted them enough to know if they are an aligned support. The next circle is for organizations, people, and programs that you are not currently connected to but seem promising (the City School labeled this ring “don’t know but seem cool”). The final circle they labeled “strangers and/or adversaries.” After brainstorming with young people, families, and other community collaborators to identify where on this map various connections might fall, the City School posed the following questions: Are there any folks in the outer circles you’d like to bring in closer? How might you do that? Are there any folks in the innermost circles who maybe shouldn’t be? What might you do to change that relationship?



(Allen, B., 2020)

CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF AI

Throughout the education sector, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has become an important consideration. While there are numerous types of publicly available AI models, a common one that can be used to sort through and quickly return information from large datasets is called “generative AI.” Career development practitioners are beginning to experiment with using generative AI to assist young people with tasks such as drafting resumes and cover letters to career exploration and conducting job searches. In some cases, particularly for young people in communities that do not have robust career-readiness supports, this can be a powerful tool. At the same time, generative AI has been known to replicate racial, ethnic, and gender biases and “hallucinate,” or return information that is not factual or a mischaracterization of the data source from which it was generated. If you plan to use generative AI to support young people’s career-readiness activities, be sure to review and discern the validity of the content it produces.



Try This!

Despite some concerns related to AI-powered tools in the education landscape, many organizations are harnessing this technology to assist young people in career development. American Student Assistance (ASA) has developed [Futurescape](#), an interactive, “mobile-first experience” (meaning it was designed for optimal use on mobile devices such as cell phones, which may make it more appealing to young people) that allows youth to explore careers depicted as planets across a vast universe. ASA has also designed a platform called [EvolveMe](#), that allows users to [build a social media profile](#) (they describe it as “a professional profile for Gen Z”) that is shareable with colleges and employers.





Professional Preparation

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

Setting community-based career coaches up for success: Deepen professional knowledge in career development practices and relationship-centered approaches.

As stated earlier in this playbook, while many talented youth workers have a knack for helping young people plan for and reach their career and academic goals, being a quality career coach isn't something one should attempt to "just do." Even those who have strong relational skills should seek to continuously improve their practices, and career coaching specifically requires an ongoing effort to stay abreast of local, state, and national changes to workforce and employment trends, policies, and areas of opportunity. Professional preparation for community-based career coaches is about recognizing career coaching as both a **science** and an **art**; coaches must continuously commit to deepening professional knowledge of career development practices *and* relationship-centered approaches, including being willing to examine and disrupt potential limiting narratives and personal biases.

The Art & Science of Community-based Career Coaching

Preferred experience includes:

- Lived experience shared with the young people they serve
- Identity shared with the young people they serve

Preferred skills include:

- Relational skills to provide individual, group, and community supports
- Skills in coaching, including in self-determination, efficacy, and resourcefulness

Prerequisite knowledge includes:

- Deep understanding of their communities and how to partner with them (including young people and their families, educators, and their support networks)
- Broad understanding of career development work, including all the industry and career clusters, the local labor market, and the range of pathways to accomplish career goals



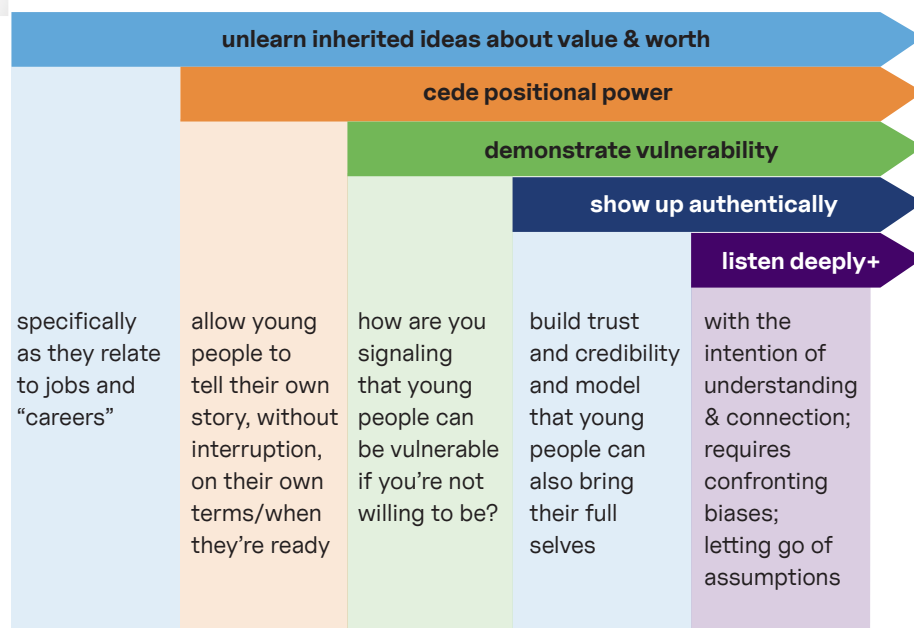
START WITH SELF

Community-based coaches often rely on their own lived experience to provide career guidance to young people in their programs. While this can be beneficial, particularly for young people with whom coaches share aspects of identity or lived experience, our own understanding of the career landscape could be outdated, limited, or biased. It's important for community-based coaches to examine the ideas they have inherited or learned for these pitfalls. In addition, even coaches with shared identity, lived experience, or an existing relationship with a young person must take care not to map their own experiences onto them; it is important that career coaches not assume they know what a young person sees as their strengths, for example, or what kinds of fields in which they might be interested in working.



It Worked!

In 2024, the Coalition for Career Development (CCD) Center launched the pilot of its Community-Centered Career Coaching initiative in Greater Boston in partnership with direct-service staff in community-connected nonprofits and agencies serving young adults. A key part of this program was the design of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) that allowed staff from participating agencies to collaborate across agencies, share their areas of expertise, and develop collective best practices. During the PLC, participants received training on an asset-based, culturally relevant career coaching model for social mobility. The training, rooted in the principles of critical mentoring and using curriculum adapted from the National Career Development Association, focused on disrupting limiting beliefs and narratives while equipping coaches to guide young adults toward employment success aligned with self-identified interests and strengths. Participants were trained in the Witnessing Young People framework, which is rooted in self-reflection and unlearning inherited ideas about value and worth, particularly related to careers.



(Allen, B., 2024)

The Witness framework articulates robust career coaching as characterized by the internal work of practitioners (unlearning inherited ideas about value and worth, ceding positional power) combined with external/visible work of practitioners (demonstrating vulnerability and showing up authentically) and collaborative work between youth and practitioners (listening deeply “plus,” signaling that listening is just the beginning of the work). Note that the last stage in the model requires confronting biases and letting go of assumptions, which is essentially the work of the first stage, reflecting the iterative nature of career coaching.

LOCATE THE MENTOR MINDSET

It may be helpful to think of Community-Based Coaching as a relationship that is ultimately grounded in mentorship. Mentorship has been a part of how societies learn and grow across cultures for eras: people with more experience, skills, and talents take someone—often but not always younger—under their wing to nurture them to get to where they want to be. While coaching and mentoring are not *technically* the same thing, adults across a variety of roles— from teacher to advisor to coach—who wish to support young people in a culturally responsive, relationship-centered, asset-based way may find it useful to adapt what is called a “mentoring mindset.” As defined by MENTOR National, a mentoring mindset “beyond simply creating a culture that fosters mentoring relationships, but also structures mentoring in a helpful way, including



being constructive, respecting difference and diversity, and cultivating positive progress” (check out [this video](#) for more).

It has been established that engaging with a mentor can support young people’s personal, academic, and career goals. One factor that enables these kinds of positive outcomes is when both the mentor and young person have a [growth mindset](#). Simply put, a growth mindset is the belief a person has that putting in effort (e.g., studying or practicing) will lead to learning and growth over time; in other words, a belief that they have the capacity to learn, change, and achieve desired outcomes. Having a growth mindset is tied to resilience, problem solving, and motivation, all of which can contribute to positive academic and career outcomes. Adults who model growth mindsets for young people, as mentors often do through encouragement and believing in their potential, support these characteristics in the youth they serve.

Continuing to lean into career coaching as a form of mentorship, another important factor is adults’ willingness to co-create the coaching relationship with a young person with whom they work. Mentoring is not something one does *to* a young person, but *with* them. Similarly, a core principle of career coaching is that coaches do not simply tell young people what they should do, but use facilitation skills and curated experiences to help young people arrive at their own answers about what they want for their futures. It is commonly understood that mentorship has four distinct phases: initiation, cultivation, transformation, and closure. It may be helpful to think of your work with young people as advancing through these stages as well and explore ways to co-create the coaching relationship at each stage:

1

initiation/beginning: what do you want our time together to be like? what are your hopes for this coaching relationship?

2

cultivation/nurturing: what is the best way for me to show up for you? in what ways can you commit to showing up?

3

growth/transformation: what do you notice has changed, for each of us, because of this coaching relationship.

4

transition/closure: how should we celebrate our time together? what supports do you need if you are transitioning out of this coaching relationship.



“A powerful question is a meaningful tool that evokes self-awareness, challenges assumptions, and invites deep thinking or reflection”

Sharon Givens,
Past President, National
Career Development
Association



Try This!

Reflect on the chart above. How could you engage young people in co-creating experiences at each of these stages? For additional support developing a mentor mindset, check out [this map of MENTOR's national affiliates](#), organizations across the U.S. that provide technical assistance and capacity-building support. (Allen, B. 2024)

UNDERSTAND THE CAREER COACHING PRACTICE

Career coaching combines two domains of knowledge: coaching and career development. Understanding the skills associated with each of these domains is critical to performing in the capacity of a career coach. While full career coaching training requires a more extensive discussion, below we outline some basics. Key skills associated with coaching include:

- **Active Listening:** Develop techniques for listening effectively and empathetically to young people.
- **Powerful Questioning:** Develop the ability to ask open-ended, thought-provoking questions to young people. See MINT's [Overview of Motivational Interviewing](#) and the Universal Coach Institute [Techniques and Examples for Motivational Interviewing](#).
- **Goal Setting:** Guide young people to set realistic, achievable career goals.
- **Action Planning:** Assist young people in creating actionable steps to reach their goals. Massachusetts Institute of Technology offers an open learning class on [Problem-solving](#).
- **Accountability:** Keep young people on track and motivated throughout their career journey by providing milestones and benchmarks for success.

SEEK TECHNICAL TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

There are a number of opportunities for coaches to participate in training and professional development through webinars, workshops, training programs, conferences, and events. Many organizations and coaching professionals offer webinars on various coaching topics, providing convenient and often affordable learning opportunities. These can cover specific coaching skills, new methodologies, ethical considerations, or business development for coaches. The [National Career Development Association](#) (NCDA) is the largest and most well-known career development organization of career development; it offers professional membership, [training opportunities](#), and pathways leading to [industry-recognized credentialing](#).



Try This!

Labor Market Worksheet: It's important for career development professionals (including community-based career coaches) to understand the labor market landscape and how quickly it can shift. Dr. Sharon Givens, former president of the NCDA, advises career coaches to reflect on these questions every 90 days, as the labor market can change quickly and often (i.e., this is not a one-time exercise).

- Who are the top three employers in your state?
- What is the current employment rate in your region? How does it compare to the national average?
- What are some potential barriers to employment in your area?
- Identify the top three industries in your area that are currently experiencing growth? What factors contribute to this growth?
- What occupations are in the greatest demand in your state? City?
 - What skills or qualifications are employers seeking for these roles?
 - What are the projected job growth rates over the next 5-10 years?
 - What factors might influence these projections?
 - What education or training is typically required for entry?
 - Are there any certifications or licenses that are particularly valuable?

You can also find labor market data using the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) tool on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website. It allows you to search occupations using filters such as salary and education requirements, and easily find the fastest growing occupations. This [teacher's guide](#) will help you understand how to navigate the tool.

Given how quickly and how much the workforce landscape can change, this may seem like an unnecessary exercise for middle school students. However, identifying labor market trends can help career coaches guide young people to relevant programs and activities, inform aligned high school selection in districts where some secondary schools have designated pathway programs, and lead to work-based learning opportunities. Still unsure how to introduce the concept of labor markets to young people? This middle school activity from the California Career Resource Network, California Department of Education, [What's the Market for My Labor?](#), is designed for 5th graders!



FORM OR JOIN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

As with any profession, regular participation in learning and networking opportunities provides opportunities for community-based coaches to refresh and reset, which can go a long way toward preventing burnout and sustaining your enthusiasm for your work. In addition to developing [self-care practices](#), coaches can often find support through joining or building a Community of Practice. Communities of Practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wegner et al., 2002). This concept is social learning theory; as stated by Mass Mentoring Partnership (2025), “learning is a social process, where individuals learn best by actively participating in a group with shared interests, experiences, and practices, allowing them to collaborate, share knowledge, and develop their skills together through ongoing interaction and mutual support.”



Try This!

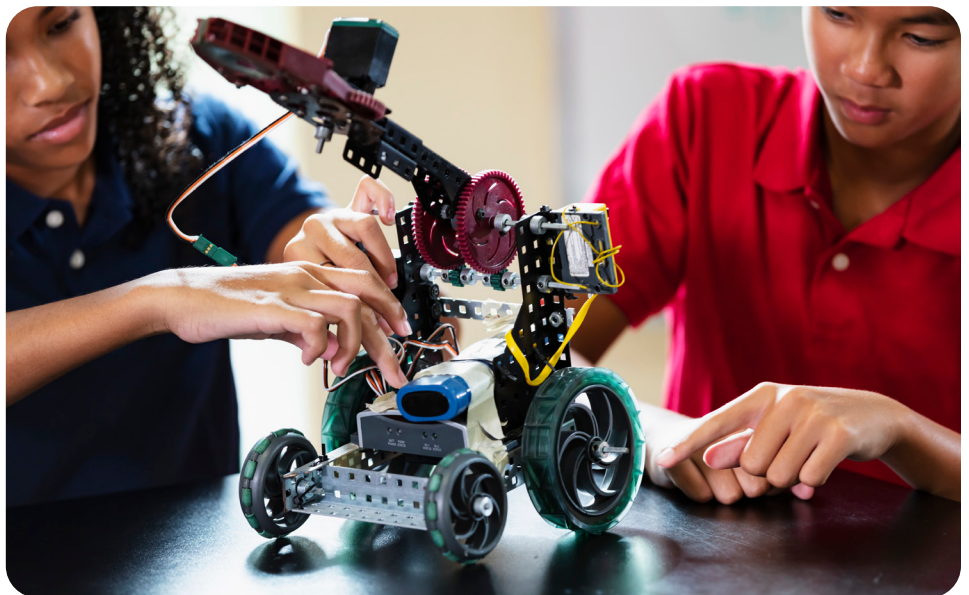
If you’re interested in joining a Community of Practice but can’t find one, consider organizing with other organizations to start one. The Social Change Agency has created a resource you might find useful: [How to create and manage a community of practice or peer network](#).

Being connected to a network of practitioners allows you to tap into different perspectives, resources, and opportunities for yourself, your students, and your community. Do some digging to investigate the partnerships of the sending schools of your students; there may be local Educational Service Organizations, after school programs, community centers, houses of worship, and art programs that also support the students with whom you work. Reach out to them to build or grow your network to include other career-readiness professionals. Attend local workforce development meetings or industry-specific career-readiness events to network with others who serve youth in your community. Your city’s website may have a list of meetings and other opportunities to connect with career development professionals, and may offer training and other resources. You can also use LinkedIn or social media to connect with fellow coaches, educators, and nonprofits focused on career development.



It Worked!

The City of Boston's Office of Youth Engagement and Advancement (OYEA) works to provide a platform for young people in the city to drive the changes and programs they want to see. In addition to holding events and providing resources directly to young people, OYEA convenes a partner network that meets bimonthly "to connect, network, share resources and opportunities, meet with City leaders, and discuss topics and issues facing the city's young population"—including career readiness. Explore whether your local municipality has a youth engagement office, and whether it has a similar network for community partners. Even if it doesn't have a partner network, it may hold meetings or trainings that are open to community members that can be a good way to gain professional skills and connect with other mission-aligned professionals and programs.





Everyone Engaged

Whom to engage to effect change and sustain effort

Elevating community wealth and power: Connect with other community-based coaches, aligned organizations, families, and other community members to build and grow a collective network of support.

While engagement in school begins to decline in the middle grades, young people continue to be engaged participants in community-based programming. As community-based coaches are not beholden to the same types of competing priorities, policies, and practices as school-based staff, they can experiment with programming that might not be possible in school settings and have an opportunity to present career-readiness experiences that may be more culturally relevant and youth-centered. Although it can be helpful, and this playbook advocates for alignment with school-based career-readiness initiatives, community-based career professionals must take care not to simply replicate the programming happening in schools; a balance must be struck whereby practitioners are creating experiences that reinforce positive career-readiness work happening in other parts of a young person's life while offering their own discrete activities that have the “flavor” that makes their programming appeal to young people (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

Community-based career coaches also need to consider their own engagement with career-readiness initiatives and service providers on a local, state, and national level. Being connected to a network of practitioners allows you to tap into different perspectives, resources, and opportunities. Because of the relational nature of youth work, community-based career coaches can be particularly valuable partners to families, school systems, and other organizations working to cultivate career readiness among young people.

UNDERSTAND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Returning to Yosso's cultural wealth framework, communities are rich in people, traditions, institutions, and relationships that, taken together, are a source of education for its members, including but not limited to young people. Baldrige (2019) captures this through the term “community-based education spaces” and reminds us that “schools are not, have never been, and will never be the only site of learning,” including when it comes to preparing young people for their futures. Adults engaging in youth work in and through connection to after-school programs, out-of-school time settings, faith-based groups, and other youth organizations are one part of a [web of support](#) needed for young people to grow, learn, and thrive.

MEET YOUNG PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Effective student support ensures that all young people have the guidance, tools, and confidence they need to navigate career pathways. This involves



being prepared to deliver services to young people from a range of backgrounds and abilities, and proactively anticipating that the young people you serve may require specific accommodations in order to have a meaningful career coaching experience.

Understanding the young person you are coaching as a complete person means being able to tailor supports to a student's specific needs without reducing the young person to those aspects of their identity that require specialized attention. For example, if the young person you are coaching uses a mobility device, you must determine if activities you have planned will be physically accessible to them. While that young person depends on their mobility device and this is an important consideration, the young person is more than their mobility device; they have other needs and desires that must inform your coaching work as well.

PARTNER WITH FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

The families and caregivers of students can be a powerful influence on a young person's journey toward becoming career-ready. Families and caregivers may be able to provide insight into 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 student once they go onto high school. They are an essential part of an individualized approach to career readiness. Families 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, taking into account their cultural context.

Beyond being a champion for the individual student, the families of the young people you coach are likely to represent a range of careers and can be conduits of connection to employers and potential partners throughout the community. Inviting families into the discussion as thought leaders about the working world can broaden your, and if connected to an organization, your organization's ability to provide opportunities such as tours of local businesses, additional mentorship, and work-based learning (e.g., internships). There are limitless possibilities when students are coming into daily contact with a network of individuals who are experts at being adults in the real world!

Authentic connection and building affirming relationships based on trust is something that community-based mentors and programs do well, often with young people and their families, but also with young people who do not have a supportive family structure. Community based mentors often fill that gap for young people who feel otherwise isolated, unattached, or without close ties to enough adults whom they trust and to provide the support and encouragement they need to believe in themselves and their future. Community-based coaches must become advocates and encourage others to play their part in wrapping their youngest and most vulnerable members in the support and care they need. This includes involving city agencies, schools, funders, employers, and other community organizations and out-of-school programs.



Student Support

How to make sure each young person gets what they need

Showing up with intention and care: Provide holistic support to each young person in developing their unique vision for themselves, their families, and communities.

Effective student support is rooted in relationship and ensuring that all young people have the guidance, tools, and confidence they need to navigate career pathways. This involves being prepared to deliver services to young people from a range of backgrounds and abilities, and proactively anticipating that the young people you serve may require specific accommodations in order to have a meaningful career coaching experience. Student support isn't only about accommodations, however. To provide effective student support, community-based career coaches also need to provide holistic guidance, recognize and celebrate progress, and foster student efficacy and agency.

FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIP

Building a trusting, youth-centered relationship will make engaging young people in meaningful, personalized career coaching more attainable.

FOSTER YOUTH EFFICACY AND AGENCY

According to the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) model, young people develop ideas about what is possible and what they are interested in based on learning experiences. Community-based career coaches have an opportunity to broaden what young people think is possible for their future by 1) working to understand the past and/or ongoing experiences young people have had, and 2) being intentional about the kinds of learning experiences they offer them.

While the full [SCCT model](#) is complex, the image below presents a very simplified overview. Essentially, young people have formal and informal learning experiences that can affect their efficacy (their belief in their ability to do something); outcome expectations (what young people believe is possible); and personal goals in both positive and negative ways. This, in turn, informs their career interests and related choices.

The following questions may help community-based career coaches to understand the kinds of learning experiences young people have had, as well as the impact of these experiences on their current efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals:

- 1 What experiences have you had that shaped your ideas about what you are good at? Have any experiences led you to believe that you are “bad” at something?



- 2 What experiences have you had that formed your ideas about work? For example, what's a "good" or "bad" job, and how did you come to believe that? Are there any jobs that you think are "right" or "wrong" for you? How did you come to believe that?

Based on your conversations with young people, next reflect on the following questions:

- 1 Do you share elements of identity and/or lived experience with the young people you serve? How might that help you reinforce or disrupt young people's ideas of what jobs are "right" or "wrong" for them?
- 2 What opportunities do you provide for young people to access additional role models/mentors who share elements of their identity and/or lived experience? Do these individuals offer an opportunity to reinforce or disrupt young people's ideas of what jobs are "right" or "wrong" for them?
- 3 What experiences (positive or negative) might youth have had that triggered emotional or physiological reactions? How might your program focus on experiences that produce positive reactions, and limit those that lead to negative feelings?

A young person's sense of their ability to take charge of their lives is sometimes called "agency." Like self-efficacy, high youth agency is correlated with better academic and career outcomes. Research has found that shifting to an approach that encourages the development of peer support, "promote[s] autonomy and psychological empowerment by purposefully identifying opportunities for choice-making and independent action, self-advocacy by teaching the student how to request help from peers when needed, and social valorization by highlighting the student's strengths and fostering conditions in which peer relationships can grow and flourish" (Brock et al., 2020, 166).

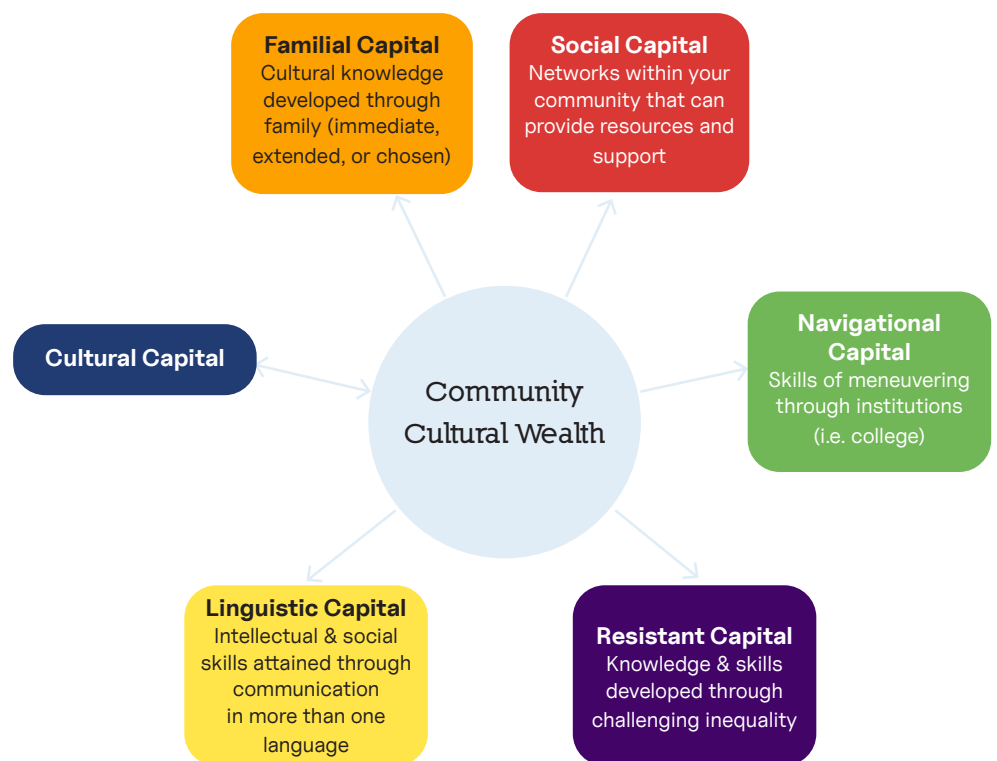


Resource Readiness

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

Setting middle-grade youth up for success: Understand what resources young people need to support their career journeys and develop strategies for connecting young people to available resources in their communities.

As a community-based career coach, Resource Readiness refers both to an understanding of the resources available to young people in a community and whether those resources are accessible and aligned with the interests and needs of the young people you coach. As well, it refers to the resources you need in order to serve as an effective coach. As you review the materials below and begin to gather resources, continue to reflect on what resources young people are requesting, what resources you and/or young people have access to already, and where there are gaps. Where possible, explore leveraging existing partnerships or establishing new ones that could open up additional resources. Remember: Don't overlook the cultural wealth that your community possesses! Below is a depiction of cultural wealth from Community Cultural Wealth Theory; T.J. Yosso, 2005.



Source: San Francisco State University; retrieved from <https://urbanuniversity.wordpress.com/2020/07/27/leveraging-students-community-cultural-wealth-moving-from-deficit-to-asset-based-approaches-to-student-success-by-christel-perkins-ed-d-and-andrea-rodriguez/>



UNDERSTAND WHAT RESOURCES YOUNG PEOPLE NEED

We will share some curricular models later in this section, as well as some considerations for selecting activities, lessons, and/or entire programs you may want to use in your coaching work. Before getting started, however, it's important to recall some of the work described in earlier sections around gathering feedback from young people and their families; centering their interests, aspirations, and needs; and designing experiences that respond to these inputs. It is also important to continue to examine your own biases to ensure you are not selecting and using deficit-based materials that send limiting narratives to young people based on assumptions (e.g., that you already know what a young person's strengths and interests are), outdated ideas (e.g., certain kinds of careers are only for people of a specific gender or racial identity), and deficit thinking (e.g., that young people from low opportunity backgrounds are not capable of attaining certain goals).

While there is no one-size-fits all career-readiness curriculum, the chart below presents a non-exhaustive list of some basic elements of a career-readiness program and some key topics that should be included.

Starting with Self: → Personal Identity (Who am I?) → Community & Cultural Identity (What is my role in community?) → Future Identity (What do I want for my future self?)	→ Self discovery → Personal values exploration → Skills and strengths assessment → Goal setting → Action planning
Broad Career Exploration	→ Career interest inventories → Researching career paths
Workplace Norms	→ Behavioral norms → Communication → Online presence
Essential Skills	→ Time management → Teamwork/collaboration → Problem-solving → Conflict resolution
Job Seeking	→ Resume and cover letters, email communications → Researching organization for value alignment → Job search platforms → Networking basics → Interviewing → Salary negotiation



In addition to thinking about what kinds of narratives you hold broadly about the idea of “career,” when selecting resources, you should also be thinking about what messages the materials themselves convey. For example, what do the resources say about what it means to be “professional,” what norms are upheld through terms like “workplace etiquette,” and how is “success” defined and measured? One way of thinking about these concepts is to recognize how dominant workplace norms (i.e., what is often called “professionalism”) can be described through the lens of culture and through the metaphor of navigation. In your work as a community-based career coach, how might you help young people tap into their existing ways of being and knowing related to navigating new landscapes—for example, starting a new school—in a way that allows them to adapt to a new culture while maintaining a strong sense of self? Another useful metaphor might be fluency; how might you position lessons on workplace norms as similar to learning a new language? Learning a new language is an asset, and does not mean you stop speaking your first language; similarly, a young person who is learning new ways of being to help them navigate a workplace should not lose or devalue their existing ways of being, which may feel more aligned with their authentic self.

BUILD YOUR CAREER RESOURCES TOOLBOX

A robust career-readiness curriculum ensures that students gain practical skills, industry knowledge, and a clear sense of their career paths. For middle- grades students, the curriculum should balance self-discovery, academic learning, and hands-on experience while being adaptable to individual student needs and local workforce demands. Yet many community-based coaches who have traditionally operated in an informal way might not use or think of what they do as having a defined “curriculum.”

While using a clearly articulated, well-designed curriculum supports the delivery of consistent programming that allows young people and coaches to hone skills and better understand their potential impact, it may help community-based coaches to think of curriculum as less of a collection of lessons and assignments (as we typically may) and more of a set of experiences they provide for the young people they serve. In addition, there are many freely available career-readiness curricular tools online—perhaps overwhelmingly so. Ideally, whether using an existing curriculum or designing original experiences, all tools or curricular materials should be vetted for youth interest and relevance. Further, some curricula are not culturally responsive and in fact could promote harmful narratives that lead to entrenched ideas among young people about what careers are—and are not—possible for them.



Try This!

Consider the following as you search to build your career-readiness toolbox.

- **Consider youth voice and choice.** When considering a potential resource, consult with the young people you serve. Does it spark their interest? Does it address their needs? Is it accessible to them?
 - What original curricular materials and career-readiness experiences might you design in partnership with the young people you serve?
- **Develop strategies for connecting young people to available resources.** If you work for or partner with an organization with existing career development programming, explore whether there are resources that would be appropriate for you to use in your work as a community-based coach.
 - There may be a need to adapt the curriculum if, for example, it is not possible to implement it in a one-on-one setting or if you do not have access to the platform that hosts it or full implementation materials and tools.
 - TIP: Some schools may have designated credentials that allow community support members to access parts of the curriculum and/or curricular resources that are designed specifically to be implemented outside of school settings. Do a little research to find out if this is an option for you!
- Whether you are using or adapting an existing curriculum or creating your own programming, **consider whether it is developmentally and age appropriate and take care not to introduce/uphold biases.**
 - For understanding developmental stages and how to determine if programming is age-appropriate, see the resources provided by [Act For Youth in Resources that Support Youth Development](#).
 - For understanding bias/how to vet programming for racial and other forms of equity, see the resources provided by CCNetwork in [Tools and Guidance for Evaluating Bias in Instructional Materials](#).

Again, there are a plethora of resources available online, and there are more coming online every day. Advances in AI and shifts in workforce needs are fueling new platforms, apps, and other resources, and community-based coaches may feel as though they should simply choose one and run with it. Be mindful, though: there is no one-size-fits-all solution and, as noted earlier, coaches should be particularly discerning about AI-produced resources. Even resources suggested in this playbook—although we reviewed them carefully before including them—should be weighed to determine if they are appropriate for and useful to the young people you serve. ALL means all, but not every tool will work for every young person or coach in every context. Research shows that



the most effective career coaching is highly individualized, so it's worth the time it takes to vet any tool you intend to use with a young person. That said, below are some trusted resources for broad career exploration, which should be a foundational component to any career-readiness program.

- [Roadtrip Nation](#) presents thousands of videos and tools to help young people explore career pathways, and this [Roadmap Tool](#) allows young people to enter interests and find out information about related fields.
- PBS's [Brief but Spectacular](#) video series. Many of these videos focus on career trajectories, navigating setbacks, and switching course. PBS also offers [lesson plans](#) on Brief but Spectacular videos on topics related to Civics & Social Studies, Arts & Culture, and STEM (though not necessarily directly related to career exploration).
- Association for Middle Level Education's (AMLE) [Exploring Career Paths: A Guide for Middle Schoolers \(and the People Who Care About Them\)](#) includes a middle school career exploration playbook filled with activity templates.

CULTIVATE PARTNERSHIPS THAT CAN UNLOCK ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As alluded to throughout this playbook, community-based career coaches do not do their work alone; they rely on partnerships and collaboration from schools, nonprofit organizations, and public and workforce agencies to expand their capacity and align programming toward the collective goal of increasing positive academic and career outcomes for the young people they serve. Another benefit to building strong, cross-sector partnerships is resource sharing. Community-based career coaches should actively seek partnerships with individuals and organizations that could lead to grants, donations, or sponsorships and ensure access to quality resources like computers, internet access, or career-readiness software. For example, you could reach out to a local tech company to inquire whether they offer refurbished laptops or free software licenses to students in need. Staying connected to educational, direct service, and professional organizations that often share information on available resources will ensure that you are aware of what's out there. Other resources that can be unlocked through partnerships are opportunities for young people to tour local businesses and colleges, hear from adults in a range of roles and industries about their career paths, and opportunities for mentorship, role models, job shadowing, and internships. Community-based career coaches should be modeling the networking skills they seek to share with young people to draw in opportunity and access that could support their career readiness.

As discussed in the Student Support section, it is also a good idea to cultivate relationships with organizations and programs that offer direct social services to young people. Young people who are confronting multiple challenges will be less likely to succeed in a career development initiative if they have unmet needs; knowing what supports are available to youth in your community and having



relationships with people and organizations that provide those supports will better enable you to serve as a bridge if and when needed.

CONSIDER MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

Just as community-based career coaches need to consider what young people need when gathering resources, it's also important to consider what young people want for their future selves. A common narrative, particularly in school-based settings, about career and life success includes young people graduating from college. This is for good reason; having a bachelor's degree is correlated with numerous positive outcomes for young people, notably a [higher lifetime income](#). However, there are paths to many meaningful jobs in a number of fields (e.g., in technology, health care, and vocational trades, such as electricians and plumbers) that do not necessarily require a college degree. In addition, there are emerging certification and skills-based credential programs that can help a young person transition into entry level employment opportunities in high-paying fields (e.g., information technology). Tools to check include [Overcoming Obstacles Student Surveys](#) for middle and high school student on durable skill development and a [Goal Setting Tool](#) for students.

As noted in the introduction to this playbook, recent analysis by the Walton Family Foundation of 2024 Gallup poll data found that interest in school among middle and high school students is declining, especially for those who do not plan to attend college. Even if a school does support non-college pathways, this lack of engagement means that many young people may never learn of—let alone access—them. The data indicate that schools do a poor job of connecting young people to non-college options; fewer than one quarter of high school students surveyed reported exposure to “apprenticeship, certificate or vocational programs (23%); jobs that don’t require a college degree (19%); or starting a business (13%).” As you consider resources to use in your coaching work, you should be sure you are not relying on materials that exclude these kinds of options.

At the same time, take care not to assume that a young person you coach is not interested—or capable of—getting a college degree. Again, it's important for community-based coaches to return to the work of examining their potential biases *and* listening deeply to the young people they serve. Among the narratives that a community-based career coach should be disrupting is that there is a “right” and a “wrong” career path, and they should recognize that success for one young person might be defined differently for another—and it might not align with your inherited ideas about what it means to be successful.

Reflection: In your mind, what does it mean to have a “successful” career? How did you learn this? What messages did you receive when you were the age of the young people you serve regarding careers and definitions of success?



Beyond unpacking how you *think* about success, how you *measure* it (i.e., assessment or evaluation) can be a daunting aspect of career readiness for community-based coaches. Effective assessment tools are carefully designed and validated, which is a technical skillset not everyone has. As with other resources, any tool you consider using needs to be vetted for appropriateness. Before using an assessment, check to make sure you understand how the tool defines impact as it might not be the right measure for your work. For example, a tool that simply measures how often or how long coaching is taking place might be important for an organization that needs to meet certain thresholds to receive funding, but community-based coaching is about the quality of experiences, not just frequency of meeting. If you decide to use an existing curriculum—one that you found online or that you are using in collaboration with a school partner, for example—it may have its own assessment tools. Like the curriculum itself, you may be able to adapt it to better capture progress toward the outcomes that matter to you and the young people you coach.

If that is true for you, or in cases where it may be challenging to collect robust data, don't be afraid to use qualitative data. Qualitative research, which “gathers participants’ experiences, perceptions, and behavior” and “answers the how’s and why’s instead of how many or how much,” ([Tenney et al, 2022](#)) can provide powerful insights and moving reflections from young people, family members, and others in the community that can reinforce the vision of your career-readiness programming. It can also uncover areas of growth. Examples of qualitative studies include interviews, focus groups, and surveys.



Try This!

Assess the satisfaction of young people you coach with a brief qualitative survey or interview.

- **Central inquiry:** How do young people feel about the coaching process and the resources they were provided?
- **Approach:** Collect student feedback using short surveys or interviews. Ask open-ended questions like:
 - “What was the most helpful part of the coaching?” or “Because of the coaching I received, I...”
 - “What challenges did you face that we could help with next time?” or “What would you change about the coaching you received?”



- **Engage in reflection:** How do you (as the coach) feel about the impact you're making? What areas do you feel you could improve on? Record your responses to questions that correspond to those in the youth survey, and compare if and how your answers align with feedback from the young people you coached.
- “What was the most impactful thing you did as a coach?” and “Because of my coaching, the young person I coached...”
 - “What were the most challenging parts of coaching?” and “What would you do differently in the future”





Compliance Concerns

How to follow the rules and navigate the system

Preparing youth for their next moves as they navigate becoming work-ready: Keep young people protected and guide them through the basic legal implications of joining the workforce.

In addition to the skills-based work community-based career coaches do with young people to support career readiness, there are some logistical and legal considerations we must explore. As young people move toward increasing independence, they will have to understand and navigate systems related to the world of work. Given the trust-based nature of this work that seeks to engage youth as partners in the coaching relationship, the lines of what is viewed as appropriate can become blurred. While we recognize that we have to set boundaries working with young people, we can wrestle with striking an appropriate balance between maintaining professional norms and standards and establishing a friendly, informal, and trustworthy relationship with youth.

KEEPING YOUTH SAFE

Whenever you are working with young people, the first priority is to protect their safety. While absolute safety cannot actually be guaranteed—and it's important to acknowledge some things that make some people feel safe may be threatening to others (e.g., a person who has experienced police violence might feel threatened by police presence, whereas others might feel protected by it)—adults must take great care to establish relationships, boundaries, and spaces that allow young people to experience [emotional and physical safety](#). Hopefully, you will never have to manage a crisis or face a situation with a young person who is experiencing an unsafe environment; nonetheless, we present some trauma-informed best practices.

- **Setting boundaries.** Establish healthy boundaries between adults and youth and, if applicable (e.g., if you are coaching a group of young people), peer-to-peer boundaries as well, keeping in mind:
 - *Sexual boundaries* protect a person's sexual privacy, including protection from unwelcome touch or comment as it pertains to a person's body or sexuality.
 - *Physical boundaries* protect a person's body, including protection from unwelcome touch or invasion of one's personal space.
 - *Emotional boundaries* protect a person's feelings and behavior.
 - When uncertain about a boundary being crossed:
 - Consult a more experienced and trusted colleague(s).
 - Listen to instinct: something that feels wrong probably is.



- Ask “what is healthiest for the youth involved?” and err on side of caution.
- **Effective communication.** Practices, protocols, and boundaries should:
 - Underscore that safety of youth is a priority.
 - Be clearly stated and applied consistently.
 - Be developed with youth input/buy-in.
 - Be reviewed/assessed periodically (with youth).
- **Preemptively develop language for managing conflicts/crisis.**
 - Managing conflicts is easier when you have a plan.
 - Messaging should balance the privacy of those involved with acknowledging/being honest about what’s happened (youth often already know when something has happened).
 - Communicate updates/outcomes when appropriate and with appropriate audiences.
- **Due diligence.** If a situation arises in which safety has been compromised:
 - Assess the appropriate level of response:
 - Individual.
 - Group.
 - Agency (if applicable).
 - Outside agency, including mandated reporting. (This resource on Mandatory Reporting and Keeping Youth Safe from the Family and Youth Services Bureau provides tips, data, and additional information.)
 - Follow the practices/policies established with youth, even if they say it’s “no big deal.”
 - Address the situation as quickly as possible.
 - Communicate effectively (see previous bullet).
- **After managing crisis/conflict.**
 - Uphold any accountability measures identified.
 - Communicate outcomes appropriately.
 - Assess policy for effectiveness/appropriateness, consider revising based on lessons learned.



- Check in with impacted parties.
- Consider what policies/protocols may prevent similar situations from reoccurring; is anything missing?

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH LABOR LAW

Work-based learning experiences—such as apprenticeships, internships, or job shadowing—can be invaluable. While some programs may offer work-based learning experiences for middle-grades students, community-based coaches need to be aware that youth employment laws and policies often preclude young people in middle school from participating in them. 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. This [interactive map](#) from the U.S. Department of Labor details Child Labor Laws by state, which can help you understand when and how young people can secure work permits.

NAVIGATING REQUIRED WORK DOCUMENTS

Paperwork to get a work permit can often be a barrier, particularly for young people who do not already have a birth certificate, passport, or other forms of identification and proof of citizenship or residency. Online forms (for summer employment opportunities, for example) can be unclear, not intuitive to use, and only available in English. This can be discouraging for some young people, especially if they don't have an adult in their lives who can help them navigate what is ultimately unfamiliar territory. Community-based coaches should research documentation requirements and explore systems/online tools youth may need to use to access work-based learning and employment opportunities so that they are prepared to guide youth through the process.



Try This!

Share The Hire Package video from [Khan Academy](#) with students to help them understand what forms they'll need to provide when hired.



It Worked!

Based in Boston, Apprentice Learning (AL) staff help young people and their families apply to relevant agencies for documents, such as birth certificates and social security cards, needed to obtain state and/federal identification. AL developed a partnership with the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles to create an opportunity for the students to obtain their first state ID, which more easily facilitates eligibility for future jobs opportunities.



BE SURE YOUTH KNOW THEIR WORKER RIGHTS

Try this: Identify and use local resources that can help young people understand their rights and how to be safe. Some agencies provide trainings, such as this [Teens Lead at Work training project](#), and this video training series from the City of Boston on teen worker rights (see [Part 1: Basic Employment Rights](#), [Part 2: Staying Safe and Healthy on the Job](#), [Part 3: Workplace Discrimination](#), and [Part 4: What Should I Do? Preparing for Situations on the Job](#)).



Conclusion

Thinking about the future can be overwhelming, especially for young people. Middle school youth are in a period of intense successive transitions—in the near term, to high school and soon after, to the post-secondary world. Further, in our evolving post-pandemic world and with the rapid growth of AI, the entire workforce is in transition. Within this shifting backdrop, young people need more support than ever. Adults must witness, value, and support young people and young adults based on who they are now, as well as potential future versions of themselves.

Those in a community coaching role often understand the context of the community and those within it and can troubleshoot with other community leaders, identifying easy entry points and pressure testing ideas where connections makes sense. Community-based coaches can serve as the connective tissue in a community, facilitating opportunities focused on the young people they serve.

To create **sustained career-readiness opportunities for ALL**, community based coaches 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 this shared mission.

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

References

- AdvanceCTE, Education Strategy Group, & New Skills Ready Network. (2021, November). *Implementing Individual Career and Academic Plans at Scale*. https://careertech.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Implementing_ICAPs_Scale_Nov_2021.pdf.
- Advance CTE. (2018, October). Expanding Middle School CTE to Promote Lifelong Learner Success. https://careertech.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AdvanceCTE_MiddleSchoolCTEReport_2018.pdf.
- Allen, B. (2020). Graphic of City School's Community Mapping Process. Self-published.
- Allen, B. (2024). Elements of practicing witness. Developed for the Coalition for Career Development Center.**
- Allen, B. (2024). Stages of the coaching relationship (adapted from the Mass Mentoring Partnership). Developed for the Coalition for Career Development Center.**
- Association for Career and Technical Education. (2018). *Career Exploration in middle school: Setting students on the path to success*. https://www.acteonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ACTE_CC_Paper_FINAL.pdf.
- Baldrige, B. J. (2019). Reclaiming community: Race and the uncertain future of youth work. Stanford University Press.
- Brock, M., Schaefer, J., & Seaman, R. (2020). *Self-determination and agency for all: Supporting students with severe disabilities*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Matthew-Brock-2/publication/337853271_Self-determination_and_Agency_for_All_Supporting_Students_with_Severe_Disabilities/links/5ea0469845851564fc347d19/Self-determination-and-Agency-for-All-Supporting-Students-with-Severe-Disabilities.pdf.
- EcoFaith Recovery. Story of Self. <https://www.ecofaithrecovery.org/>.
- Elmore, R. (2012). *Remarks at Aspen Institute Forum*. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4458844/user-clip-elmore-1>.
- Godbey, S., & Gordon, H. R. (2019). Career exploration at the middle school level: Barriers and opportunities. *Middle Grades Review*, 5(2), 2.
- Hayes, K. & Kaba, M. (2023). Let this Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care. https://www.academia.edu/120401953/Let_this_radicalize_you.
- Lammers, J., & Mathers, K. (2024, July 25). The State of Career Exploration in Middle School. <https://www.ecs.org/state-of-middle-school-career-exploration/>.
- Lee, D. S., Ramirez Garcia, J. M., Overton, L., Gordon Biddle, K. A., Lacey, R. O., Gorter, J., & Heller De Leon, B. (2022). Exploring the role of family support and ethnic pride in cultivating the academic and career resourcefulness of underserved youth in an afterschool program. *The Urban Review*, 54(4), 624–648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-021-00632-z>.
- Lin, L., MENASCE HOROWITZ, J., & Fry, R. (2024). *Americans' job satisfaction in 2024*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/12/10/job-satisfaction/#:~:text=Half%20of%20U.S.%20workers%20say,all%20satisfied%20with%20their%20job>.
- Mann, A., Denis, V., & Percy, C. (2020). Career ready? : How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19. *OECD Education Working Papers*, 241. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e1503534-en>.
- Mass Mentoring (2025). MMP Connects.

Savitz-Romer, M. & Bouffard, S. M. (2012). *Ready, willing, and able: A developmental approach to college access and success*. Harvard Education Press.

Sliwinski, H. (2023, November 8). *Nearly Half of Graduates Feel Unprepared for the Workforce While Life Experience Is Ranked More Useful Than a Degree*. BusinessWire. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20231108451086/en/Nearly-Half-of-Graduates-Feel-Unprepared-for-the-Workforce-While-Life-Experience-Is-Ranked-More-Useful-Than-a-Degree>.

Solberg, V. S. (2019). *Making School Relevant with Individualized Learning Plans: Helping Students Create Their Own Career and Life Goals*. Harvard Education Press.

Solberg, V. S. H., Donnelly, H. K., Kroyer-Kubicek, R., Basha, R., Curtis, G., Jaques, E., Schreiber, K. (2022). *Condition of Career Readiness in the United States*. Coalition for Career Development Center and the BU Center for Future Readiness.

Tenney et al. (2022). *Qualitative Study*. National Library of Medicine. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/>.

Walton Family Foundation & Gallup. (2025). *2025 Report Card: Student Perspective on U.S. Schools*. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/651674/gen-z-research.aspx>.

Walton Family Foundation & Gallup. (2024). *2024 Voices of Gen Z Study*.

https://nextgeninsights.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Walton_Gallup_Voices-of-Gen-Z_Year-2-2024-Final-Report.pdf.

Wegner E, McDermott R, Snyder W. (c2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Yeager, D.S. & Dweck, C.S. (2020). *What can be learned from growth mindset controversies?* *American Psychologist*, 75(9), 1269–1284. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000794>

Yosso, T. J. (2005). *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>.

