



# The Nonprofit Leader Playbook:

PARTNERING FOR EARLY CAREER  
READINESS

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At ALLready—an extension of the Coalition for Career Development Center—we believe career readiness should be at the very core of American education. Our **mission** is to make career readiness for ALL the first priority of American education across the lifespan. Our **vision** is for ALL individuals and communities to forge self-determined pathways to social and economic mobility. We **value** a cross-sector collaborative approach to ensuring that ALL students can enter personally productive and meaningful work in their chosen career path upon graduation. Together with leaders from business, education, community, and government, we are building seamless pathways from learning to work, so everyone is ALLready for the future they deserve.

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### **In Gratitude**

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### **About Us**

This playbook was published by the nonprofit corporation of the Coalition for Career Development (CCD) Center. The CCD Center was founded as a policy think tank by thought leaders from more than 50 organizations in industry, workforce development, education, and government. Our mission is to make career readiness for ALL the first priority of American education across the lifespan.

ALLready is an extension of the CCD Center, amplifying our “think and do” approach to building a career readiness infrastructure. We provide practical tools, guidance materials, and technical assistance to support local career readiness efforts. By providing user-friendly support to everyday educators, community members, and local and state leaders, ALLready moves leaders from vision to real-world action.

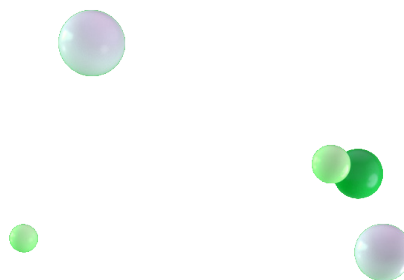
Eva Mitchell is the CEO of the CCD Center and ALLready, which are working to accelerate learners and leaders across industry, education, government, and communities nationwide.

Visit us at [ALLready.org](https://ALLready.org).

# What's Inside

<b>What's Inside</b>	4
<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>Transformational Practice Dimensions</b>	10
Leadership Levers	12
Learning Landscape	18
Professional Preparation	23
Everyone Engaged	26
Student Support	30
Resource Readiness	33
Compliance Concerns	36
<b>Conclusion</b>	38
<b>References</b>	39
<b>Thank You and Acknowledgements</b>	41

# Introduction



**Welcome.** As an organizational leader—whether you direct a nonprofit, manage a youth-serving program, or lead a community initiative—you already know the power your organization holds to shape futures. You are positioned to inspire not only the young people you serve, but also the networks, systems, and partnerships that surround them. This playbook is designed to help you leverage that position to help realize ALLready’s mission: to make career readiness for ALL the first priority of American education across the lifespan.

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

## What Is a Career-Readiness Ecosystem?

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

- **Career-ready students**, who are **individuals** gaining experiences, knowledge, and skills that allow them to navigate a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous future with confidence and autonomy.
- **Career-ready partners**, who actively support learners to be curious, interested, engaged, and inspired. Partners can 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**, which are supported by the ecosystem partners. Such programs leverage one or more of the five pillars of career readiness: career-ready learning, advising, planning, technology, and accountability.

## Why a Career-Ready Ecosystem for Young People?

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

With learning happening increasingly outside of schools, partners across sectors have the opportunity and responsibility to provide learning experiences—especially those that will help young people explore and discover pathways into the adult world of work.

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

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

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

The average American 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). Career awareness and readiness start early.

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

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

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

The objective is to provide opportunities, tools, or experiences to begin developing a sense of who they might become, what work they might enjoy, and how to take steps towards adulthood in a way that is personally meaningful to them.

## Who Should Be Reading This Playbook?

This playbook is designed for **youth-serving community nonprofit leaders** who hold vision and authority—people who can marshal resources, forge partnerships, and align others toward a common goal. Examples include **Executive Directors, Vice Presidents of Programs, Chief Impact Officers, Program Directors, Project Managers**, and **other leaders of youth-serving nonprofits** who know that middle grades are a launching point for life and career readiness. It is for anyone whose decisions ripple outward to shape the opportunities young people encounter.

This playbook can be used by leaders in **nonprofit, youth serving, and community-based organizations; out-of-school-time providers; networks of youth serving organizations; cultural institutions; municipal youth agencies; and organizations providing specialized youth services, tools, resources, and training.**

## Why Are Nonprofit Leaders Critical to Making the Change?

Community-serving nonprofit organizations can create meaningful opportunities to connect learning with future possibilities. Nonprofits are uniquely positioned to fill the gaps schools cannot always reach. With trusted relationships, flexible programming, and connections to both families and industry, nonprofits can **expand a collective sense of what is possible** for young people. By doing so, they move not only students, but entire communities, toward thriving.

Organizations like yours are critical because change does not happen by accident. It happens when leaders step up to redesign systems and relationships. You stand at the intersection where schools, families, industry, and community meet. You hold the keys to influence: convening partners, directing funding, and setting priorities that make career readiness part of the DNA of your organization—and by extension, the ecosystem around you. With your leadership, efforts align, scale, and stick.

To lead in this space is to **see farther**—to recognize that the middle grades are not “too young” but just right. It means believing that career exploration is not a privilege for some, but a right for all. It means **building bridges** where silos exist, **leveraging power** to open doors that stay open, and **holding yourself accountable** to outcomes that transform lives. Leadership here is about shaping futures, one decision, one partnership, and one young person at a time.

## About ALLready Playbooks

This playbook is one of a connected series of guides for leaders across the career readiness ecosystem who shape and initiate career-ready experiences for students in grades five through eight. The series includes playbooks for:

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

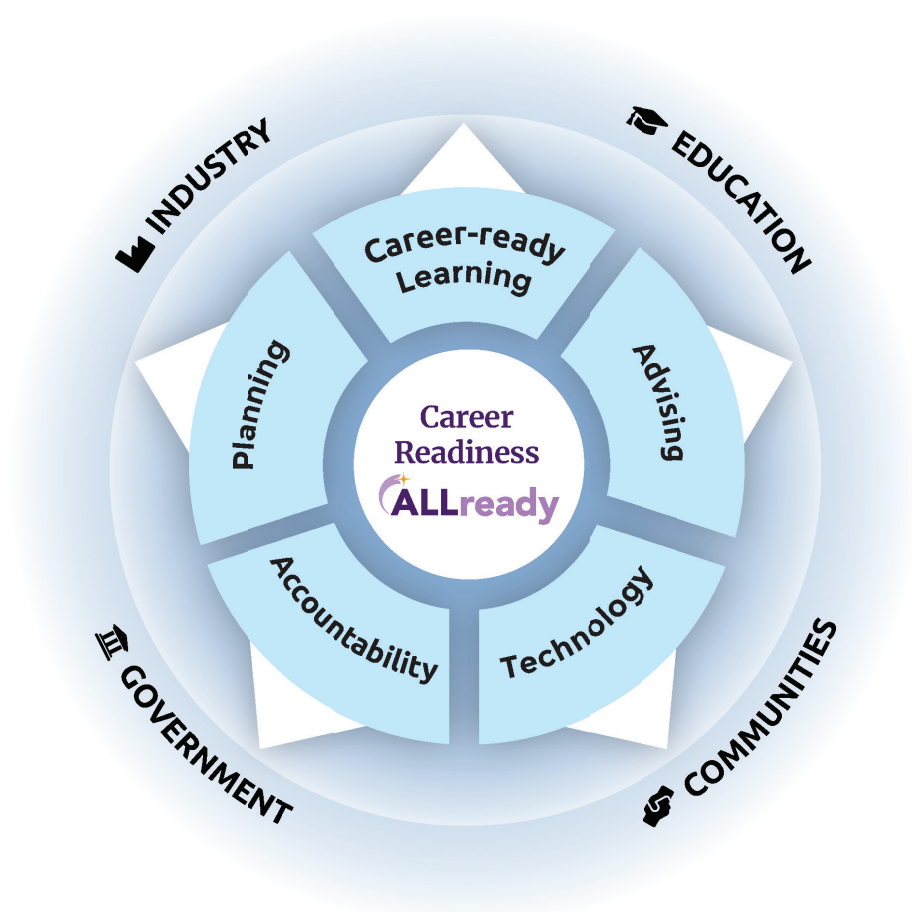
The ALLready playbooks fill a gap in the available resources on developing career readiness.

Each guide incorporates ALLready’s five career readiness **pillars**: career-ready learning, advising, planning, technology, and accountability. In keeping with our organizational strategy, this series:



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

Visit [ALLready.org/tools-you-can-use](https://ALLready.org/tools-you-can-use) to find the entire series of playbooks. Share them with colleagues in different roles within your ecosystem so they, too, can be prepared to support your career readiness efforts.



# Transformational Practice Dimensions

This playbook outlines and addresses ALLready's **seven Transformational Practice Dimensions**. Each dimension offers a lens for planning, implementing, and sustaining high-impact career readiness initiatives. Reflecting on and applying these practices will strengthen your organization's role in making an impact.

- 1 Leadership Levers - How to create and achieve the vision together**  
This includes mission, influence, communication, strategy, and planning.
- 2 Learning Landscape - What young people need to know and be able to do**  
This includes career-connected content, tools, resources, and alignment with other practitioners and guided practice.
- 3 Professional Preparation - What the adults in the system need to know and how to prepare them**  
This includes 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.
- 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 young people, schools, and organizations need to support the work**  
This includes ensuring adequate resources are in place, such as funding, time, talent, technology, assets, materials, facilities, and transportation.
- 7 Compliance Concerns - How to plan for and comply with applicable policies and regulations**  
This includes compliance with federal, state, and local policy, regulations, civil rights and access, insurance and liability, and assurances of safety.





## Leadership Levers

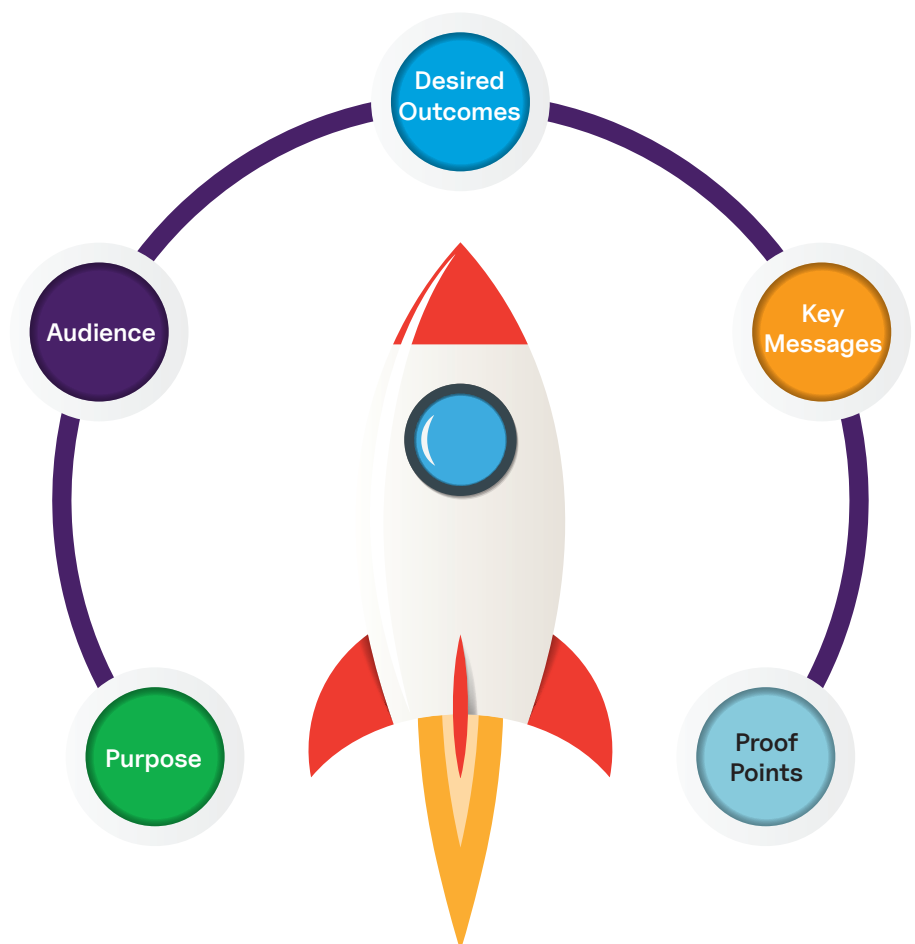
### How to create and achieve the vision together

Nonprofit leaders set the tone and build momentum across the ecosystem. This dimension is about how leaders like you can take discernable action to deepen your impact on career readiness. Leadership levers require courage and clarity. They also require **intentional systems**—clear vision, active partnerships, measurable goals, and a culture where leadership is shared. Avoid the trap of doing this work alone; the strength of your leadership lies in the network you cultivate.

#### DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE A COMPELLING VISION

As an organization outside of the school system, you are in a position to advance and supplement youth exploration with specialized services and support networks. Your organization may be connected across the ecosystem in unique ways and connected to youth directly, making you the ideal messenger for a clear vision of why the middle grades are the right time to focus on career readiness.

**Create a Vision Map** - Create a vision for a focus on youth career readiness that is aligned with, part of, or complementary to both your organization's vision and mission and the overall tone and current narrative of your ecosystem. Make it aspirational yet specific enough to guide daily decisions. To increase impact by inspiring curiosity and encouraging exploration during the middle grades, start with the end in mind and communicate it. Try drafting a one-page vision map with: *Purpose → Audience → Desired Outcomes → Key Messages → Proof Points*.





### Try This!

A [Portrait of a Graduate](#) is a framework for a collective vision of student success. Reference the framework used by your partner school districts to align your work with their vision or create your own for your organization. Use this to frame what students should know and be able to do through the activities that you offer.

**Tell the Story Everywhere** – Communicating the “why” is an essential part of leading. Use both compelling data and powerful stories of success to illustrate why career readiness in the middle grades matters and why career readiness should be a core pursuit of youth education initiatives. Tell stories in staff meetings, board sessions, and funding proposals. The idea is to make career readiness part of the organizational narrative. The stories provide human connection to the data and foster interest in your work. Gather case studies and talk with staff and partners who are engaging with youth every day to then share stories within your organizational community.



### Consider This...

- The [Impact Report](#) from Mass Mentoring’s K-12 education is an example that highlights metrics and stories.
- Junior Achievement of Greater Washington launched the [JA Finance Park](#) for middle school students, which combines financial planning with career exploration. The vision—“Every child prepared for a world beyond school”—was woven into every partnership pitch and staff training. This clarity attracted corporate sponsors and school district buy-in.





At [Apprentice Learning](#), the “why” comes alive through the voices and journeys of young people. The organization shares data beyond how many 8th graders completed apprenticeships or how many workplaces partnered with them. They carry the stories into every room they enter: staff meetings, board sessions, community events, and funding proposals. It is the story of one young person that translates the data into a vision.

Take Diana, an 8th grader who was nervous about her first day at her apprenticeship site. She had practiced introductions in class, rehearsed her “handshake and hello,” but as she stood in the lobby of a bustling architectural firm, she whispered to her Community Manager, “I don’t know if I belong here.”

Two hours later, Diana walked out of that same building with her head high, a grin wide across her face. She had helped measure floor plans, met engineers who looked like her, and even learned the shorthand they used to sketch ideas. At the debrief, she said: “I didn’t know my ideas mattered in a place like that. Now I want to design spaces where people feel safe.”

That is the why. Apprentice Learning tells Diana’s story because it reminds staff that their work is more than logistics—it is possibility. They share it with the board so members see the direct impact of their governance and support. They offer it to funders as proof that investment doesn’t just yield outcomes, it changes trajectories. And they return to it internally, over and over, because these stories are the heart of their organizational narrative: career readiness is not a program, it is a portal for young people to see themselves in the future where they take their first steps into a wider world, knowing they belong there.

Letta Neely, CEO of Apprentice Learning

## CULTIVATE A SHARED LEADERSHIP CULTURE

Empowering staff at all levels to share ownership of the vision creates momentum that can be carried by everyone.

**Distribute Leadership** – Whether your organization is launching a new initiative for career readiness integration into current programming or managing grant funded pilot projects, try distributing and rotating leadership roles across your organization. This creates ownership in the work at all levels and shares responsibility for carrying out the mission.



### Consider This...

In New York City, executive leaders from [iMentor](#) embed a culture of shared leadership by empowering program managers to lead strategic initiatives. This distributed model increases retention and program scalability.

**Model Leadership for Youth as Well as Staff** - “The act of decentering leadership from the auspices of positional leaders or authority figures—typically adults—empowers youth to navigate complex challenges and apply novel solutions to effect change as they positively transform families, schools, communities, organizations, and society” (Dugan, et al., 2023). Model a focus on career readiness for the staff and for the students with whom you work. Inclusion of specific job activities related to youth career readiness in job descriptions will solidify the organization’s commitment and its expectations of staff.



### Consider This...

[What Does Career Readiness Look Like in Middle School](#) offers examples of executives empowering young Latino staff and alumni as peer mentors, project leads, and co-creators—sharing leadership roles and embedding cultural expertise into program design.

**Celebrate Learning Publicly** - Recognition reinforces engagement and signals that leadership at all levels matters. Sharing staff wins feeds the leadership and learning culture and provides stories to tell outside of the organization. Maintain a commitment to **transparency**—share findings with stakeholders, even when outcomes fall short.

## LEAD WITH INFLUENCE BEYOND YOUR WALLS

The credibility that your organization holds and your stated commitment to young people’s career preparedness can be a catalyst for convening schools, businesses, and community stakeholders around shared goals.

**Leverage Existing Networks** - Whether your organization is looking for support services in certain areas of youth programming or opportunities for joint fundraising, the network of potentially interested parties can be fruitful. Consider tapping municipal youth agencies, workforce boards, and education councils to amplify your influence. (See more in the [Everyone Engaged](#) section.)

**Become the Connector** - Your organization’s role as a convener demonstrates a commitment to collaboration and coordination. You can position your organization as the bridge that links industry, education, and families. Nonprofit and community-based organizations bring specialized skills, services, and



expertise to be leveraged in advancing career readiness integration. Recognize what and how each organization's core competencies develop successful career-ready students.



#### Consider This...

In the [Whole School, Whole Child Model](#) at City Year, local executive directors work not just within schools but across city agencies, influencing district policy on student success indicators, including career readiness exposure for middle-grade students.

### PLAN FOR MEASURABLE, SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

To ensure your vision translates into tangible progress, it is important to pair it with a solid strategy that includes clear objectives, milestones, and accountability measures.

**Develop a Logic Model** - A great way to structure this is by developing a [Logic Model](#), which is a simple framework that maps out how your programs will achieve results, detailing inputs, activities, measurable outputs, and long-term outcomes. When creating your model, remember to incorporate SMART Goals—objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound—to help anchor your progress.

**Embed Continuous Improvement** - Additionally, embedding intentional continuous improvement is key. This involves constantly managing and adapting your career-related student engagement activities based on lessons learned. Make sure to establish baseline measures, like student self-efficacy surveys, and dedicate resources to evaluation, whether internal or external, to collect and analyze data. Resources such as [A New Model for Growing Impact](#) from the Urban Institute's Nonprofit Outcomes Framework offer practical guidance for measuring outcomes and using them for ongoing improvement and expanding your impact.



#### Consider This...

At the [Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship \(NFTE\)](#), regional directors set measurable impact goals (e.g., number of middle school students starting business plans, teacher professional development completions) and tie them to funding outcomes.





### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Set the tone and build momentum for career readiness in middle grades by defining a compelling vision and communicating its importance using data and stories.
- ✓ Cultivate a shared leadership culture, where staff at all levels own the vision and its implementation.
- ✓ Position your organization as a connector between schools, businesses, and community stakeholders to amplify impact.
- ✓ To ensure lasting impact, pair the vision with a solid strategy that includes clear objectives, milestones, and accountability measures, utilizing tools like Logic Models and embedding continuous improvement.





## Learning Landscape

### What young people need to know and be able to do

For nonprofit leaders, shaping the learning landscape means creating experiences that meet young people where they are and preparing them for where they want to go. These approaches require intention, relevance, and data-driven refinement. A strong learning landscape **connects theory with practice**—rooted in relevance, aligned with schools and workforce, and refined through data.

The most effective leaders in this space build continuums, not fragments, to ensure every experience contributes to a larger narrative of growth. As part of this process, you may need to pivot and recalibrate, embrace agility, learn from mistakes, and normalize amending approaches as a continuous process of improvement.

### DESIGN EXPERIENCES, NOT JUST PROGRAMS

Shifting from one-off activities to a continuous stream of career-connected experiences that evolve with students is critical to creating meaningful learning opportunities for students.

**Integrate Career Readiness Across Existing Offerings** – Young people involved in your organization might benefit from the reinforcement of career-ready learning embedded into each existing program, like afterschool activities, summer initiatives, and leadership development. Consider incorporating curricula across your initiatives, focused on career exploration and developing durable workplace skills, with an emphasis on student self-awareness, self-leadership, and self-exploration.



#### Consider This...

[Pathsmith](#) offers solutions for educators and employers to integrate durable skills into everyday instruction and professional development.

**Create a Continuum of Career Experiences** – To create a truly impactful continuum of career experiences, successful implementation of youth career-focused initiatives ideally involves a multi-year timeframe with varied and sustained engagements. This requires planning with adequate resources for genuine connection, self-exploration, and skill development to foster personal growth and curiosity in students. A helpful approach is to create a mapping tool that charts current offerings against a developmental continuum, moving from initial awareness (e.g., career days, guest speakers) to exploration (e.g., job shadowing, project-based learning), and finally to immersion experiences (e.g., internships, mini-apprenticeships).



### Consider This...

At [Apprentice Learning](#) in Boston, MA, leaders designed a 12-week apprenticeship continuum—classroom prep, hands-on worksite learning, and post-program career coaching for middle-grade students. This structure, rather than one-off field trips, drives skill-building over time. The model combines preparatory classes, workplace mentorship, and post-program career support.

**Leverage Local Industry** - You can also leverage local industry partners to design real-world experiences that expand youth exposure. Industry partners can engage in various ways, from short to long-term activities.



### Try This!

- [The Modernized National Career Clusters Framework](#) from Advance CTE's Work-Based Learning Continuum is used to plan progressive experiences. The [Career Interest Surveys](#) available through Advance CTE allows learners to select interests and traits sorted by Career Cluster.
- [The SPARK Pre-teen Mentoring Program](#) offers curriculum and guidance to nonprofits (and schools). The SPARK Initiative in Chicago and Philadelphia involves multi-year experiences where middle schoolers explore careers through workplace mentors, not just short-term exposure. Leaders emphasize continuity to increase impact.

## PRIORITIZE HANDS-ON, RELEVANT LEARNING

To make learning truly resonate, offer content that connects to real-world opportunities and reflects students' identities.

**Bring Learning to Life** - Community organizations often have the unique capacity and freedom to prioritize hands-on activities where students actively engage in problem-solving, full spectrum projects, and interacting with professionals through community service, job shadowing, and workplace simulations. These experiences help students build durable skills and explore different career paths, fostering agency and reflection.



### Consider This...

- [Girls Who Code](#) club leaders ensure that coding projects connect to girls' real-world interests making learning tangible and empowering in their clubs.
- The Philadelphia Education Fund hosts [Middle Grades Initiatives](#) that provide career exploration and self-discovery opportunities to help students understand, experience, and be motivated to pursue the possibilities for college and beyond.

**Use Culturally Relevant Curriculum** - It's also vital to make connections by building learning landscapes that offer multiple avenues for students to find relevance, including partnerships with community mentors who share lived experiences. Using a culturally relevant curriculum—with materials, examples, and mentors that reflect students' backgrounds and aspirations—is crucial for authentic engagement.



### Consider This...

- [The Immokalee Foundation's Career Exploration program](#) in southeast Florida begins in middle school, introducing a broad range of career choices to youth.
- [Big Thought programs](#) embed cultural identity into hands-on arts, as well as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), experiences, creating relevance for youth from diverse backgrounds in Dallas, TX.

## ALIGN WITH ACADEMIC AND WORKFORCE STANDARDS

**Use a Shared Vocabulary for Skills** - To ensure your programming complements what schools teach while integrating skills employers value, it is important to define and describe the skills you are trying to develop in young people. The [Empowering Learners for School, Work, and Life](#) report from America Succeeds emphasizes the need for systems to consistently develop competency in “durable skills,” connecting academic growth with real-world readiness (Crawford et al., 2024). This playbook focuses on durable skills, which are transferable and prepare students for future educational endeavors and career developments. The Education Design Lab explains its [decision to use the term durable skills](#), and the [America Succeeds' Durable Skills Wheel](#) provides a helpful list of these skills.



### Consider This...

- [United Way Greater Atlanta's College & Career Ready Programming](#) aligns out-of-school-time programs to build academic success while integrating durable skills identified by employers. This alignment simultaneously builds credibility with school leaders and corporate partners.
- [CAPS Network](#), in partnership with American Student Assistance, delivers CAPS career modules in which Profession-Based Learning provides students the opportunity to learn and practice essential or durable skills and designs situations where students must leverage durable skills to achieve success.

**Crosswalk with Local Curriculum** – Your organization can also crosswalk your programming with local schools' curricula to align with academic priorities and reinforce core grade-level learning objectives. Career readiness programming and exposure to career fields typically emphasizes job-specific technical skills, which are helpful exposure for young people. However, intentionally pointing out to youth the relevant academic skills used in the workforce and the durable skills that are leveraged across sectors and contexts can provide more robust and eye-opening learning experiences.



### Consider This...

[Junior Achievement Rocky Mountain](#) added Business Quest to expand programming to reach 6th and 7th graders. The engaging, technology-based program is aligned to middle school standards for personal financial literacy and is easy to implement in classrooms.

**Stay Informed on Industry Trends** – Finally, staying informed on industry trends using labor market data from state workforce agencies and local chambers of commerce will help keep your programming current with emerging career opportunities.



### Consider This...

- [Boston Private Industry Council](#) coordinates with Boston Public Schools to align work-based experiences with career clusters and labor market demand.
- [LaunchSkills' Rural Model](#) links middle-grade competencies in literacy and math with local labor market demands (e.g., healthcare, manufacturing, government) tailored to rural economies. Leaders in the LaunchSkills Rural Life Readiness Program design multi-level middle-grade career exploration modules.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Plan industry engagement with students as part of a planned, continuum of life readiness experiences.
- ✓ Integrate hands-on, project-based activities with real-world relevance.
- ✓ Create and show alignment with academic standards and workplace skills.





## Professional Preparation

**What the adults in the system need to know and how to prepare them**

Youth career readiness is only as strong as the adults shaping it. Professional preparation in your organization involves investing in staff's personal and professional well-being and growth, as well as deepening knowledge of career-centered youth engagement. Preparation is about getting your organization ready to add or enhance career readiness activities or to launch a middle school program. It means supporting staff in daily implementation and ensuring your organizational structures are in place.

### INVEST IN A LEARNING CULTURE

Planning for robust training on adolescent development, career pathways, and effective mentoring will prop up your staff for implementation.

**Demonstrate the Value of Learning** – Creating a learning organization that values personal and professional development not only benefits your organization but also models the importance of life-long learning for partners and students. Professional development for staff can capitalize on adults' natural ability to learn through making connections. Consider offering a variety of high-quality professional development experiences that are connected to their daily practice, such as coaching, peer learning, and scaffolded leadership opportunities for staff.

**Provide Relevant Professional Development** – With a focus on middle-grade youth, topics might include: *adolescent brain development*, *trauma-informed approaches*, *cultural competency*, *positive youth development*, and *mentoring practices*. You may also want to embed learning around topics related to youth career readiness in areas such as: *emerging career pathways*, *work-based learning facilitation*, and *partner and project management*.

The [National Mentoring Resource Center](#) offers mentoring tools, program and training materials, and no-cost training and technical assistance. The [Association for Middle Level Education](#) offers the Middle School Model with professional development, resources, publications, and a network for middle school educators.



### Try This!

- As a professional development activity, adults can learn how artificial intelligence (AI) can help them to identify more questions for students, and how they can use AI to follow up with students in a personalized way. The Harvard Business Review's article [Want to Use AI as a Career Coach? Use These Prompts](#) was written for adults, but can help professionals learn about (1) the kinds of questions to ask students and (2) how to find information about careers.





- Consider [Career Conversation starters](#) from the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) that help you ask the right questions for students with developmental levels that range from elementary to middle to high school.

**Create Safe Spaces for Innovation and Risk-Taking** - Your organization can intentionally provide staff with a safe space for innovation and risk-taking by supporting staff to pilot ideas without fear for their jobs, their reputation, or their social standing. Rewarding and recognizing calculated risk taking can both foster innovation for your programming and demonstrate an imperative leadership skill to the young people involved in the programming.

## BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES ACROSS ROLES

As an organizational leader, you can bring educators, program staff, and industry mentors together to exchange ideas, share successes, and tackle challenges as a community.

**Create Cross-role Communities of Practice** - Participants can learn from one another's experiences, discover new ways to strengthen programs, and identify opportunities to expand offerings or fill gaps. Within your own organization, cultivating internal learning communities—with tools and structures that encourage sharing ideas, resources, and support—helps model what it means to be a true learning organization. These communities can complement formal training and empower staff to innovate and manage more effectively day to day.

This [guide on creating communities of practice](#) from The Social Change Agency includes steps and resources. Hosting regular peer exchange sessions is another way to build this culture—celebrating case studies, progress, and lessons learned while maintaining a focus on collaboration and solutions.



### Consider This...

[Apprentice Learning](#) supports staff cohorts to gather quarterly for a week-long Academy as protected time for learning and practice. Follow-up support reinforces new skills and prevents training fatigue. The result: confident, connected staff aligned with mission and values, ready to bring authenticity, possibility, and connection into their daily work with middle-grade youth.

**Demonstrate Your Own Commitment** - As a leader, your participation sets the tone, showing staff, students, and partners what engaged, reflective, and growth-oriented leadership looks like and demonstrating how a learning-oriented organization would operate in any sector.





## ADDRESS BIAS AND EXPAND WORLDVIEWS

**Raise Awareness** – To truly serve all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, leaders need to help adults examine and broaden their own perspectives. Proactively addressing biases can help avoid the potential of skewing program delivery, influencing resource allocation, or limiting connections.

**Use Reflective Exercises** – Providing opportunity for staff to reflect on their own career journeys and open themselves to new perspectives helps to inform their work. You may want to invite a wide range of professionals to host training and reflection experiences. This can also involve showcasing various educational and career paths that expand staffs' awareness of pathways to career success and repertoire of examples to share with students.

## DEMONSTRATE HEALTHY WORK BALANCE AND PREVENT BURNOUT

**Normalize Coaching and Reflective Supervision** – This is particularly salient in organizations that provide youth career readiness. As leaders model coaching and reflection, they demonstrate best practices for youth supervisors who aim to prepare young people for roles in the workplace.

**Support Wellness and Balance** – An organization's position on providing a healthy work-life balance can help boost recruitment and retention. Examples can include manageable caseloads, recognition for efforts, intentional resource allocation, and well-communicated, healthy manager expectations. To support rest and rejuvenation, some nonprofit organizations close down to give staff additional weeks off a year beyond paid vacation time as respite time. As a result, leaders find that staff experience a healthy work environment, demonstrate self-care, and nurture their social-emotional skills.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Provide relevant professional development opportunities for staff to be fully prepared for implementing career readiness based on appropriate adolescent development.
- ✓ Host crossrole Communities of Practice in which you pair mentors with educators for joint case study reflection.
- ✓ Encourage reflective practice tools (e.g., journaling prompts, coaching circles) that challenge personal narratives and bias.
- ✓ Revisit the organizational structure related to work-life balance to consider time off for respite, daily scheduling adjustments, or more emphasis on coaching and reflection.



## Everyone Engaged

### Whom to engage to effect change and sustain effort

Middle-grade career readiness is not something that can be accomplished by one organization or leader alone. Leaders of industry, education, community organizations, and government throughout the entire ecosystem need to come together to build and sustain quality career readiness initiatives at the local level. That said, nonprofit organizational leaders have a unique vantage point that makes them prime candidates as catalysts, conveners, and bridges among the ecosystem. By their very nature, community organizations must form partnerships across the ecosystem to survive—for funding, for access to the young people they serve, for access to resources and opportunities, and for many other reasons. Within this dimension, we recommend capitalizing on existing relationships to mobilize the ecosystem around common goals and mutual value; leveraging parents and families as partners; and remaining aligned with local policy efforts.

### MAP AND MOBILIZE PARTNERSHIPS

Identifying and forging partnerships with schools, local government, industry partners, and community organizations can help nonprofit organizations to amplify their impact.

**Create a Partnership Map** - Leaders can begin by creating a partnership map that includes all these players, noting what each brings to youth career readiness, as well as what current assets and access each partner has. Then consider whether there are any significant gaps in what is available through the identified partners and what other organizations might be able to join the network to better ensure your collective ability to reach a shared goal.



#### Consider This...

At [Citizen Schools Boston](#), leadership leveraged relationships with Fortune 500 companies (e.g., Google, Bank of America) to create apprenticeship opportunities and host WOW! showcases at corporate sites. Citizen Schools' credibility as a connector allowed it to influence both business and education sectors, and these relationships are sustained with recurring commitment and public celebration.

**Form Partnership Agreements** - Agreements or Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) formalize relationships and clarify roles. Organizational leaders can propose a shared, written plan outlining how partners or coalitions can work together, common objectives, and roles and responsibilities in partnership management. Having a ready supply of agreement and MOU templates can help you facilitate partnership opportunities swiftly.



**Prioritize Partnership Management** – Finally, consider how you will prioritize partnership management, perhaps by dedicating staff to cultivate and maintain these relationships or ensuring consistent communication to maintain mutual accountability.

### **SUSTAIN RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON MUTUAL VALUE, NOT TRANSACTIONS**

**Find Mutual Value** – Developing partnership agreements that prioritize mutual benefit and long-term collaboration can be incredibly helpful in leading organizational and community change and bringing your vision for career-ready students to life. When you identify what each partner gains from engaging with students in a career-focused way, everyone finds value. For example, industry partners build awareness for future workforce development, schools help students connect learning to careers, and community organizations expand their youth programs with hands-on career readiness activities.



#### **Consider This...**

- [Delaware Pathways for Middle Grades](#) facilitates a partnership between the State Advisory Council on Career and Technical Education, multiple agencies related to workforce and education, and the local United Way to support “acquiring both academic and technical skills in combination with meaningful work experience [to] give students the freedom to choose their life’s path.”
- Elevate Indianapolis’ [Pathways to Purpose College & Career Program](#) sustains partnerships through [Strengthening Collaboration in Youth Development](#) and by emphasizing scaling collaboration and student-voice-centered and outcome-driven measurables.
- As an intermediary, [ExpandedED builds coalitions and networks](#) designed to improve and advance learning opportunities for young people in a variety of areas.

**Recognize Contributions** – Further, these partnerships can bring benefits beyond theoretical support, including monetary contributions, volunteers, and valuable connections. Cultural institutions and businesses might offer internships, volunteers for mock panels, or job shadowing opportunities, while schools provide access to students, teachers, and counselors. Community organizations, in turn, offer specialized support services, creating a win-win for all involved.



## INVOLVE FAMILIES AS CO-CREATORS

**Capture Family and Community Insight** – Families are an imperative partner in shaping the career pathways of young people. Leaders can invite parents and caregivers not just as participants or observers of programs, but as thought partners and contributors to career readiness initiatives. Remember to consider language access, culturally responsive facilitation, and flexible meeting times to accommodate the needs of all types of families.

Further, families of student participants can offer their own perspectives to shape program design, ensuring a representative sample of experiences are represented in the student experience.

**Engage Families in Career Exploration** – You might consider hosting family career nights, where families share their own work experiences and journeys, fostering community and personal connections for students and bringing career pathways to life for young people. Your organization may want to share with families tools and tips for having career conversations, both in the school community and at home. The [Family Engagement Toolkit](#) from the [National Council for Community and Education Partnerships](#) offers tools for planning, building trust, using data, and launching family engagement.



### Consider This...

- [Black Star Project](#) leaders engage parents through initiatives like “Parent University,” involving families not merely as attendees but as change agents who shape programming priorities.
- [Padres Unidos](#) has adapted the [Spectrum of Family & Community Engage for Equity in Education](#) to establish a cadre of parents prepared to participate in improving educational outcomes for their students. The organization is working both inside and outside the system to ensure that parent voices matter. This tool from Movement Strategy provides a framework for moving from marginalization to community ownership, differentiating efforts for inside the school system and outside community organizing.

## ALIGN WITH SYSTEMIC EFFORTS

To secure systemic support and align efforts, organizational leaders can proactively engage district offices, city agencies, and industry councils to ensure that their programs and practices are reinforcing local policy efforts.

**Connect with Other Leaders in the Ecosystem** – Connecting with other leaders in the ecosystem, such as district career readiness leads and city youth offices, can lead to resource efficiency and effective use of political capital.



### Consider This...

- [Career and Technical Student Organizations \(CTSOs\)](#) are student-led groups that are involved with career and technical education programs in their schools. CTSOs can be a strategic partner and are often well-established with a national infrastructure. In many of these, the students look for opportunities to connect with nonprofit community groups through hands-on community service experiences, mentorship programs, and career exploration programs.
- [The Appalachian Cradle to Career Partnership](#), sponsored by Partners for Rural Impact, convenes organizational leaders, rural school districts, local industry, and health agencies to guide cross-sector alignment around college and career readiness at scale in isolated communities. Their cradle-to-career approach is tracked across indicators like 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment—informing strategic adjustments and demonstrating impact for funders.

**Understand Local and State Workforce Plans** - As an organization, your language and communications should reflect your understanding of local and state workforce plans, as operating in isolation from these broader initiatives can cause confusion and may drain resources. This [Education Strategy Group](#) study commissioned by American Student Assistance outlines state by state analysis of the vision, policies, and infrastructure to support quality middle school career readiness and may be a helpful place to start to better understand your state's policies.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Prioritize partnership building as a critical component of organizational growth and impact.
- ✓ Build a detailed partnership map—schools, city departments, employers, community nonprofits—and assign steward roles.
- ✓ Design family advisory councils to gather input and codesign.
- ✓ Structure ongoing partner cultivation: periodic convenings, shared metrics, and refreshed agreement terms.



## Student Support

### How to make sure each young person gets what they need

Career readiness starts with understanding each student's context and aspirations, meeting each student where they are. Often, nonprofit organizations can connect students with a more personalized mentoring experience than can schools, which offers the opportunity to get to know young people as individuals and shape their program and learning experiences to address their interests, concerns, and ideas more directly. To better support student success and increase organizational impact on career readiness, nonprofit leaders prioritize structures that leverage the voices of youth in program design, offer students scaffolded learning opportunities, and continually recognize and reinforce growth.

### CENTER YOUTH VOICE AND AGENCY

**Incorporate Student-led Planning and Feedback Loops** - To design programs that allow students to shape their own career exploration journeys, it's important to incorporate student-led planning and feedback loops. This approach fosters high student agency by identifying the "sweet spot" between what students can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance (Montalvo, 2024). By tapping into student voice and utilizing students to advise on curriculum and programming, organizations can ensure experiences feel relevant and not imposed, while also providing students with valuable durable skills in leadership, data analysis, verbal communication, teamwork, reflection, and networking.



#### Consider This...

Young Americans Center for Financial Education has a year-long [youth advisory board](#) that engages young participants in their programs in discussions with adult board and management members to advise on program development. While adults gain valuable insight into program success, student leaders learn more about business, banking, and nonprofit management. They also gain leadership and business etiquette skills.

**Tap Student Voice** - When students lead and design, they gain durable skills for college and career readiness like leadership, data analysis, verbal communication, teaching, teamwork, and reflection. Experiences then feel relevant and less imposed. [Research from the National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\)](#) suggests that young people are more keenly aware of workplace dynamics than adults may believe and, when given an opportunity, can use this awareness to help center programming on their true concerns about workplace readiness, such as the abilities to read the room, respond to ambiguity, adjust to unfamiliar norms, build trust, navigate power dynamics, and manage emotional labor (McCullough & Miller, 2025).



### Try This!

[Defined Careers](#) offers platforms that increase student engagement and selfawareness. Students voice their interests, and staff align supports accordingly.

## SCAFFOLD EXPERIENCES TO MATCH DEVELOPMENT

To offer age-appropriate learning that truly stretches students' skills without overwhelming them, it is helpful to start with low-stakes exposure, like career talks, and gradually build toward more complex engagements. Scaffolding experiences in career-focused programs is all about empowering students to build on what they already know and encouraging them to take ownership of their learning. Since middle schoolers thrive with hands-on, interactive formats, tailoring support based on their current expertise and gradually reducing that support as they become more proficient will help them achieve positive learning outcomes independently.



### Try This!

In this article, Two Rivers Learning Institute in Washington, D.C. shares its [model for Student-Led Conferences](#), which support student reflective skills and agency and offer opportunities for stronger scaffolding of learning. Its model includes digital portfolios and reflection.

Sociedad Latina provides intensive, year-round STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) afterschool programming to 150 middle school students (grades six through eight) with a focus on Latine students and English Language Learner (EL) students. In this program, participants complete experiential, collaborative STEAM projects that are rooted in the context of real-world challenges that face the community. In order to be inclusive of all learning styles and language abilities, STEAM Team activities are designed to be visual, tactile, and experiential. Projects revolve around three “Big Questions” which students explore and reflect on using scientific and artistic inquiry: 1) “What is true?”, 2) “Why does it matter?”, and 3) “How can we move our community forward?”

The STEAM Team meets after school for eight hours per week in 10-week sessions during the school year. Sessions are team-taught by professionals in related STEM and Arts fields, who provide interdisciplinary perspectives on their topics of expertise. With the option to choose one of two themes each session depending on their interests, students are encouraged to embrace both science and art, creativity and logic, and right- and left-brain thinking while engaging



in program activities. Each session culminates in a community presentation of student work for families, teachers, friends, and community members. Self-reflection and assessment are integrated throughout the program, which allows leaders to measure program effectiveness and quality. A six-week summer program expands on the themes and topics covered during the school year.

### CELEBRATE PROGRESS TO BUILD CONFIDENCE

At the middle school level, it is important to reinforce students' belief in their potential by recognizing milestones and celebrating progress. Implementing recognition systems like badges, showcases, and certificates can amplify student success and boost engagement. Embedding frequent celebrations into programming, beyond just annual awards, builds confidence and encourages continued participation, fostering a culture of positivity and gratitude. Consider planning fun field trips where youth can earn tickets; instituting a gratitude wall; throwing parties for reaching milestones; and publicly sharing student projects and stories in newsletters, websites, and social media.



#### Consider This...

- Recognizing a mental health crisis for youth, [Sociedad Latina](#) created a wellness department with a wellness manager position and a youth wellness council. The wellness manager provides activities staff can use with youth and implements a happiness curriculum which teaches youth the skills they need to protect their mental and digital health (e.g., how to breathe, move, and practice gratitude).
- [Akron Community Foundation's nonprofit discovery days](#) allow 6th graders to spend a day working with nonprofits aligned to their interests. Leaders scaffold experiences, collect student feedback, and celebrate participation via showcase events.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Facilitate student advisory councils and work with youth to codesign career exploration content.
- ✓ Implement developmental scaffolds by starting with simple career exposures and gradually expanding to offer more involved career readiness projects.
- ✓ Use public showcase events or badge systems to acknowledge growth and build confidence.





## Resource Readiness

**What young people, schools, and organizations need to support the work**

Securing resources requires a strong business plan, building relationships with funders, gathering data and success stories, and always using your creativity in providing students with rich and relevant experiences that are core to career readiness. Being resource-ready involves preparing your organization to blend revenue sources to stabilize and grow programs and collect and act on both qualitative and quantitative feedback to improve relevance and outcomes.

### SECURE AND DIVERSIFY FUNDING STREAMS

**Diversify Revenue** - To stabilize and grow programs, community organization leaders benefit from blending funds from grants, sponsorships, and earned revenue. This is important, since relying on a single funding stream can make programs fragile. Sustaining an organization year after year, and carrying out efforts for continuous improvement and growth, requires developing a secure and diversified revenue model. Grants may even support product or service development with the goal of creating longer-term revenue streams from contracts. [Candid](#) provides a good list of resources for donations and for grants.

**Develop Earned Revenue Models** - Developing earned revenue models can create a more balanced and sustainable financial structure for a nonprofit. [This guide](#) from Impact Funding Solutions explores some earned income considerations for nonprofits. Specific to the middle school career readiness space, considerations may include offering products and services such as curricular and career resources and training for schools and out-of-school-time programs; playing intermediary roles; project launch and program management services; membership and subscription models; or specialized services that supplement or complement a career readiness program, such as tutoring or mentoring.

### LEVERAGE ECOSYSTEM ASSETS

**Engage Community Members** - Organizational leaders can reach out to retired professionals and corporate partner employees to volunteer time and resources for career readiness efforts. They can also leverage board member contacts and other local organizations, or post opportunities on volunteer job board sites. For many who want to give back to their community, the opportunity to engage with youth is attractive.

Also, consider grocery chains' fundraising options or an online fundraising platform, such as Go Fund Me, to help fund a specific initiative. Ask partners, parents, or individual donors to fund things on a wish list.

**Consider Tangible Donations** - Think about how the community can directly support student learning with in-kind donations. Donations of equipment, tools, supplies, subscriptions, computers, etc. provide career readiness programs with essential resources. Businesses and community members are often



interested in supporting students in hands-on learning to build life skills. Also, look for underused meeting or activity space in community centers, government buildings, schools, university and college campuses, and unoccupied business spaces. [Good360](#) connects community-based nonprofits with high-quality donated products from leading retailers and manufacturers.

**Thank Donors** - Consider how the organization can highlight donors' contributions. Ideas include thoughtful notes from students, posting on social media about the donor, and sharing photos of donations being used by students.

## USE DATA TO REFINE THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

**Analyze Outcomes, Not Just Outputs** - Ask yourselves if you are measuring what truly matters to youth outcomes. Measure growth in student skills, confidence, and career awareness—not just participation numbers and number of workshops. Employing a logic model will distinguish between outputs and outcomes.

**Collect Feedback from Multiple Voices** - Use surveys, focus groups, and interviews with students, families, and partners to understand impact. The diversification of input is important, yet be mindful not to overburden staff, partners, teachers, and students with gathering feedback. Quality over quantity is key; too many metrics can create resistance. Also, consider how findings are shared with staff, partners, and funders.



### Consider This...

- The [Cristo Rey Network](#) uses ongoing student and employer feedback to adjust work-study models, ensuring they stay relevant to workforce realities and student growth.
- [ExpandedED Schools](#) in New York City, continuously collects qualitative and quantitative feedback from students and educators to adapt middle-grade career readiness programming to community needs.
- At the [CAPS Network](#), executive leadership tracks student engagement, self-efficacy, and durable skill development; adjustments to content and delivery are informed directly by student and educator feedback.
- [East Oakland Youth Development Center](#) offers the Bridge program for grades six through eight that leverages community assets—such as free facility use, local volunteers, and grant funding—to ensure continuity. Strong data tracking supports funder reporting and continuous improvement review.
- Youth Voice Surveys used in [Gallup's Voices of Gen Z Study](#) offers model questions to understand student perspectives.



**Adjust Programming Based on Findings** - Make iterative improvements rather than waiting for an annual review. The focus on data-driven decision making for improvement will reduce resistance to data gathering. Share data and answer “so what” or identify the “why” for continuous improvement. For example, student pre- and post- surveys will inform program developments and also help build the case to continue and grow initiatives. This fosters a culture of learning where feedback is embraced as a tool for growth.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Aim to diversify revenue: blend grants, sponsorships, contracts, and foundation support.
- ✓ Audit internal assets and community donations: meeting space, volunteer expertise, and inkind donations.
- ✓ Use data from tracking systems to monitor student participation, outcomes, partner contributions, and resource utilization for continuous improvement.





## Compliance Concerns

### How to plan for and comply with applicable policies and regulations

For organizations interacting with young people, it is critical to take seriously the regulations and requirements to protect your staff and the children with whom you engage. Funders, school systems, companies, government agencies, and partner organizations all have requirements to follow and should consider compliance to be a top priority. Ensure your organization understands this landscape and plans adequately.

#### UNDERSTAND AND PREPARE FOR LEGAL AND REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

**Understand Youth Labor Laws** – Many states require minors (under 18) to obtain a work permit. For organizations engaged in work-based learning experiences—such as apprenticeships, internships, or job shadowing—be aware of youth employment laws and policies to ensure young people in middle or high school can participate. The [U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment/Age Certificate](#) map details Child Labor Laws by state, including information on when and how young people can secure work permits.

**Adopt Privacy Policies** – Protect your organization, staff, and those from whom you collect data, otherwise known as your “consumers.” Although not all nonprofits are required to have privacy policies, instituting them can demonstrate commitment to responsible data collection and protection. The [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) is a U.S. federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. Understand how FERPA relates to your work with youth, and know that your partner educational institutions are required to comply. Other sources for reference are state [laws that impact nonprofit privacy policies](#).

#### PRIORITIZE SAFETY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

**Develop Youth Protection Protocols** – This set of policies should be designed to ensure the safety and well-being of children. The policies should include prevention strategies including background checks, protocols for supervision, and guidelines for rules about behavior and interactions with youth. Also consider policies for reporting suspected abuse or neglect, investigating incident reports, and disciplinary actions. When staff are engaging with youth, background checks are often required of all adults, and written acknowledgment of behavior may be required for visitors, speakers, and partners. The [Youth Protection Program](#) from FIRST is focused on creating safe environments for participants and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s [National Youth Safety Initiative \(CareerSafe\)](#) offers youth worker resources.



**Ensure Physical and Psychological Safety** – Develop and follow procedures both internally and with those outside of your organization. This includes health and safety protocols as well as policies designed to maintain appropriate boundaries, prevent conflicts of interest, and ensure a safe and ethical learning environment.

## ENSURE ACCESS

**Consider Student Access Challenges** – Ensure programming appropriately addresses accessibility issues, civil rights standards, language access, and physical accessibility. If all young people are not succeeding, ask what can be done to increase success. For example, if some students are less likely to attend or show up on time, investigate transportation access. If some are less engaged, ask questions and work to build programs around their needs. Begin with key goals that the organization is striving for in its accessibility reviews. [Civil Rights Laws published by the U.S. Department of Education](#) is a portal for enforcing civil rights in schools.

**Conduct Accessibility Audits** – Look at all aspects of outreach, programming, and impact. Consider how issues of geography, resources, and social networks might impact career readiness and preparation. The [Association of Local Government Auditors \(ALGA\)](#) provides auditing resources to help nonprofit leaders frame questions to engage the board or staff in strengthening accessibility. The [Youth Program Guidelines](#) from the University of Richmond is an example that outlines age-specific protocols for a variety of activities.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Assign a staff member to focus on legal and regulatory compliance.
- ✓ Develop youth protection protocols and conduct accessibility audits.
- ✓ Ensure all programming meets accessibility/civil rights standards, including language access and physical accessibility.

# Conclusion

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

Career readiness in the middle grades is not a program; it is a promise. It is a declaration that every young person of every zip code, perspective, or circumstance deserves to see themselves in the future and believe they can get there. So, when pursuing career-focused programming for youth, hold tight to the “why” and stay nimble in the “how.” **The “why”** is your lodestar. When obstacles come—and they will—your “why” will hold you steady. **The “how”** is where courage and creativity live. This work requires adaptation. Partnerships will fray, funding will ebb, policies will shift. Stay nimble. Innovate. Let data guide you, but let your humanity guide you more.

And remember: **leadership is not about standing above; it is about standing among.** Build a culture where vision is shared, where mid-level managers lead boldly, where families and youth shape the path with you. The strongest ecosystems grow from many roots, not a single trunk.

The middle grades—these years where identity is forming and agency is rising—are an opening, a doorway. Take the next action, however small: convene a meeting, call a partner, map what you already have. You are not starting from scratch; you are starting from **strength**.

This is more than workforce preparation. It is about **community wealth**—not just financial, but cultural and relational wealth that flows from one generation to the next. When you invest in the career readiness of middle-grade youth, you invest in the survival and thriving of us all. So, gather your tools. Hold the vision. Lead with courage. And know that the work you do will ripple far beyond what you can see. This is how transformation begins. This is how we build futures worthy of our young people’s brilliance.



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