



Five Best Practices

for Partnering with
Middle Schools to
Build Sustainable
Career Exploration:
Lessons Learned

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Why Middle School?

Research shows that middle school is an ideal time to expose students to activities designed to help them explore their skills and talents, experiment in potential occupations, and start a plan that can evolve over time to reach their ultimate education and career goals. To help them stay engaged and plan for their future, middle schoolers need educational experiences that match their stage of intellectual and social-emotional development. According to the Association for Career and Technical Education, “research has identified middle school as a time when students can benefit the most from career exploration.”ⁱ The National Career Development Association recommends that middle school students learn about themselves by developing awareness of their occupational interests, aptitudes, and career values; gain an understanding of the value concept of work; and make preliminary occupational choices that are open to change.ⁱⁱ

In addition, when students are exposed to career exploration as early as middle school, they can begin to prepare for their futures by selecting the appropriate type of high school experiences and accompanying curriculum, whether it be Honors courses, college preparatory, or career and technical education. Starting the college and career conversation too late means all these options are already off the table. To ensure students make the most of their postsecondary education, we must ensure they have as long a runway as possible to explore their own passions and interests, experiment with different careers, and develop postsecondary plans that align with specific career goals.

Earlier career-connected learning is also growing as a focus area for education philanthropists, policy makers, businesses and school leaders. Amid fears over students’ lack of college and career readiness, there is an increased urgency to provide career exploration and experimentation opportunities to young people. Simultaneously, our nation’s businesses and economies depend on an educated workforce armed with both durable and technical skills. Supported by educators, employers, and policymakers on both sides of the aisle, career-connected learning, both inside and outside the classroom, is being increasingly recognized as an effective model to increase student engagement, build durable skills, and connect students to hands-on, real-world learning that provides tangible context for their education.

Additionally, career-connected learning is increasingly being seen as an issue of equity and economic mobility. Providing all students with early opportunities to investigate

their own passions and interests, explore various industries, and experiment in potential careers is an options multiplier, opening students up to limitless choices for their future. Career-connected education helps to even the playing field for traditionally underserved student populations, exposing them to high-quality pathways to post-high school education and career success, providing them with opportunity to build social capital and mentor networks, and instilling durable workplace skills to last an entire career.

But while middle school may be the ideal time, it will take a reimagining of our current K-12 education systems to shift career exploration programming earlier in the educational journey. Federal laws and funding streams have expanded in recent years to permit funding to be used for career exploration programming as early as fifth grade, but most states have not yet established comprehensive middle school curriculum to offer this programming. As a result, the work to build and maintain career exploration experiences is still largely left to individual school administrators and teachers.

Overview of ASA’s Middle School Career Exploration Program

It was against this backdrop in 2018 that American Student Assistance, a national nonprofit changing the way kids learn about careers and navigate a path to postsecondary education and career success, began the process of partnering with school districts across Massachusetts to test innovative and scalable career exploration methods and models at the middle school level. ASA sought to obtain rich, longitudinal outcomes to gain better insights into which activities work in a middle school setting, as well as the implications of discovery and exploration activities on the middle school-to-high school transition. While ASA’s role was primarily that of funder and researcher, ASA also offered participating schools implementation counseling and support around approaches to community engagement and educator buy-in, in order to learn how best to support culture change and program sustainability.

ASA’s first grant of \$125,000 was awarded to Hopedale Public Schools to support Explore classes, a program focused on science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM), at Hopedale Junior-Senior High School. In subsequent years, ASA expanded its Massachusetts middle school grants to total \$1.3 million to 14 Massachusetts-based district partners, representing a total of 22 schools, 900



educators and 11,000 students. Participating districts were diverse, with strong representation from communities that have historically been underserved: the 14 districts were home to 29% students of color, 41% low-income students, and 18% high school graduates with non-college plans. As such, grantee districts were representative not just of Massachusetts communities, but of the broader national landscape.

The Pandemic: Multiple Barriers, But Also Opportunities

Much has changed since the grants began five years ago. The pandemic understandably affected middle school grantees' career-connected learning plans, causing many to postpone spending grant funds to subsequent years, cancel activities or transition to remote programming. Even when in-person schooling returned, educators were often focused on other priorities like reversing learning loss, attending to students' mental health and well-being, and dealing with behavioral issues. A key learning: career exploration was not seen as a solution to engage students and help with learning loss, but still as a separate and stand-alone activity in many places.

“COVID has had a huge impact both on our programming and planning in the 21-22 year. Staff absences and vacancies (turnover) made it very challenging for planning as counselors were subbing much of the day to cover classes. In addition, student absences caused many students to miss lessons throughout our year. We also had partner technology teachers change throughout the year, making the consistency and culture in the technology classroom a challenge. Student self-regulation, social-skills, and conflict resolution skills were impacted by the pandemic as well.”

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But even with all the barriers posed by the pandemic, many ASA middle school grantees found a way to still deliver impactful career exploration programming. Technology enabled students to meet virtually with industry professionals all over the world to gain insight into different careers. Educators were able to swiftly adapt their plans to

“We also shifted our focus from emphasizing physical making to “making connections” through self-discovery and virtual interviews.”

**MENDON UPTON
REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**

a remote environment and still foster meaningful changes in attitudes and behaviors among their students, schools and communities. As education evolves in the post-pandemic world, some of these best practices in virtual learning will surely continue as a means to help students overcome physical distances and build personal and professional relationships.

“We had an amazing program available to our grade 6 students. We had a Zoom call where classes logged in. They were able to meet with exciting professionals from all over the world. Presenters included (but were not limited to) army mechanics and a marine biologist in Saudi Arabia.”

MILFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“We got to talk to different people about how they like their job and what they do.”

6TH GRADE STUDENTS, MILFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Lessons Learned from ASA Middle School Grants

The resilient approaches and models explored by our grantees were detailed in the previous report, [“Efficacy and Innovation in Middle School Career Exploration Proven Models for Student Success.”](#) Now, as the grants wind down, this new report captures learnings about implementation, with a particular focus on how these kinds of grants can be most effective and achieve the greatest impact in this space, and how education funders, school administrators, and those partnering with school districts should approach expansion of these school-based programs.

Based on the experiences of ASA's middle school grantees, here are five key learnings that should be considered when creating or enhancing career-connected learning programs and curriculum for middle school:

- **Build relationships** among students, educators, school districts, funders, industry and the community.
- Reduce **administrative burden** on schools and ensure open communication between school and funder.
- **Create buy-in** at multiple levels.
- Elevate **champions**.
- Celebrate program **individuality and flexibility**.

“We have seen students engage with industry professionals and receive feedback and insights into their profession. We have seen our students make connections with what they are learning. We have seen students create presentations and research what specific education is needed for desired professions. We have seen an increase in girls of color engaging in engineering fields.”

SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“I loved STEM and it really made me think about if I want to be an engineer.”

6th GRADE STUDENT, DOUGLAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“The program ‘Building a Bridge between School and Career’ affected the school community positively. Common language and college and career-related activity upheld the notion that planning for your future is essential. Students’ curiosity and questioning increased, and discussions related to individual hopes and dreams began to occur across the campus. Staff shared their postsecondary pathways with students, and students shared their postsecondary goals with staff.”

MILFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“I liked getting to experience different options and opportunities that help me decide what career might work best for me.”

7th GRADE STUDENT, MILFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Lesson

Build Strong Relationships

Student-teacher relationships are central to middle school career exploration. After all, career exploration is all about helping students learn about their interests and disinterests, and this can be most effectively accomplished when educators understand their students and can tailor projects and instruction to their wants and needs.

But it’s also important to help students form relationships with other adults; while students spend a lot of time with their teachers, in some cases, more than 50% of staff in schools are adults who are not teachers.ⁱⁱⁱ Students also

Research shows that young people with a mentor are 55% more likely to be enrolled in college, and 130% more likely to hold a leadership position.

[Youth Today](#)

need to be introduced to adults outside the classroom who work in the professions that students wish to explore, so they can learn how to build the networks and social capital that will be essential to achieving career goals. Securing employment and career advancement today often depends on who you know, rather than what you know: as much as 80% of jobs are filled through personal and professional connections.^{iv} Networks will be critical to student success

“Warm, caring, supportive student–teacher relationships, as well as other child–adult relationships, are linked to better school performance and engagement, greater social competence, and increased ability to take on challenges.”

[Learning Policy Institute](#)

as they enter the workforce, but many students, particularly those who are low-income and/or Black, Indigenous or People of Color, do not have the same opportunities to develop meaningful relationships or connections with caring adults who can help them further their career potential.

Engaging employers and businesses who can give students a head start on building their own networks is therefore a key component of any high-quality career exploration program – and program administrators must be

“The Steam Night, although virtual, had a great impact. At that time of the pandemic, it was refreshing to see how many families across the district registered to participate and came to the school to pick up their materials to participate. Presenters participated virtually and led students through design exercises that they were able to follow along with the materials provided. Families were engaged and happy to participate. It opened our eyes to the level of participation and support we can gain from our community members.”

EAST BRIDGEWATER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

intentional in recruiting professionals from a wide range of industries and diverse in background, race and gender. It is hard for youth to dream of being what they do not see; students need to have a network of adults who look like them and who have histories and experiences similar to their own. Additionally, employers who offer onsite work-based learning opportunities need to create a supportive environment and inclusive culture that welcomes youth from all backgrounds and makes them feel safe in the workspace.

Of course, amid the pandemic, ASA’s middle school grantees had to creatively find ways to facilitate connections among students, industry professionals and the broader



“The relationships that we have made with community members has brought a sense of a village that is working together to ensure success for all our students. Authentic, rigorous learning experiences are taking hold and students and staff are seeing the benefits of this type of learning. Students are seeing the value of identifying strengths and areas for growth and using these to create goals to strive for.”

BARNSTABLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

community. Several schools held virtual events for students and families to hear from representatives of various occupations and learn more about available career-connected learning opportunities. As pandemic restrictions eased, one school, whose career exploration grant focused on STEM-centered programs, used recurring special events to nourish relationships across the district and among students of various grade levels. “Looking externally, a team facilitated several events that connected community to this work, engaging parents and students in the use of

“I really enjoyed STEM/STEAM because I got to build things and work in groups.”

“I liked how I took some online quizzes to try to find my interests, which could help me find a career.”

6TH GRADE STUDENTS, EAST BRIDGEWATER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

technology and helping them understand the purpose and goals of these programs,” explained a school administrator from Uxbridge Public Schools. “Hosting several “pop-up” nights here at the high school, we invited several students from grades 2-6 to use the technology we employ in our engineering lab, facilitated by some of our middle and high school students in grades 6-10. We had to host three of

“The Inspired Innovation Center has offered opportunities for students and teachers to connect with people outside of the classroom in ways never considered or attempted in the past. Students have received more external feedback or insights from industry professionals than ever before.”

MENDON-UPTON REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

them, because the interest was so high, and to see students from our younger grades interacting with the technology, while their parents were seeing how our programs work from teachers and students alike, was truly incredible. As a result, parents and community seem to have a legitimate enthusiasm around this work, beginning at the youngest

grades, which is something that perhaps did not exist as recently as two years ago. Additionally, we can now see that a “program” from across the district is starting to emerge. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the message

“I like how for inspired learning day they had a bunch of different things like policemen and firemen so you could think about your career a little more.”

5TH GRADE STUDENT, MENDON-UPTON REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

has been socialized. When parents walk out asking when there will be another one, and when those not in attendance ask for ways to connect better with the school for more of these events, we can consider it a success.”

Relationship-building is critical for students who are widening their own networks. But it is also important for school districts, which can sometimes operate in silos. Funders and community intermediaries can serve as a crucial connector to link schools together, ensure schools and/or districts are not competing for similar resources or industry partnerships, and provide additional supports as needed.

In ASA’s middle school grant program, monthly optional virtual meetups were held, where districts could talk to each

“We would like to connect with any other partner interested in Project-Based Learning development and maker-oriented learning. Additionally, the Cajon Valley School District has been a source of inspiration. We’d like to have more regular interactions with that ASA partner, if possible, to learn from them. If other innovative districts are partners beyond MA, we would be open to working with and learning with them.”

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other, ask questions and problem solve. Often, a specific school was highlighted and those educators shared the work they did with the group. This led to collaboration—sharing of resources, connecting each other to networks, building stronger relationship across districts, and tackling challenges together.

Ultimately, relationship-centered approaches in education are key to building social capital, unlocking networking opportunities, and contextualizing what students are learning in a tangible setting. This was true for students served by the grants, and the educators themselves.



As such, philanthropic investment in this area is desperately needed, yet the concept of building relationships and social capital can appear vague and intangible - hard to operationalize and measure – and therefore not prioritized. That’s why in recent years ASA has partnered with the national nonprofit MENTOR on a participatory action research project to identify gaps and outline recommendations for future investments to advance relationships and expand social capital for young people.ʋ

To support the building of strong relationships, there are several things to consider. First, capacity planning and overhead are critical in the efforts to help youth build social capital. Efforts to help young people forge strong relationships shouldn’t just be tacked on to someone’s list of responsibilities, but carefully planned and deliberately executed. Additionally, building relationships takes time and results must be measured over the long haul; therefore, multi-year commitments to this effort are key to ensure long-term planning and sustainability. And finally, just as networking is essential for youth to advance in their careers, it also plays an essential role in the world of philanthropy – and that often leads to inequities. Securing funding so often depends on who you know rather than what you do. There must be more of an effort to ensure those who seek funding have equal opportunity to build their own social capital, and fund programs for all learners, not just those who know where to turn for funding.

Lesson 2

Funders, Reduce Administrative Burden on Schools. Schools, Remember to Communicate with Funders.

Many middle schools often lack the requisite resources or personnel to properly plan, fundraise for, and implement a career exploration program. For many ASA grantees, the pandemic only exacerbated these trends or shifted educators’ priorities to dealing with learning loss and other negative impacts of extended remote learning.

“Each of our schools has been challenged with staffing shortages and high rates of turnover. This has made it more challenging to partner with technology/Project Lead The Way teachers, as in many cases those positions have been vacant for an extended period of time.”

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“For a school our size, it seems as though we are constantly leaning on the same individuals to coordinate programming. While we have had some success with involving other departments, teachers and counselors, on the whole, are tired and stressed. As a result, the work that seems to be ancillary or beyond the normal scope of the job tends to be a bit of a stretch, even when resources are offered . . . Finally, from a central office standpoint, having turnover of both the curriculum director and superintendent has shifted priorities, and with a lack of institutional history with respect to these programs, the work in these areas can sometimes be seen as secondary or subordinate to traditional academics.”

UXBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Education funders and partners should be prepared to be flexible in all parts of the grant process, from reviewing the applicant’s proposal, to providing support to ensure successful program implementation, to making sure reporting requirements aren’t onerous. For their part, schools should be aware of the funder’s requirements and communicate regularly as circumstances change.

Tips for funders:

First, education funders should anticipate schools and/or district applicants who are less familiar with the grantmaking process and should look to create streamlined Request For Proposal and application procedures. Determine creative ways to share your RFP or identify potential applicants and proactively reach out, to ensure under-resourced schools can find your funding opportunities. Also, be mindful of the fact that some schools can lean on district-level grant writers, while others must rely on school-level personnel to tackle proposals on their own. Reviewers of grant proposals are encouraged to consider the central idea of the proposed programming and its potential, vs the polish of the presentation. ASA put in place a short RFP process and then followed up with either a site visit or interview, to help mitigate the issue for districts with less experience with grant writing.

Throughout the duration of the grants, in addition to the monthly meetings described in the previous section, ASA provided monthly newsletters that incorporated important dates as well as useful resources. We also provided districts

“Covid restrictions, change in the Master Schedule, two administrative changes, and evolving learning models made full program implementation challenging throughout the year.”

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with the option to meet with a member of our team to ask questions or request additional supports.

Education funders should also anticipate variations on districts' preparedness to receive and allocate grant funding. Some districts are well equipped to handle finances, while others are overwhelmed; funders should streamline the funding process as much as possible, provide clear instruction, and be available for questions. Being flexible regarding budget spending is also key, especially post-pandemic. Allow more operational funding and make sure districts can reallocate funds fairly easily. Again, relationship between grantor and grantee is crucial; the ASA team found that being transparent and empathetic in all of our grantee interactions helped them to feel comfortable in sharing obstacles and created an honest environment for brainstorming solutions.

Requirements for reporting on grant outcomes should be a delicate balance between gathering the needed data to paint a full picture of program impact on one hand, and not overburdening educators on the other. Where possible, consider providing supports to help schools and/or districts put the right report structures into place. For example, ASA served as the creator of all pre/post student surveys (with feedback from schools) for our middle school grants, and we provided supports to ensure that districts could collect surveys as well as Student Information Management System data. We also provided grantees with a streamlined reporting process, requiring them to fill out two short question sets via a digital platform at the middle and end of each year. Streamlined reporting requirements also allow for continuity in case of staff turnover.

Some schools, however, face even steeper barriers than a lack of resources in their efforts to implement a high-quality career exploration curriculum in middle school. Regulatory restrictions at the local or state level may mandate career exploration begins at a higher grade level. Historically, there was a prohibition on using Perkins federal funding for career exploration activities below seventh grade, but legislation in recent years lifted this restriction and federal funding can now be used for career exploration as early as fifth grade. Education funders may want to lend their voice to advocate for any needed policy and/or regulatory changes at the state or local level, such as administrative changes to a state's definition of Career and Technical Education. For example, the state of Maine passed L.D. 1576, which redefined the state definition of CTE to include language about middle school.^{vi}

Tips for schools:

Many schools and districts may want to pursue grant funding for middle school career exploration programming, but most do not have a grant writer on staff. As anyone who has applied for a grant knows, the process is time-consuming and might be difficult for school personnel to take on in addition to all their other responsibilities. While funders are encouraged to consider a proposal for its core ideas and not be overly swayed by its "polish," there is no denying that a well-constructed and well-written proposal will probably score higher in the grant maker's eyes. Schools may want to seek help from professional consultants that offer grant writing services; a simple Google search turns up several organizations that offer services ranging from merely editing a proposal that the school drafts to a full-service approach that includes finding grant opportunities, writing the application and managing the entire process.

Once funding is secured, schools will want to assign a dedicated staff member(s) to manage the administration of the grant, including accepting payments and reporting outcomes. While widespread buy-in throughout school staff and faculty is ideal (as we will detail in the next section), having one or more team members managing and owning the entire grant process is critical to ensure smooth implementation.

Finally, schools should communicate with funders often and be transparent. If problems arise, such as a need to shift grant payment dates or reporting deadlines, tell the funder as soon as possible. As the middle school grantees faced challenges, ASA was able to accommodate different funding arrangements and extend due dates as needed, but continuous communication was key.

Lesson 3

Buy-in Is Critical

ASA's experiences with middle school grantees illustrated that buy-in at all levels, and at all stages, is crucial to creating a successful career exploration program. Too often, classroom teachers had been left out of important conversations during the planning phase; some districts applied for funding, but classroom educators weren't brought in until implementation and thus didn't understand the scope of the program. Similarly, school and/or district administration approval was equally important during the implementation phase. Without it, educators in the classroom often faced barrier after barrier, and this was particularly hard to overcome in cases with high turnover at the school and district leadership level. The most successful models are instead multi-tiered approaches that include



involvement from classroom educators, counselors, and school and district administrators from the get-go.

However, it's also important to not overburden teachers. While it is important classroom educators know about the program from initial conception, feel involved and can provide insight, they often have too much on their plate already and shouldn't be the only ones carrying the load.

“School leadership changed in the fall of 2020, disrupting program implementation. An interim principal was in place in December of 2020. The Naviance representative working with Stacy Middle School changed in the fall. An assistant principal left mid-year to pursue alternate career opportunities.”

MILFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Other members of the school and district team should offload additional planning work so educators can put the time and energy into instruction. Consider using a community of practice model where multiple stakeholders, including representatives of the school and/or district, community members, businesses and employers, students and families, collaborate and share the workload.

Another reason buy-in is so critical to the long-term success of a program is the prevalence of staff turnover. While teacher exit rates vary by region, in general the pandemic ushered in an era of high turnover across the nation: Research shows a number of states saw an increase in the share of educators leaving teaching positions between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years.^{vi} Therefore, it's important to properly onboard new team members and share the “why” of a project early on so they see it as a priority in their new role. For example, when key personnel were newly hired at a grantee school or district, ASA always offered a meeting to provide context and shared all previous reports and information with the new staff member.

Program leaders and funders should encourage procedures that ensure programming content and knowledge lives on regardless of turnover. “We would like to create a drive where this curriculum will live so that when a staff person retires, the lessons don't leave as well,” said an administrator of Blackstone-Millville Regional District, an ASA grantee.

Buy-in can be hard-fought, but worth the battle. As an administrator of ASA grantee Barnstable Public Schools said, “Buy-in from all staff has been and continues to be a challenge especially in a year such as this. It is hard to reach out of your comfort zone and try something new. But even with that said, we are seeing more and more educators taking the leap and showcasing the amazing work that their students are doing. Many different teams

and neighborhoods have taken on community action projects or worked directly with community members to help solve problems of local businesses. A wonderful example of this is a social action campaign by our 7th grade teams . . . Students have chosen their own projects to support, including homelessness, mental health, pollution and supporting local businesses.”

As buy-in spreads among the staff, interest and confidence multiply. “The most significant change we've seen is a general awareness of the Inspired Innovation Center and its resources for curricular work,” said an administrator from Mendon Upton Regional School District. “Teachers have begun reaching out with project needs, requests for collaboration, or project ideas. There's also been a

“There is [now] a greater sense of shared ownership across disciplines for the career pathways at UHS.”

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“District leadership changes . . . have made prioritization for implementation challenging. Of the leadership team that started the 2018-19 school year, only two principals remain, meaning the district has seen at least one change in Superintendent, Curriculum Director/Assistant Superintendent, Director of Facilities, Technology Director, Business Manager, and Pupil Services Director. All three buildings have seen building-level administration changes as well. That has stunted continuity, which, when combined with the challenges of the pandemic, has made for shifting priorities and even difficulty in onboarding different stakeholders with a degree of consistency.”

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more open-mindedness to career-oriented work, both in exploration and lesson design . . .and also a level of confidence emerging amongst the staff to attempt career-oriented, maker-based projects. This confidence does not go unnoticed by colleagues, and it has a compounding effect.”



Lesson 4

Elevate Your Champions

As outlined above, developing multiple advocates of a program, rather than relying on one particularly amazing champion, is crucial to ensure program longevity and sustainability in the face of staff attrition. Initially, though, programs may struggle to find individuals in the classroom or at the administrative level who feel qualified to lead career-connected learning initiatives. This can be especially true at the middle school level, since the US K12 education system has traditionally reserved college and career readiness for students in the later high school grades. An ASA survey of Massachusetts middle school counselors, for example, showed they felt most prepared and able to help students handle the transition to high school, but much less so with respect to college and career planning, aptitude mapping and the like. While 98% reported confidence in supporting students' emotional needs around preparing for high school, only 70% felt confident helping students identify and map skillsets, and merely 61% felt confident enough to discuss post-high school options.^{viii}

Not surprisingly, counselors in that same survey cited a lack of training in instruction on career planning, with only 41% participating in training on how to lead discussions around post-high school options and 38% learning how to teach about identifying and mapping skillsets. Education funders and school leaders, then, should encourage and fund professional development opportunities to ensure proper staffing of these activities and that there is a network of champions to do the work. ASA held two full professional development days for middle school grantees each year and districts were allowed to use grant funds to pay for substitute teachers so that educators could attend training during the workday.

“Several individuals participated in a number of conferences and workshops across the nation, which has helped our schools in adjusting to national (if not international) trends and in balancing the needs of students from an academic standpoint with some of the career exploration goals.”

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“Communicating and collaborating with other schools through this process was very eye-opening and helpful. Our mid-year and year-end Zooms provided so much food for thought, and really were inspiring.”

MONSON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Once program champions are in place, it is also important to give them a stage so they can spread awareness and interest among peer educators, students, parents, and the community. Education funders and other influencers can spotlight these programs as expert panelists and co-presenters at trade conferences and thought leadership events, or funders and grantees can collaborate on public relations efforts to highlight career exploration programs and students in local, state and national media. Funders can also give program champions an opportunity to write case studies and research reports on their work – when ASA partnered with the Association for Middle Level Education on [Career Exploration in the Middle Grades: A Playbook for Educators](#), several grantees were invited to contribute case studies based on their experiences.

Of course, program champions don't only have to be adults; students can be your best ambassadors! Consider incorporating student stories into your advocacy efforts with policymakers or add a student perspective to conference panels and presentations. If the logistics of in-person appearances are too burdensome, consider using pre-recorded video or a live Zoom for student participation.

Lesson 5

Celebrate Program Individuality

While there are common barriers to early career exploration (staff turnover, faculty and parent buy-in), each school and/or district faces unique challenges and must implement distinct solutions suitable to its own situation. No two programs are exactly the same.

“We got to learn more about the jobs in our community.”

6TH GRADE STUDENT, BARNSTABLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The strongest school models are built around the unique needs of the surrounding community. Program administrators should develop relationships with local employers to increase student awareness of career pathways, close opportunity gaps, ensure against occupational segregation, and lay the groundwork for a future regional workforce that is more diverse and equitable. Such a high level of individuality may make it difficult to bring programs to scale for impact; funders should not anticipate grantees to produce turnkey models that are fully scalable and easily reproduced. But program distinctiveness also brings tremendous benefit, such as greater flexibility and adaptability, the ability to pivot when circumstances warrant, and to incorporate student voice.



Closing Thoughts

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, education funders, partners, administrators and businesses should stand ready to work side by side with educators to make middle school career exploration programs a success. All the other factors outlined in the pages above (relationships, reducing administrative burdens, buy-in, champions and flexibility) must also be in place for a successful program to be sustained. Where possible, funders must be prepared to offer hands-on strategic planning and implementation support to overburdened educators. The pandemic may have eased but educators are still struggling with an incredibly difficult learning environment and more teachers are exiting the profession than ever before.^{ix} Simultaneously, with students' academic behaviors and mental health in decline as a result of the pandemic, there's never been a more important time to boost student engagement by increasing their understanding of the connections between classroom learning and their future careers. As educators are asked to do more with less, funders, employers, partners and all who support these programs should be prepared to roll up their sleeves.

With the proper support structure in place, and even in the face of great adversity, ASA's middle school grantees proved that educators can build amazing, life-changing career exploration programming for students that gives them more time to better know themselves, understand their options, and make informed decisions about the rest of their education journey. In closing, here are just a few inspiring examples of how grantees persevered through difficult circumstances to produce high-quality career exploration experiences that resonated with students and families:

“This year we were able to complete our STEM engineering project through November and December, which we called “DeSTEMber.” During this project students completed an engineering project at home that was specific to their grade level. Each grade level presented their projects to a team of various industry professionals during one day in December. Eighth graders created therapeutic toys for children with cerebral palsy, 7th graders built bridges with specific guidelines for what it should be able to hold, 6th graders worked on an app, and 5th graders presented scratch programming projects. More than 50 middle school students submitted engineering projects to present to their peers, teachers, and industry professionals. The industry professionals who attended and provided feedback on the virtual presentations were from GE, Amazon, Google, Accenture, Belcan, Boston Children's Hospital, Delta Airlines, UMass Lowell, PBLWorks, and Mass STEM Hub. Representatives from Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology and UMass Lowell Francis College of Engineering showed students what STEM can look like after high school, while Brickyard Collaborative, a Lynn-based maker space, demonstrated rapid prototyping techniques. Even though it was difficult to monitor success in a remote learning environment compared to in-person learning, we still found bright spots this year. Despite it being a virtual presentation, students still experienced the nervous excitement of presenting to an expert and were incredibly proud of their presentations. While they were at home students created high-quality and thoughtful projects, which we saw led to increased engagement with science class.”

KIPP MASSACHUSETTS

“Thus, the grant's goal became sustaining momentum from the prior year and trying to keep the Inspired Innovation Center on people's radar as a resource. Although the students couldn't move to different classrooms, we sought to bring the IIC to the students. We also shifted our focus from emphasizing physical making to “making connections” through self-discovery and virtual interviews. IIC-related projects almost always had an introductory presentation or consultation with an industry professional to frame the project or an interview/presentation as the culmination of student work. Additionally, we used resources like Naviance's Career Key, Strengths Explorer, and Thrively's interest inventory. . . When I reflect on the grant, I think the biggest impact was that it made us think flexibly about what we COULD accomplish within the constraints. The IIC programming was its own design challenge in that the conditions and needs for space were changing. As a result, the plan presented in the summer was far different than what we ultimately enacted. Innovation often comes through reinventing oneself while adhering to one's core values. The IIC program did just that. Given that making was limited, we shifted our focus to interest-oriented career interviews. When we couldn't offer the in-person family workshops, we redesigned the nature of the workshop so it could be enacted over Zoom. The IIC also became interview central as small groups of students and classes used microphones, conference cameras, and large screen TVs to connect with experts from across the country. When restrictions eased, we were thrilled to invite whole classes into the IIC for the first time. Observing students applying curricular knowledge to create projects and models of their choosing with their peers brought the idea of an Inspired Innovation Center to life. The end projects, however, left me in awe. Words won't do it justice, but to see an entire interactive digital museum or theme park rides in Minecraft left me convinced that we are on the right track and further enhanced my commencement to this important work.”

MENDON-UPTON REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



“Our program is helping our students plan for their future. As a school we are putting together more trips and events surrounding college and career readiness. Students are speaking out about their future and interested in planning events to gain more knowledge (career days, college week, etc.)”

FALL RIVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“Students had a great deal more opportunities to think about their futures and knowing themselves. They’ve built their soft skills, workplace skills, explored their own passions, and increased their confidence levels. They got a taste of several career fields even in middle school. In the past, the hands-on experience may not have occurred until later in their high school career.”

MONSON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Voices of our Middle School Grantee Students

- **We were able to do some hands-on activities involving the career path.** *(Blackstone 2022-2023, 7th Grade)*
- **I liked when we had a career fair because I can see what opportunities I can have to go to college.** *(Springfield 2022-2023, 7th Grade)*
- **I loved the business pathway, it was fun, helped me learn about what I have to do to open a business.**
(Uxbridge 2022-2023, 8th Grade)
- **I liked doing pathways media and pathways finance because it was enjoyable and I learned from it.** *(Uxbridge 2022-2023, 8th Grade)*
- **I liked that we had a day dedicated to careers.** *(Blackstone 2021-2022, 8th Grade)*
- **You got to learn about different careers and even if you don’t want to do it in the future, you still got to know about it and it expanded your knowledge.** *(Blackstone 2021-2022, 6th Grade)*
- **I liked the freedom we were given to explore any career.** *(Douglas 2021-2022, 8th Grade)*
- **I liked how they brought us on a field trip to UMASS and gave us a look around the college.** *(Fall River 2021-2022, 7th Grade)*
- **I liked that teachers and staff at my school encouraged people to look into many careers that we might be interested in.**
(Fall River 2021-2022, 6th Grade)
- **The science fair and the public health project was very fun and engaging.** *(KIPP 2021-2022, 8th Grade)*
- **I liked that we were able to explore different topics and actually create things on those topics to build our understandings.**
(KIPP 2021-2022, 8th Grade)
- **I liked learning about the opportunities in the medical field in health class.** *(Milford 2021-2022, 7th Grade)*
- **I could try new things and give me a better idea about what I want to do in my future.** *(Milford 2021-2022, 7th Grade)*
- **I liked how our school let us use job recruitment sites to browse jobs.** *(Monson 2021-2022, 6th Grade)*
- **I liked that I was able to take a test that shows me what I am most capable of for my job. I also liked that we were able to make slides identifying our future life.** *(Monson 2021-2022, 6th Grade)*
- **I liked that we were able to see and experiment with a lot of career options instead of just ones that are known to be most successful. It allowed us to be ourselves.** *(Springfield 2021-2022, 6th Grade)*
- **I liked that we were walked through the ways to find a right school for us.** *(Sutton 2021-2022, 8th Grade)*
- **I learned a lot about what my skills are and what I know how to do.** *(Sutton 2021-2022, 8th Grade)*
- **I liked learning about my different strengths so that I can take classes best fit for what I wanna do when I get older.**
(Sutton 2021-2022, 8th Grade)
- **Something I liked about the career exploration opportunities at my school was doing hands-on activities.**
(Taunton 2021-2022, 7th Grade)
- **Something that I liked about the career exploration opportunities is that we get to build things.** *(Taunton 2021-2022, 7th Grade)*
- **I liked how they showed me how I could get to that career.** *(Uxbridge 2021-2022, 7th Grade)*



About American Student Assistance® (ASA)

American Student Assistance® (ASA) is a national nonprofit changing the way kids learn about careers and navigate a path to postsecondary education and career success. ASA believes all students should have equitable access to career readiness learning, starting in middle school, so they will be equipped to make informed, confident decisions about their futures. ASA fulfills its mission by providing free digital-first experiences, including Futurescape® and Next Voice™, and EvolveMe™, directly to millions of students, and through impact investing and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others. To learn more about ASA, visit www.asa.org/about-asa.

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^{ix} **Knox, L.** "Teacher Education Programs Desperately Seek Students." (2022.) Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/29/teacher-shortage-tied-education-programs-enrollment-drop>

