



YOUTH CAREER READINESS OUTLOOK

ALL OPTIONS ON THE TABLE

**Parent Views on Postsecondary
Education and Career Paths**



Introduction

Parent views on suitable education-to-career pathways for their children are evolving to keep pace with a rapidly shifting labor market. Greater acceptance of shorter, faster postsecondary routes to career, a trend accelerated by the pandemic, is growing even faster as worries that AI will soon replace entry-level white collar jobs increase.¹ While the return on investment for a traditional bachelor's degree ideally should be measured by a graduate's lifetime employment and earnings, many parents may be changing their views on higher education because they see diminished opportunities for their children's first job out of college. In fact, recent research shows that, for the first time, unemployment rates for young recent graduates are rising faster than for those without a college degree and 52 percent of the Class of 2023 worked in a job that did not require a bachelor's degree one year out from college.² That first job can have lasting implications: 73% of graduates who start out underemployed remain so 10 years after completing college.³

...parents feel a growing openness to career and technical education (CTE) and nondegree pathways...

It is against this backdrop of rising skepticism over the four-year degree, persistent concerns over college costs and student debt, and a roiling job market for recent graduates, that American Student Assistance® (ASA) set out to uncover evolving trends in the attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making of teenagers – and the ecosystem of caring adults around them – as they plan their post-high school

pathways. A national nonprofit at the forefront of changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures, ASA implemented Youth Career Readiness Outlook as a new research series exploring what it means to be ready for life after high school from the perspectives of young people and the adults who support them—parents, educators, counselors, and employers. Drawing on primary research, each report examines key aspects of teen career readiness, including education plans, skill-building, and career aspirations. Together, the series offers a comprehensive look at how today's youth are navigating their paths toward the future.

In this installment of the Outlook series, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of parents and caregivers. Parents play an outsized role, among a large ecosystem of influencers, in guiding youth on education and career.⁴ The nationally-representative online survey of 2,230 parents of middle and high school students (grades 6–12) analyzed parents' preferences for their children's post-high school education choices, their familiarity with various pathways, and their level of preparedness to offer guidance.⁵ This latest round of research builds on a prior national survey of parents conducted by ASA in 2019 and identifies significant landscape shifts.

Overall, our findings indicate parents feel a growing openness to career and technical education (CTE) and nondegree pathways (although many still have concerns over career growth, income potential, and familiarity gaps with newer pathways); a confidence in their ability to support their children in navigating nondegree options; and a clear-eyed view of the potential benefits and drawbacks of alternatives to traditional postsecondary education. Importantly, findings also indicate more parents are feeling less certain about which path their child should take – a growing number of parents do not prefer the traditional college route but are unsure of which alternatives are best.

¹ Lindsay Ellis and Katherine Bindley, "AI Is Wrecking an Already Fragile Job Market for College Graduates," *Wall Street Journal*

² Johanna Alonso, "Bleak Job Landscape for Today's Degree Holders," *Inside Higher Ed*

³ "Talent Disrupted," *Strada Education Foundation*

⁴ "Next Steps: An Analysis of Teens' Post-High School Plans," *American Student Assistance*

⁵ This nationally-representative, quantitative survey was conducted online in March 2025 and included 2,230 parents of middle and high school students (grades 6–12). The sample was balanced across geography, gender, race/ethnicity, and grade level. Comparisons to 2019 data are based on the ASA 2019 Parent Survey



Key Findings

The survey results point to seven notable trends regarding parents' attitudes toward their children's education and career planning:

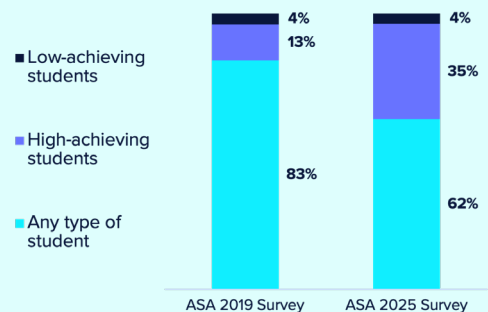
- 1. Parents increasingly view Career & Technical Education (CTE) as an option for high-achieving students.** In 2025, 35% of parents believe CTE is best suited for high-achieving students—up from 13% in 2019.
- 2. Parents still prefer traditional college, but less dominantly than in the past.** While college remains parents' top preference for their child after high school, the percentage of parents preferring it has dropped from 74% in 2019 to 58% in 2025.
- 3. Parents are actively involved and supportive.** Most (88%) parents report having discussed postsecondary plans with their child and the majority of parents broadly agree with their child's chosen path.
- 4. Priorities are shared by parents preferring both traditional and nondegree pathways for their children.** Parents want their children's chosen education program, regardless of whether it's a four-year college or nondegree program, to align with their interests and instill skills needed for career.
- 5. Familiarity with certain nondegree pathways is high.** Most parents are at least "somewhat familiar" with trade schools (95%) and apprenticeships/internships (93%), but familiarity drops with other nondegree pathways, like technical bootcamps (30%).
- 6. Parents feel equipped to guide their children.** Four out of five parents (79%) believe they would be a good resource for helping their child navigate a non-degree pathway, including 41% who strongly agree.
- 7. Parents recognize both benefits and drawbacks of nondegree options.** Nearly all (98%) parents see at least one benefit of nondegree paths, such as hands-on learning – but most (89%) also identify

potential downsides, including limited career growth (32%), limited opportunities (32%), and lower income potential (32%).

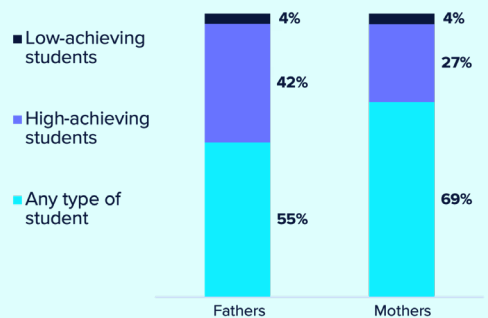
Perceptions of CTE are evolving

Our survey results from 2025 show that a growing number of parents believe CTE, at the secondary level, is best suited for high-achieving students, reinforcing the trend away from reserving CTE, or as it was formerly known in decades past, "vocational" education, for students on a non-academic path. The percentage of parents who believe CTE is for high-achieving students increased substantially, from 13% in 2019 to 35% in 2025. Similarly, 83% of parents in 2025 think any type of student should pursue CTE, compared to just 62% in 2019.

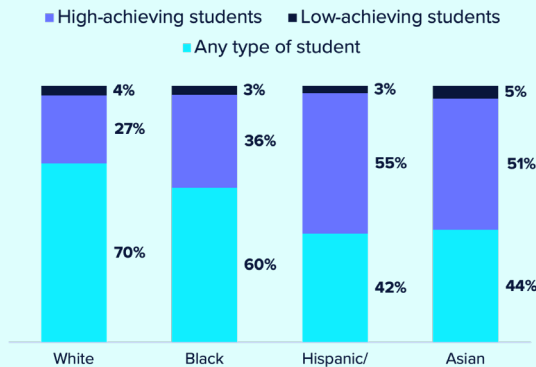
"Career & Technical Education Is Best Suited for..." by Survey Year



"Career & Technical Education Is Best Suited for..." by Parent's Gender



“Career & Technical Education Is Best Suited for…” by Parent’s Race



Perceptions of CTE vary by demographics: Hispanic/Latino (55%) and Asian (51%) parents are more likely to feel CTE is for academically high-achieving students compared to Black (36%) and White (27%) parents. Additionally, fathers (42%) are more likely than mothers (27%) to associate CTE with high-achieving students.

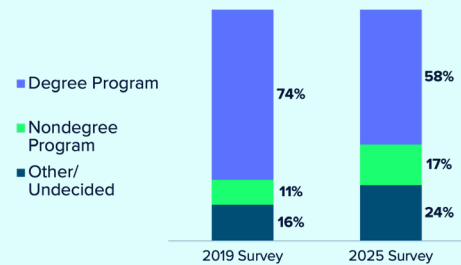
Parents still prefer college, but less dominantly than in the past

Traditional four- or two-year college remains parents’ top preference for their child to pursue right after high school, confirming similar results from other surveys.⁶ But its popularity is waning: ASA surveys show the percentage of parents preferring it has dropped from 74% in 2019 to 58% in 2025. However, while the preference for college has decreased by 16 percentage points, interest in nondegree pathways has grown by only six points, indicating a rise in parents who are either undecided or considering other options.

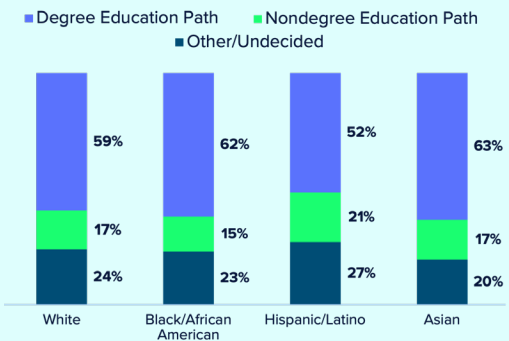
While no meaningful differences emerged between parents of children in different grades or who lived in different regions, there were small variations by race and ethnicity. Hispanic/Latino parents are slightly more likely than average to

prefer nondegree options (21% vs. 17%) and to be undecided or open to other paths (27% vs. 20%). However, gender, of both parent and child, did produce differences. Although parents of girls and boys are equally likely to prefer a nondegree path (18%), parents of girls (61%) are more likely to prefer college than parents of boys (56%). Further, mothers (20%) are more inclined to prefer a nondegree path than fathers (15%).

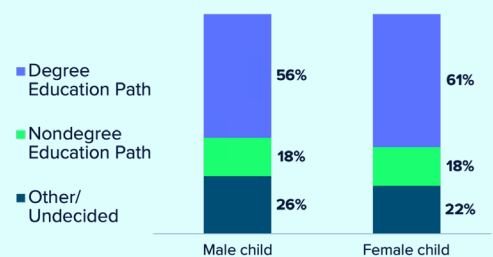
Top Preference for Their Child Following High School by Survey Year



Top Preference for Their Child Following High School by Race



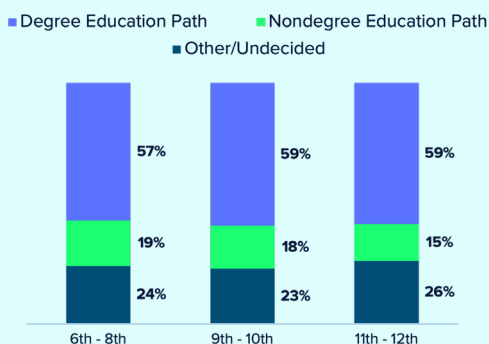
Top Preference for Their Child Following High School by Child’s Gender



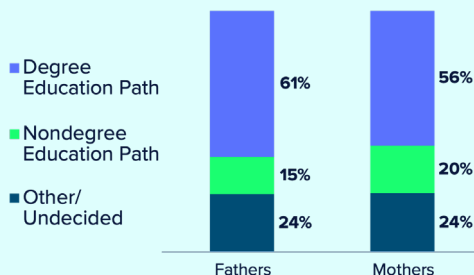
⁶ Stephanie Marken, “Most Parents Prefer College Pathway for Their Child,” Gallup



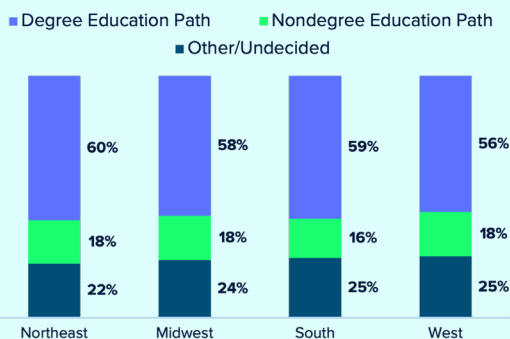
Top Preference for Their Child Following High School by Age



Top Preference for Their Child Following High School by Parent's Gender



Top Preference for Their Child Following High School by Region



Nondegree pathway includes vocational school, apprenticeship, internship, certification/tech bootcamp

⁷ "Next Steps: An Analysis of Teens' Post-High School Plans," American Student Assistance

⁸ Ibid

Parents are actively involved and supportive

Unsurprisingly, parents are typically the largest influence on their children's education and career plans. Prior research in our Outlook series suggests that, among a diverse circle of caring adults and peers that includes teachers, school counselors, friends and classmates, other family members, community leaders, bosses and coworkers, coaches and more, parents stand out as the ones teens turn to most for advice and guidance.⁷ Our 2025 parent survey found that most (88%) parents report having discussed postsecondary plans with their child—aligning with our prior findings that 91% of teens say they have discussed their plans with their parents.⁸

Parents also say they broadly agree with their child's chosen path. Parents whose child is likely to pursue a traditional college degree approve slightly more (88%) than those whose child seeks a nondegree option (83%).

Interestingly, teens' perceptions of their parents' level of agreement with their plans is not as rosy. Overall, only 5% of parents say they do not agree with their child's plans -- but 19% of teens feel their parents are not on board with their ideas for the future. This difference between what parents say and how teens perceive their parents' opinion grows even larger when the most likely path is a nondegree education option. While only 8% of these parents say they disagree with their child's plan, 30% of teens say their parents disagree. Parents prioritize pathways that align with interests and specific skills.





Teen Perspectives

In an online community of teens curated by ASA called Project Waypoint (separate from our Youth Career Readiness Outlook surveys), some youth have provided more insight into why their parents disagree with their future plans:

“They want me to immediately go to college in my state, but I think it’s better if I become financially responsible and stable to be able to afford college, especially since I’m considering out-of-state colleges.”

- Age 17, Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin; Black or African American, Nonbinary, Arizona

“Personally, I have no clue what I want to be or do in the future. My parents, on the other hand, want me to go to college for a degree and get my education. I love knowledge and learning, too. Just trying to figure out how to learn without going to a physical classroom and sit there for over an hour.”

-Age 18, Asian/Asian American, Female, New York

Parents prioritize pathways that align with interests and specific skills

Regardless of whether they want their child to pursue a traditional degree or follow a nondegree path, parents believe the most important feature of a chosen pathway is that it aligns with their child’s interests. “Suited for my child’s interests and/or academic needs” was the top reason for degree-preferring parents (34%) and the second-most cited reason for nondegree-preferring parents (32%). Parents also rated “Learn skills for a specific career” as a leading factor, with nondegree-preferring parents selecting it as their top response (34%) and degree-preferring parents choosing it as their third-highest response (32%).

The financial affordability of all postsecondary paths was less important to parents; 18% of parents preferring a degree pathway weighed program cost as an important factor, and only 20% of parents preferring a nondegree path said cost played a significant role. Even less important to parents was if a postsecondary path was recommended by teachers/counselors (11% degree-preferring, 14% nondegree-preferring).

Key differences between parent groups, however, emerge on other issues. When it comes to parents’ preferences on helping their child select a pathway, there was a 10% difference, with parents preferring degree pathways at 34% compared to 24% of parents preferring non-degree pathways. Degree-preferring parents were also more likely to view their child’s chosen path as a steppingstone to future education (29% vs. 20%) and as the “most appropriate next step” (29% vs. 16%).

Have you had specific discussions with your child about what they will most likely do after they graduate from high school?

Most Likely Path Post-Graduation:	Degree Program	Nondegree Program	Other/Undecided	Overall
Yes, and I agree with their plans	88%	83%	71%	83%
Yes, but I do not agree with their plans	3%	8%	8%	5%
No, we haven’t really discussed it yet	9%	9%	20%	12%



Reasoning Behind Parents' Top Preference for Post-Graduation Pathway

Top Reason for Supporting Degree Pathway	% of Respondents
This will provide the best experience suited to my child's interests and/or academic needs	34%
It will help them figure out what they want to do for a career	34%
They'll learn skills for a specific career	32%
The career my child is interested in requires it	32%
It is what my child wants to do	31%
It will increase their chances of being hired	30%
It's the most appropriate next step after high school	29%
It's a steppingstone to continue their education	29%
I want my child to get properly trained for the job market	27%
They will form a good network of connections	23%
It's financially affordable	18%
This is what I did after high school, and I want the same/similar experience for my child	17%
I did not have this experience, and want this experience for my child	13%
Their teachers/school counselors recommend it	11%
Most of the kids in our community do this	9%
We haven't looked at any other options	5%
Another reason	1%

Top Reason for Supporting Nondegree Pathway	% of Respondents
They'll learn skills for a specific career	34%
This will provide the best experience suited to my child's interests and/or academic needs	32%
It will increase their chances of being hired	28%
It is what my child wants to do	26%
The career my child is interested in requires it	25%
I want my child to get properly trained for the job market	25%
It will help them figure out what they want to do for a career	24%
It's a steppingstone to continue their education	20%
It's financially affordable	20%
They will form a good network of connections	19%
It's the most appropriate next step after high school	16%
Their teachers/school counselors recommend it	14%
This is what I did after high school, and I want the same/similar experience for my child	13%
Most of the kids in our community do this	10%
I did not have this experience, and want this experience for my child	9%
We haven't looked at any other options	6%
Another reason	2%

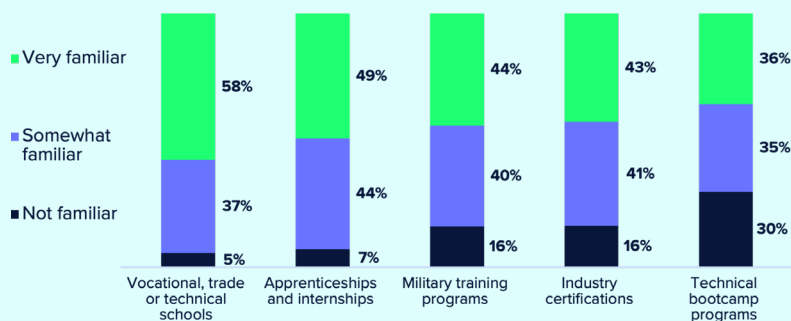
Parent familiarity with certain nondegree pathways is high

Today, as educators, employers, policymakers and the media increasingly embrace nondegree pathways as a viable route to sustainable jobs and careers,⁹ most parents say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with vocational schools (95%) and apprenticeships/internships (93%). But parents

report slightly less familiarity with other nondegree options, like military training and industry certifications (both 84%), and a full 30% say they are not familiar at all with “bootcamp” programs that teach technical skills.

Our analysis did find some notable differences by parent gender, race/ethnicity, and region. For example, fathers report greater familiarity than mothers across all nondegree pathways. Black and Hispanic/Latino parents are more likely to

How familiar are you with each of the following nondegree pathways?

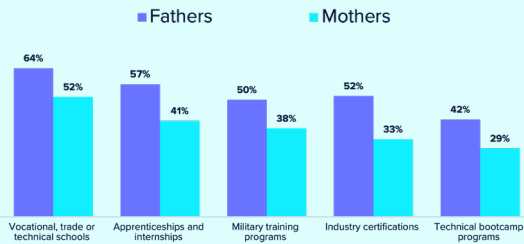


⁹ "Next Steps: An Analysis of Teens' Post-High School Plans," American Student Assistance

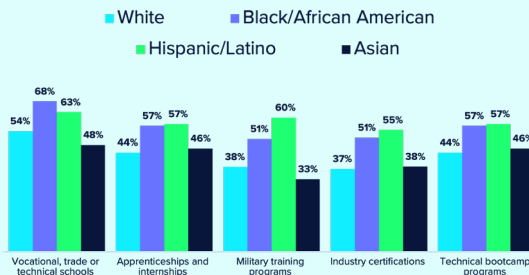


report being “very familiar” with nondegree options, as compared to White and Asian parents, and parents in the Midwest report lower familiarity with nondegree options than their peers in the Northeast, South, and West.

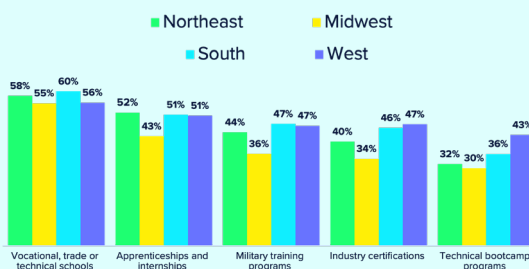
“Very Familiar” with Nondegree Pathways by Gender



“Very Familiar” with Nondegree Pathways by Race



“Very Familiar” with Nondegree Pathways by Region

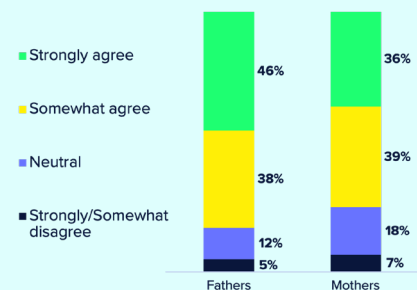


Parents feel equipped to guide their children along nondegree pathways

Encouragingly, and in line with their rising familiarity around nondegree pathways, most parents feel confident in their ability to advise their children on non-traditional education plans. Four out of five parents (79%) believe they would be a good resource for helping their child navigate a nondegree pathway, including 41% who strongly agree. Confidence is highest among Black parents (51% strongly agree) followed by Hispanic/Latino parents (42%), White parents (38%), and Asian parents (33%). Fathers are more confident (46% strongly agree) than mothers (36%).

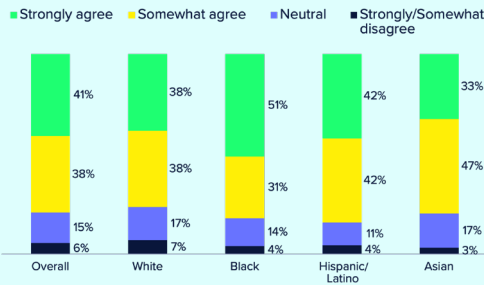
Parents’ growing understanding of options beyond the traditional degree likely correlates with their confidence in acting as a trusted source of advice. Educators, workforce development professionals, lawmakers, and other stakeholders must continue to produce parent-focused education resources that highlight all postsecondary education options, including those beyond the traditional degree, so that parents can continue to build their knowledge and comfort with paths that fall outside the norm. Education and information that highlight newer pathways, such as technical bootcamps that have emerged in recent years, are particularly important in helping parents appreciate the wide range of possibilities for their child after high school.

“I am confident that I would be a good resource to help my child navigate a non-degree education pathway” by Gender

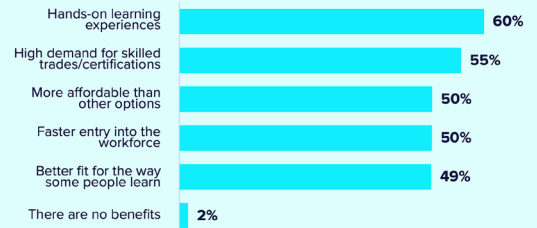




“I am confident that I would be a good resource to help my child navigate a nondegree education pathway” by Race



What do you believe are the main benefits of pursuing a nondegree education pathway?



Parents recognize both the benefits and drawbacks of nondegree pathways

Nearly all (98%) parents see at least one benefit of nondegree paths: hands-on learning is most often cited (60%), followed by high demand for skilled workers (55%). However, most (89%) also identify potential downsides, including limited career growth (32%), limited opportunities (32%), and lower income potential (32%) associated with nondegree pathways. Clearly, parents recognize that many nondegree pathways do not have the long history of results so often associated with the bachelor’s degree – higher lifetime earnings, healthier lifestyles, more engagement in civic and community life, and so on. As the number of nondegree programs and providers proliferate in the coming years, it will be crucial to measure student outcomes, with respect to earnings and growth potential, and disseminate that data into the hands of parents and students so they can make informed decisions about their futures.

What do you believe are the main drawbacks of pursuing a nondegree education pathway?





Conclusion

Just as teens and young adults are changing the way they prepare for the future in light of anticipated labor market shifts, so too are parents expanding their ideas of acceptable pathways from education to career. Career and technical education, once dismissed as an alternative for non-academically inclined students, is increasingly recognized by parents as a viable option for a broader range of students, even those who plan to attend traditional college. Parents also display slightly more openness to postsecondary pathways beyond the bachelor's degree, and their degree of familiarity with more well-known and established nondegree options, such as internships and apprenticeships, is high. More recent innovations in nondegree pathways, however, are less understood; parents require additional resources and tools to help them make sense of evolving options like technical bootcamps and industry certifications. In fact, while survey results do show more parents preferring a nondegree pathway for their child, they also show a rise in parents feeling undecided about the best path forward.

Helpful resources for parents could include clear outcome data, side-by-side comparisons of costs and career trajectories, and localized directories of reputable work-based learning providers. Tailored outreach may be needed for parents with lower familiarity rates—such as parents in certain regions or those less confident in guiding nondegree choices—delivered through schools, community organizations, and trusted online channels. Ultimately, as the range of education-to-career paths grows ever broader and anxiety grows ever higher about future job opportunities, parents must be prioritized as a critical guide, influencer, and support system for the youth who will one day make up the labor force that drives our nation's economy.

About American Student Assistance

American Student Assistance® (ASA) is a national nonprofit at the forefront of changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures through access to career readiness information and experiences for all. ASA helps middle and high school students to know themselves—their strengths and their interests—and understand their education and career options so that they can make informed decisions. ASA fulfills its mission—in schools and beyond the classroom—by providing free digital experiences, including Futurescape® and EvolveMe®, directly to millions of students, and through advocacy, impact investing, research, thought leadership, and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others. ASA fosters a generation of confident, crisis-proof young people who are ready for whatever path comes next after high school. To learn more about ASA, visit www.asa.org/about-asa.

