

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Research has identified middle school as a time when students can benefit the most from career exploration, a process of learning about oneself and the world of work, identifying potential careers and developing a strategy for realizing education and career goals. Career exploration engages middle school students at a time when they are at a higher risk for disengaging from learning due to challenges they face in forming identity, coping with puberty and navigating new environments. It also capitalizes on their developing abilities to think abstractly and plan for the future and their preferences for teamwork; active learning through authentic, real-life scenarios; and personally relevant experiences. These preferences make middle school a natural time for students to learn about careers and develop skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork through career exploration experiences.

While career exploration has proven benefits for middle-grades students, challenges exist to providing exploration experiences in middle school, including lack of funding, a focus on core academic courses and overburdened school counselors. Educators, administrators and counselors have developed a variety of flexible practices to overcome these barriers.

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A key way career exploration is provided to middle school students is through exploratory and introductory CTE courses. These courses engage students in identifying careers of interest and developing employability skills that will serve them in further education and the workplace. They can be organized in various ways, from yearlong classes that address all 16 Career Clusters® to semester-length courses in one broad career area. However, these courses all provide opportunities to learn about careers and education pathways and to build skills in problem solving, communication and career decision-making.

Middle school students can also craft personalized education and career plans, in collaboration with parents, counselors and teachers, to help guide decisions about future course-taking and potential careers. These plans include opportunities for self and career exploration, work-based learning and the development of employability skills. Scalable technology like Career Cruising can support and enhance this planning, while keeping students’ options open.

Middle-grades students have further opportunities to explore careers through career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) and work-based learning. An intracurricular element of many CTE programs, CTSOs help students develop leadership skills and connect with business leaders through service activities and industry-based competitions. Middle school students can also interact with employers through workplace tours, guest speakers, job shadowing and other work-based learning activities.

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To help teachers, counselors and administrators implement and improve these practices at the program, school and district levels, ACTE recommends the following:

1. Incorporate career-related project-based learning in the classroom.
2. Design projects and activities to develop employability skills.
3. Be flexible when offering exploratory and introductory CTE courses.
4. Facilitate academic and career planning with scalable online planning tools.
5. Enable short-term interactions with business, military and community leaders.
6. Provide opportunities for CTSO participation, including financial support when needed.

While these recommendations focus on strategies at the local level, states have a major role to play in ensuring access to career exploration in the middle grades, as evidenced by recent state legislation. Policymakers at all levels should work to ensure their states recognize the critical importance of middle-grades career exploration and embrace supportive policies.

