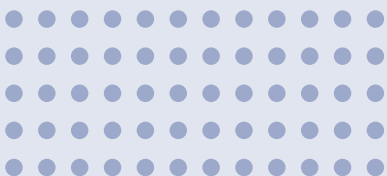




WHITE
PAPER

Empowering Students with Equitable Access to Career Experiences



Aiming to help all students succeed beyond high school, a growing number of K-12 school systems are expanding opportunities for career exploration and experience as well as extending these activities into the younger grades.

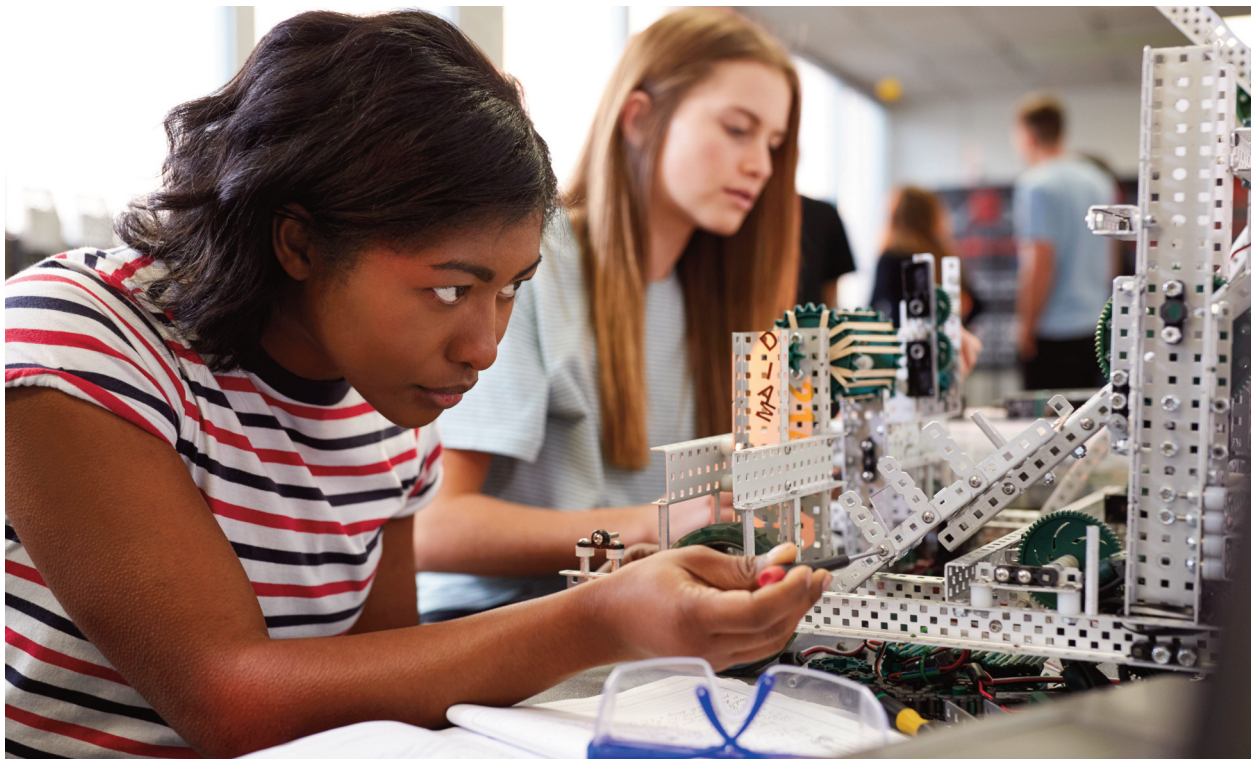
There are many compelling reasons for doing so. As the Hechinger Report observes, connecting what students are learning to careers not only deepens their engagement in school but also helps them make more informed choices about their future.¹ What's more, it's never too early to get students thinking about possible career paths.

"The road to graduation starts well before kids get to high school," says Traci Davis, former superintendent of the Washoe County School District, the second largest school district in

Nevada with more than 64,000 students. "I'm a firm believer that every student should have an opportunity and the skill set to go to college, but we know that not every student will go to college. We need to give students other options as well."

Giving students early exposure to career options is a critical strategy for closing economic gaps and putting students on a path toward college and a high-paying career, the nonprofit Center for American Progress (CAP) argues—especially students from low-income communities.²

This white paper explores why school systems should empower *all* students with equitable access to career experiences, and it describes the keys to doing so successfully.



Giving students early exposure to career options is a critical strategy for closing economic gaps and putting students on a path toward college and a high-paying career.



Why All Students Should Have Career-Based Learning Experiences

Providing career experiences for all students is a matter of equity. It levels the playing field by ensuring that every child has an opportunity to chart a course toward an inspiring future. Here are three reasons why this is absolutely critical.

It expands the range of possibilities available to students.

“Children only know what they know,” says David R. Schuler, superintendent of Township High School District 214 in Arlington Heights, Illinois. While everyone grows up knowing about doctors, lawyers, teachers, and firefighters, there are hundreds of nontraditional careers that students might never be aware of unless they learn about those jobs in school.

“It’s important for us to plant other possibilities in students’ minds as they’re growing up and thinking about their future,” Schuler adds.

This is especially true for students who grow up in low-income communities and therefore have less exposure to high-paying jobs of the future.

“Students in low-income communities [have fewer] opportunities to learn about jobs in the future workforce, ... as many low-income communities lack a diverse pool of employers,” CAP notes.³

Schools can play a key role in providing exposure to career options that students wouldn’t otherwise see within their network of connections at home and in their surrounding environment.

It helps students set goals and focus on their future.

Helping students figure out what they might want to do for a career before they graduate sets them up more effectively for success. It ensures that students will be taking relevant and required courses while they’re in high school, and it can prevent them from wasting valuable time and money on fruitless college courses or areas of study.

“The earlier we can encourage kids to find things they love to do and nurture those interests,” Davis says, “the earlier we can put them on pathways to be successful and fast track them into those areas, so they don’t become wayward souls who take years to figure out what they want to do.”

Research suggests that many students enroll in high school courses that lead to a dead end, leaving them ineligible for their desired postsecondary options.⁴ That means students must take additional remedial courses in college, which often prolongs their postsecondary experience. And the longer this takes, the less likely students are to earn a college degree.⁵ Providing career experiences for students early on in their K-12 experience can help them avoid this scenario.

In Schuler’s district, surveys help students explore their career interests, and every student must choose a career pathway before the beginning of their sophomore year.

“That doesn’t mean students are locked into a certain pathway,” he explains. “We have multiple on-ramps and off-ramps in case they change their mind. But we’re trying to prevent students from spending two years in a postsecondary institution and then deciding that’s not what they want to do. I’d rather have them find that out while they’re still in high school.”



It enables them to see the relevance of their education.

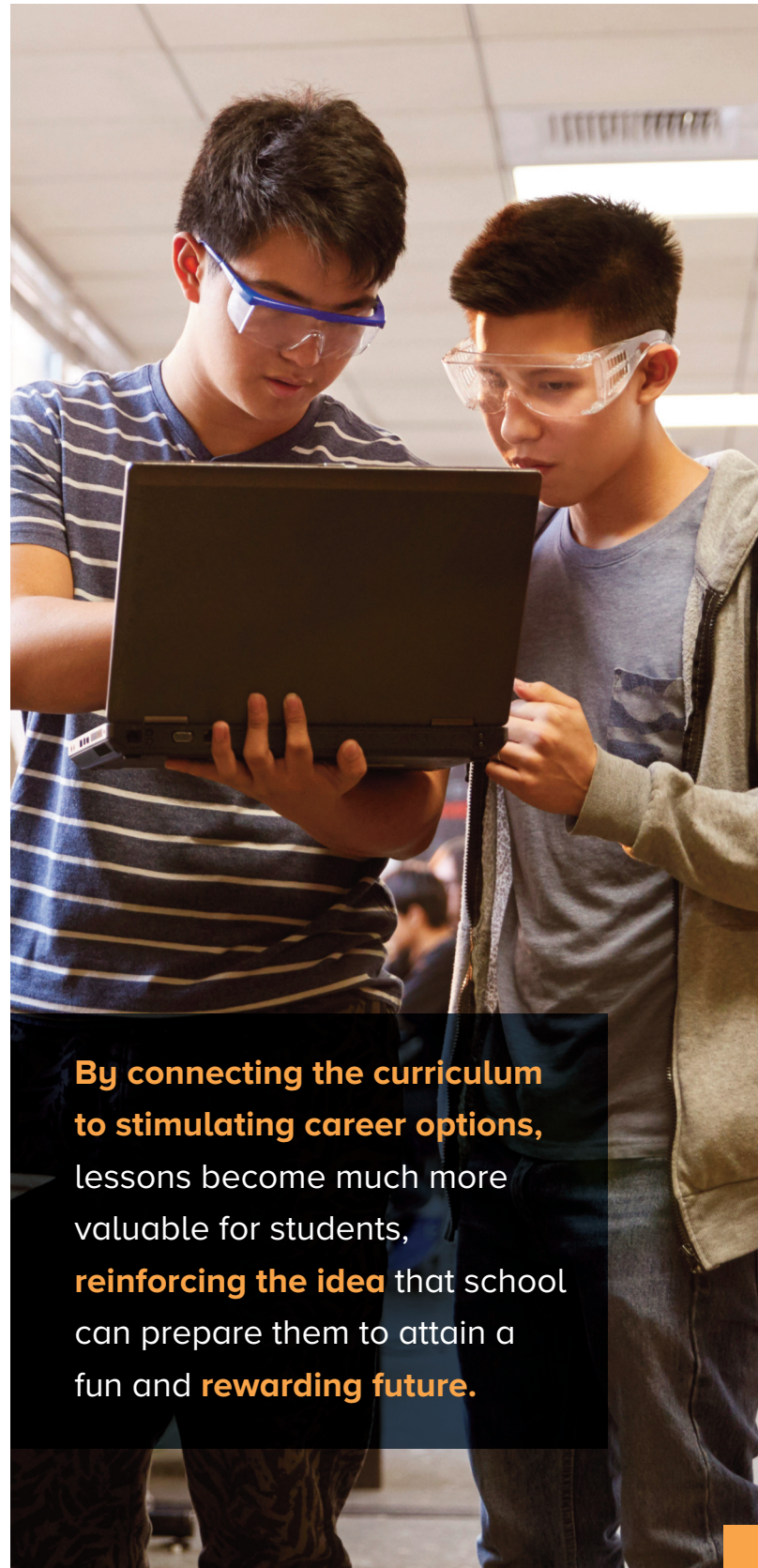
Embedding career experiences within K-12 instruction helps students understand how the skills they're learning in class apply within the real world. It helps teachers answer the age-old question: "Why do we need to know this?" That, in turn, can help students remain engaged in their education.

Research suggests that students become less engaged in school the farther they advance. A 2013 Gallup poll of 500,000 students in grades five through 12 found that nearly eight in 10 elementary students were attentive, inquisitive, and generally optimistic about school. By high school, that number dropped to just four in 10.⁶ Linking school with careers can help prevent this decline in students' interest as they get older.

"We have to ensure that students' educational experience is relevant to them," Schuler says. "That means helping them understand how everything they are learning is connected to their future."

To make this connection explicit for students, Schuler's district has redesigned its academic handbook. Rather than organizing courses by discipline, such as math, science, or social studies, courses instead are grouped according to career clusters like health, education, and manufacturing.

By connecting the curriculum to stimulating career options, lessons become much more valuable for students, reinforcing the idea that school can prepare them to attain a fun and rewarding future. "If a student is excited by working with animals, for example, there are few things an educator can say that is more powerful than hearing a zoologist stress the importance of science while standing in a waddle of penguins," writes Ed Hidalgo, chief innovation and engagement officer at Cajon Valley Union School District in California. "Instantly, biology is much less boring."



By connecting the curriculum to stimulating career options, lessons become much more valuable for students, **reinforcing the idea** that school can prepare them to attain a fun and **rewarding future.**

Three Keys to Success

To ensure that all students have access to high-quality, career-based learning opportunities before they graduate from high school, here are three key strategies to consider.

Start early.

Fairly or unfairly, students form opinions about various jobs at an early age—and these ideas are likely to persist. For instance, research from Kings College London suggests that students' perceptions about STEM careers form when they're as young as 10 years old and remain unchanged by age 14 unless they have in-depth exposure to what these careers involve.⁸ Early career experiences can help students develop more accurate impressions of career options at a young age.

When Davis was an elementary school principal in Clark County, Nevada, she dedicated 30 minutes of instructional time every Friday for student participation in career-focused clubs. Each student picked an activity that interested them, such as robotics, cooking, filmmaking, or computer repair.

"This gave them early exposure to activities that related to some type of career," she says. "We wanted to get kids thinking about their future before they even got to middle school."

Give students many options.

"Students eventually find their space when they have opportunities to see what they like," Davis says. The more career options they're exposed to, the more likely this is to occur.

At Washoe County School District, Signature Academies provide career-based learning experiences for high school students. These are four-year, themed programs of study that include

opportunities for students to earn college credit and industry certifications as they learn career-based skills. Programs include Business and Marketing, Engineering and Manufacturing, Media and Communication, Performing Arts, and more.

"Students could go through our advanced manufacturing pathway and get a job with Tesla making over \$60,000 a year," Davis says. "That's a lot better than just working at a burger joint."

"It changes the whole high school experience. Kids want to be there. It provides so much more energy and excitement in the school."

High School District 214 in Illinois has organized its courses according to pathways for each of the 16 career clusters recognized by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. This gives students a wide range of choices to explore—from agriculture, food, and natural resources to finance, hospitality, or information technology.

Create opportunities for experiential and project-based learning.

Simply making students aware of various careers isn't enough to help them choose whether those options might be suitable for them. Students must have a deeper understanding of what each career entails and the skills that are needed for success—and the best way to develop this understanding is to provide opportunities for hands-on career experience, ideally through the use of authentic projects and learning tasks.

"Everybody knows doctors make good money," Davis says, "but if you don't like the sight of blood, it's not going to be a good career match."



High School District 214 guarantees every student an external workplace experience within their area of interest before they graduate. “To expose students to career experiences, we offer everything from micro-experiences where students get 30 hours of practical job experience in the workplace, all the way up to a registered apprenticeship program,” Schuler says.

In addition, educators embed career experiences within students’ core classes. “For our legal services pathway, we have a courtroom where we have a spot for the judge, for the attorneys, and even for the bailiff and the stenographer,” he says. “We’ve got two industrial kitchens in the district. We hold aviation classes at the local airport. In our business and entrepreneurship pathway, students make pitches like on Shark Tank. We had three students whose idea for a skunk aid product was picked up by a national pet supply company.”

He adds: “When you have those opportunities, it changes the whole high school experience. Kids want to be there. It provides so much more energy and excitement in the school.”

Opportunities for Every Student

Career-based learning gives students broader exposure to the possibilities for their future. It enables them to chart a path forward that will allow them to be successful, and it helps them connect the dots between school and work in ways that will keep them motivated and engaged.

Because all students should enjoy these benefits, school systems should provide equitable access to career education and experiences for everyone.

As Davis concludes: “Every child needs an opportunity to be successful.”

Defined Careers offers hands-on learning experiences for students

Practical, hands-on learning opportunities are an essential component of career education. However, not every school has the capacity to provide internships or other experiences in the workplace—and these types of experiences aren’t feasible for younger students.

Defined Learning offers a new solution that can fill this need. Called Defined Careers, it’s a project-based platform that allows students in grades five through 12 to explore and experience more than 400 careers across 79 career pathways through engaging, hands-on projects.

Defined Careers includes a multidimensional assessment that helps students identify possible career paths based on their interests, values, and preferred areas of study.

Defined Careers includes a multidimensional assessment that helps students identify possible career paths based on their interests, values, and preferred areas of study. Students then complete real-world projects across their recommended career pathways. As students complete these performance tasks, their work is saved in an online portfolio. In this way, educators can track students’ progress as they explore additional careers.

Defined Careers helps educators provide equitable access to career-based learning experiences for all students. To learn more about this resource, see <https://www.definedlearning.com/what-we-offer/career-based-learning/>.





About Defined Learning

Defined Learning is a K-12 online project-based learning (PBL) solution that provides teachers with the educational and assessment tools needed to implement high-quality PBL. We provide a library of hands-on projects that are based on careers and give students the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world challenges. Our Defined Careers™ platform offers personalized career assessments and recommended career pathways projects to students in grades 5-12. Defined Learning and Defined Careers create excitement about the future and empower students to build the critical skills they need to succeed in college, careers, and life.

To learn more, visit www.definedlearning.com.

¹ Strom, Stephanie. "What does 'career readiness' look like in middle school?" The Hechinger Report, July 7, 2019. <https://hechingerreport.org/what-does-career-readiness-look-like-in-middle-school/>

² Jiminez, Laura. *Preparing American Students for the Workforce of the Future: Ensuring Every Student's Readiness for College, Career, and Civic Life*. Center for American Progress, Sept. 14, 2020. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2020/09/14/490338/preparing-american-students-workforce-future/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kolodner, Meredith. "6 Reasons You May Not Graduate on Time (and What to Do About It)." *The New York Times*, April 6, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/education/edlife/6-reasons-you-may-not-graduate-on-time.html>

⁶ Jason, Zachary. "Bored Out of Their Minds." *Ed Magazine*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Winter 2017. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/ed/17/01/bored-out-their-minds>

⁷ Hidalgo, Ed. "How Can Children Aspire to Careers They Don't Know Exist?" *Getting Smart*, May 31, 2018. <https://www.gettingsmart.com/2018/05/how-can-children-aspire-to-careers-they-dont-know-exist/>

⁸ Torii, Kate. "Why school kids need more exposure to the world of work." *The Conversation*, July 29, 2018. <https://theconversation.com/why-school-kids-need-more-exposure-to-the-world-of-work-100590>

