

# Efficiency and Innovation in Middle School Career Exploration

## Proven Models for Student Success

Too many students leaving American high schools burdened by a high level of uncertainty about their future. A relatively simple shift in how self-discovery and career exploration are carried out in schools (and the age at which they begin), we now know for certain, can help to shatter some of the uncertainty facing these learners and build their confidence to better understand their options.

In this white paper, "[Efficiency and Innovation in Middle School Career Exploration: Proven Models for Student Success](#)," from American Student Assistance (ASA), learn how the national nonprofit organization began the process of partnering with school districts interested in career exploration initiatives. The goal was to test innovative and scalable career exploration methods, while offering funding that would help schools create programs in this

area. Specifically, ASA sought to obtain rich, longitudinal outcomes to give better insights into which activities work in a middle school setting, and to help schools support and scale effective models. In total, ASA selected 14 Massachusetts-based district partners from across the applicant pool, representing a total of 22 schools, 900 educators and 11,000 students, and granted \$1.3 million (the average grant was \$100,000 per district) over three years. The program used best practices in career exploration and showcased the efficacy of a variety of models.

## What We Learned: Top Seven Key Findings

**1 Middle school is the right time to start:**

Counselors and teachers agree that middle school is a critical time to begin self-discovery and career exploration activities as defined above, in order to pre-empt the "crunch time" effect of high school when student stressors and peer pressures are high and when the efficacy of these activities may be impacted by extraneous variables.

**AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS:**

**87%**  
INTERESTED IN WAYS TO MATCH SPECIFIC SKILLS AND INTERESTS WITH POTENTIAL CAREERS

**85%**  
INTERESTED IN WAYS TO LEARN THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE CAREERS THEY ARE INTERESTED IN

**2 Exploration helps kids build in-demand skills:**

Data from the grants program validates something that may not come as a big surprise to most educators: students who participate in self-discovery and career exploration activities through structured programs are 20% more likely to report having had the opportunity to learn about their personal skills and interests than those who do not. In particular, that includes having real opportunities to learn about and practice skills that are in-demand in the workplace, like creativity and problem solving (+20%).

**STUDENTS IN GRANTEE PROGRAMS**

**20%**  
more likely to learn about and practice in-demand workplace skills like creativity and problem-solving than those who did not participate.

**3 Exploration encourages kids to engage with school:**

Comparing the same students from the beginning of the school year to the end, we saw a measured increase in student engagement across all courses, and significant improvements in class engagements overall. **Across all grantee schools, there was a 7% increase in those who say that the statement *I like what I'm learning* describes them a lot, from 2020 to 2021.** There was also a 5% increase in students reporting that what they learn in school is interesting. And some 56% of career exploration participants in the grant schools reported that they feel their school now gives them opportunities to learn about their unique skills and interests. Increased engagement leads to an increase in student confidence, as well as perceptions of control over their future, personal agency in decision-making, and a feeling of being supported by a school that is committed to their individual growth and development.

**CAREER EXPLORATION PARTICIPANTS IN GRANT SCHOOLS**

**56%**

Feel their school now gives them opportunities to learn about their unique skills and interests

**Students who participated in two full years of programming**

**39%**  
more satisfied with their school year overall than those who did not participate

Compared to students at the same schools who did not participate in grant programming

**20%**  
less nervous about their future

**4 Exploration helps kids enjoy school:**

Among the biggest challenges teachers (particularly those working with students from underserved demographics) face is that, frankly, many students don't find school engaging. **Our grantee school data shows that students who participated in two full years of programming were 39% more satisfied with their school year overall than those who did not participate, and 78% of students reported that they enjoyed the school year. And compared to students at the same schools who did not participate in grant programming, participating students were 20% less nervous about their future.**

**5 Exploration helps kids think about and plan for their future:**

Critically, exploration activities give students the self-awareness, resources, and framework to begin planning for the future and the motivation to build a personalized plan that connects learning to work. Our grant-related research shows that students at grantee schools who participated in two years of exploration programming are more likely to report that they plan to take classes related to a future career path and related to preparing for college. **Of career exploration participants, 60% report that they know how to search for a career that is a good fit for their skills and interests, and 65% agree that the skills they learned will help them in the future.**

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**AFTER PARTICIPATING IN TWO YEARS OF EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES**

**CAN IDENTIFY A MENTOR FOR THEIR INTERESTS AND PLANS**

**6 Exploration helps kids feel more connected:**

Career exploration activities and self-discovery carried out in a vacuum are very likely to end at the school's exit door. In that regard, mentorship and interpersonal guidance are among the most critical components of any exploration program, as they help to bring learning to life for students, and offer them access to a real-world network of opportunity. At the conclusion of the program, we observed that **students who participated in two years of exploration activities were more likely to report being able to identify an appropriate mentor for their interests and plans.**

**7 Digital tools enhance the landscape:**

Educators are increasingly exploring ways in which they can give students more ownership of their learning by using digital tools and spaces to augment the teaching and learning environment. (This type of independent, digitally driven work is often at the heart of the student-directed model.) Lessons, activities, and platforms that leverage student interests and choice can create experiences that are engaging and meaningful for kids. (For instance, innovative challenges, such as the national *'Solve Together' Challenges* for middle school students, enable middle school classrooms to tackle real-world problems on a digital platform. This competition featured **189 total submissions from 23 schools across 12 states nationwide.**)

**189 SUBMISSIONS**

**23 SCHOOLS**

**12 STATES**

### About American Student Assistance (ASA)

American Student Assistance® (ASA) is a national nonprofit committed to helping students know themselves, know their options, and make informed decisions to achieve their education and career goals. ASA believes students should have access to career-connected learning, starting in middle school, so they can develop a plan for their future. ASA fulfills its mission by providing digital-first resources directly to students and support for educators and intermediaries.