

Middle School Career Counseling: Using Data to Center Student Learning

EBSCC 2025

Shona McMorrow, M.Ed.

Claudia Smith, M.Ed.

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Session Objectives

Participants will be able to:

01

Identify

Identify **pre-existing career counseling tools** that can be **modified** to meet students' needs.

02

Understand

Understand the ways in which modern career counseling is shaped by **students' interests, workforce trends, and identity development.**

03

Connect

Connect **data-driven practices** to **career counseling** and **lesson planning** to support student development.

Middle School Career Counseling In Context

Many studies focus on high school career counseling, yet **acknowledge that exploration should start before this point.**

58% of states fund positions dedicated to career development for high schools, whereas **31% of states fund this kind of role in middle schools.**

Middle school is “in the middle” of career development: more involved than the career awareness activities in elementary school, yet more flexible than the career preparation activities in high school.

Career exploration must be deliberate: it is a skill that has to be developed.

Middle schoolers overwhelmingly want to participate in college/career development.

(Albritton et al., 2020; Arrington, 2000; Curry & Milsom, 2021; Grigal et al., 2019; McFadden & Curry, 2018, as cited in Godbey & Gordon, 2019; Mupinga & Caniglia, 2019; Sanders et al., 2017)

Barriers to Career Counseling in Middle School

There are a number of factors that **prevent** middle school counselors from **truly engaging** in career development activities:

- **Time** constraints and **competing demands**
- **Lack of awareness or access** to information about market data and pathways
- Districts prioritize college/career development for grades 10-12, but **not younger years**
- Issues **accessing technology** to support career development
- **Accessibility** of resources for younger students or diverse student populations
- **Low school counselor efficacy** around career counseling

(Godbey & Gordon, 2019; Grigal et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2017)

Why is Middle School a Great Time for Career Exploration?

Middle schoolers are **primed for exploration!**

- Developmental; currently **exploring their identities** and interests via hobbies, extracurriculars, electives, etc.
- Experiencing **rapid** changes to **self-concept** and **self-efficacy**

Students are **building the foundational skills** for high school and postsecondary education.

- **Career development is a skill** – it needs to be cultivated!

Exposure to college/career information **prior to high school** can help students:

- **Learn** more about themselves
- **Reduce** stress/anxiety
- **Strengthen** community partnerships with all stakeholders

(Akos, 2020; Albritton et al., 2020; Arrington, 2000; Falco, 2017; Godbey & Gordon, 2019; Grigal et al., 2019; Montello, 2024)

Notes on Career Development

Career development is **contextual**: students naturally receive a lot of career information from family/peers.

- Depending on their context, this may **broaden** or **limit** the **amount of information they can access** on options/pathways.

Marginalized students may be **at risk for long-term challenges** in their career development: unemployment, lower postsecondary degree attainment, lower career self-efficacy, etc.

- **School counselors can help mitigate** systemic barriers through career development activities.

Career exploration is about **examining careers AND pathways** to help students understand how to prepare for high school and beyond.

- Students **may not be aware** of the educational/training requirements for specific careers.
- Some middle schoolers must **decide** between “**traditional**” high school or **career/technical** high schools.
- Can help students see the **connection** between their **academics** and **future opportunities**.

Career counseling can happen anywhere: students can explore careers/pathways in their classrooms, or it can be blended with social-emotional lessons.

(Akos, 2020; Albritton et al., 2020; Arrington, 2000; Bussell et al., 2021; Glessner et al., 2017; Godbey & Gordon, 2019; Grigal et al., 2019; Montello, 2024; Mupinga & Caniglia, 2019; Paolini, 2019; Sanders et al., 2017; Saunders & Estrada, 2020; Smith, 2020)

How Did We Get Here?

Interest

Wanted to do more career counseling;
began reading Curry & Milsom (2021) as
a starting point.

1



Search

Not a lot of evidence-based career
counseling resources, especially for
middle school!

3



2

Pre-Assessment

Started with a pre-assessment to gather
information about what matters to
students.

4

Adapt

In lieu of accessible resources, we
decided to use data to adapt the
resources currently at our disposal (i.e.,
Naviance) to meet students' needs.

(Akos, 2020; Dimmitt et al., 2007)

Putting This Into Practice: A Massachusetts Middle School

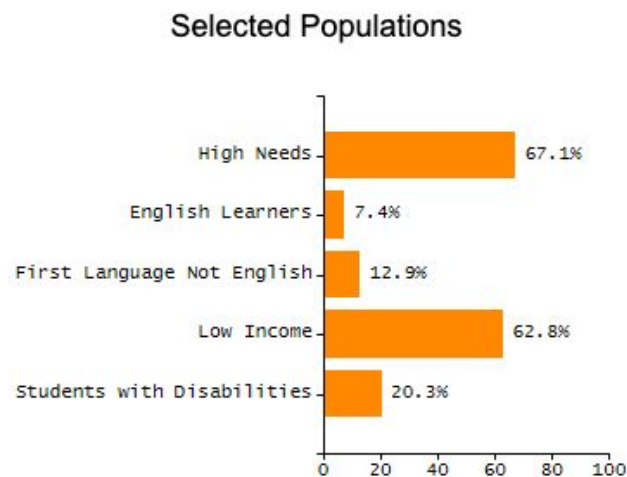
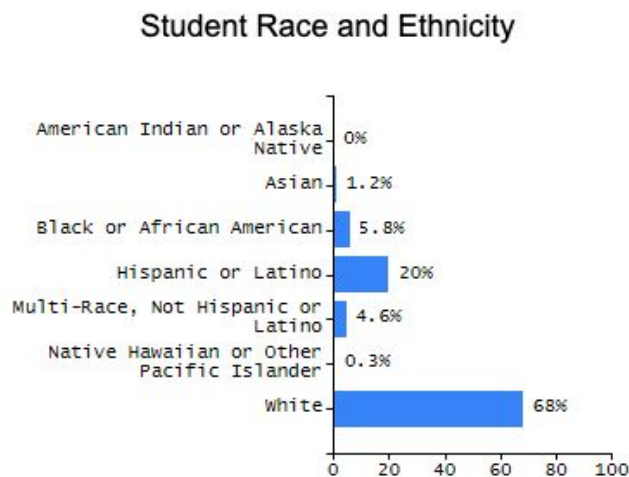
Title I
Grades 5-7
(Lessons delivered to
grades 6 & 7)

District is located in a
small city in largely
rural/suburban Western
Massachusetts

Many students' families have
lived in this community for
generations and work within
the community

High needs population
especially when looking at
socioeconomic status

Putting This Into Practice: DESE Demographics



Putting This Into Practice: Pre-Assessments and Data

Assessments are a critical component of evidence-based school counseling.

Before getting started, students answered key questions using an anonymous brief **pre-assessment**.

- Measuring students' **baseline knowledge** of career and college planning
- Where are they in their **career "journey?"**
- What are their **plans** post middle school
- Do students **understand** their options?
- Importantly! **What do our students think about career counseling?**

Data specific to our school also helps us to make individual decisions such as where to start, what may need to be supplemented based on student knowledge and equity.

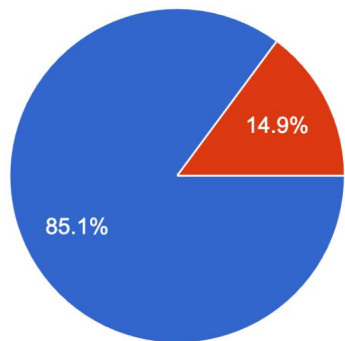
This **survey will be completed again** at the end of the year to measure our **effectiveness** and provide data to school administrators to **advocate** for the continuation of career counseling and highlight a comprehensive evidence based school counseling program.

(Zyromski & Mariani, 2016)

Pre-Assessment Data & Graphs

I plan to work a part-time job in high school

175 responses



● Yes
● No

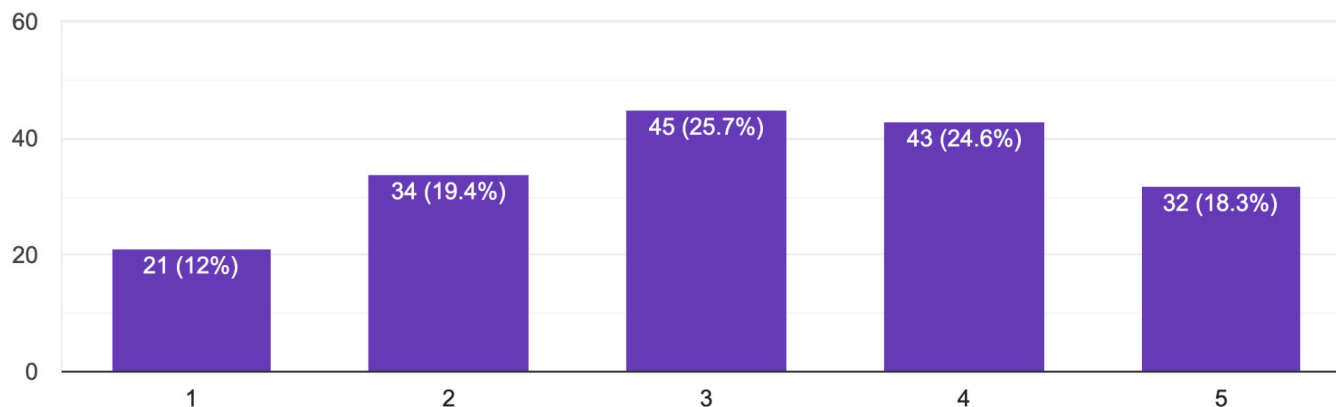
Some of the reasons students plan to work in high school include...

- To earn extra money for myself (65.1%)
- To earn money to support my family (34.9%)
- To develop my professional skills (32.6%)

Pre-Assessment Data & Graphs

I understand the difference between community college, four-year private and public college, and vocational/trade school

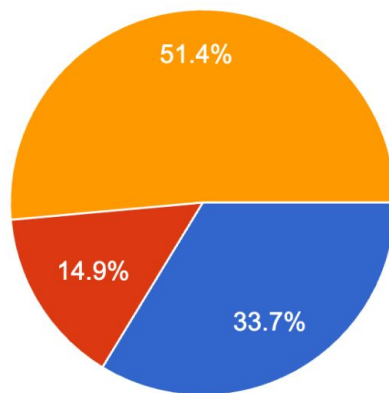
175 responses



Pre-Assessment Data & Graphs

Right now, I am considering attending a vocational high school

175 responses

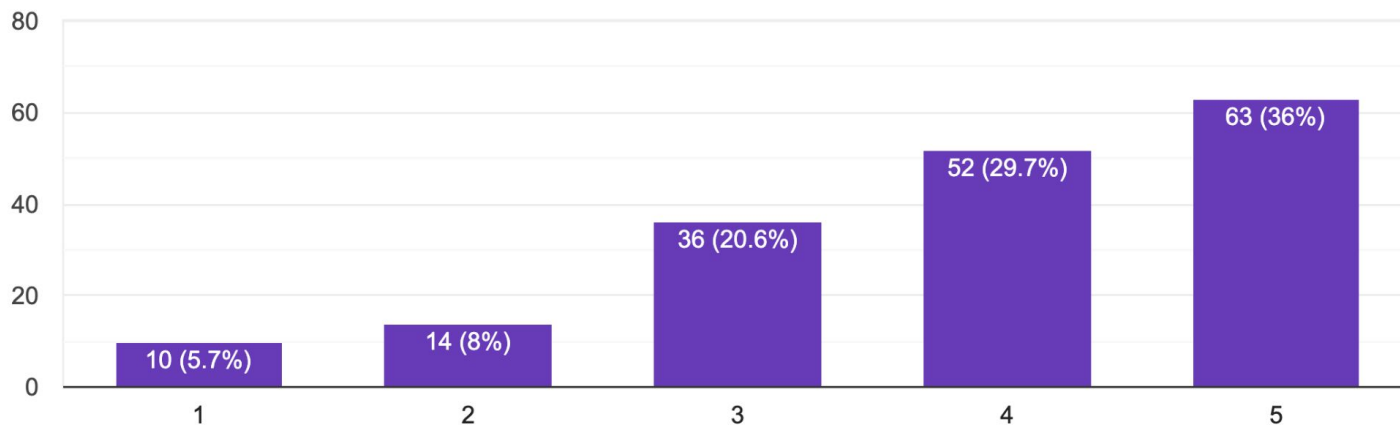


- Yes
- No
- Unsure/haven't thought about it

Pre-Assessment Data & Graphs

Career planning is relevant/important to me

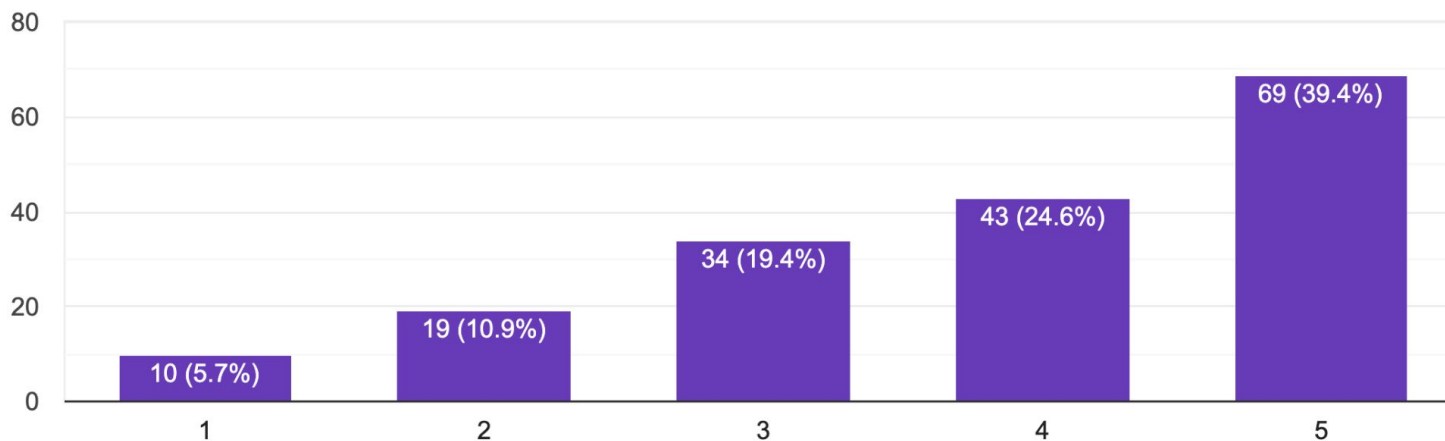
175 responses



Pre-Assessment Data & Graphs

I have an idea of what I would like to do after I graduate from high school

175 responses





Lesson One

Lessons were delivered **during advisory period** (a half hour class period at the beginning of the day dedicated to SEL with smaller class sizes) and were **discussion-based**, building upon existing **classroom community**.

The discussion: **Why do people work and what are values?** How do they relate to this idea of career and work?

“Think. Pair. Share.” Model

- Students were asked to independently answer the question: **“Why do people work?”**
- They then **paired up** and shared answers with each other and were asked to **expand upon their answers** in these **groups** (e.g. if they wrote down money, thinking about why people need money in the first place)
- Repeat with values; defined and discussed, student then had time to **think and write about their own values**
- Each group then **shared their answers with the entire class**: we had a variety of answers that I was able to expand upon and provide examples for as well as ask students to “say more”

Knowing your population: when collaborating with the teaching team they provided **context** such as students’ vocabulary. We **worked together** to define values and question prompts as well as a word bank.

Lesson One: Continued

Every single classroom participated and had **buy-in from students and teachers**.

Teachers became **very involved** in these lessons.

- Stakeholder buy-in is incredibly valuable in career counseling
- School has dedicated teacher/counselor collaboration time; able to include them in preliminary discussions

Some classrooms **continued the values discussion** into the next advisory or their core classes.

- Teachers also have access to Naviance; can continue career exploration within their classroom or during advisory block/free time.

We used worksheets and writing so that student had a **place to think and work** could be collected and **put into a “portfolio” for students** to hold onto and used for future lessons.

(Curry & Milsom, 2021)

Why do people work?

Why do people work?

to make money
to help people

Why do people work?

- For \$\$\$
- For the people
- meet new people

Why do people work?

to get a house and not
be homeless, and pay
child support

Why do people work?

People work to make
money to pay the
house bills and if

People work in order to
get food and supplies.

People work to accomplish the dream jobs

Why do people work?

either for money or they like the job
to help people depending on their job

Why do people work?

TO make money
OR TO work
for a dream.

Why do people work?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to pay bills • to have food • to have internet • to have a car • to go to college • to have technology • to pay for gas/more gas • to have house/apartment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to survive • to have clothes • to have money • to feel entertained • to be happy |
|---|--|

What are your values?

- I do not know??

- play
- family
- kindness
- responsibility
- patient
- trustworthy
- smartness

Why do people work?

People work for money,
education, independence, socialization,
to buy a house, to get food

Why do people work?

Money
Social



I like

I need more fake tan and acrylics

Why do people work?

- to earn money
- to use up time
- to have value to a community
- to help

What are your values?

What are your values?

Innovation
work-life balance
Supportive
Hard work
Persistence
Humor
Knowledge
Wise
meaningful work
Humility

What are your values?

- Time
- Responsibility - Teamwork
- hard work
- Honesty
- Family
- Happiness
- Kindness
- Empathy
- Respect

What are your values?

Something you cherish,
something you care for,
something that's important to you.
MONEY
Food
Family
my phone
Sleeping all the time
pets
Friends

What are your values?

Family, friends, equality, pets, boldness,
education, empathy, results, service,
achievement, kindness, love, learning,
adventure, money, loyalty, respect.



What are your values?

- studying
- helping people / community
- self care / take time for yourself
- hard work / consistent work
- family

What are your values?

- Responsibility
- Leadership
- Team work
- Bravery
- power
- Sports
- Happiness
- athletic
- reputation
- hard work
- Humor
- flexibility
- weather wealth

What are your values?

- family
- peace
- kindness
- money

What are your values?

Something i value is my education, because i need to learn if i want to
get a job. family

What are your values?

- I value family
- I value peace
- I value my animals
- I value respect
- helping people or animals

Lesson Two

Based on first lesson/pre-assessment; students were **eager to think about options/careers**.

Utilized **Self-Discovery page** on Naviance:

- Career Interest Profiler (Holland Codes): captures interest/helps **connect personality traits to careers** using U.S. Dept. of Labor Data

Students completed the **Career Interest Profiler** and answered the following questions:

- **How did it feel** to take these surveys and answer questions about yourself?
- **Were you surprised** by your results? Did the results meet your expectations? How do these results relate to your experience as a student?

Compared results to peers/with previous ideas; students were often surprised by the results. This allowed them to **explore more options!**

Doing this in **community**: reacting to others' results, **learning more about each other** or confirming traits they notice in others, and opportunity to **talk about self-concept** with others.

Lesson Three

Skills Match – making the **connection between skills** you learn and use in school and **how they apply to careers** and post graduate options.

Students are given a word bank of skills and **matching these skills to current courses and extracurriculars**, with examples of how they use them.

Students then **match these skills to careers** and think about themselves as professionals.

- Used as a starting point to develop resumes with 7th graders

How to make your **first resume without work experience**; identifying gaps to fill in.

- Students may want to become **involved in the school community** through clubs, sports, and town community extracurricular activities
- Note: this came from pre-assessment data and feedback from students while delivering lessons; some of our students can begin paid work as soon as this summer

Final Lesson

Multimedia vision boards/portfolio **connecting their learning to future.**

- What do you **envision for yourself** when it comes to your career?
- What **steps** may you need to take to get there?
- What are your **best hopes for the future**?
- What **goals** do you have for yourself?

Building a **career and college going culture**: every student can achieve their goals, we are here to support them in getting there.

Opportunity to get creative after a semester of impressive work! Leaving with an **artifact** of the time they spent thinking and learning about careers.

These vision boards will be **displayed** in the 6th and 7th grade hallway before students take them home.

(Bryan et al., 2022)

Takeaways

Student centered: no expectations around right and wrong answers, encouragement, insightful group conversations.

- **Agency:** students have control over their choices being sure to send the message that every student can achieve their dream

Being evidence-based or theory-based doesn't mean only using what is available; it means taking what we have and **using data to understand what is important to our population.**

Consider developmental level!

- Middle schoolers are ready for these conversations but we have to meet them where they are at

Using student answers and demographics to guide approach.

- For example if the pre-assessment showed that students were not interested in this topic, I would not have started with a discussion-based and open-ended lesson

Thank You!

Questions?

CREDITS: This presentation template was created by
Slidesgo, including icons by **Flaticon** and infographics
& images by **Freepik**

Email us!

Shona McMorrow
smcmorrow@umass.edu

Claudia Smith
csmith@umass.edu

References

- Akos, P. (2020). *Starting early: Career development in the early grades*. Association for Career and Technical Education.
- Albritton, K., Cureton, J. L., Byrd, J. A., & Storlie, C. A. (2020). Exploring perceptions of the path to work/life success among middle school students of color. *Journal of Career Development*, 47(4), 440-453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845319832667>
- Arrington, K. (2000). Middle grades career planning programs. *Journal of Career Development*, 27(2), 103-109.
- Bryan, J., Kim, J., & Liu, C. (2022). School counseling college-going culture: Counselors' influence on students' college-going decisions. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 100(1), 39-55.
- Bussell, K., Cunningham, P. D., Fletcher, E. C., Boone, B. J., & Lepicki, T. (2021). Partnering with families for middle school career exploration: Research-based strategies for middle-level educators. Retrieved from <https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu>
- Curry, J. R., & Milsom, A. (2021). *Career and college readiness counseling in p-12 schools*. Springer Publishing.
- Dimmitt, C., Carey, J., C., & Hatch, T. (2007). *Evidence-based school counseling: Making a difference with data-driven practices*. Corwin Press.
- Falco, L. D. (2017). The school counselor and STEM career development. *Journal of Career Development*, 44(4), 359-374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845316656445>
- Glessner, K., Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., & Lopez, M. L. (2017). "Yes, I can": Testing an intervention to increase middle school students' college and career self-efficacy. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 65, 315-325. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12110>
- Godbey, S., & Gordon, H. R. D. (2019). Career exploration at the middle school level: Barriers and opportunities. *Middle Grades Review*, 5(2), 1-8. <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol5/iss2/2>
- Grigal, M., Cooney, L., & Hart, D. (2019). Promoting college and career readiness with middle school youth with disabilities: Lessons learned from a curriculum development project. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 42(1), 64-71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143418814246>
- Montello, J. (2024). The impact of career education on middle schools in the united states. *International Forum of Teaching and Studies*, 20(2), 34-70.
- Mupinga, D., & Caniglia, J. (2019). What middle school students know about careers and the influences surrounding their choices. *The Journal of Technology Studies*, 45(1), 36-45. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48647057>
- Paolini, A. (2019). Social emotional learning: Role of the school counselor in promoting college and career readiness. *Anatolian Journal of Education*, 4(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.29333/aje.2019.411a>
- Sanders, C., Welfare, L. E., & Culver, S. (2017). Career counseling in middle schools: A study of school counselor self-efficacy. *The Professional Counselor*, 7(3), 238-250. <https://doi.org/10.15241/cs.7.3.238>
- Saunders, M., & Estrada, C. (2020). *NEPC review: Creating strong building blocks for every student: How middle schools can lay the foundation for rigorous high school pathways*. National Education Policy Center. Retrieved from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/cte-pathways>
- Smith, A. (2020). *Connecting social-emotional learning (SEL) to career success*. Association for Career and Technical Education.
- Zyromski, B., & Mariani, M. (2016). *Facilitating evidence-based, data-driven school counseling: A manual for practice*. Corwin Press.

THE
**Evidence-Based
School Counseling**
CONFERENCE

Thank you for attending
this session and the conference.

*Save the date for next year's online conference:
March 13-14, 2026*



**Earning
NBCC Hours**

You **must** submit a session
evaluation for each session
you attend to earn NBCC
hours.



**Attention school
counselors!**

The Practitioner Advisory
Board is looking for
current school counselors
to help support the
mission and growth of
EBSCC!

EB

