



Charting the Course for Middle School Career Development

A Framework for Special Educators Supporting
Students with Complex Support Needs

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About this Framework



The following pages provide a framework to guide efforts to increase effective middle school career development practices and expectations for students with complex disabilities.

The purpose of this framework is to:

1. Set the foundation for middle school student success.
2. Establish high standards for career development.
3. Clarify the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that students need.
4. Provide guidance on effective practices.

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Career Development across K-12



Career development is a multi-year, student-driven process where students explore the world of work to make informed career decisions. The goal is to help students create and refine a vision for their life after school. This process requires thoughtful planning, allowing students to better understand their strengths, preferences, interests, needs, and future opportunities. The ultimate goal is not just securing any job but climbing a career ladder and setting advancement goals based on increased education or experience.

STAGES OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

When you reflect on your career development journey, you probably remember the important milestones that brought you to where you are today. But you probably won't remember every step, learning opportunity, or even every time you changed your mind! The career development process is just that: a learning process that takes time and effort. It involves a continuous progression of skill development and engagement in various activities, spanning from elementary to high school.

Elementary School: Career Awareness and Exploration

The first stage of career development is awareness. The primary focus is on introducing students to the concept of work, fostering an understanding of careers, setting goals, and emphasizing the value of lifelong learning. This initial stage is centered on awareness, where students are just beginning to enhance their understanding of the world of work. Teachers play a crucial role in assisting students in developing social skills, teamwork, goal-setting abilities, and navigating their interests and skills.

How To Enhance Career Awareness and Exploration

- Build upon self-awareness of strengths, hobbies, and interests.
- Understand the concepts of job and career.
- Identify career choices through exploration.
- Demonstrate goal setting.
- Practice good decision-making.
- Participate in work-based learning experiences (career day, guest speaker, workplace tour, etc.).
- Understand that behaviors such as punctuality, respect, proper dress, and proper language are essential to current and future success.
- Understand the importance of teamwork in working towards a common goal.

Middle School: Career Development and Planning

In middle school, it's about exploring. During this time, students increase their awareness of different career clusters and pathways by exploring and identifying what education or training they might need in high school or as an adult to reach their career goals.

As students dig deeper into understanding themselves and the world of work, their skills, preferences, and interests start to become clearer. During this phase, it is essential to inspire students to think beyond what they know about careers and consider pathways they might not be familiar with yet.

How To Enhance Career Development and Planning

- Enroll in a Career Investigations Course (Virginia requirement).
- Identify strengths, preferences, skills, and interests that influence career choices.
- Explore and research career clusters and pathways that align with strengths and interests.
- Demonstrate workplace readiness skills such as teamwork, initiative, and communication.
- Create an Academic and Career Plan.
- Participate in work-based learning (job shadow, service, learning, informational interview, school-based enterprise, etc.).

High School: Career Focus and Experience

In high school, the emphasis is on honing in on career choices and gaining hands-on experiences that prepare students for the demands of the workplace. At this stage, students have a clearer vision of their career path. It is important to provide activities and experiences to assist them in preparing for their goals.

How To Enhance Career Focus and Experience

- Apply learning through practical experiences to develop knowledge and skills necessary for post-school success.
- Research career interests, and conduct intensive career exploration.
- Refine career goals, and identify necessary training preparation.
- Participate in work-based learning (internship, entrepreneurship, paid employment, service learning, clinical experience, etc.).
- Engage in part-time employment.
- Refine required Academic and Career Plan and Transition IEP.

Build the Foundation for Success



Now that you know the stages of career development, it's important to build a solid foundation to prepare students with complex needs for employment. The best way to do this is to embrace the principles of Employment First. This involves maintaining high expectations, viewing students through a lens of strengths, not deficits, and supporting inclusive practices throughout the career development process.

EMBRACE EMPLOYMENT FIRST

The foundation for career success is believing everyone, including individuals with significant disabilities, can participate in competitive, integrated employment. When schools, students, families, agencies, and communities share this vision and support all individuals, we can create an inclusive environment and change the outcomes for students with disabilities.

[Employment First](#) is a nationwide framework that believes everyone can work, even those with complex support needs. Virginia supports this philosophy and is committed to shifting the way society thinks about who can achieve competitive, integrated employment. As school professionals, we can support this by raising our expectations, prioritizing inclusive practices, and creating opportunities for students and families to dream big for life after high school. To make employment a reality, schools, students, families, community agencies, and businesses must support the Employment First philosophy. Educators can begin by applying the philosophy of Employment First at school, in the community, and at home.

Maintain High Expectations

Maintaining high expectations throughout the career development process is crucial. Our attitudes and beliefs regarding students' capabilities can positively or negatively impact student achievement. When teachers, families, and others set high expectations, students often develop the same mindset. In career development, maintaining high expectations involves believing that all students can work with the right support, such as assistive technology, a job coach, customized employment, or transportation support, to name a few.

Show your students that you have high expectations by providing clear guidance on what they need to know and do. Motivate them to strive for those expectations. Be open to diverse ways that may meet these expectations. Collaborate with families to align high expectations at home to assist students in enhancing skills for independence in the home and community.

There are a variety of ways that school personnel and families can show the value of high expectations at school, home, and in the community.

How To Enhance Career Development and Planning

School

- Align career development stage with students' ages and grade levels.
- Believe that every student can learn and work in a career of their choice.
- Build relationships with every student.
- Provide equal access to career exploration curriculum.
- Use person-first or identity-first language.
- Focus on students' strengths and skills.
- Give positive feedback on effort towards reaching expectations.

Home

- Believe that every student can learn and work in a career of their choice.
- Assign chores to everyone in the family.
- Assist students in identifying their strengths, interests, and skills.
- Promote workplace readiness skills, such as taking the initiative, following directions, and working as a team.
- Help students set goals, and support them in reaching those goals.
- Provide opportunities for career exploration that match the student's interests and strengths.

Community

- Get students involved in community activities and organizations.
- Inform community members about high expectations for all students.
- Recommend students should be treated at the same level as everyone else in the community.
- Assist students in succeeding in work-based learning experiences (paid/unpaid) in the community.
- Advocate for the student to work in a competitive, integrated environment prior to exiting school.

Use a Strengths-Based Approach

Middle school is the perfect time for students to increase their knowledge of personal strengths and abilities as they begin the career development and planning process. However, many middle schoolers are unaware of their strengths. They tend to know what they can't do instead of what they can do. It's important, therefore, to focus on abilities instead of deficits when it comes to their career journey.

A strengths-based approach celebrates your student's positive qualities and contributions instead of the skills and abilities they may lack. This is especially important when it comes to career development and transition planning. Without a vision of possibilities, we limit our view of a student's ability. In turn, we can miss the chance to help every student build the skills they need to reach their potential.

Incorporate Specially Designed Instruction

Specially designed instruction (SDI) is instruction to meet students' individual learning needs. While everyone gets general instruction, SDI is specifically for students with IEPs. It's provided by qualified special education teachers to give students the support they need in every lesson. SDI is important because it helps students reach the same learning standards as their peers. Teachers can adapt the content, method, or delivery of instruction to design and plan for SDI.

SDI Examples

Content: Adjusting the content to match students' abilities and interests.

- **Method:** Using different teaching methods tailored to students' learning styles.
- **Delivery:** Modifying how the lesson is delivered, such as providing visual cues or extra time.

Strategies to Incorporate SDI in Middle School Career Development

- Offer career exploration based on students' interests, strengths, and abilities.
- Teach workplace skills like time management and communication.
- Provide hands-on experience through school-based enterprises.
- Use assistive technology to support students in career activities.
- Teach self-advocacy skills for students to advocate for themselves in the workplace.

Use High-Leverage Practices for Students with Extensive Support Needs

The Council for Exceptional Children has identified 22 [high-leverage practices](#) (HLPs) that every special educator should master. When used effectively, these critical practices arm special education teachers with essential tools to support positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Each of these practices is grouped into one of four categories: **collaboration**, **assessment**, **social/emotional/behavioral practices**, and **instruction**. These categories provide teachers with a road map to follow to help students succeed.

When improving career development practices in middle school, it's important to incorporate the categories below. By doing so, students will have a better chance of success.

HLP Categories

- **Collaboration:** Work with families, other teachers, students, and others to understand student needs.
- **Assessment:** Use different types of formal and informal assessments to learn about student strengths and needs for IEPs and instruction. Consider students' culture and language.
- **Social/Emotional/Behavioral Support:** Build positive relationships and use evidence-based practices to support students' social and emotional well-being and behavior.
- **Well-designed instruction:** Design instruction based on learning standards, evidence-based practices, and IEP goals. Use various practices to engage students in learning.

Support Inclusive Practices

Support inclusive practices by ensuring all students, including students with complex disabilities, can participate and learn. Students thrive when they are included, recognized, and valued as members of the school and community. For middle school students, this means being involved academically, physically, and socially. Consider how every aspect of your school supports this spirit.

When it comes to career development, this means that students with disabilities also participate in activities and experiences that will prepare them for competitive employment. Access to these experiences is highly regarded as a predictor of post-school success. For example, inclusion in Career and Technical Education programs and Career and Technical Student Organizations helps students develop the skills they need to be successful beyond high school. As with all students, students with disabilities benefit from career awareness, exposure, and planning to create and realize employment goals that align with their strengths.

Promote Independence through Prompting

To raise expectations effectively, it's important to understand each student's needs and develop a plan to promote independence. For instance, when learning a new task or job within a school-based enterprise, students might need reminders to perform certain steps correctly. These prompts can be related to the task or the expected behavior during the task. For example, if a student is learning to take public transportation, they might need a reminder to stand in the right spot for the bus and to wear earbuds if they listen to music on the bus. These prompts assist the student with learning both the task and the accompanying social skills.

Prompts vary in their level of support, ranging from least to most restrictive. The least restrictive prompts involve the support person being near the student. The most restrictive prompt requires the support person to provide full physical assistance. Other prompts can be auditory, visual, gestural, or verbal.

To promote independence, it's best to start with the least restrictive prompt and only increase it if needed. This approach makes it easier to gradually fade the prompts over time. Fading means reducing the frequency or intensity of the prompt, or switching to a less restrictive type.

Before beginning instruction and collecting baseline data on a student who requires support, it's important to develop a fading plan. This ensures a smooth transition towards greater independence for the student.

Increase Collaborative Partnerships



Fostering collaborative partnerships is essential for guiding students toward success in achieving their career goals. Successful career development requires a collaborative effort with schools, students, families, and community partners. In essence, everyone plays a role in the career development process. Collaborative teams should include members from Career and Technical Education (CTE), general education, special education, employers, counseling, and DARS. For increased collaboration, engage families and build community partnerships to tailor a pathway that ensures students are prepared and equipped for life after high school.

ENGAGE FAMILIES

Families are your students' earliest teachers. As your students enter middle school, families continue to be an essential part of students' development and future planning. [Engaging families](#) means having them as active members of their student's IEP and transition team by ensuring their input is included and valued. Nurturing a collaborative relationship with each family will assist in laying out a meaningful career pathway for students. Using this information, students begin to consider their future careers and what they want to do after high school.

How To Engage Families

- Provide regular communication to share resources, student progress, and successes.
- Develop increased knowledge and sensitivity of the students' and families' cultures, experiences, and values.
- Provide networking activities for families to connect with support organizations and agencies.
- Involve families in career planning and goal setting.
- Organize family workshops and cover their roles in career development and transition planning topics.
- Talk to families about the importance of work-based learning experiences.

BUILD COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Collaborative partnerships should extend outside the school setting to include [vocational rehabilitation agencies](#), businesses, and non-profit organizations. Community partnerships are essential to strengthening school CTE programs. For example, schools with [business or employer partnerships](#) can offer students opportunities for job shadowing, informational interviews, service learning, and mock interviews.

It's also important to connect students and families with vocational rehabilitation agencies early on. In Virginia, we can refer students to the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) for pre-Employment Transition Services starting at age 14. These services are designed to support students in preparing for employment.

How To Build Community Partnerships

- Establish clear goals for community partnerships.
- Network with colleagues to identify businesses, non-profits, and organizations that value working with schools and students.
- Communicate with community partners by email or phone calls to express interest in collaboration.
- Articulate the mutual benefit of collaboration and its impact on students.
- Create roles and responsibilities flyers to ensure a shared understanding of the partnership.
- Involve business representatives in providing feedback on student progress and program components.
- Organize events that bring together local businesses, organizations, and schools to enhance employment opportunities.

Incorporate Effective Career Development Practices



In middle school, students start figuring out who they are and what they want. That's where effective career development practices come in. These practices are crucial for getting students ready for the real-world challenges they'll face. They help students explore what interests them, develop workplace readiness skills, and start understanding how the world of work relates to their interests and strengths. Let's review some key practices.

SELF-AWARENESS

Middle school career development practices emphasize increasing self-awareness to enhance student's understanding of themselves to assist in identifying careers that match with their strengths and interests. Self-awareness involves uncovering a student's skills and identifying what makes them unique. It's about knowing who they are, identifying what they're good at, and using this information to initiate the exploration of career interests.

[Transition assessment](#) provides a starting point to help students understand their strengths, preferences, interests, and needs. This information is invaluable to the career development process because it gives students, educators, and community partners important clues about potential career interests. Once we know their interests, it's easier for students to set goals for what they want to do after high school. The IEP team can then plan activities to explore careers. It's a multi-year process that helps students, educators, and families identify resources and support for successful preparation for high school.

How To Increase Self-Awareness

- Engage students in activities like strengths and interest assessments to help them better understand themselves.
- Have students interview families and teachers to get insights about their abilities and strengths.
- Demonstrate self-awareness by sharing your own experiences with self-discovery.
- Celebrate uniqueness by highlighting what makes each student special.
- Encourage positive feedback among peers to foster a sense of self-worth.
- Create real-life learning activities that allow students to apply their interests in practical ways

EARLY EXPLORATION

Once students have a better understanding of their strengths, preferences, interests, and needs, it is time for them to put this knowledge into practice and explore career options. Career development practices during this time help students identify potential career paths and make informed decisions about their future. One way students can learn about the many careers out there is by exploring career clusters. These clusters are organized around specific career areas, and they help students, families, teachers, and counselors create a plan for classes and work-based learning experiences based on what students are interested in. In Virginia, there are 17 career clusters representing over 80 career pathways.

How To Explore Careers Options

- Use career assessments to help students identify interests, skills, and values associated with careers.
- Conduct informational interviews with professionals in career areas of interest to learn about responsibilities, experiences, and the skills and training required.
- Promote volunteer experiences in areas that interest the student to gain insights into the environment.
- Use online career exploration videos and additional resources to research different professionals and job roles.

GOAL SETTING AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Introducing a variety of career options early allows students to set realistic goals for themselves. It helps them understand the connection between their education and future career possibilities, motivating them to work towards specific objectives.

It is important to provide middle school students with opportunities to learn skills that support goal setting and [self-determined](#) behaviors such as decision-making, advocating, and problem-solving. Their future plans will involve setting goals and making choices such as what classes to take, what career to choose, and what steps to take to reach their goals.

How To Increase Goal Setting and Self-Determination

- Identify and focus on strengths.
- Provide students opportunities to set achievable goals.
- Provide student leadership opportunities.
- Allow students a role in their IEP meetings.
- Let students make choices and decisions.
- Allow students to lead their IEP meetings.

How To Increase Goal Setting and Self-Determination (continued)

- Teach problem-solving skills.
- Encourage students to speak up for themselves.
- Teach students to express needs and ask for help when needed.
- Introduce technology that can support independence.
- Involve students in planning their education and future.

CONNECTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND CAREERS

Middle school career development practices should also make a clear connection between education and careers through Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses. [CTE](#) serves as a gateway to exploring various career options. When students are provided with opportunities to learn and try out different careers, they are better prepared to make informed choices about their future careers. Taking CTE courses in middle school provides students with the time to think about where their career interests truly are. If a student discovers a particular career interest that is not a good fit for them, there is still time to investigate other career options.

Did you know that, in Virginia, every middle school student is required to take a Career Investigation course? The [Career Investigations Course](#) is a required curriculum in all Virginia middle schools. School divisions have the flexibility in how the content is delivered, provided it meets the rigor and standards set forth by the Virginia Department of Education. This course is designed to allow students the opportunity to explore various career options, identify opportunities, and develop essential workplace readiness skills emphasizing the 5 Cs.

The 5 Cs

Critical Thinking

Creative Thinking

Communication

Collaboration

Citizenship

This course can be taught in various ways, including as a stand alone class, integrated into different subjects, through online modules, or spread over multiple middle school years with a school counselor. It is expected that all students, including those with significant disabilities, should have access to this curriculum. If you are uncertain about how your school offers this course, please check with your school administrator.

For students with significant disabilities already receiving instruction in this content, consider reinforcing the curriculum through an additional employability course. This course, provided in a supported environment, can offer more opportunities for students to discover strengths, explore interests, delve into careers, and develop crucial workplace readiness skills essential for success in the job market.

WORKPLACE READINESS SKILLS

[Workplace readiness skills](#) are essential skills that students are introduced to in elementary school. These are the skills employers look for in their employees. They include personal qualities, how you get along with others, and professional traits that make students succeed at work. These skills have been a part of Virginia’s CTE curriculum for decades, and they happen to be the first 22 competencies students are introduced to in every CTE course—including middle school CTE courses. Developing these skills takes time, so it’s important to practice them across various environments. Teachers and families can help students develop and practice these skills at home, in school, and in the community to prepare them for their future careers.

Integrate WRS within Hands-on Learning

One of the best ways to help students develop critical workplace readiness skills is integrating WRS into hands-on learning to prepare for work. Instead of just talking about and practicing these skills in a classroom, students can learn by doing real job tasks. By combining WRS with practical learning, students can understand how what they learn in school connects to real-world jobs.

SCHOOL-BASED ENTERPRISES

In school-based enterprises, students engage in a real-world setting to explore the world of work. Students are actively supported in taking the lead and directing all aspects of the enterprise. This approach allows students to develop important technical skills, workplace readiness skills, and professional habits necessary for successful employment. Additionally, students have the opportunity to problem-solve and make decisions, which increases their self-confidence and promotes self-determination.

How To Start a School-Based Enterprise

- Begin by defining outcomes for the business and student participants.
- Work closely with the school’s and division’s administrative staff. Their understanding of school and division-wide policies and resources is invaluable.
- Consult with CTE teachers on effective practices and paperwork requirements.

How To Start a School-Based Enterprise (continued)

- Secure and maintain input from families and community business leaders on the enterprise's development, implementation, and ongoing evaluation.
- Create a structured business plan outlining the key objectives and strategies for the enterprise.
- Develop a comprehensive manual that includes procedures, job descriptions, training schedules, and policies.

Benefits of a School-Based Enterprise

- Students develop workplace readiness and employability skills.
- It provides leadership opportunities in a real setting.
- Schools broaden their range of work-based learning opportunities.
- It provides services or goods to the school community.
- It better prepares the future workforce for employment in the community.
- It provides teachers a setting to teach and assess both academic and workplace readiness skills.
- It actively involves students in the career exploration process.
- It encourages student input and choice in the enterprise design process.
- It creates opportunities for individualized learning and skill differentiation.

Examples of School-Based Enterprises

- Farmers market: fresh vegetable garden on school grounds
- Breakfast cart: coffee and muffins
- Dog and cat biscuits and collars
- Vinyl sticker business
- Balloon and candy business
- School store
- Cookie business

Conclusion



As you implement this framework, remember that career development is an ongoing, student-driven process. Begin early and embrace the principles of Employment First. Maintain high expectations, adopt a strengths-based approach, support inclusive practices, foster collaborative partnerships, and incorporate effective career development practices. This will contribute to creating an environment where all students, including those with complex disabilities, can achieve competitive, integrated employment. By playing an active role in shaping students' futures, you are helping to prepare them for a successful life beyond high school.



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