

Charting the Course for Middle School Career Development

Introduction

For students with disabilities, career development is important for positive employment outcomes. Yet, data still shows employment gaps between students with disabilities and those without. Surprisingly, career development is not only for high school students. Middle school students with disabilities also benefit from career development activities and experiences. Early exposure to career development prepares students to be college and career ready. So, how can middle school educators best support positive student outcomes? We begin early with career development.

Educators must ensure students have the skills and attitudes to be life ready. For students and families, it may be hard to see the future, but it is coming. As a middle school professional, you can help prepare them with four simple steps: 1) believe everyone can work, 2) use a strengths-based approach, 3) build collaborative partnerships, and 4) infuse career development practices.

Believe Everyone Can Work

First, you must examine your own beliefs and values about employment. To prepare your students with disabilities for successful employment, you must believe everyone is capable of employment. Inclusion is possible with a shared vision between schools, communities, and families. Advocate for middle school practices that accept and elevate students with disabilities

Use a Strengths-Based Approach

There are several ways that you can help build a successful foundation for the future, and one of the most important is to use a strengths-based approach. Middle school is the perfect time for students to increase knowledge of their strengths and abilities as they begin the career-planning process. A strengths-based approach focuses on the 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 perspective of each student's ability and miss the chance to help every student build the skills they will need to reach their potential and grow.

Build Collaborative Partnerships

Educators can also cultivate student readiness by building collaborative partnerships. Build collaborative partnerships to extend beyond the school setting to include vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies, community businesses, and employers. These connections are vital to creating career pathways that are realistic and practical. With these partnerships, students will see how their lessons connect to real-world expectations and experiences.

Encourage students and families to connect with agencies early and often to learn about services and supports. After graduation, these relationships will be useful to young graduates who seek employment. Having an early relationship with VR agencies will help increase positive outcomes for students long after they have left middle school. Collaborative partners play a valuable role in the career development process.

Infuse Career Development Practices

Career development practices begin with self-exploration, so encourage students to identify their personal interests and activities. As they become more self-aware, students will be better equipped to identify their goals and plan for the future. Course planning as it relates to career choices is an important step of the process. In Virginia, middle school students will develop a personal learning plan and course of study to align with their academic and career goals. This Academic and Career Plan not only guides students, but it helps everyone to support them in developing the academic and career skills needed to pursue their career interests.

Another way to develop students' career competencies, also known as 21st-Century Skills or "soft skills," is through career and technical education courses. Did you know that, in Virginia, teachers can use the Middle School Career Investigation course and curriculum to help students develop these skills? This course provides the foundation for students to further develop their academic and career plans, and it can be tailored for classroom, online, or community instruction.

Conclusion

Middle school is a great time to increase student awareness about career pathways and provide career guidance that will enable students to gain the education or career training they will need after school. Early career experiences and activities help students create a vision for their future and introduces them to skills that will prepare them for the workplace.