



A Quick-Start Guide to Launching Student-Led Enterprises

From classroom ideas to authentic workplace experiences

Center on
**transition
innovations**
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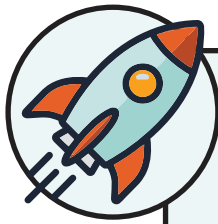
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About this Guide



Ever wonder how to turn your students' interests into authentic workplace learning? A student-led enterprise gives middle school students opportunities to dream, design, create, problem-solve, collaborate, and do while developing workplace readiness skills through authentic school-based experiences.

This guide is designed for middle school special educators, transition and CTE professionals, school administrators, and community partners. It offers simple, practical tips to help schools support the development of middle school enterprises that keep students front and center throughout the process.



LAUNCH TIP

Start small. Make it authentic.
Let students lead.

What is a Student-Led Enterprise?

Student-led enterprises (SLEs) help students learn by running a small business. SLEs help students learn how to explore and create products or services. While the product or service is important, the real outcome is career exploration, career development, and student learning.

While many educators associate career planning with high school, opportunities for career development begin in the early years. Middle school offers students the chance to dive deeper into their interests and connect them to career clusters and pathways.

Through an enterprise, students are introduced to and have the opportunity to learn and develop critical skills necessary for future career pathways, such as:

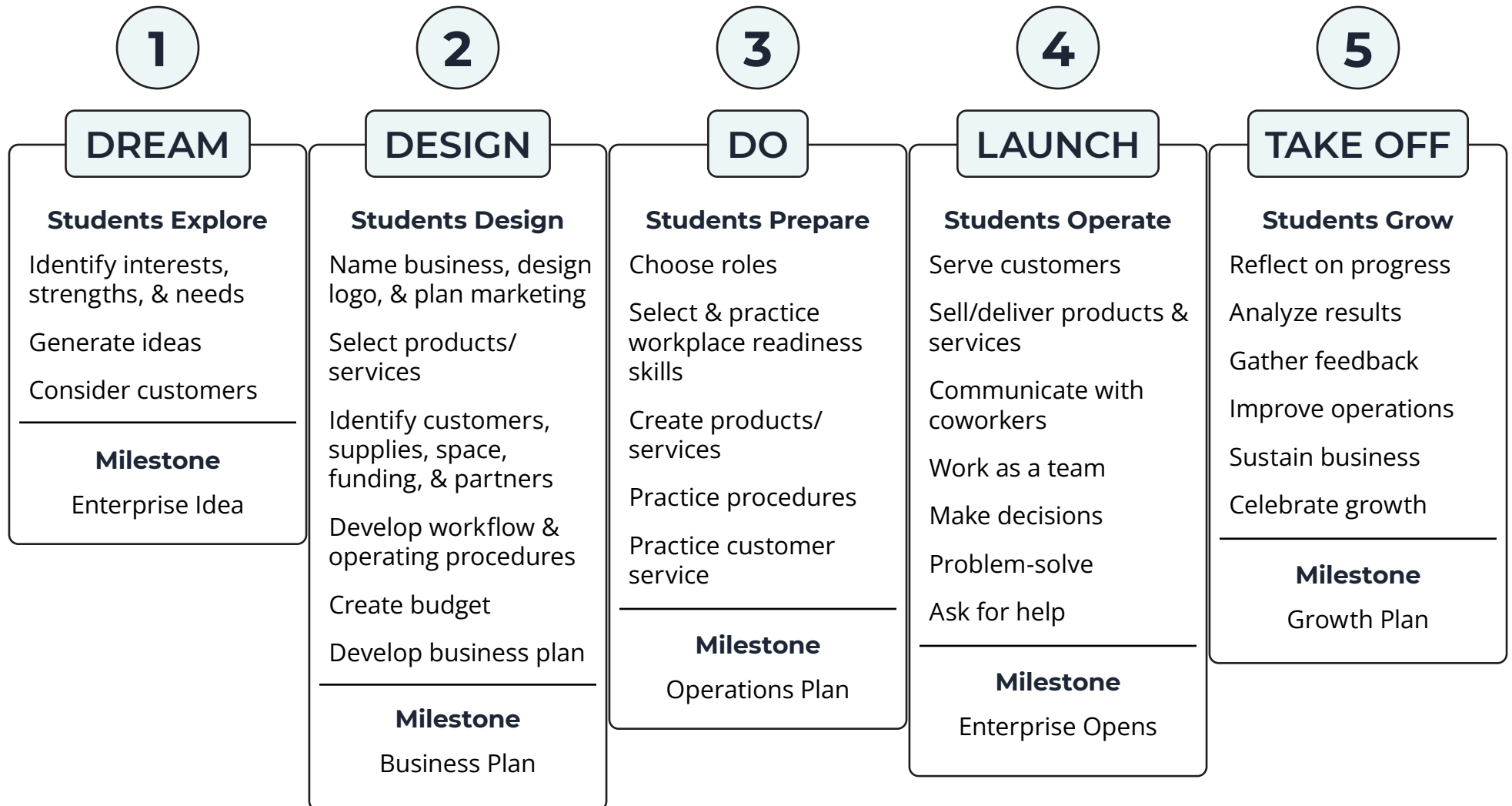
- Communication
- Collaboration and teamwork
- Problem-solving
- Taking initiative
- Professionalism
- Customer service
- Self-determination

Dream to Take Off:

5 Student-Led Steps at a Glance



From the first idea to opening day and beyond, these five steps help you support students as they plan, launch, and lead their enterprise. Use this overview to see the key student activities and milestones at each step.



Bring Each Step to Life



Ready to put the five steps into action? Explore each step in more detail, with practical strategies and guiding questions to help you support student leadership and build workplace readiness skills. Adapt the activities to your students' strengths, interests, and support needs.

STEP 1 | DREAM - START WITH STUDENTS

Build your foundation, explore possibilities, and engage students in envisioning their enterprise.

Before deciding what the enterprise will sell or do, ask: Who are your students?

Identify Your Students

- Strengths and abilities
- Interests and preferences
- Support needs
- Career interests
- Workplace readiness skills
- Opportunities to build greater independence

Ask Students

- What are you good at?
- What would you like to learn?
- What problems could we solve in our school?
- What products or services would people actually use?

Use student discussion, interest inventories, transition assessments, observations, and classroom activities to generate enterprise ideas.

"Professionally, it was very valuable to be able to work alongside these students and put practice into implementation."

- Student-Led Enterprise Teacher

STEP 2 | DESIGN THE ENTERPRISE



Move from student ideas to a realistic business or service concept. Consider the following questions to guide your discussion and build your business plan.

Need

What need or opportunity exists in our school or community?

Customer

Who will use or purchase the product or service?

Product/Service

What will students create or provide?

Resources

What supplies, equipment, space, technology, and funding are needed?

People

Who needs to be involved?
Related service professionals?
Community partners?

Operations

When, where, and how will the enterprise operate?

Marketing

What is the logo and name of the business? How will students market the enterprise?

Success

How will we know whether the enterprise and students are succeeding?

A successful enterprise might operate only one day a week, serve one group of customers, or offer only one or two products or services. You can grow after students and staff learn the process.



LAUNCH TIP

Give students time to dream big, but guide them to start small and build from there.

STEP 3 | DO - BUILD STUDENT ROLES



Students should do more than complete isolated classroom tasks. Create an operations plan and authentic roles based on students' interests, strengths, and preferences. Then connect student roles to how a real workplace operates.

Possible Teams

Leadership & Management

Planning, scheduling, team meetings, quality control

Production & Operations

Creating products, preparing orders, managing supplies

Marketing & Sales

Branding, advertising, displays, promotions

Customer Service

Greeting customers, taking orders, responding to feedback

Finance & Inventory

Pricing, counting, tracking sales, inventory

Select and Practice Job Skills

Students can apply for jobs, interview, rotate roles, receive feedback, and reflect on their performance. Be sure to choose skills students will intentionally practice through the enterprise and allow them time to:

- Practice their assigned jobs
- Learn workplace expectations
- Use task analysis, checklists, visuals, or other supports
- Practice customer interactions
- Learn safety procedures
- Practice handling money or technology when applicable
- Learn how to ask for assistance
- Solve common workplace problems

"One of the participants in the project was in charge of creating all of the fliers. During this assignment, I noticed a confidence he had never shown before."

- Student-Led Enterprise Teacher



Connect to Workplace Readiness

Below is a list of key workplace skills, followed directly by a description of how each skill is demonstrated in practice.

Communication

Greeting customers, taking orders, asking questions

Teamwork

Completing tasks with coworkers

Problem-Solving

Responding when supplies run out

Professionalism

Arriving prepared and following procedures

Taking Initiative

Beginning a task without repeated prompts

Self-Advocacy

Asking for help or clarification

STEP 4 | LAUNCH

It's time to put the plan into action! As students begin operating the enterprise, encourage them to take increasing responsibility for the work. Students should have opportunities to:

- Serve customers
- Sell or deliver products and services
- Communicate with customers and coworkers
- Work together to complete assigned roles
- Make decisions
- Solve workplace problems
- Use money, technology, or equipment as appropriate
- Ask for help when needed

STEP 5 | TAKE OFF



Once the enterprise is operating, help students learn from the experience and take greater ownership. Support students to:

- Reflect on what worked and what didn't
- Gather customer and team feedback
- Identify workplace skills they are developing
- Analyze results
- Recommend changes
- Improve products, services, or operations
- Consider ways to sustain business
- Celebrate progress and success

Your first operating day does not need to be perfect. Instead, treat each enterprise session as an opportunity for students to practice, receive feedback, solve problems, and improve. Hold brief student team meetings to identify what's working, what needs to change, and what students may want to try next.

"The project encouraged greater collaboration, problem-solving, and communication among students, while also allowing me to take on a more coaching and mentoring role."

– **Student-Led Enterprise Teacher**

Reflect and Measure Student Growth

Business success matters, but the most important question is: What are your students learning by participating in this enterprise?

Collect simple evidence to develop a growth plan such as:

- Workplace readiness skill ratings
- Student self-assessments
- Teacher observations
- Work samples
- Customer feedback
- Increased independence
- Student reflections
- Pre/post skill data

Ready to Get Started?



Use this checklist to launch your student-led enterprise.

- ☐ Student interests identified
- ☐ Potential products and services explored
- ☐ Business plan created
- ☐ Budget considered
- ☐ Community partners identified
- ☐ Student leadership roles planned
- ☐ Workplace readiness skills identified
- ☐ Operating procedures established
- ☐ Feedback gathered
- ☐ Sustainability plan developed
- ☐ Success celebrated

REMEMBER

Student-led enterprises are not about running a perfect business. They help students learn by doing, build confidence, develop workplace readiness skills, and discover that their ideas can make a meaningful contribution to their school and community.

Want to learn more about this project?

Use the [Dream! Design! Do! Student-Led Enterprise](#) resources for additional tools and guidance at VCU Center on Transition Innovations.



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CenterOnTransition.org

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