RAND

Research Report

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Preparing Students for What Comes Next

Educator and Student Perspectives on Career-Connected Learning in K–12 Schools

Increasingly, when employers hire entry-level workers, they are placing a higher value on candidates who have a variety of skills and experiences (Hanson, 2026; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2026). As the labor market for young adults shifts accordingly, educators are facing a growing need to understand how K–12 students learn about and navigate college and career pathways. Research on how schools help students explore career fields and gain professional experience is therefore a key complement to research on traditional college preparation supports.

In academic year 2025–2026, we gathered survey data from district leaders via the American School District Panel, from school principals via the American School Leader Panel, and from students via the American Youth Panel. Our data included information about college advisory and preparatory activities and work-related learning. Together, our three survey panels offer a timely and nationally representative view of career-connected programming in K–12 public schools and students' experiences with that programming. Our findings can inform policymakers, workforce development coordinators, career and technical education (CTE) directors, and school leaders across the United States who are seeking to design or strengthen these learning opportunities.

RAND AMERICAN EDUCATOR PANELS

RAND American Life Panel

We focused on survey items that pertain to two overarching research questions:

1. How do district and school leaders structure the career-connected learning experiences that they offer to students?
2. How do current high school students describe their experiences with career-connected learning and the quality of support that they receive to plan their futures?

KEY FINDINGS

- Career-connected learning in high school centers on pathways to college. Sixty-six percent of high school students reported hearing a lot of emphasis from educators about attending a four-year college, while other career pathways received much less emphasis.
- Schools most often provide work-related learning through coursework and career and technical education, but apprenticeships and internship opportunities are relatively rare.
- Most leaders described providing students with their first experiences with career-connected learning in middle school, with almost all districts offering some form of career exploration or planning support. However, only 26 percent of districts leverage out-of-school time programming for career learning in middle school.
- Students described making after high school plans late in their high school careers: By spring of their junior year, more than four in ten students had yet to make a plan or meet with their counselors about college and career plans.
- Students' plans for work-related learning consistently outpace their follow-through. By spring of their senior year, only 39 percent reported visiting an employer or workplace, even though 71 percent had planned to do so, and only 22 percent had actually participated in an internship or apprenticeship, even though 66 percent had planned to do so.
- Sixty-three percent of high schools set numeric targets for students to meet with counselors about school or career options, and around half (52 percent) set targets related to the number of students developing postsecondary plans. Few high schools track whether students are accepted to college (32 percent) or secure employment after high school (15 percent).
- Students offered mixed reviews of their school's helpfulness in planning for their future: Students who do not want to pursue a bachelor's degree rated their schools the most negatively. Students from lower-income families were also less likely to report that school supports are well-matched to their families' financial situations.

In the first section of this report ("How Educators Structure Career-Connected Learning"), we summarize the types of career-connected learning opportunities that leaders indicate are provided most often, first at the middle school level and then at the high school level. To better understand which areas high school leaders are focusing on the most, we also examine the career-connected learning activities and milestones against which principals actively set numeric targets. We conclude the first section by exploring in greater depth the opportunities that districts offer that are directly related to work and career exposure (i.e., work-related learning) and distinct from traditional college preparatory activities.

In the second section of this report ("What Students Say About Career-Connected Learning and Planning for Their Future"), we present findings from our nationally representative survey of current high school students. We explore when students first began to hear from adults at their schools about planning for their future and what pathways they hear about the most from adults at their schools. From there, we examine what kinds of activities students plan to do to prepare for college and a career and which activities they actually complete. Finally, we examine how students rate the helpfulness of the supports that their schools are providing to help them plan for their future after high school.

Data Sources and Analytic Approach

Throughout this report, we present our results using descriptive statistics. Our intent is to provide exploratory and descriptive information rather than to test causal relationships. We examine subgroup differences (e.g., by district locale or student grade level) when relevant to support our findings. For each of the three survey panels we draw from, our responses are weighted to be nationally representative for that group (i.e., for U.S. public school districts, for U.S. public schools, and for current public high school students). A summary of our samples, response rates, and weighting methodology for each survey is provided in the appendix.

We assess the statistical significance of subgroup differences using specific tests that account for our survey weights. Unless otherwise noted, we describe only differences between subgroups that are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. Because of the exploratory nature of this report, we did not apply corrections for multiple comparisons. Percentages reported in the text and figures are rounded to the nearest whole number and therefore may not sum to 100.

Limitations of Our Approach

Our analysis has several limitations that are worth keeping in mind. First, as with any survey, there are potential biases that can emerge from self-reported data, including social desirability bias, recall bias, and acquiescence bias (Choi and Pak, 2005). Additionally, although our survey weights adjust respondents to match national population characteristics on observed variables, our findings could still be biased by unobserved differences related to which district leaders, school leaders, or students chose to participate. Furthermore, although our weights are calibrated to the overall student, school, and district subgroups we examine, we do not weight each subgroup separately to ensure that it is nationally representative.

Second, because the three surveys referenced in this report draw on independent samples of districts, schools, and students, our data describe complementary national perspectives rather than linked accounts of the same school systems; differences between educator and student reports should be interpreted with this in mind. Our results are descriptive and exploratory and cannot support causal conclusions about the effects of career-connected learning offerings on students' experiences or plans.

Finally, readers should keep in mind that our school principal and district leader surveys correspond to the national populations of schools and districts, respectively, rather than to the national average student experience. In particular, slightly more than half of students in the United States attend large (and typically urban) school districts that serve 10,000 students or more, but these represent just 12 percent of all school districts nationwide. Small (and typically rural) districts that serve fewer than 3,000 students represent more than two-thirds of districts nationwide and in our sample, but these collectively serve fewer than one-quarter of students nationwide. In light of this dynamic, we report our district survey results both overall and across subgroups defined by locale.

Because the three surveys draw on independent samples of districts, schools, and students, our data describe complementary national perspectives rather than linked accounts of the same school systems.

How Educators Structure Career-Connected Learning

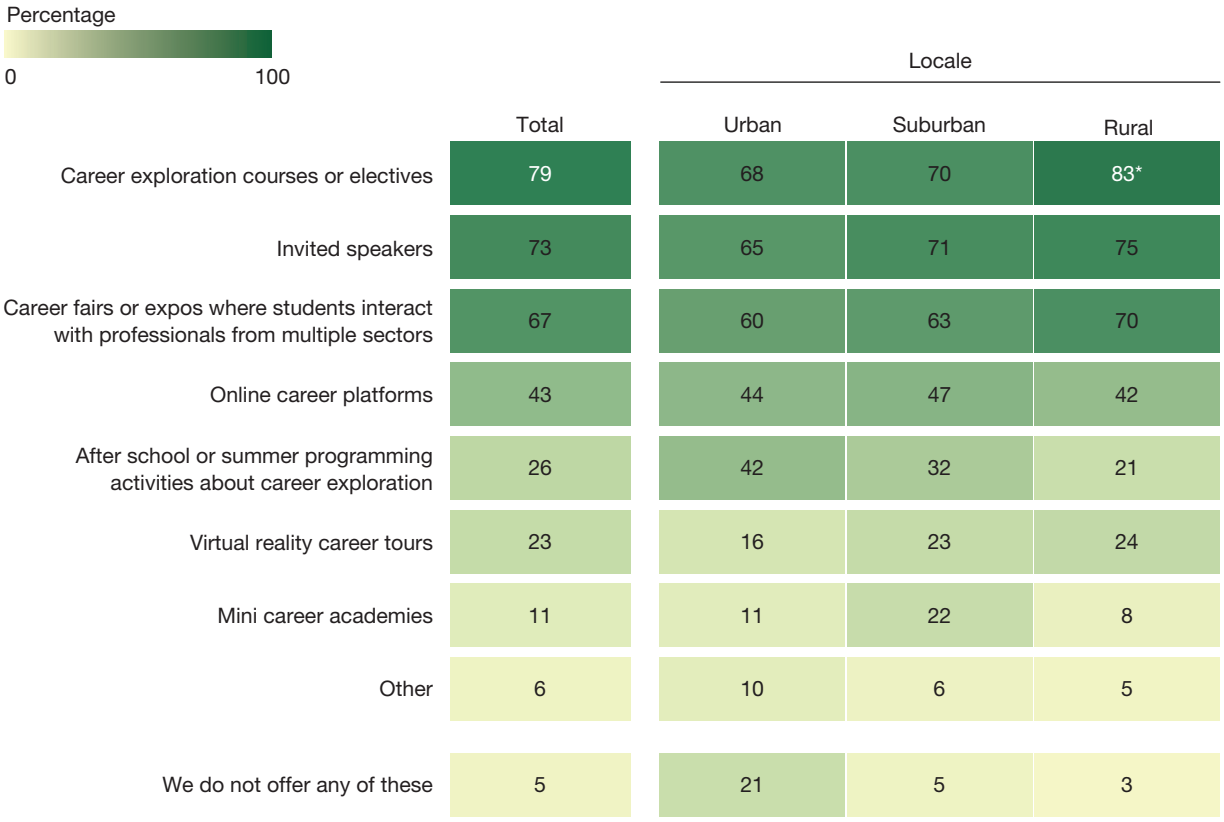
In this section, we examine what schools and districts provide to students when it comes to career-connected learning. We intersperse results from our survey of school district leaders and our survey of school principals depending on which survey offered the most insight on each topic of interest.

Middle Schools Emphasize Career Exploration and Start Early

Our survey of school district leaders included the most questions about career-connected learning at the middle school level. Most leaders described career-related education that starts early in middle school and focuses on exposure to possible careers. As shown in Figure 1, the most common career-connected learning experiences offered in middle school are career exploration courses or electives (typically offered in 79 percent of districts), invited

FIGURE 1

Career-Learning Opportunities Districts Typically Offer to Middle Schoolers



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of district representatives in spring 2026 (n = 372): "Which of the following, if any, does your district typically offer to educate middle schoolers about different careers or trades this school year?" Respondents were instructed to select all answers that apply; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100. An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between districts in a particular locale and all other districts at the $p < 0.05$ level.

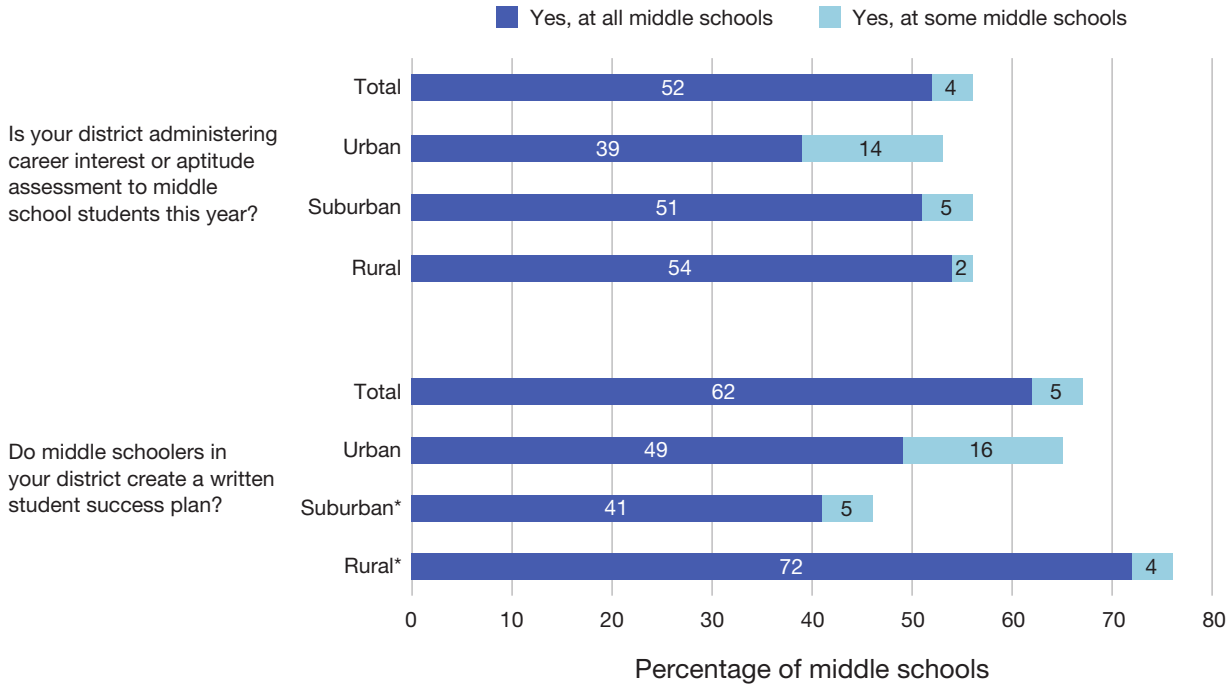
speakers (73 percent), and career fairs or expos (67 percent). Rural districts—even though they tend to be smaller than other districts—are significantly more likely to offer courses or electives designed to help middle school students explore career opportunities.

Online career platforms are offered to middle school students in 43 percent of districts. Career learning via out-of-school-time programming—including after school and summer school—is uncommon, typically offered in 26 percent of districts. Just 5 percent of districts reported not offering any of these career education opportunities to middle schoolers.

Districts also frequently engage middle school students in structured planning and assessment activities related to career-connected learning, as shown in Figure 2. Sixty-seven percent of district leaders reported that some or all of their middle schools ask students to create a written plan about their academic, career, and personal goals and how they plan to explore those goals. Additionally, 56 percent of leaders indicated that their middle schools use career interest or aptitude assessments to gather data about students' career interests. Consistent with our earlier finding about course offerings, rural districts are significantly more likely to engage middle school students in developing written plans about their

FIGURE 2

District Use of Written Career Plans and Related Assessments in Middle School, by Locale



NOTE: This figure is based on the following two survey questions administered to a nationally representative sample of district representatives in spring 2026 (n = 372): (1) "Do middle schoolers in your district create a written plan (sometimes called a 'student success plan'), in which they state their academic, career, and personal goals, along with what classes and activities they plan to take to explore their career or trade interests?" and (2) "Is your district administering career interest or aptitude assessments (e.g., Naviance) to middle school students this school year?" An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between districts in a particular locale and all other districts at the $p < 0.05$ level.

future, while suburban districts are the least likely to do so. These data suggest that educators in rural districts may prioritize early career awareness more than their urban and suburban counterparts.

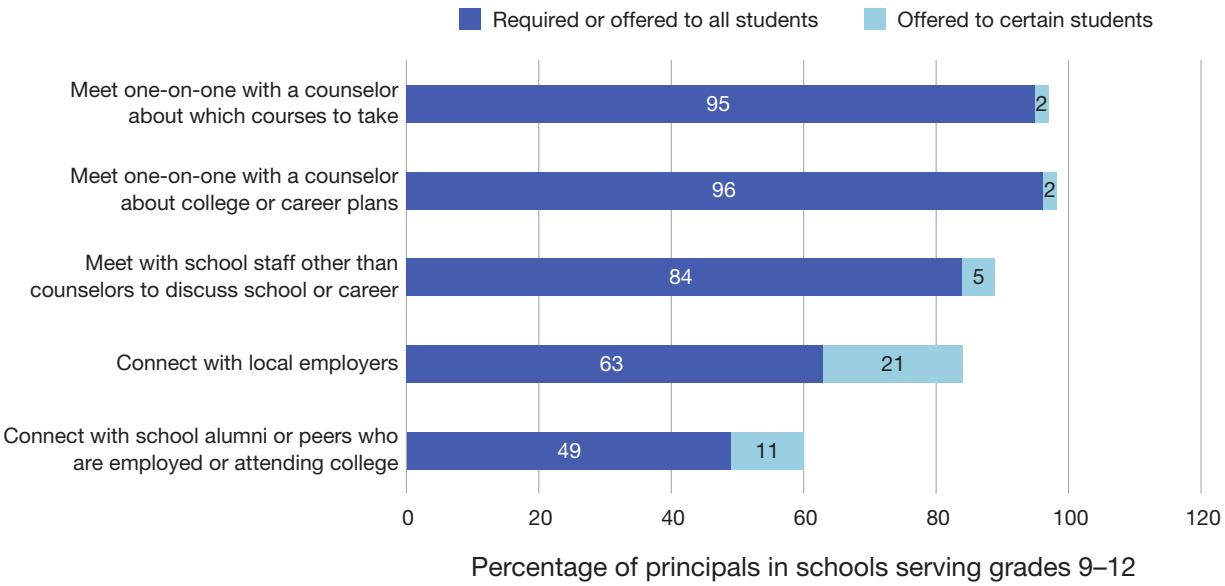
High School Career-Connected Learning Centers on Counselor and Staff Interactions

To examine career-connected learning at the high-school level, we draw on our school principal survey, which included the largest set of questions about which supports schools typically offer. At the high school level, career-related learning appears to be almost universal, with an emphasis on interactions with counselors and other school staff.

Figure 3 shows the types of opportunities that high school principals reported offering at their schools and how participation is structured. Almost all school principals reported offering one-on-one engagement with guidance counselors, and a large majority (84 percent) also offer career-connected engagement opportunities with other school staff. Most schools offer some form of connection with local employers to all students (63 percent), although certain schools prioritize these opportunities for only targeted groups (21 percent). Around half of schools (49 percent) offer opportunities for students to connect with alumni or peers who are attending college or working, but a sizeable minority (40 percent) do not offer these opportunities in any formal way.

FIGURE 3

Career-Connected Learning Opportunities Offered by High Schools



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question administered to a sample of middle and high school principals in spring 2026, with results shown for just schools that include (but are not necessarily limited to) grades 9 through 12 (n = 842): "Indicate if your school offers any of the following opportunities for students in grades 6–12 this school year (2025–2026) and which students can (or must) participate."

Most Principals Set Numeric Targets for College-Pathway Milestones but Rarely Track Post–High School Outcomes

To better understand which types of career-connected learning schools systematically monitor, we asked high school principals whether they have specific numeric targets for the proportion of students they would like to complete a college- or career-preparation activity, such as filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Of the 17 college- and career-preparation activities we asked about, 87 percent of principals reported having a specific numeric target for at least one activity.

The types of career planning or preparatory student experiences that schools monitor vary widely but include a mix of both college-oriented and work-oriented activities, as detailed in Figure 4. For example, 63 percent of principals reported tracking whether counselor meetings involve talking about school or career options after high school. Fifty-nine percent set numeric targets for how many students have filled out or submitted the FAFSA for college aid. A little more than half (52 percent) set targets for whether students develop explicit goals for what they want to do after high school. Fewer than half of schools set targets related to whether students engage in work-related learning activities, including writing a resume or cover letter (47 percent), participating in a career day or job fair (46 percent), or participating in a CTE course or pathway (45 percent). Other activities and outcomes, such as visiting colleges or workplaces or engaging in internships, are infrequently linked with numeric targets.[1]

Notably, most principals reported that their schools do not have numeric targets around college and career outcomes, such as whether students are accepted into college (32 percent track this) or accept a part-time or full-time job (15 percent). The targets schools set primarily pertain to such inputs as the receipt of school services.

Work-Related Learning Relies Heavily on Coursework; Internships and Apprenticeships Remain Uncommon

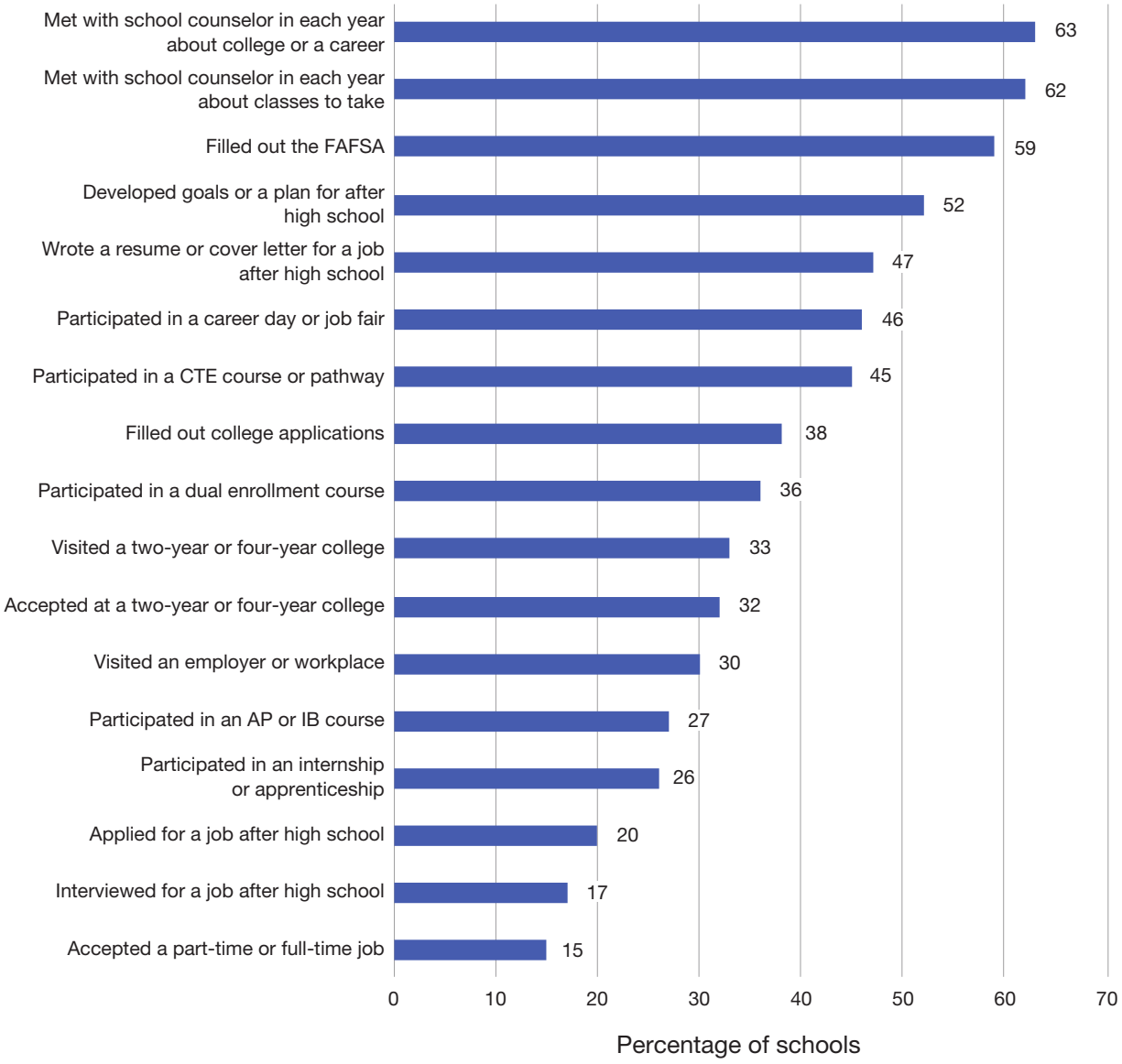
Next, we share results from our survey of school district leaders on work-related learning experiences. We asked district leaders about the types of work-related opportunities their students can access across a variety of industry sectors. We summarize our results in Figure 5. Across the 14 industries we asked about, 69 percent of district leaders reported that one or more schools in their district offer at least one complete CTE pathway, while 61 percent reported that schools offer some other kinds of credit-bearing courses as a form of work-related learning.

Districts and their partners offer internships and apprenticeships far less often than other forms of work-related learning; only 37 percent of districts offer any internships and 21 percent offered apprenticeships in any industry in the most recent school year (2025—2026). Urban districts, which are typically larger, more often offer a variety of work-related learning programs, while suburban districts are significantly less likely to offer complete CTE pathways.

Notably, most principals reported that their schools do not have numeric targets around college and career outcomes, such as whether students are accepted into college or accept a part-time or full-time job.

FIGURE 4

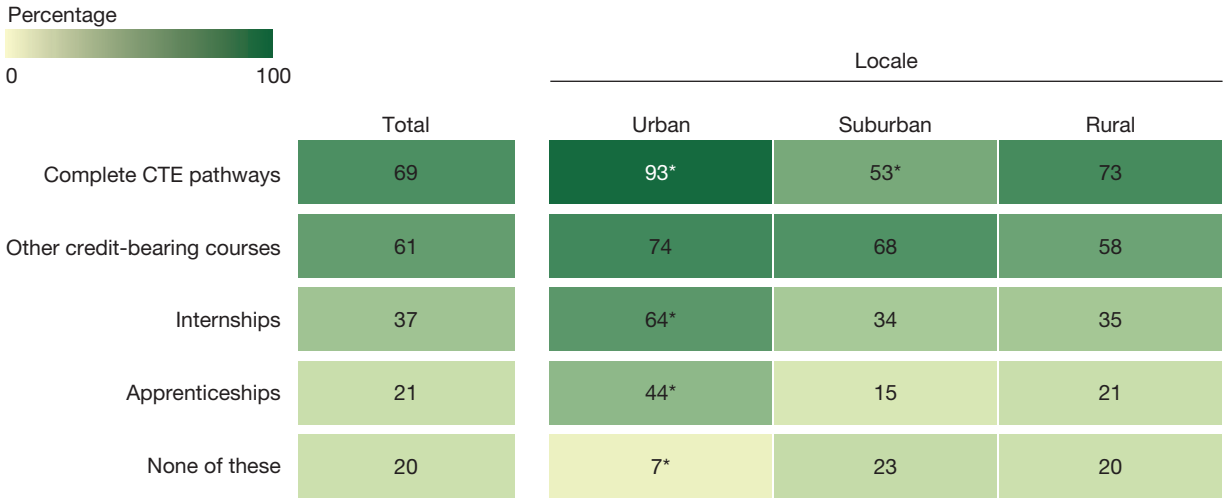
Extent to Which Schools Set Numeric Targets for Various Career-Connected Activities



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question, which was administered to high school principals whose schools serve only students in grades 9 through 12 in spring 2026 (*n* = 720): "Does your school have specific numeric targets for any of the following college and career preparation activities?" AP = Advanced Placement; IB = International Baccalaureate.

FIGURE 5

Percentage of Districts Offering Each Work-Related Learning Opportunity



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of districts leaders in fall 2025 (n = 233): "Which types of career and technical education (CTE), apprenticeships, or internships, if any, do one or more of your middle or high schools offer to students in the 2025–2026 school year? Include programming the district, school, or a partnering institution offers." Respondents provided answers to this question across each of 14 individual industry categories. An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between districts in a particular locale and all other districts at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Around 20 percent of districts did not offer any of these work-related learning opportunities in any of their schools. The statistics cited above may also overstate the number of students who typically receive these opportunities because we did not ask districts whether opportunities are offered at *all* of their high schools.

Looking at individual industries, we found that districts provide work-related learning across a variety of industries, as detailed in Figure 6. The industries that district leaders most commonly reported are health care and human services (67 percent), agriculture (62 percent), digital technology (60 percent), education (60 percent), construction (59 percent), and arts, entertainment, and design (56 percent). Many other industries are also well represented. By contrast, fewer districts offer work-related learning in public service and safety (33 percent), energy and natural resources (18 percent), or supply chains and transportation (17 percent).

Work-related learning varies significantly across locales in the industries represented. These differences appear to correspond to differences in local economies and district scale. Urban districts offer work-based learning in more industries, likely because of their larger average size and proximity to a broader variety of local employers. Rural districts, despite their smaller size, are significantly more likely than other districts to offer work-related learning in agriculture. Suburban districts are the least likely to offer opportunities in agriculture, construction, and energy and natural resources.

FIGURE 6

Percentage of Districts Offering Career and Technical Education Programs, Credit-Bearing Courses, Apprenticeships, or Internships, by Industry



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of districts leaders in fall 2025 (n = 233): "Which types of career and technical education (CTE), apprenticeships, or internships, if any, do one or more of your middle or high schools offer to students in the 2025–2026 school year? Include programming the district, school, or a partnering institution offers." Respondents provided answers to this question across each of 14 individual industry categories. An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between districts in a particular locale and all other districts at the $p < 0.05$ level.

What Students Say About Career-Connected Learning and Planning for Their Future

In this section of the report, we explore data from our survey of current high school students. Their responses offer insight into both their aspirations and how they experience the career-related learning opportunities provided by schools.

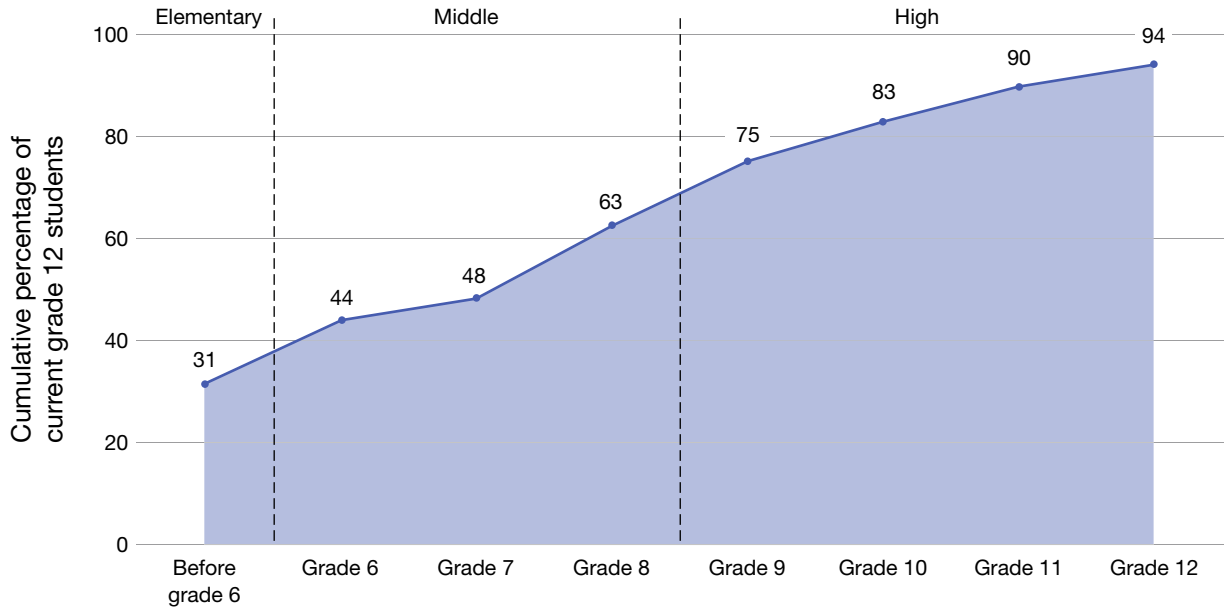
Most High Schoolers First Heard About Careers Before High School

To better understand the trajectory of students' career-connected learning experiences, we asked current high school students nationwide whether and when they engaged in various career-related learning experiences. In Figure 7, we show when high school seniors recall first hearing from adults in their schools about preparing for their future. Although students may not recall the exact timing of these conversations, their responses provide some indication of the first college and career preparation conversations that registered as meaningful to them. Consistent with educators' reports about middle school learning opportunities, most seniors recall first hearing about preparing for their future before the end of grade 8.

We also asked students currently in grades 9 through 12 about their engagement with school counselors and the extent of their planning for after high school—activities principals reported as among those most-commonly tracked by schools (see Figure 8). Although most high school students described meeting one-on-one with their counselors to talk about classes as early as grade 9, conversations with counselors about school or career options after high school tended to occur later; for more than one-quarter of students, those topics had still not been discussed by spring of their grade 12 year. Consistent with these late discussions about school or career options, most students had not developed goals or plans for what they want to do after high school

FIGURE 7

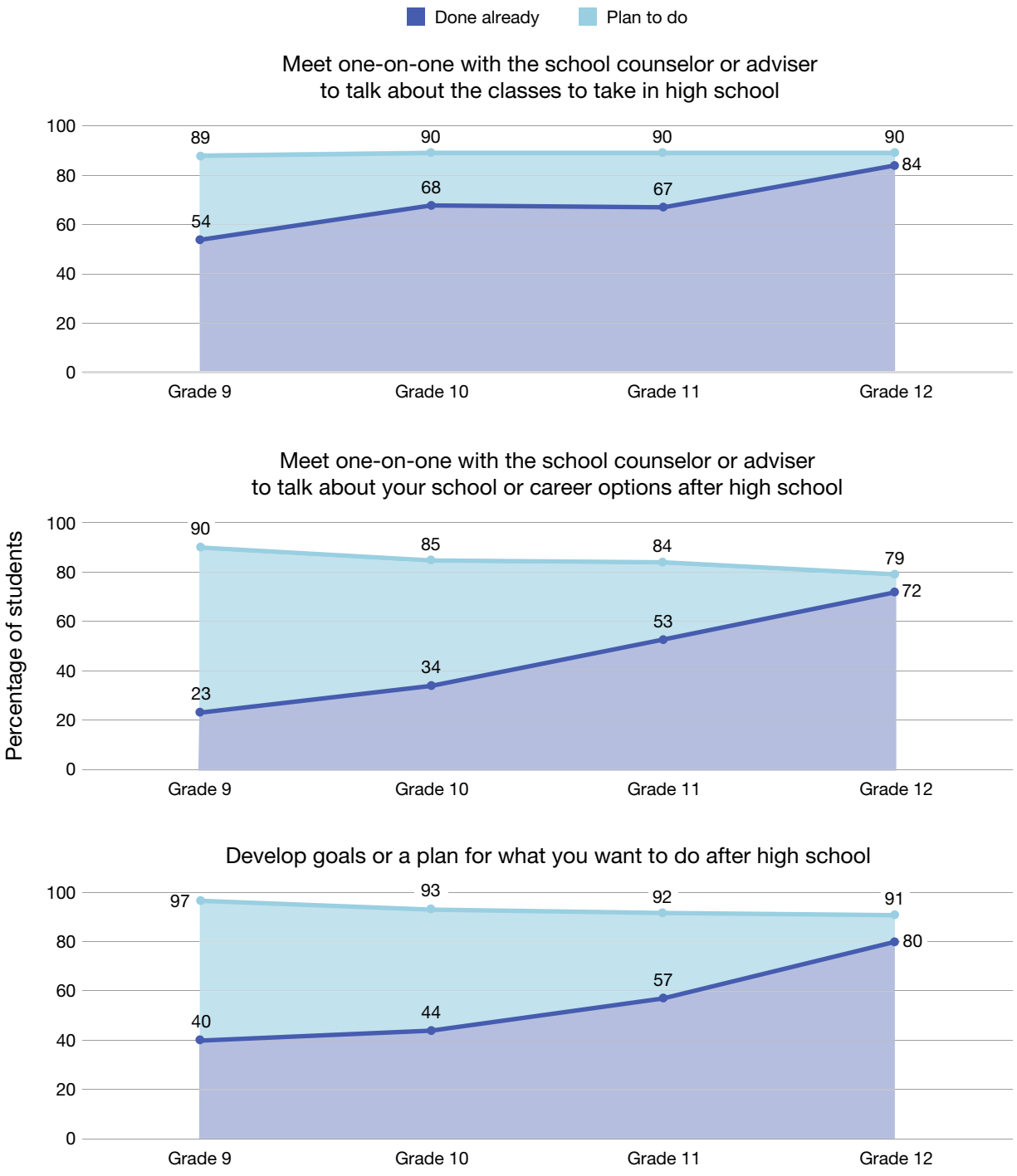
When High School Seniors First Recall Hearing Messages About Preparing for Their Future from Adults in School



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question administered to a sample of high school seniors via RAND's American Youth Panel: "When did you first hear messages from adults in school (teachers, counselors, principals, coaches) about preparing for your future?" (*n* = 140). Additionally, not depicted in the figure, 6 percent of seniors said that they did not remember, and 0 percent said that they had never heard anything from adults in school about preparing for their future.

FIGURE 8

High School Students' Engagement with Counselors and Planning for After High School



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of high schoolers (enrolled in grades 9 through 12) via RAND's American Youth Panel: "Which of the following activities do you plan to do before you finish high school?" (n = 626). The response options were as follows: (1) Done this; (2) Not done this, but plan to; and (3) Not done this, and don't plan to. Those who responded "Not done this, and don't plan to" are not shown.

prior to grade 11, and 20 percent of grade 12 students described still not having done so at the time of our spring semester survey.[2]

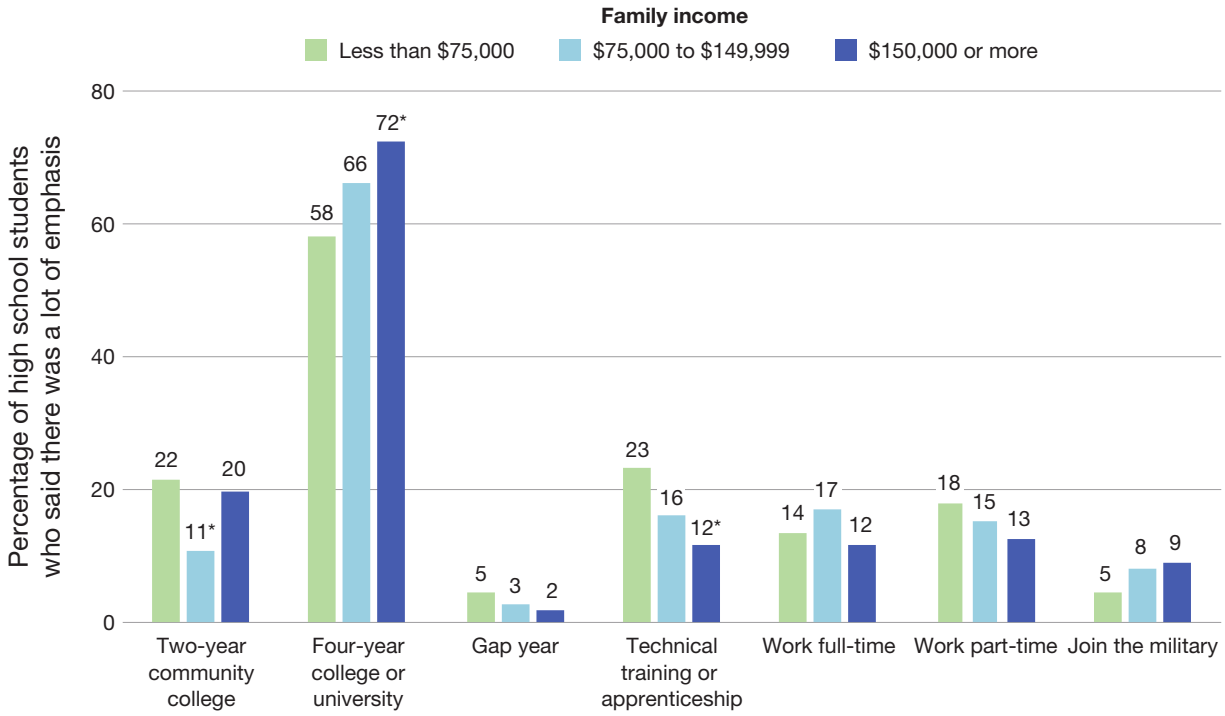
School Messages About Future Pathways Heavily Favor Four-Year College

As high school students engage with their guidance counselors and other school staff about their career plans, around two-thirds (66 percent) reported a heavy emphasis on four-year college as a target, while relatively few reported an emphasis on other potential pathways. As shown in Figure 9, the areas of emphasis differ somewhat by family income level, which may indicate that either educators are tailoring messages to students or that messages vary across community contexts.

The degree of emphasis on four-year college is unsurprising given that 45 percent of students nationwide attend a four-year college immediately after high school and more may aspire to do so (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). However, given that 38 percent of high school graduates do not immediately matriculate into any college (neither two-year nor four-year), the comparative lack of emphasis on other pathways may indicate a gap in school supports relative to some students' needs.

FIGURE 9

Pathways Emphasized by School Staff When Speaking with High School Students



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of high schoolers (enrolled in grades 9 through 12) via RAND's American Youth Panel: "When adults in your high school (teachers, counselors, principals, coaches) talk about options for your future, how much do they emphasize each of the following?" (n = 622). The data include only respondents who heard messages. The figure shows the percentage of high school students who said, "a lot of emphasis." An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically different result relative to youth in families with incomes of less than $75,000.

For many students, the expectation of engaging in work-related learning is at odds with what they will realistically be able to do before graduating from high school.

The Vast Majority of High Schoolers Indicate Having Plans for College, but Many Have Not Completed Key Steps by Senior Year

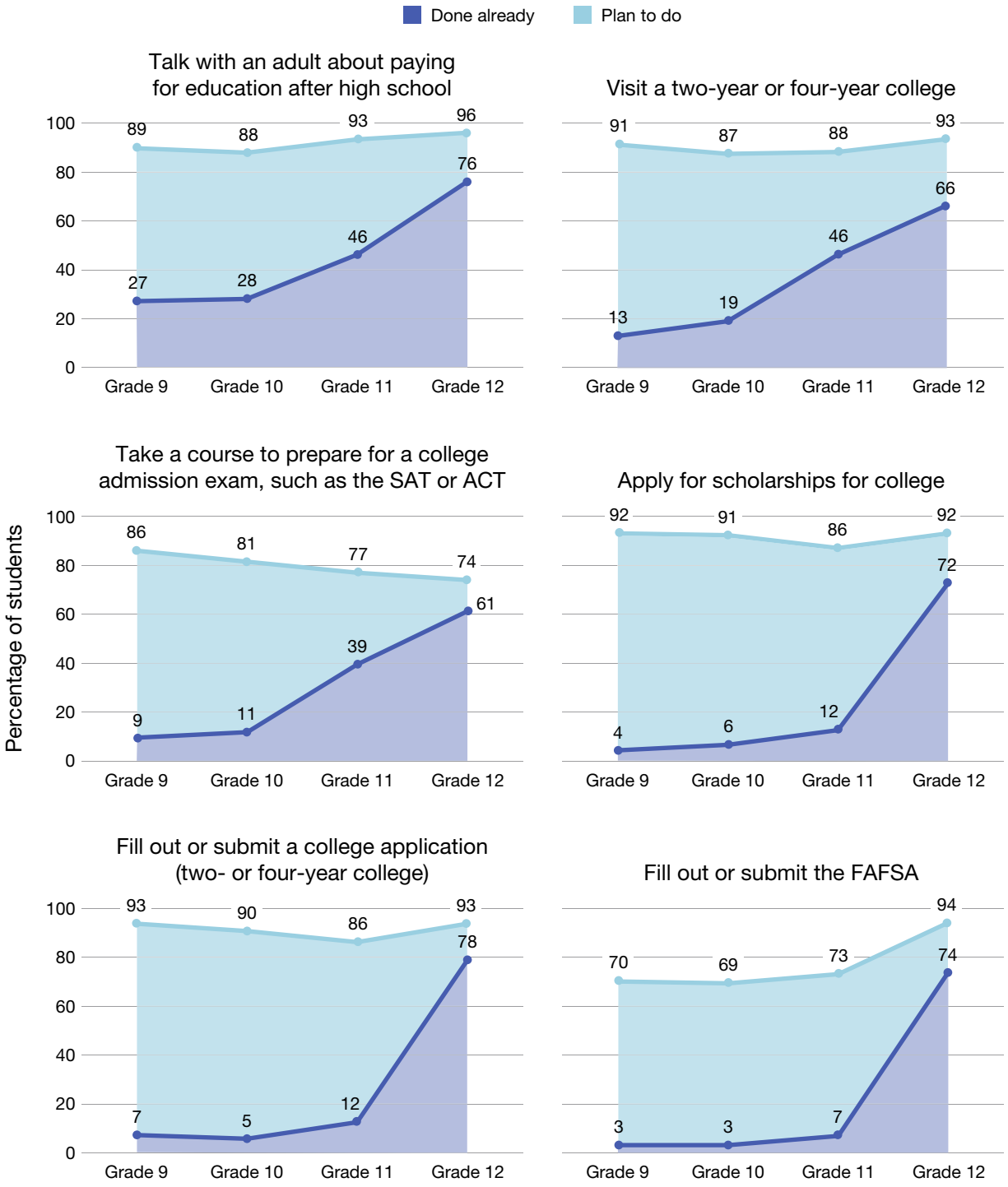
Next, we asked students about a variety of activities and plans directly related to preparing for college, with results shown in Figure 10. We found that these activities ramp up in grade 12: Around three-quarters of high school seniors reported having had conversations with an adult about paying for education after high school, submitting a college application, or filling out the FAFSA. However, as of March in academic year 2025–2026, a sizeable gap remained between the proportion of seniors who planned to do these and other college preparatory activities and the proportion who had already done them.

Students Plan to Do Work-Related Learning at Far Higher Rates Than They Actually Complete It

We also asked students about their experiences with several work-related learning opportunities, with results shown in Figure 11. Engagement in these activities is far less common than in college-oriented activities, and the data reveal wider gaps between what students say they plan to do and what they have actually done. Among high school seniors, only 39 percent reported visiting an employer or workplace, even though 71 percent said that they planned to do so. Furthermore, only 22 percent had actually participated in an internship or apprenticeship, but 66 percent had indicated that they planned to do so. While some students may have concrete plans to engage in these activities after graduation, these findings suggest that for many students, the expectation of engaging in work-related learning is at odds with what they will realistically be able to do before graduating from high school. These results could reflect the level of supports that schools provide for these activities, the degree of commitment by students and families in following through on work-related learning plans, or some combination of both.

FIGURE 10

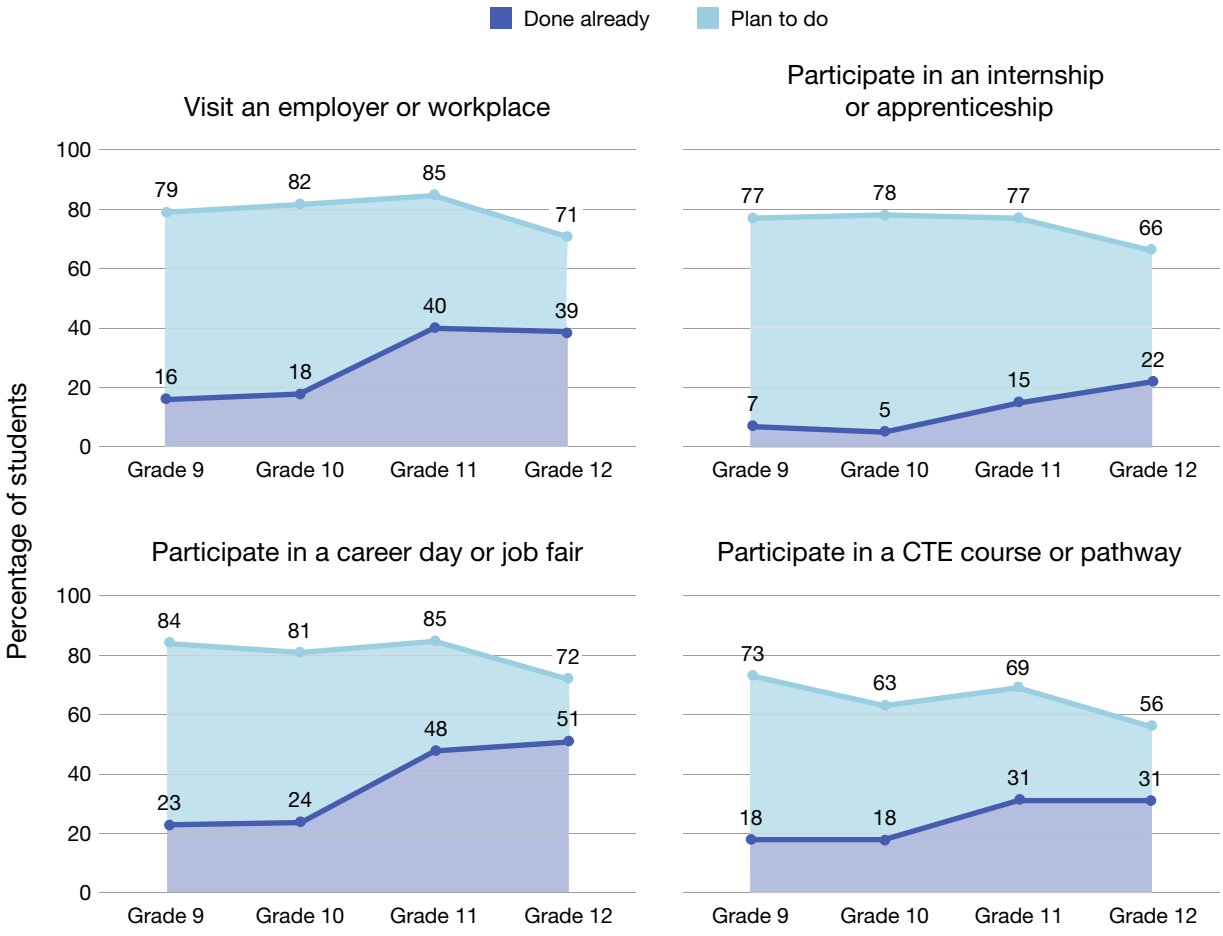
High School Students' College Preparatory Activities and Plans



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of high schoolers (enrolled in grades 9 through 12) via RAND's American Youth Panel: "Which of the following activities do you plan to do before you finish high school?" (n = 626). The response options were as follows: (1) Done this; (2) Not done this, but plan to; and (3) Not done this, and don't plan to. Those who responded "Not done this, and don't plan to" are not shown.

FIGURE 11

High School Students' Work-Related Learning Activities and Plans



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of high schoolers (enrolled in grades 9 through 12) via RAND's American Youth Panel: "Which of the following activities do you plan to do before you finish high school?" (n = 626). The response options were as follows: (1) Done this; (2) Not done this, but plan to; and (3) Not done this, and don't plan to. Those who responded "Not done this, and don't plan to" are not shown.

Students Who Do Not Want to Earn a Four-Year Degree Rate School Supports the Most Negatively

Finally, we asked students to rate how well the information they get in their schools about planning for their future matches their interests, how well it matches their families' financial situations, and how helpful their schools have been overall. Figure 12 details our results related to students' interests and their families' financial situations. Across all high school students we surveyed, 71 percent rated the information they receive from their schools as only "somewhat" matched to their interests, while 22 percent find it "very much" matched.

In subgroup analyses, we found that youth who do not want to obtain a bachelor's degree find the information they receive from schools significantly less well matched to their interests: Only 13 percent reported that the information "very much" matches compared with 27 percent among students who would like to obtain a bachelor's degree or a higher degree. This gap may reflect that students who do not want to complete a bachelor's degree are less interested in the information schools provide about four-year college pathways or that the information schools provide about other pathways is not well-aligned to their interests.

When we examined results across students' families' income levels, we found that students

FIGURE 12

Extent to Which the Information Schools Provide Is Well Matched with Students' Interests and Their Families' Financial Situations

Percentage

0 — 100

Question	Answer choices	All students	By college plan: Bachelor's degree or higher (*n* = 194)	By college plan: Less than a bachelor's degree (*n* = 431)	By family financial situation: <$75,000 (*n* = 100)	By family financial situation: >$75,000 and <$150,000 (*n* = 110)	By family financial situation: >$150,000 (*n* = 332)
Match with student interest	Not at all	7	5	10	4	8	9
	Somewhat	71	68	76	72	74	71
	Very much	22	27*	13*	24	18	20
Match with family's finances	Not at all	14	12	19	23	16	8*
	Somewhat	62	60	66	56	67	65
	Very much	23	28*	15*	21	16	27*

NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following two survey questions administered to a nationally representative sample of high schoolers (enrolled in grades 9 through 12) via RAND's American Youth Panel: (1) "How well does the information you get in school about how to plan for your future match your interests?" (*n* = 625), and (2) "How well does the information you get in school about how to plan for your future match your family's financial situation?" (*n* = 625). Subgroup results are shown for youth who reported (in the same survey) that they would like to complete a bachelor's degree or higher and for those who do not want to do so. Subgroup results are also shown for students with varying family income levels. An asterisk (*) indicates that the results for a particular subgroup are statistically significantly different from the results for students not in that subgroup at the $p < 0.05$ level. This figure and associated text were updated in August 2026 to correct data related to student interest (by college plan and by family financial situation).

from higher-income families are significantly more likely to report that the information schools provide matches their families' financial situations. We found no significant differences by family income level in terms of matches with student interests. Taken together, these subgroup findings suggest that the information schools typically provide is more closely tailored to students from higher-income backgrounds and those seeking to attend a four-year college.

Finally, we examined how students rate the overall helpfulness of their school's support for planning for their future. On a ten-point scale, students' average rating was 6.3. Sixty-four percent of students rated their school as "doing better than OK," 21 percent rated their school as "doing OK" (five out of ten), and 15 percent rated their school as "doing worse than OK."

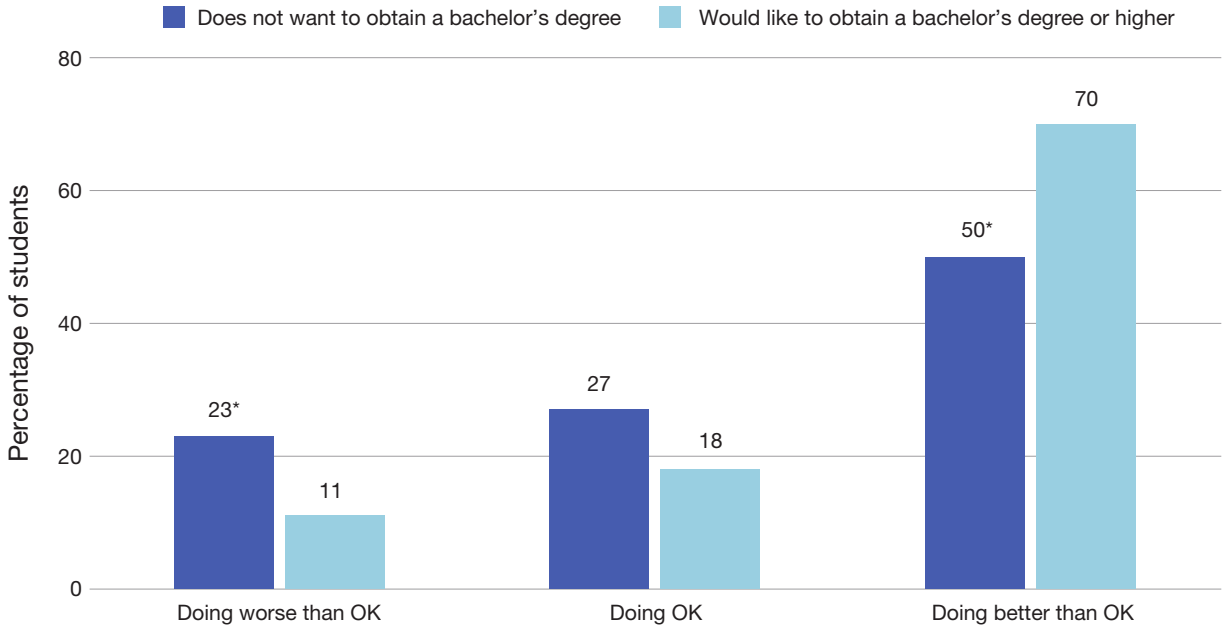
The results differed significantly ($p < 0.05$) between students who would like to obtain a bachelor's degree or a higher degree and those who do not want to do so, as illustrated in Figure 13. Only 50 percent of students who do not wish to obtain a bachelor's degree rated their school as doing better than OK, while 23 percent rated it as doing worse than OK. In contrast, 70 percent of students who want to obtain a bachelor's degree rated their school as doing better than OK, and only 11 percent rated it as doing worse than OK. These findings reinforce the impression that the career-connected learning that schools provide may be a poor match for students who do not wish to attend a four-year college after high school.

Implications

This study provides unique insight into how K–12 schools across the United States structure career-connected learning and how students experience that learning. We found evidence of disconnects between what schools prioritize and provide and what many students need. More than 40 percent of students

FIGURE 13

High School Students' Assessments of How Well Their Schools Are Helping Them Plan for Their Future



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question administered to a nationally representative sample of high schoolers (enrolled in grades 9 through 12) via RAND's American Youth Panel: "On a scale from zero (0) to ten (10), how well is your school helping you plan for your future? Zero (0) means not doing a good job, 5 means doing okay, and 10 means doing an excellent job." ($n = 626$). The results of 0 to 4 are summarized as "doing worse than OK," and the results of 6 to 10 are summarized as "doing better than OK." An asterisk (*) indicates a significant difference between students who do not want to obtain a bachelor's degree and students who would like to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher at the $p < 0.05$ level. This figure was updated in August 2026 to correct the legend.

reported not yet discussing college or career plans with a guidance counselor or developing a post–high school plan of their own by the spring of their junior year, a gap that reflects in part the well-documented strain on school counseling capacity (Hilts, Liu, and Guo, 2023). School supports are most-heavily geared toward supporting four-year college pathways, yet many students who plan to attend college do not follow through on essential early steps. Other pathways receive substantially less emphasis, and students who are not interested in pursuing a four-year degree rate their school's guidance significantly worse than their peers.

These gaps are particularly concerning in light of broader shifts in the post–high school landscape. Public confidence in the four-year degree as a default path is eroding (Jones, 2026), and the share of students who aspire to earn a bachelor's degree has dropped sharply over recent decades (Simone and Christopher, 2025). Meanwhile, employers report seeking a greater diversity of experiences and skills when hiring first time workers (Brynjolfsson, Chandar, and Chen, 2025; Hanson, 2026; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2026). Our findings suggest that many schools and districts should reconsider the mix of career-planning supports that they prioritize and their approach to matching those supports to individual students' goals and circumstances.

Most districts offer work-related learning—primarily through CTE pathways and credit-bearing coursework—but hands-on experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships, remain far less common, especially outside urban areas. Student interest is not the limiting factor: A substantial majority of students reported planning to participate in work-related learning opportunities. Yet many do not follow through, either because of limited availability or difficulty prioritizing these experiences. Our data suggest that schools are not doing enough to encourage take-up of the opportunities that do exist and that many schools may lack the employer connections that are needed to expand those opportunities. This reflects an enduring challenge for the field: Work experiences take place largely on employers' turfs, and much of the knowledge and trust that shape students' career decisions reside with families and communities. Yet policy has long struggled to activate the mediating relationships that would more fully engage these actors (Education First, 2022; Otero Martinez, Pearce, and Shoemaker DeMio, 2024; Strada Education Foundation and Upskill America, 2026).

Finally, schools and districts face a structural obstacle to improvement: limited visibility into what happens to students after graduation. School leaders are far more likely to track student plans and college application milestones than to monitor whether students actually matriculate, persist, or find employment. Without that feedback, it is difficult to know which supports are ultimately helping students and which are failing to reach those who need them most. More-systematic collection and use of postsecondary outcome data, as well as surveys of recent graduates, could give school and district leaders the evidence they need to refine their priorities over time. State education agencies are well positioned to help, both by facilitating more-robust data infrastructure and by making those data accessible to districts in actionable form. In a period of genuine uncertainty about what pathways will serve students best, closing that feedback loop may be a critical first step for school systems nationwide.

Most districts offer work-related learning, but hands-on experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships, remain far less common, especially outside urban areas.

APPENDIX

Survey Samples and Weighting

In the following sections, we describe our approach to sampling district leaders, principals, and youth across the three survey panels referenced in this report. In describing our methods, we re-use some of the language that we have used in previous RAND reports about these survey panels.

Survey of District Leaders Administered Via the American School District Panel

We asked district leaders about the career-learning opportunities, planning activities, and work-based learning experiences their districts typically offer. American School District Panel surveys are designed to allow multiple representatives from the same district central office to complete different portions of the survey if needed. We administered the spring 2026 district survey to around 12,000 K–12 public school districts nationwide, with a response rate of 4 percent; we administered the fall 2025 district survey to the same sample, with a response rate of 2.8 percent. The responses are weighted as a function of district enrollment size, locale, poverty level, racial and ethnic composition, and region to be nationally representative of U.S. public school districts. Because not all respondents answer every question, the number of districts responding to each question varies and is indicated in our figure notes. Full technical details regarding these surveys are available at www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org (Master et al., 2026a; Master et al., 2026b).

Survey of School Principals Administered Via the American School Leader Panel

We asked principals about the frequency of students' career-connected learning experiences and the extent to which their schools set and monitor targets for students' college and career preparation. The American School Leader Panel (ASLP) is composed of nearly 8,000 principals leading K–12 public schools, recruited using probabilistic sampling methods. The survey that we analyzed in this report—the American Mathematics Educator Survey—was designed to produce nationally representative estimates and state-level estimates in four states (California, Florida, New York, and Texas). It was fielded between March 9, 2026, and May 11, 2026. To achieve our desired number of 3,300 complete responses, we administered the survey to members of the ASLP and a supplemental sample of principals outside the ASLP. More specifically, 7,370 ASLP members were invited to participate in the survey. Of these, 2,166 principal panelists completed the survey (a completion rate of 29.7 percent, after adjusting for ineligible records). Meanwhile, 6,550 non-panelist principals were invited to participate in the survey. Of these, 1,256 completed the survey (a response rate of 19.2 percent, after adjusting for ineligible records). The two survey samples were combined into a single data file of survey responses from 3,422 principals. The combined principal sample was weighted to be representative of the national population of K–12 public school principals and the schools in which they serve, with respect to their gender, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, school level, school neighborhood poverty level, school student racial and ethnic composition, school enrollment size, and school locale. Our analyses in this report focus on the 1,960 respondents whose schools span grades 7 through 12 and the 720 respondents whose schools span grades 9 through 12.

Survey of High School Students Administered Via RAND's American Life Panel

The American Youth Panel is a subset of the broader RAND American Life Panel, a panel designed to be representative of the U.S. general population. American Youth Panel panelists were eligible to be sampled for this survey if they were enrolled in high school, which we defined as enrolled in grades 9, 10, 11, or 12 at the time of the survey administration. The survey included questions about the timing of students' career planning and preparation activities and their perceptions of the information and supports they receive from their schools. We adminis-

tered the survey between March 4, 2026, and April 3, 2026. Our goal for this survey was to obtain as many completed surveys as possible. Therefore, we sampled all American Youth Panel panelists (1,030) who met our eligibility criteria, including some siblings in the same families. Parents of sampled minors were notified or asked to provide consent before their child received the 10-minute survey; we removed 13 cases from the sample because we did not receive permission to include their child in our survey sample. In total, 1,017 panelists were invited to complete the 10-minute survey; 809 students completed the survey for a survey-specific completion rate of 81.1 percent. The survey included students in all types of schooling environments, including public schools, private schools, and homeschools. To align this survey sample with the other survey samples described above, we restricted our analyses to 626 students in public schools. The analytic sample included 137 students in grade 9, 176 students in grade 10, 173 students in grade 11, and 140 students in grade 12; where noted, we report findings separately for high school seniors. Student responses were weighted to be representative of the national population of youth in grades 9 through 12 enrolled in public schools, at least with respect to their sex, grade enrolled, family income (as reported by their parents), and region.

Notes

[1] In separate data (excluded for concision), we examined what percentage of targets stem from states or districts rather than schools. Across the 17 college- and career-preparation activities that we asked about, on average, more than two-thirds of schools' targets were selected locally and were not required by a state or district.

[2] Note that these data reflect cross-sections of students in each grade level; they do not necessarily indicate what we would see in a longitudinal analysis of a single cohort of grade 9 students over time. Also, some students may meet with counselors in group settings that would not be captured in our question about one-on-one meetings.

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About the American School District Panel

The American School District Panel conducts nationally representative surveys of public school district leaders twice a year, in addition to focused interviews to gather more context for select survey topics. For more information, visit www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org.

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About This Report

In this report, we analyze data from multiple RAND survey panels to examine the state of career-connected learning in K–12 schools as of school year 2025–2026. In particular, we use data from the American School District Panel, the American School Leader Panel, and the American Youth Panel to explore this topic from the perspectives of district leaders, school leaders, and current high school students. This work is meant to inform policymakers and education leaders across the United States who are working to design or strengthen career-connected learning opportunities for students.

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