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CENTER ON EDUCATION AND  
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# Partnering with Families for Middle School Career Exploration

Research-Based Strategies for Middle-Level Educators

Developed by the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center

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**Middle Years to Careers**

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Families are a primary influence on their children’s career development,<sup>2, 25</sup> a process that begins with early childhood and continues into adulthood. In alignment with the Ohio Department of Education’s Career Connection Framework,<sup>19</sup> there are three primary periods students experience as they grow in their career development. During childhood, the focus is on career awareness—gaining exposure to the world of work and the many options and opportunities for different careers. As students enter middle school, the focus shifts to career exploration—gaining awareness of their own interests and aptitudes and considering what career opportunities best align with those. In high school, students engage more actively in career planning—making more intentional decisions about coursework as it relates to career goals as well as beginning to solidify career interests and planning for life after high school. Throughout this process, families’ career expectations and influence play a critical role in shaping students’ career paths and success.<sup>8</sup>

Schools and their community partners provide important supports to students and families in this process. Although schools and families are poised to partner in providing these supports, roles are not always well-defined and not all students receive the same assistance for career development. When schools, families, and community partners work together, all students have a better chance of reaching their best and brightest futures.

In this research brief we use Epstein et al.’s<sup>7</sup> framework of family engagement to describe research-based strategies that middle-level educators can use in partnership with families to support career exploration for middle school students. In this model, six key partnership types are described between home and school: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. We describe each type of partnership and apply it to the career exploration process to help educators understand the important roles that families play and to help identify specific opportunities for collaboration between schools and families for middle school career exploration. Middle school (6<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade) is a critical period in students’ career development as they prepare to transition to and select courses for high school. Students benefit from knowing how their schooling ties to the real world, which becomes even more relevant in their transition to high school.<sup>26</sup> This is important because students who lose interest in school in the middle grades are likely to struggle in ninth grade and are at higher risk of dropping out.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the courses students select and their social or career-related experiences can have a great impact on their academic and career trajectory. With these considerations in mind, we believe middle school provides an excellent opportunity to explore opportunities in school-family-community partnerships for middle school students’ career exploration.

A note to the reader. In this brief we have chosen to use language that is inclusive of all families. We refer to “families,” “parents,” and “caregivers” as the adults who parent middle schoolers and can include grandparents, uncles, foster parents, adoptive parents, and other kin. There are many options for referring to children at this stage of life, but for this brief, we have chosen to refer to middle school-age children as “students” throughout the text. Finally, there are many different adults in schools who support students’ career exploration. School counselors and career and technical education teachers are two of the most common and important. We recognize that not every school system assigns roles in the same way or has resources to support the same personnel – so in this brief we refer mostly to “school personnel.”

# Strategy #1

## Value families' role in career development.

Epstein et al.'s<sup>7</sup> first key begins with “parenting,” which focuses on understanding the ways that all caregivers establish environments to support their students. It also includes the role of schools in understanding the families of their school community. In this context, parenting refers to the general caretaking and raising of children by a parent, guardian, grandparent, or other primary caretaker. Schools can partner with families to promote students' healthy behaviors regarding socioemotional development, academic development, and career development by learning about and supporting the specific needs of the families in their care.

Students consider their families to be a major source of influence and support with their education and career decisions.<sup>2, 15, 25</sup> Parent and caregiver occupations have been shown to impact students' choices when it comes to their decisions regarding studies and career paths.<sup>5</sup> Also, postsecondary career decisions are a primary conversation topic between families and students.<sup>25</sup> There are also subtle yet significant ways that families impact their students' career trajectories, including through their mindsets and attitudes.<sup>5</sup> One study showed that students with a growth mindset, or the belief that they can continue to grow, learn, and develop new talents and skills over time, had higher achievement in math and were more likely to enter careers in the STEM field. The same study also indicated that parents and caregivers with a growth mindset impacted students' growth mindset and their career outcomes. This point underscores the importance of parents and caregivers using language that promotes and instills a growth mindset in their students. This includes phrases such as “I believe I can get better,” “I'm not good at this yet,” or “what should I try instead?”

As a result of their significant role, schools should understand and value this important role that families play in the career exploration process and seek ways to partner with families to encourage healthy career-related dialogue. Additionally, not all families have a high self-efficacy regarding career development and career-related conversations. Schools can support families by helping them to understand the level of influence they have and provide them with specific strategies for supporting their students' career exploration.

### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL PERSONNEL CAN USE:**

- Reflect on ways families inform students' career exploration and decisions and help families understand the important role they play in their students' career development.
- Ask families about career-related conversations taking place at home and the things that they most value when it comes to their students' career development.
- Encourage families to support students' career exploration at home by providing mealtime conversation starters about interests, aptitudes, and career opportunities.
- Provide tools and resources to families that will increase student exposure to careers outside of their immediate social circles.

- Model growth mindset language about career exploration with families in school communications.
- Provide families with information about the power of their own growth mindset to impact their student's beliefs about their abilities and aspirations. Provide families with information about how they can develop their growth mindset and communicate it with their students.

## Strategy #2

### View families as collaborative communicators.

The second key partnership type emphasizes families and school personnel as communicators, engaging in collaborative communication with each other, students, and community members.<sup>7</sup> Two-way communication is vital to home-school partnership practices because families are a valuable source of information regarding their students, family, and community. It is also critical that families have an opportunity to have their questions and concerns addressed by school personnel. Families also need timely, accurate, useful information from their child's school. Trust is built between schools and families as a result of this reciprocal, two-way communication.

Open, reciprocal communication about career development between schools, families, community resources, and middle school students is critical to students' growth in this area.<sup>3, 22</sup> Families need to understand the work that is done in schools to support students' career exploration and they also should be consulted regarding students' interests and skills. Further, students should be encouraged to share what they are learning regarding career development at school with their families and ask their family members for their input regarding choices they are making.<sup>22</sup>

#### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL PERSONNEL CAN USE:**

- Help families feel welcomed and included by encouraging them to share about their students' interests and skills. Ask families what is important to them regarding the career development of their students.
- Ask families for their feedback regarding career-related communication and practices from the school.
- Share important career-related information with families including login information for career-readiness software, helpful websites and resources, and questions they can ask their students about their career development.
- Clarify important roles within the school, communicating who the "point person" is regarding career-related communication.
- Create toolkits and resources for families to make information readily accessible. This can be aided by automated email reminders or communication tools such as "Remind."

## Strategy #3

### Build partnerships with families through volunteering.

The third key type of family-school partnership, volunteering, includes anytime and anywhere a family member supports students' learning or behavior or the school's goals.<sup>7</sup> When families partner with schools in this type of volunteer capacity, they gain a better understanding of the work of the school personnel and students receive more one-on-one attention. School personnel also develop more awareness of families' talents and interests, and they are more willing to partner with more families in new ways. Schools should facilitate creative, attractive, and accessible volunteer opportunities for the families of all students that extend beyond the traditional view of volunteering within the school building during the school day. These alternative forms of volunteerism can create more opportunities for families to take on this form of partnership with the school.

In a school's career development program, there are many ways schools and families can partner through volunteerism. As school counselors have a variety of responsibilities and face many constraints in their work, partnering with families to deliver career-related programming can help. Families bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences about not only their occupation, but also their own career development. Leveraging the expertise and unique experiences of families as volunteers in the implementation of career programming can add to the efforts of school personnel, allowing for a more robust and effective career development experience for students.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned earlier, opportunities for volunteering are not limited to in-school events and should be viewed as any activity that members of the family community engage in to support the goals of the school.<sup>7</sup> Families bring with them many skills and experiences they can share and pass on to students in support of the career development process. This could involve families sharing about their career development to other students in the school, hosting students at their jobs, attending events about courses and careers at the school or virtually, and supporting mock interviews among many other examples of volunteerism both in and out of the school building.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL PERSONNEL CAN USE:**

- Survey families to find out how they would like to be involved in career-related activities with the school.
- Request families provide job shadowing opportunities.
- Ask families to participate in career-related functions (e.g., career day volunteering with the event operations, speak about their career path, etc.)
- Invite families to teach employability skills and/or technical skills within their areas of expertise. This may include pre-recorded webinars, invitations to meet with students

outside of class to review interviewing skills, and various other volunteer opportunities both in and out of school.

- Solicit families to be career mentors to students.
- Request families to chaperone field trips to local career centers or apprenticeship programs.
- Invite families to virtual and in-person events to learn more about the courses available to their student and how courses help prepare them for future careers.



## Strategy #4

### Encourage families' career-related learning at home.

When students perceive that their families support their career exploration and aspirations students have more positive vocational development.<sup>6, 12</sup> The fourth type of partnerships between home and school are those actions that support career exploration at home.<sup>7</sup> These partnership activities include schools providing opportunities for families to support students with homework and other curriculum-related activities. It also describes the valuable, formative learning that occurs at all ages in the home and community.<sup>7</sup> The exchange between families and students can include formal instruction or support as well as the informal ways that families guide their children regarding coursework, decisions, and planning. It also includes character development, learning of families' funds of knowledge, and a myriad of other skills and knowledge that gives relevance and application of what is learned in school.

Since students trust their families as a source of career-related information, it is important that students' families are empowered to support their career-related learning and exploration at home.<sup>2, 25</sup> Schools should consider the challenges some families face supporting the career development of their children. As partners with families, schools can work to understand and support families who feel unable to guide their child's exploration because of their own career histories or self-doubt for holding career-related conversations.<sup>16</sup> Families may not understand or value some of the specific career-related activities their children are engaging in at school or feel unequipped to support them at home. To provide supports for families, it is important to connect with parents and caregivers regularly and intentionally throughout their children's career exploration process. School personnel should understand families' experiences and their level of comfort with supporting their children through this process. Additionally, schools should provide families with career-related information and resources that can be accessed at home including tools and techniques that can be used to guide students' career development process.<sup>14</sup>

#### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL PERSONNEL CAN USE:**

- Communicate with families early and often during the career-exploration process, seeking their input and expertise and asking about their confidence in supporting their students in this area.
- Express the importance of family engagement in the career exploration process utilizing various forms of communication and language that is accessible and understandable.
- Share with families about career-related activities that are taking place in school, such as career inventories or self-assessments, and provide information on follow-up activities or conversations to have at home.
- Send home guides for how to help students interpret career- and self-assessments.

- Assign activities that would provide opportunities for students to interview family members about their career paths.
- Refer families to the Ohio Department of Education, Career Connection's website to explore [career pathways](#) and review their local secondary school program offerings as they prepare to schedule high school courses.

## Strategy #5

### Collaborate with families as decision makers for career-related planning and curriculum.

A fifth type of school-home partnership is enhanced through actions that support families as decision makers. These actions support family engagement with students' education by partnering with schools to guide decisions regarding curriculum, programs, or other school- or district-related matters.<sup>7</sup> This form of engagement is most successful when families are actively invited by school personnel to participate in these decisions. Invitations can be extended to all families, specific families, or organized groups of families, such as the PTA/PTO or other established groups. Engaging families in decision-making roles also helps to develop leaders and representatives within the parent and caregiver community. These decision makers often serve as cultural brokers, building connections between the school and other groups of families to further strengthen these collaborative partnerships.<sup>17, 20</sup> This fifth type of home-school partnership includes actions that engage families as partners in decision making for their own child. This entails practices such as parents and caregivers of students with disabilities actively participating in their child's postsecondary transition planning. It also includes families providing insight and guidance to their child for their middle and high school course selections.

With middle school career development, families should be actively involved in curriculum planning and other important programmatic decisions.<sup>13</sup> One way to engage families as decision makers is by seeking their input in the form of a career-related needs assessment, sent to the entire parent and caregiver community, soliciting their feedback on practices that have worked, opportunities for improvement, and preferences for communication. Additionally, schools can involve smaller groups of parents and caregivers as advisors in more specific planning discussions. For this type of engagement, it is most effective to define a schedule at the beginning of the year instead of scheduling ad-hoc throughout the year.<sup>1</sup> Rather than spending time trying to align schedules for each meeting, this approach allows more time for making decisions.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL PERSONNEL CAN USE:**

- Recruit families to participate in the planning of career-related programming inside and outside of school.
- Establish a standing schedule for meeting with families on career-related topics.
- Solicit feedback from families, in the form of surveys, regarding the effectiveness of current career exploration practices.
- Ask families about ways that the school can better partner with families and students in the career exploration process.

- Develop parents and caregivers into leaders by sharing important career-related information and encouraging them to share with other members of the parent community.
- Ensure meetings for postsecondary planning and course selection are conducted in a way that families can access. Encourage families' active participation and build intentional opportunities for families to provide their input and guidance.

## Strategy #6

### Collaborate with the community.

The sixth type of partnership practices within this framework highlights the importance of collaboration with the community.<sup>7</sup> Community in this context refers to any member of the larger community that is interested in or impacted by the quality of education. Families build partnerships with many stakeholders in the community who can provide supports to students. The National Network of Community Partnerships shares examples in their [Community Partnership Chart](#) on how schools make these connections in their shared goal of student success.

Community partnerships related to middle school student career development activities can appear in a variety of forms. One primary form is through work-based learning experiences. Such experiences provide a variety of opportunities for students: adequate preparation for the world of work,<sup>11</sup> exposure to and preparation for possible career paths,<sup>19</sup> and the building of employability and technical skills.<sup>9, 24</sup> Although work-based learning experiences can take some time to coordinate and may prove difficult, the benefits to students are significant.<sup>4, 10</sup> Partnerships with businesses, postsecondary education, and other community partners are essential to work-based learning program success.<sup>4, 19</sup> Schools can help to facilitate these partnerships between families and community partners by establishing their own connections and providing families with relevant contacts in the community.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL PERSONNEL CAN USE:**

- Engage businesses to offer job shadowing experiences or summer skill camps.
- Invite businesses to make school visits to share what their organizations do and what types of careers exist in their industries.
- Invite area career and technical educators to connect with students through field trips so that students can see onsite labs, hear about organizations hiring from the career and technical programs, and learn of potential pre-apprenticeships or internship opportunities available in high school and how to prepare for those.
- Connect families with other families whose students have graduated or currently are in career and technical education programs or pre-apprenticeships.
- Connect families with after school programs that offer career-related experiences.
- Ensure that opportunities for work-based learning are equitable for all students and families. Monitor accessibility, diversity of participation, and inclusive practices.

## Reflections

Use this reflection tool to collaborate with your team to identify currently aligned practices and opportunities for improvement.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Glow</b> What can we celebrate about our current work?	<b>Grows</b> What are our next steps?
1. Value families' role in career development.		
2. View families as collaborative communicators.		
3. Build partnerships with families through volunteering.		
4. Encourage families' career-related learning at home.		
5. Collaborate with families as decision makers for career-related planning and curriculum.		
6. Collaborate with the community.		

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