

Project #1

Title: Middle School Predictors of College and Career Success

Organization: Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University

Description: (1) Our organization is launching a community of practice for rural school districts focused on using data to improve students' college and career outcomes. Through this network, we will support districts in using data and evidence to better understand the root causes of challenges impacting student outcomes, identify areas for improvement, and inform decision-making. A central focus of this work will be understanding how middle school programming, particularly career exploration and exposure, influences students' longer-term educational and career trajectories. A key challenge in this work is that our ultimate outcomes of interest (e.g., high school course-taking patterns, postsecondary enrollment and completion, career pathways, employment, earnings) occur many years after middle school (3-10+ years), making it difficult to assess program impact in the short-term. Since we plan to work with districts over a 1-3 year timeframe to design, refine, and potentially scale middle school initiatives, we need to identify meaningful short- and intermediate-term outcomes that can serve as early indicators of impact. We are seeking a research fellow that can help us identify validated early indicators that connect middle school experiences to long-term success. (2) Through this research project, we hope our research fellow can help inform how we measure the impact of middle school interventions by helping us identify: (a) Proximal and short-term outcomes that can be measured immediately or up to 1 year after the middle school career exploration initiative (b) Intermediate outcomes that occur 1-2 years later (e.g., late middle school or early high school). We are interested in outcomes that (a) could be impacted by interventions such as middle school career exploration or career-connected learning and (b) have been validated as predictors of longer-term outcomes of college and career readiness and success such as high school course taking, postsecondary enrollment, credential completion, and career outcomes. We hope to better understand how these outcomes have been defined and measured in prior studies, including any validated instruments or commonly used metrics. (3) Our primary research question for the fellow is: What indicators measured during middle

school are validated predictors of longer-term college and career readiness and success (e.g., high school course-taking patterns; postsecondary enrollment and completion; employment and earnings)? How have these outcomes been defined and measured? Complementary research questions of interest are: - What outcomes measured during late middle school or early high school serve as intermediary outcomes between immediate and longer-term outcomes? - What evidence exists related to the impact of career exploration initiatives during middle school such as work-based learning, career exposure, or other career-connected learning experiences? (4)

We will use the findings from this research to inform our data- and evidence-use community of practice with rural school districts. Specifically, the research will help: (a) inform the development of data diagnostics that enable districts to understand their current performance and identify areas for improvement, and (b) guide the design and evaluation of middle school career exploration initiatives, including the short- and intermediate-term outcomes that we should prioritize collecting and how we should measure them. We will add the collected studies and research syntheses to our Postsecondary Research Clearinghouse (<https://ncern.provingground.cepr.harvard.edu/rural-postsec-research-clearinghouse>).

The Clearinghouse is a web-based resource designed to provide education leaders and practitioners with accessible summaries of existing evidence on policies and practices in secondary schools that support students' college and career readiness and success. Its goal is to help education leaders make informed, evidence-based decisions tailored to their local context. The Clearinghouse consists of 6 research domains, covering topics from College and Career Exploration to Increasing College Affordability. The work completed by the research fellow would help us uncover additional studies that we could add to existing domains or use to develop an additional research domain. (5) We are currently in the planning stage of launching the data- and evidence-use community of practice and are in the early phases of developing data diagnostics, potential interventions, and evaluation frameworks. We have conducted some initial exploration of career-connected learning, primarily at the high school level, and have engaged in internal discussions about potential outcomes. We have begun some initial literature

reviews in this area; however we would benefit from research support for a more structured and in-depth review of the literature and synthesis of these findings.