

Project #1

Title: Middle School Predictors of College and Career Success

Organization: Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University

Project Overview

Our organization is launching a community of practice with rural school districts focused on using data to improve students' college and career outcomes. A central focus is understanding how middle school career exploration and career-connected learning shapes students' longer-term college and career outcomes.

Because the outcomes we care most about (e.g., high school course-taking, postsecondary enrollment and completion, employment, earnings) occur years after middle school, districts need earlier indicators they can track over a 1–3 year timeframe. This project will involve a structured literature review to identify short- and intermediate-term indicators that connect middle school experiences to long-term college and career outcomes.

We are in the planning phase of the community of practice and have conducted limited, exploratory reviews (mostly at the high school level). The fellow's work will provide a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of early and intermediate indicators, filling a key gap in our current evidence base.

Core Research Questions

The fellow's work will be organized around the following questions:

Primary questions

- (1) Which 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; earnings)?
- (2) How are these indicators defined and measured in existing research (including any validated instruments or common metrics)?

Complementary questions

- (3) What outcomes measured in late middle school or early high school function as intermediate indicators between immediate program effects and long-term outcomes?
- (4) What evidence exists on the impact of middle school career exploration and career-connected learning (e.g., work-based learning, career exposure activities) on these short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes?

We are especially interested in outcomes that are (a) plausibly influenced by middle school career exploration or career-connected learning, and (b) Validated or empirically linked to later college and career outcomes.

Scope of Work for the Fellow

The fellow will conduct a structured literature review and synthesis to:

- Identify proximal/short-term outcomes measurable during or within one year of a middle school initiative (e.g., attitudes, knowledge, skills, behaviors, course choices).
- Identify intermediate outcomes measurable 1–2 years later (late middle school / early high school).
- Document how these outcomes and indicators have been operationalized (e.g., survey scales, administrative data metrics, participation measures, course-taking indicators).
- Summarize the strength and nature of the evidence linking these indicators to longer-term college and career outcomes.

How the Findings Will Be Used

The findings will directly inform our work with rural districts by:

- Guiding the design of data diagnostics that help districts understand current performance on key early indicators and identify areas for improvement.
- Informing program design and evaluation of middle school career exploration initiatives, including which short- and intermediate-term outcomes districts should prioritize and how they can measure them using existing or feasible data sources.
- We will also add relevant studies and syntheses to our [Postsecondary Research Clearinghouse](#), expanding its coverage of middle school and early indicators of college and career readiness. This will help education leaders nationally make more evidence-informed decisions about middle school programming and data use.