



Entrepreneurship Education in Middle Grades: The Case for Starting Early

Middle school is a pivotal and exciting chapter in a young person's life, usually encompassing grades 5 through 9. It's a time of newfound independence, as students learn to juggle different teachers and classrooms. Their interests begin to blossom, confidence ebbs and flows, and they start forming lasting impressions about different subjects. This period is a whirlwind of discovery, growth, and the forging of lifelong attitudes towards learning. In fact, studies have shown that the middle school years are crucial for closing the achievement gap, boosting high school graduation rates, and enhancing college readiness.¹ It's also during these formative years that students start to think seriously about their future and the careers they might pursue.

According to the Association of Middle-Level Education (AMLE), a community of over 35,000 middle-grade educators, students in grades 5 through 9² are especially receptive to career exploration programs. This period offers a perfect opportunity for young people to dive into their interests, discover what excites them, as well as what doesn't, and explore the vast array of possibilities they could pursue in high school and beyond. For middle school students, just learning about different careers isn't enough—they need meaningful, real-world experiences that match today's fast-changing economic landscape. This is where entrepreneurship education shines. It goes beyond traditional career education, equipping young people with the experiences, knowledge, and skills they need to thrive while giving them ample opportunities to explore. Studies show that early exposure to entrepreneurship education leads to greater engagement,³ academic progress, and positive outcomes in later education.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CAREER EXPLORATION PROGRAMMING IN THE MIDDLE GRADES



Source: ASA/AMLE Playbook, 2021

The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) believes in preparing middle-grade learners for their potential career paths and sees the integration of entrepreneurship education in middle school curricula as an excellent avenue for this exposure.

¹ Hemmy, A., Newton, A., & Simpson, S. (2021). Career Exploration in the Middle Grades: A Playbook for Educators. AMLE.

https://my.amle.org/Portals/0/assets/pdf/Career_Exploration.pdf (accessed on 4/22/24)

² Ibid.

³ American Student Assistance. (2021). Efficacy and Innovation in Middle School Career Exploration. <https://www.asa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Efficacy-And-Innovation-In-Middle-School-Career-Exploration-Proven-Models-For-Student-Success.pdf> (accessed on 4/22/24).

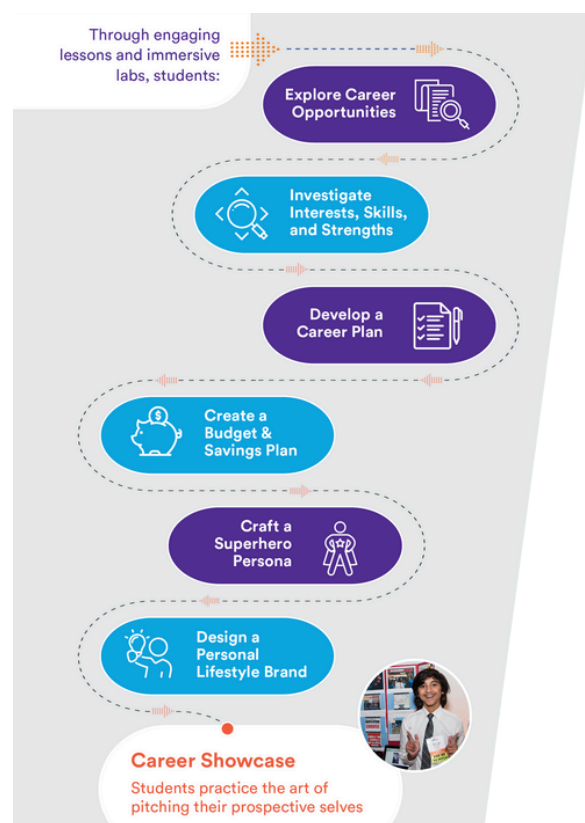
Entrepreneurship education during middle school gives students the chance to dive into their interests, experiment with various career paths, and tackle challenges using business concepts. It creates a supportive environment where learning from failure and embracing risks become part of the journey—skills vital for navigating high school and beyond. This early exposure not only boosts critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication abilities but also fosters creativity, resilience, and adaptability—traits essential for 21st-century success. Collaborative efforts between educational organizations, federal initiatives, and state policies can build a strong framework for nurturing entrepreneurial skills among young learners, setting them up for future career success.

Bridging the Gap: Connecting Middle School Students with Career Exploration Opportunities

Entrepreneurship education is crucial for equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to start and manage their own businesses or to become innovative employees within existing companies. According to a nationally representative survey conducted by American Student Assistance, half of middle school students reported "picking the right career for me" as a source of stress, while 41% cited "thinking about the future and what I will need to do to reach my future goals" as a stressor. Furthermore, 87% of middle school students expressed interest in ways to match their specific skills and interests with potential careers, and 85% wanted to learn about the education and experience requirements needed for the careers they are interested in.⁴ Young people are eager for meaningful learning experiences that help them make informed decisions about their future. Providing a variety of learning experiences is essential for achieving those deep, transformative impacts.

Innovative, out-of-the-box curricula are an incredibly useful resource for school districts and educators seeking to incorporate career exploration and entrepreneurship education. NFTE's Exploring Careers program is designed to help middle school students explore their interests, skills, and personal strengths while learning how these factors align with potential career paths. The program encourages students to recognize that the world of work is always changing and equips them with an entrepreneurial mindset and key skills needed to be flexible and successful no matter their eventual chosen career path. The program also emphasizes financial literacy, a crucial component of career planning. Lessons throughout the curricula arms students with basic financial skills—such as budgeting, saving for long- and short-term goals, banking, and payroll deductions—to help them become fluent in this key area of life.

Several states and countries, including Texas, Massachusetts, Florida, Illinois, and Bermuda, piloted the program during the 2023-2024 school year, with plans for expansion. Teachers have reported positive outcomes, with one stating, "Students were really interested in learning their specific (top) Entrepreneurial Mindsets! They also had a blast creating the television shows and ads. The creative and social element provided by the small group activities is something the students look forward to." Another teacher emphasized, "NFTE does an excellent job of making the assignments easy to navigate. The card sort



Source: NFTE Exploring Careers One-Pager, 2024

⁴ American Student Assistance. (2020). Career Exploration in Middle School: Helping Students Dream Big, While Giving Them the Tools to Succeed. <https://file.asa.org/uploads/Middle-School-Career-Exploration-Abbreviated.pdf> (accessed on 4/22/24).

activities, matching and Exit Ticket activities give scholars an opportunity to apply newly learned skills quickly and with immediate feedback."

NFTE's Exploring Careers program encourages students to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, which represents a set of skills necessary for all types of employment, not just entrepreneurship. By focusing on growth rather than failure, students become more invested in their learning. As one student noted, "I liked those exploration activities the best because they helped me plan more for the future and they helped me understand what I want more." The program provides middle school students with tools to explore careers, develop an entrepreneurial mindset, and gain financial literacy skills, setting them on a path to success.

How NFTE Prepared One Alumna for a Dynamic Career

As Lauren Burgos, a NFTE alumna and Executive Assistant at [Medidata Solutions](#), states, "The NFTE program provided me with a strong foundation to think outside of the box and seek unique solutions - in both my professional endeavors and my personal life." Lauren has thrived by applying the entrepreneurial principles instilled in her by NFTE, despite a non-linear career path spanning finance, real estate, and technology.



Reflecting on her middle school years, Lauren wishes she had been exposed to personal finance education, which she believes is a glaring gap in traditional education systems. "Understanding concepts like the power of compound interest and the basics of investing, even in something as simple as an index fund, would've had a profound impact on my finances," she remarks. Lauren advocates for teaching financial literacy from middle school onwards to empower youth with the tools they need to take control of their financial futures and avoid falling into the traps of predatory loans and financial exploitation. She believes that entrepreneurship education in middle grades can positively impact students' future careers and overall lives by fostering critical thinking, creativity, and resilience, preparing them to make informed financial decisions and pursue their passions with confidence.

Federal & State Policies Supporting Middle School Entrepreneurship Education

With growing federal and state policies highlighting middle school career exploration as necessary to future success, entrepreneurship education serves as an important part of the solution. While there isn't a specific federal Youth Entrepreneurship Act, various bills and proposals have been introduced over the years to support youth entrepreneurship. These initiatives often seek to provide funding and resources for entrepreneurship education at the K-12 level, including middle schools.

Federal legislation has significantly impacted career exploration through the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V), the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Perkins V, reauthorized in 2018, places a strong emphasis on Career and Technical Education (CTE) and encourages states to start career exploration and guidance in middle school.⁵ It includes provisions for career exploration and development activities that help students identify their career interests and aptitudes, fostering early engagement with potential career paths.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) also supports career exploration by promoting workforce development programs aligned with local and regional labor markets' needs.⁶ WIOA emphasizes

⁵ U.S. Department of Education. Perkins V. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cte/vso.html> (accessed on 05/16/24).

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa> (accessed on 06/7/24).

the importance of career pathways and sector partnerships, which can include opportunities for middle school students to explore various industries and career options. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, offers states increased flexibility to incorporate CTE into their accountability systems.⁷ Under ESSA, states can use federal funds to support career exploration programs in middle schools, thus broadening the scope and accessibility of career and technical education. This comprehensive approach ensures that students are better prepared for future educational and career opportunities by integrating career exploration into their early education.

Policies such as these have propelled states to adopt measures focused on the middle grades space. Several states have acknowledged the significance of career exploration education beginning in younger learners, thereby integrating entrepreneurship education into their curricula to foster early interest and skill development in entrepreneurial activities.

Florida

In Florida, the Department of Education has mandated that career and technical education (CTE) begins as early as middle school to prepare students for future careers.⁸ The state has implemented the Florida Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Act, which emphasizes youth entrepreneurship by requiring middle schools to offer courses that provide students with opportunities to earn industry-recognized certifications in business and entrepreneurial fields.⁹ This policy ensures that students are introduced to a wide range of career possibilities and necessary skills at an early stage, helping them make informed decisions about their educational and career paths. The curriculum standards, known as the Florida Standards, include specific provisions for entrepreneurship education, encouraging schools to incorporate entrepreneurial concepts into various subjects to promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation skills.¹⁰

Additionally, Florida supports entrepreneurship education through its comprehensive CTE programs, which provide students with practical knowledge and skills needed for workforce success. Middle school CTE programs in Florida offer courses that focus on business and entrepreneurship, giving students hands-on experience in starting and managing businesses.¹¹ Florida also has robust certification programs that allow students to earn credentials that enhance their employability and readiness for higher-level career opportunities. The Florida Department of Education provides extensive resources and professional development for educators to ensure they can deliver effective entrepreneurship education.¹²

Texas

In Texas, the Education Code requires 7th and 8th graders to receive instruction preparing them for college and careers, including exposure to career options and their educational requirements.¹³ This policy ensures that students are introduced to a wide range of career possibilities at an early stage, allowing them to make informed decisions about their future. The state's curriculum standards, known as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), include specific provisions for entrepreneurship education.¹⁴ These standards encourage schools to incorporate entrepreneurial concepts into various subjects, promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation skills.

Additionally, Texas supports entrepreneurship education through its Career and Technical Education (CTE)

7 U.S. Department of Education. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). <https://www.ed.gov/essa> (accessed on 05/16/24).

8 Florida Department of Education. Career & Technical Education. <https://www.fldoe.org/academics/career-tech-edu/> (accessed on 05/16/24).

9 Florida Department of Education. CAPE—Secondary. <https://www.fldoe.org/academics/career-adult-edu/cape-secondary/> (accessed on 05/16/24).

10 Florida Department of Education. Standards and Instructional Support. <https://www.fldoe.org/academics/standards/> (accessed on 05/16/24).

11 Florida Department of Education. Career & Technical Education. <https://www.fldoe.org/academics/career-adult-edu/career-tech-edu/> (accessed on 05/16/24).

12 Florida Department of Education. Florida's Coordinated System of Professional Learning. <https://www.fldoe.org/teaching/professional-dev/> (accessed on 05/16/24).

13 Texas Education Code. (2024). Title 2, Chapter 28, Subchapter A, § 28.0022.

14 Texas Education Agency. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/curriculum-standards/teks-review/> (accessed on 05/17/24).

programs, which provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for workforce success.¹⁵ Middle school CTE programs offer courses focused on business and entrepreneurship, giving students practical experience in starting and managing businesses. Texas also has robust certification programs that allow students to earn industry-recognized credentials, enhancing their employability and readiness for higher-level career opportunities.¹⁶ The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides resources and professional development for educators, ensuring they are well-equipped to deliver effective entrepreneurship education.¹⁷ Initiatives like the Texas Career and Technical Education Leadership Academy further enhance the quality of CTE programs, preparing students to succeed in a dynamic economy and fostering a generation of innovative thinkers and business leaders.¹⁸

Massachusetts

Massachusetts has implemented the Middle School Career Connected Learning Partnership Grant, which provides financial support for middle schools to implement career exploration programs.¹⁹ This grant encourages schools to develop and integrate comprehensive career exploration activities into their curriculum, allowing students to gain early exposure to various career paths, including entrepreneurship. By providing financial resources, Massachusetts ensures that middle schools have the means to create and sustain programs that help students understand the relevance of their education to future career opportunities.

In addition to the grant, Massachusetts has established Career Development Education (CDE) Benchmarks, which serve as guidelines for creating career development programs that link interventions to learner outcomes.²⁰ These benchmarks are designed to help schools implement effective career development strategies, including entrepreneurship education, by providing a clear framework for what students should know and be able to do at various stages of their education. The CDE Benchmarks encourage middle schools to incorporate entrepreneurial skills and knowledge into their teaching, promoting critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. Furthermore, Massachusetts' My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP) initiative supports personalized academic and career planning for students in grades 6-12, helping them align their educational experiences with their career aspirations from an early age.²¹ MyCAP ensures that students receive continuous guidance and support throughout their middle and high school years, fostering a seamless transition from academic exploration to career readiness.

Illinois

In Illinois, the recently passed Public Act 102-0917 requires school districts to adopt and implement career exploration and development activities for students in grades 6-12.²² These activities must be aligned with the Illinois Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) Framework, which outlines specific benchmarks that students should achieve by the end of each grade level.²³ The PaCE Framework is designed to help students make informed decisions about their education and career paths, starting from an early age. By integrating career exploration into the middle school curriculum, Illinois ensures that students are introduced to a wide range of career possibilities, including entrepreneurship, and are prepared to make strategic choices about their future educational and career endeavors.

15 Texas Education Agency. Career And Technical Education. <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/career-and-technical-education> (accessed on 05/17/24).

16 Texas Education Agency. Industry-Based Certifications. <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/career-and-technical-education/industry-based-certifications> (accessed on 06/10/24).

17 Texas Education Agency. Instructional Materials. <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials> (accessed on 05/17/24).

18 Texas Education Agency. Career And Technical Education. <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/career-and-technical-education> (accessed on 05/17/24).

19 Massachusetts Department of Education and Secondary Education. FY2024: Middle School Career Connected Learning Partnership Grant. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2024/0424/> (accessed on 05/20/24).

20 Massachusetts Department of Education and Secondary Education. Office of College, Career and Technical Education. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/> (accessed on 05/20/24).

21 Massachusetts Department of Education and Secondary Education. My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP). <https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/sec-design/mycap/> (accessed on 06/7/24).

22 Public Act 102-0917, 102nd General Assembly, State of Illinois. (2022). An Act concerning education.

23 Illinois State Board of Education. Illinois PaCE Postsecondary and Career Expectations. <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/HS-PaCE-Framework-Draft.pdf> (accessed on 06/7/24).

Additionally, Illinois has outlined middle school competencies for career exploration in the Illinois Career Development K-12 Competencies and Indicators.²⁴ These competencies provide a comprehensive framework for schools to develop and implement effective career exploration programs. They emphasize the importance of entrepreneurship education by encouraging the development of skills such as innovation, problem-solving, and business acumen. The Illinois State Board of Education supports these initiatives by offering resources and professional development opportunities for educators to effectively teach entrepreneurship and career readiness.²⁵



The Lasting Impact of NFTE on an Alumnus's Career

Darius Davie, NFTE alumnus, credits his entrepreneurial journey to his early exposure to NFTE programs during his teenage years in New York City. Davie, the co-founder of Groom Guy, a venture that blends luxury hairstyling with wellness in hotels, says, "NFTE was my foundation and beginning to understanding business. Once I took the first class, I knew I didn't want to leave the world of business. It's been with me 20+ years later as an entrepreneur where I still practice those same skills but they are now more advanced."

Darius believes that entrepreneurship education in middle grades can have a significant impact on students' future careers and overall lives. "Entrepreneurship can be a key indicator in helping those choose career paths," he explained. "This education helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses. It puts them in various tests of vulnerability that can properly equip a student for the professional world. It does a lot of the work formal education may miss." Looking back, Davie wishes he had known that traditional university education is not the only path to success, saying, "There's a richness in certificate programs, vocational training, formalized apprenticeship etc."

Conclusion

Early exposure to entrepreneurial concepts and skills is vital for equipping students for success in today's rapidly evolving and competitive environment. Empowering middle school students with opportunities to explore diverse interests, sharpen problem-solving abilities, and nurture an entrepreneurial mindset lays the groundwork for their future career endeavors. Through such experiences, students not only gain practical skills but also cultivate resilience, creativity, and adaptability—essential qualities for navigating the complexities of the modern workforce and seizing opportunities for innovation and growth.

NFTE's Exploring Careers program is an example of how middle school curricula can effectively incorporate entrepreneurship education. Expanding access to programs like Exploring Careers and leveraging federal and state support ensures that more middle school students are equipped with the tools and knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their future. By embedding entrepreneurship education within middle school frameworks, educators and policymakers can empower students to explore their interests, cultivate essential competencies, and develop an entrepreneurial mindset conducive to adaptability and innovation in an ever-evolving workforce landscape.

²⁴ Illinois State Board of Education. Career Development K-12 Competencies and Indicators. https://www.isbe.net/Documents/career_competencies.pdf (accessed on 06/7/24).

²⁵ Illinois State Board of Education. Career Technical Education. <https://www.isbe.net/cte> (accessed on 06/7/24).

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