

WHITE PAPER

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Exploring WV Career Readiness and Youth Leadership Perspectives

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A Review of Relevant Literature

Career Readiness

The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) defines career readiness as:

“...the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be successful in postsecondary opportunities that lead to employment.”

Researcher and expert in the field of college and career readiness, Dr. David Conley, expands upon this definition in his 2012 publication, [A Complete Definition of College and Career Readiness](#). Within his report, he identifies four “keys” of college and career readiness:



Key cognitive strategies involve empowering students to **think**. These include an emphasis on problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, and ensuring precision and accuracy. Key content knowledge involves what students **know** about foundational content and core subject areas. This includes not only technical knowledge, but its perceived value to them and the effort they assign to it. Key learning skills and techniques define how students **act**. It captures two broad categories: 1) student ownership of learning such as persistence, goal-setting, and self-efficacy, and 2) specific learning techniques such as time management, technology skills, and self-monitoring. Finally, key transition knowledge and skills help students navigate where to **go**. This includes their awareness of postsecondary opportunities and career options, their personal role and identify within those options, and self-advocacy skills.

Youth Leadership

The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) defines youth leadership as part of the process of youth development:

“...preparing young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them gain skills and competencies.”

Youth leadership helps students take ownership and make informed decisions for their future. It can include mentoring activities, exposure to role models, training in skills such as self-advocacy and conflict resolution, and opportunities that allow students to demonstrate their leadership skills, including community engagement activities. Youth leadership has strong similarities to career readiness, but with a personal influence. It leads to personal character development, including increased confidence, integrity, and improved mental health. It also develops skillsets such as communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, time management, responsibility, initiative, and innovation. The outcomes are readiness for both workforce and post-secondary education, preparedness for leadership roles, and the ability to contribute to teams and organizations.

Early Exposure

Researchers and educators broadly recognize the importance of exposing students in early grades to career exploration and youth leadership activities. Particularly in middle school, this early exposure can address significant areas of stress and support students in forming a career identity that leads to their involvement in more focused programming at the secondary level. The American Student Assistance’s [Career Exploration in the Middle Grades](#) provides some helpful insights through their nationally-representative survey of middle school and high school students:

A recent national survey of middle school students found...



half of middle school students reported “picking the right career for me” as a source of stress.



are interested in ways to match their skills & interests with potential careers.

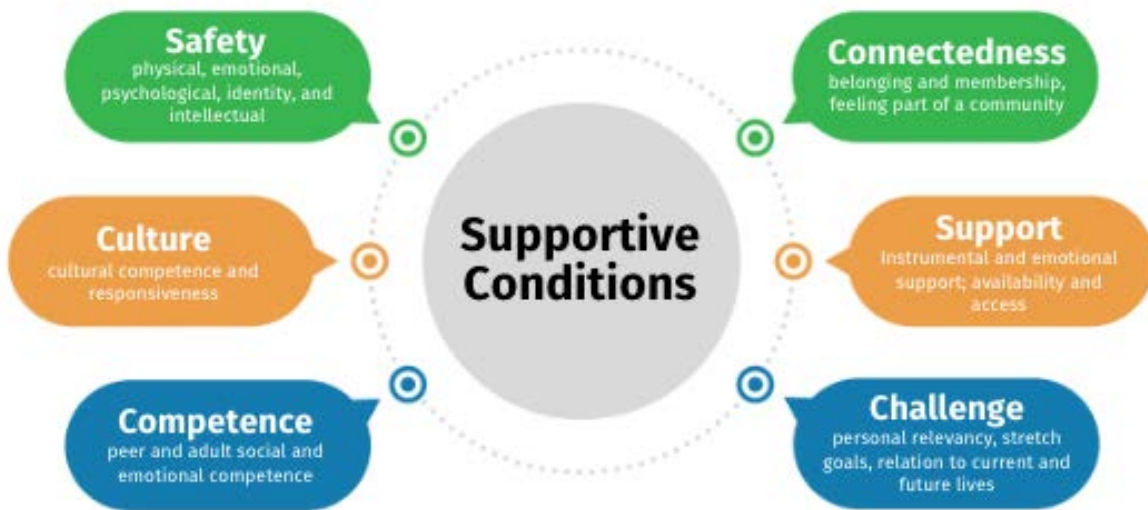


are interested in ways to learn the education and experience required for careers they are interested in.

ASA's [Efficacy and Innovation in Middle School Exploration](#) report provided further insights into the evidence supporting early exposure even beyond career impacts, summed in the following key learnings:

- Middle school is the right time to start.
- Exploration helps kids build in-demand skills.
- Exploration encourages kids to engage with school.
- Exploration helps kids enjoy school.
- Exploration helps kids think about a plan for their future.
- Exploration helps kids feel more connected.

Further, in the 2020 report, [Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning & Development](#), adolescence (ages 10-19) is identified as a window of opportunity for learning and development. During this time, youth are building agency in their own learning and development and benefit from rich learning environments that are culturally responsive and provide opportunities that enable them to thrive. The report outlines the following supportive conditions for learning and development, many of which are addressed through career readiness and youth leadership opportunities directly:



The Future of Work

Career readiness and youth leadership opportunities are instrumental in preparing students for the future of work by cultivating crucial skills and competencies. According to a [report by the World Economic Forum](#) broader “soft skills” are increasingly sought after by employers in the rapidly changing job landscape. Career education provides practical experiences and industry insights that help youth develop a deep understanding of professional expectations and trends.

Future Ready Skills

- Problem Solving
- Self Management
- Working with People



Source: Future of Jobs Report (2018), World Economic Forum

Additionally, youth leadership initiatives, as highlighted by research from [The Conference Board](#), empower students with essential traits like effective communication, teamwork, adaptability, and strategic thinking. These programs bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, fostering a generation of adaptable and skilled individuals well-equipped to thrive in the future of work.

Youth leadership and career readiness programs are particularly beneficial to rural, impoverished regions due to their potential to address unique challenges faced by these communities. Such programs empower young individuals with essential skills, knowledge, and confidence to contribute meaningfully to their local economies, thereby fostering sustainable development. Moreover, these initiatives can counter the trend of urban migration by creating opportunities within rural areas. [The World Bank](#) highlights that effective youth programs in rural regions can help retain local talent, stimulate local entrepreneurship, and bridge the urban-rural development gap. By nurturing leadership qualities and providing career-related training, young individuals can become catalysts for positive change, driving local economic growth and resilience.

According to the U.S. Census, nearly **two-thirds** (64 percent) of West Virginians live in rural areas.



West Virginia, as a rural state, presents a compelling context for the implementation of career readiness and youth leadership programming. Its rural nature brings forth unique challenges such as limited access to diverse employment opportunities and resources. By tailoring programs to address these specific challenges, West Virginia can empower its youth with essential skills, leadership qualities, and a deep understanding of local (and potential) industries. This approach not only equips young individuals with the tools they need to thrive in the region's economy but also cultivates a sense of ownership and commitment to their communities. Moreover, the state's close-knit communities offer an ideal environment for fostering leadership and collaboration, enabling youth to enact positive change and contribute to the sustainable development of their home state.

The EdVenture Group's Aligned Efforts

The EdVenture Group offers student leadership development programs, such as the [Simulated Workplace Leadership Series](#), [Nailler Learn2Lead](#), and [cMeLead](#), to middle and high school students in West Virginia. The Simulated Workplace Leadership Series project focuses on preparing current CTE students with leadership and career readiness skills to succeed in the workforce and combat economic challenges faced in their communities.

The program includes facilitated leadership workshops, self-paced online programming, and a culminating project ideated and implemented by students to solve a problem in their community. The program has impacted hundreds of students in West Virginia's most distressed communities. Impact data from the program's most recent 2022-2023 cohort provided strong insights into student perceptions:



At the middle school level, The EdVenture Group provides youth leadership opportunities through two programs: Nailler Learn2Lead and cMeLead. Nailler Learn2Lead engages middle school students in Monongalia County through workshops, summits, and community initiatives to help them develop leadership skills not taught in traditional classrooms.

cMeLead is a customized program for 8th graders that blends leadership development skills, self-assessment, and service learning through a community impact project to create further understanding and investment in the local community. Both programs help students reflect on their current leadership potential and gain skills to grow in a positive environment that promotes personal growth.



West Virginia as a state has committed significant resources for youth leadership and career readiness through its career and technical education (CTE) programs. A collaborative definition published by the [Partnership for 21st Century Skills](#), [Association for Career and Technical Education](#), and the [National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium](#) defines Career and Technical Education as:

“...an educational strategy for providing young people with the academic, technical, and employability skills and knowledge to pursue postsecondary training or higher education and enter a career field prepared for ongoing learning.”

CTE sites in West Virginia operate each class as a “Simulated Workplace” that aligns with workforce requirements, including random drug testing, professionalism, attendance, and safety. Simulated Workplace enhances instructional delivery of career education and creates a more engaged student by allowing them to take ownership of their individual performance as it impacts the overall success of their education. The strategy of “work-based learning” enables students to develop technical and employability skills through authentic work experiences, preparing them for postsecondary education or entering the workforce.

In an effort to further understand youth and educator perspectives on youth leadership and career readiness, The EdVenture Group aimed to talk with West Virginia high school students and school staff within CTE programs about career readiness experiences, leadership experiences, and suggestions for future students.

Approximately 50,000 West Virginia students take a least one CTE class in grades 6-12.



Method

Participants

A total of 10 students ($n=6$) and school staff ($n=4$) were interviewed to provide their insight into their experiences and views on career readiness and leadership opportunities in West Virginia public schools. All six students interviewed were recent high school graduates who participated in career and technical education programs at their school. All four school staff interviewed are current staff in career and technical education programs. Three are current classroom teachers and one is a school counselor.

Methodology

To meet the purpose and goals of this effort, semi-structured interviews were used. Semi-structured interviews have a set of guiding questions asked by the interviewer on the focus topics but allow for the interviewees to bring up new ideas or information further expanding the scope of the data collected. As such, semi-structured interviews were an appropriate methodology for this effort as the goal was to gather students' and school staff's insight into career readiness and leadership opportunities within the West Virginia public school system. Below are the guiding questions used in this effort.

Students	School Staff
<i>Career Readiness Opportunities</i>	
What are your post-high school options?	What are your students' post-high school options?
How are you feeling about a future career?	How do most students feel about a future career?
Tell me about a memory that stands out regarding your decision for a career.	Tell me about a memory that stands out about you helping a student with their future career options.
Knowing what you do now, what do you wish had been done differently to get more career readiness experience?	What is your role in helping students choose a career?
Tell me what career readiness resources were available to you during your education.	Knowing what you do now, what do you think could or should be done in middle school to assist students in preparing for a career?
What would be your advice to middle school students starting to think about a future career?	What would be your advice to middle school students starting to think about a future career?

Students	School Staff
<i>Leadership Opportunities</i>	
What makes a good leader?	What makes a good leader in a student?
Tell me about a time you were a leader.	Describe one of your students who is a leader.
Tell me what leadership opportunities were available to you during your education.	Tell me about a memory that stands out about you helping a student with being a leader.
Knowing what you do now, what do you wish had been done differently to get more leadership experience?	What is your role in helping students gain leadership experience?
What would be your advice to middle school students to get leadership experiences?	What would be your advice to middle school students regarding leadership?
	Knowing what you do now, what do you think could or should be done in middle school to help students gain leadership experience?

Procedure & Analysis

Participants were recruited via social media posts on The EdVenture Group's Facebook page and referrals from career and technical education teachers and reached out to the data lead to schedule interviews. All interviews were conducted by the data lead between June 7 and July 7 through phone and video calls (depending on participant preference). Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes long and were transcribed with Otter.ai. Upon conclusion of each interview, the data lead reviewed the transcript for clarity and correctness. Once all interviews were completed, the data lead used thematic analysis to review all transcripts to identify common themes, or patterns, amongst participant responses on the given topic.

Interview Takeaways and Recommendations

This section will review the main themes found in participants' responses on the career readiness and leadership opportunities in West Virginia public schools. Each theme will be accompanied by participant quotes, advice for middle school students from participants, and The EdVenture Group's recommendations for practice based on participant insight and existing literature in the field.

“Explore different things. Even if you think you don’t like it. You might.”

Both students and school staff emphasized the importance of having opportunities for students to explore different workforce fields and leadership roles in their education. Students reported that these experiences were valuable in identifying various career fields of interest, confirming or rejecting their career field of interest, and further exploring their chosen career field of interest, indicating that career exploration experiences are **valuable for all students regardless of where they are at in exploring a future career path**. The various career experiences often cited by students included:

-  Simulated Workplace
-  Field Trips
-  Career & Tech Centers
-  Non-CTE Assignments

“...there’s so many different fields and different things. When I first got into the medical field, I didn’t know what all there were until I got into the classes and learned all of the different types of specialties and I still don’t know all of them.”
Student Interviewee

Interestingly, all students wished they had had **more career readiness experiences during their K-12 education**, underscoring the importance students place on these experiences in the career exploration journey. For example, one student wished for more opportunities to talk with local business owners one-on-one. "I would have liked to reach out to local businesses and talk with me more about how they ran their business. So instead of thinking about different partnerships and stuff like that, I would like to talk to actual people about how they started their business."

Participants noted that having varied career and leadership experiences was critical for other purposes beyond career exploration, such as skill-building and personal development. All three classroom teachers described opportunities they leverage in their classroom to incorporate both career and leadership experiences for students, such as having rotating classroom roles and using different careers as examples within class assignments. One teacher stated their goal is “...just giving them opportunities. Just coming up with ways within the classroom or within the school itself to identify those students that haven't had, and even those who don't have it, to develop those [leadership] skills.”

“...giving the students that have never had leadership roles, really changes them, and it really empowers them.”
Teacher Interviewee

Additionally, many students described the benefits of career and leadership experiences beyond career exploration. For example, one student indicated the long-term, personal benefit of early career experiences, “At the very least you have learned a trade. So whenever you own a house in the future, you could possibly do that work yourself without having to hire someone. **Teach it to your children in the future.** That way they know something. It's something that you can pass on through generations.”

EdVenture's Recommendations

- School staff should continue offering and expanding career exploration opportunities, including providing field trips, continuing to adhere to Simulated Workplace protocols, establishing and maintaining partnerships with standalone career and technical centers, and incorporating exploration opportunities into non-CTE courses.
- School staff should consider incorporating activities for students to have one-on-one conversations with local workforce members.

Advice to Middle School Students

- Try, try, try. “Take your time, don't rush anything because plans can change. Pick different things, explore all of your opportunities. That's one thing, I would explore your choices while you can.”
- Take opportunities to be uncomfortable. “If you have the opportunity to either see businesses or visit places or work on different projects that you may not be comfortable with - Do it. Make yourself uncomfortable. Because staying in your comfort zone sometimes hinders you.”

CTE provides direction and opportunities.

All students credited their career and technical education with **providing them with direction and foundational leadership skills** for their future careers. Additionally, many students remarked that compared to their peers who did not participate in any career and technical education, they felt more confident in their career choice, how to pursue next steps, and how to be a part of the workforce. Of particular note, Simulated Workplace was mentioned many times by students as key exposure to career exploration and leadership. For example, one student said, “The **Simulated Workplace was really one of the best things that I got to do** at my technical center because it did prepare me for the real world. Like I would wear a uniform every day.... The Technical Center had trained me and now that I'm at this job, my real job I wear my uniform every day. It prepares you not only for yourself but in the work you also do.”



One of the key features of Simulated Workplace mentioned by both students and school staff were the rotating workplace roles in the program. Students are able to take on individual roles within their simulated workplace and experience what it is like to take on the responsibilities of that role. Over time, students rotate out of these roles and into new ones. "Every time we start a new project in the classroom, we would get assigned new roles. Occasionally, I was the foreman or the safety inspector, the grabber, or anything like that. So I trained doing all these different things. So wherever you end up in the future, you'll be ready for it no matter what; if you're a foreman; if you're the safety guy (which no one likes). **But it prepares you for the future no matter what you end up in.**"

EdVenture's Recommendations

- Simulated Workplace should be adapted for use at varying age levels, such as middle school.
- Classroom school staff should consider having rotating classroom roles rotating roles for students to gain leadership experiences.

Advice to Middle School Students

- **CTE is for everyone.** "Go to a tech center. I know not every county, but just about every county in West Virginia though, has the opportunity to go to one but they will teach you to be a leader and they'll teach you to be a follower."
- **Take those opportunities.** "It's stepping out of your comfort zone is what it is for me. I wasn't comfortable with my skills yet, even though I knew I could do somewhat good at stats but I wasn't comfortable. So I didn't try but ever since that day, and I realized my mistake, I step out of my comfort zone and I'll try things and I'll do things that's why I did stay this time. You know, I wanted to."

Student-teacher relationships are critical.

Both school staff and student participants reported on specific school staff or their own teaching behaviors they felt were critical in career readiness and leadership opportunities. Interestingly, participants were not asked about specific school staff, yet every participant mentioned a school staff member or described their own teaching practices describing the importance of student-teacher relationships. As one student remarked, "...all my teachers throughout elementary school and middle school and high school have given me all the resources I need to get to this point. I think overall, **that's really what has led me to know what field I want to go into and what I want to do for my future.**"

School staff often viewed their roles in students' lives not only to support their academic success, but their future success. To do this, school staff sought to establish personal connections with students to better understand their hopes, dreams, goals, and needs. As one school staff put it, "**they don't see all their potential.**" In doing so, school staff could leverage the information in the classroom to create tailored, meaningful experiences for students. For example, one school staff member said, "So I was just sort of talking with them, getting to know them and just **trying to work it into lessons,**" in reference to providing post-high school options for their students.

EdVenture's Recommendations

- School staff should receive training and technical assistance to incorporate tailored, meaningful career and leadership exploration experiences within their daily classroom activities.
- Career and technical education programming within West Virginia K-12 schools should consider adapting standards to include student-teacher relationships.



Advice to Middle School Students

- **Slow down and take time.** "Taking the time and fostering creativity and doing small things. Having at least some time to just think about things differently."
- **Reach out to teachers.** "It's good to talk to people who may do something that you're interested in."

Community can be a strength and a barrier.

Schools, school staff, students, and families do not exist outside the community, and therefore, it is unsurprising how integral participants found their communities to be. Both students and school staff consistently brought up available resources in their community. For example, one school staff member brought up their school's strong ties to local businesses that take on high school student interns at the career and technical center, often leading to full-time employment after graduation.

Despite the integral nature of their communities, participants also recognized that communities can be a barrier to career and leadership experiences. For example, one student noted the community they live in has limited businesses, inconsistent broadband, lack of transportation, and a high percentage of families living in poverty, meaning fewer resources for students to connect to potential leaders both within and outside the community. One student brought up the limited educational resources devoted by the state, but also in their community. "I feel like we could have more, when it comes to education resources. I just think it could be better. Because ***I don't think students are able to release their full potential because we're not giving them what they need to move on.***"

EdVenture's Recommendations

- State administrators should consider embedding community resources, such as local businesses, into career and technical education curriculum to promote student-to-community connections.
- County school systems should consider partnering with neighboring communities to share available resources with one another.

Advice to Middle School Students

- **Just go.** "Go out in the community."



Final Thoughts

It is evident from the current literature and the lived experiences of West Virginia students and school staff that career readiness and youth leadership opportunities are necessary for developing a focused, confident, and productive workforce to support a robust economy in West Virginia. Of particular note, students and staff identified varied experiences (e.g., Simulated Workplace), formal career and technical education curriculum, student-teacher relationships, and the broad community as important characteristics of career readiness and youth leadership opportunities. With this guidance, The EdVenture Group recommends both state and local education agencies incorporate and sustain these characteristics into current career readiness and youth leadership opportunities available to West Virginia K-12 students.

About The EdVenture Group, Inc.



The EdVenture Group is a national non-profit organization committed to creating customized solutions to educational challenges. Founded in 2001 by classroom teacher Dr. Lydotta Taylor, EdV is a nonprofit organization inspiring lifelong learning at all levels by developing and delivering innovative solutions to obstacles in K-12 education. The organization has managed over \$25 million in federal, state, local, and private funding to provide proven processes, programs, and expertise to students, educators, and communities in Appalachia and across the nation.

For more information, visit www.theedventuregroup.org or contact Amber Ravenscroft, Director of Innovation, at aravenscroft@edvgroup.org.

This white paper was developed by The EdVenture Group, Inc. This paper was authored by the EdVenture team, including: Dr. Megan Mikesell, Program Manager; Amber Ravenscroft, Director of Innovation; Cameron Keefe, Program Coordinator; and Victoria Taylor, Program Coordinator.

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