



Expanding Middle School Career Exploration Through Futures in Focus

PREPARING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Florida's economy is rapidly evolving with increased reliance on technology and artificial intelligence across nearly every industry. To keep pace, the state must ensure students are prepared for postsecondary education and in-demand careers, particularly students with disabilities who are at greater risk of dropping out and disconnecting from the workforce.

Across the U.S., high school is often the point when most students formally begin to explore life after graduation. Schools increasingly require education-and-career planning to help prepare teens for postsecondary options and work. By 2016, 43 states had instituted policies requiring schools to support students in planning for further education or employment.¹

THE CASE FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION

For many career paths, however, high school is too late for initial exposure to education and training requirements. Middle school is increasingly recognized as the optimal time to begin systematic career exploration.²

Career exploration engages middle school students at a time when they are at a higher risk for disengaging from learning It also capitalizes on their developing abilities to think abstractly, and their preferences for teamwork and active learning through relevant real-life scenarios. These preferences make middle school a natural time for students to learn about careers and develop skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork through career exploration activities.

FLORIDA'S LEADERSHIP

Florida has been a leader in integrating career and education planning into middle school coursework, giving students time to consider their interests, skills, and aptitudes as they plan for high school. For many career options, this early exposure is essential.

A 2024 report by American Student Assistance and Education Strategy Group analyzed state approaches to middle school career exploration.³ The analysis focused on understanding each state's level of prioritizing quality middle school exploration in three categories:

¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2025). *Extending the runway to better prepare all students for their future: A 50-state analysis of middle school career exploration* (REL 2022127). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/sites/default/files/rel-west/document/2025/07/REL_2022127.pdf

² Association for Career and Technical Education. (2018). *Career clusters: Aligning curriculum,*

instruction, and assessments (ACTE CC Paper). https://www.acteonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ACTE_CC_Paper_FINAL.pdf

³ American School Counselor Association. (n.d.). *Extending the runway to better prepare all students for their future: A 50-state analysis of middle school career exploration*. <https://www.asa.org/extending-the-runway/>

- **State Vision** – how has the state defined and prioritized middle school career exploration?
- **Policy** – what state policies and practices are in place?
- **Infrastructure** – what supports does the state provide to guide schools?

The research used three indicators to illustrate each state's status in various categories.

- **Building** – state is just starting to establish basic elements.
- **Emerging** – state is demonstrating development but has room to grow.
- **Advanced** – state is at a high level of execution.

Florida was rated *Advanced*⁴ in several areas including:

- Use of state or federal funding sources to support career exploration for middle school students.
- Providing material supports on the implementation of middle school career exploration.
- Organizations within the state that support career exploration in middle schools.
- Policies that establish standard practices for career exploration in middle schools.
- Policies that require middle school students to complete exploration activities.

Areas where Florida is in the *Building* stage and may benefit from additional support include:

- **Professional Development:** support training or professional development opportunities for school counselors and other school staff in career exploration.
- **Incentives:** create incentives directly related to middle school career exploration.
- **Advocacy:** identify and partner with organizations that are advocating for middle school career exploration.

THE URGENCY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

For students with disabilities, early exposure to postsecondary and career options is particularly crucial. Many experience the misconception that their disability is a barrier to further education, training, or competitive employment. Without direct exposure to successful pathways and supports, this belief can become a powerful deterrent.

For some students with disabilities, correcting this misconception may be the support that ensures they continue on through high school and successfully graduate. Students with disabilities have a higher high school dropout rate (10.7%) that is more than twice the dropout rate of students without disabilities (4.7%⁵).

By connecting students with disabilities to real pathways and real people in real workplaces before they enter high school, Florida can reduce the dropout risk for these students and improve their long-term employment outcomes.

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THE ABLE TRUST FUTURES IN FOCUS

Futures in Focus, a program of The Able Trust delivered in partnership with the Consortium of Florida Education Foundations (CFEF), is successfully meeting this need for students with disabilities and demand for the program significantly outpaces current funding.

⁴ American School Counselor Association. (2024). *Florida state profile: Middle school career exploration*. <https://www.asa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Florida.pdf>

⁵ Research.com. (2025). *High school dropout rate is decreasing but race, income & disability issues persist for 2025*. <https://research.com/education/high-school-dropout-rate>

Futures in Focus is an abbreviated version of High School High Tech, a long-standing statewide program The Able Trust has managed for more than 30 years. Futures in Focus extends this successful model into both middle and high school, providing earlier exposure and a smoother transition by connecting participants to hands-on experiences in their communities through a variety of activities:

- Introducing students with disabilities to post-secondary and career opportunities through in-person experiences in their local communities.
- Connecting students with disabilities to Florida's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation leading to increased pre-employment support.
- Increasing student participation in school-based Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses.

Futures in Focus can be a first step in supporting Florida's Middle School Career Exploration Infrastructure and Vision, as outlined in the *Extending the Runway* report. Working with our partners, Futures in Focus can help strengthen professional development and advocacy, two of the categories in which the report indicates Florida is in the *Building* state.

EXPANDING PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Now in its third year, Futures in Focus serves more than 850 students through the support of the Florida Legislature. However, this is a fraction of the number of students with disabilities who could benefit from this program.

- Grant applications submitted by CFEF partners were approximately double what current funding could support.
- As a result, The Able Trust was only able to fund about half of the proposed Futures in Focus projects.
- If all eligible grant requests had been funded, the program could have served an estimated additional 2,000 students with disabilities.
- The Able Trust has a goal for High School High Tech and Futures in Focus to collectively serve 5,000 students by 2030.

Example: Orange County Futures in Focus Activity

Middle school students visited their zoned high school campus for the day for an organized induction program. Each student was mentored by students enrolled in the High School High Tech program

- Students were shown a variety of course offerings including CTE programs, disability supports, clubs, and important locations such as the media center and the lunchroom to make their transition to high school as smooth as possible.
- Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) gave a presentation to help students understand their role and how VR can provide assistance.

Students left this experience with a mentor, information on VR, less anxiety about going to HS and a jumpstart to career planning through a deeper understanding of their high school course offerings.

Activities like this demonstrate how Futures in Focus bridges the gap between middle school and high school, turning abstract "future plans" into concrete next steps.

STRENGTHENING FUTURES THROUGH EARLY CAREER EXPLORATION

Early and intentional career exploration in middle school is one of the most effective strategies for helping students – including those with disabilities – connect what they are learning today to the opportunities that await them tomorrow. Research shows that when students begin thinking about their interests, aptitudes, and goals before high school, they are more likely to stay engaged in school, graduate on time, and pursue education or training that leads to meaningful employment.

The Futures in Focus program exemplifies this approach by giving students with disabilities early exposure to real-world career and postsecondary experiences. This program also enhances traditional middle-school exploration by raising family awareness of postsecondary options,

disability-related supports, and community resources, allowing them to partner effectively in their student's early career planning.

As we look to expand the program, we have the opportunity to reach more students across Florida—students who might not see the connection between their potential and the possibilities ahead.

With continued investment, Futures in Focus can build on Florida's strong foundation in career exploration, ensuring that every student, regardless of ability, can envision—and prepare for—a successful future.



Giving students options for colleges, technical schools, and the workforce has ignited their motivation and expanded their horizons. Empowering students to explore diverse opportunities has equipped them with the skills necessary for success.

Futures in Focus Instructor
Orange County



About The Able Trust

The Able Trust was established by the Florida Legislature in 1990 with a vision that all Floridians with disabilities achieve their full employment potential. Serving as the direct support organization for the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, The Able Trust advances employment opportunities for people with disabilities through strategic engagement, investment, and collaboration.

The Able Trust youth programs, located in communities across Florida, serve 2,000 students each year and help students envision and begin to work towards a future they might not have thought possible. To learn more, visit www.abletrust.org.