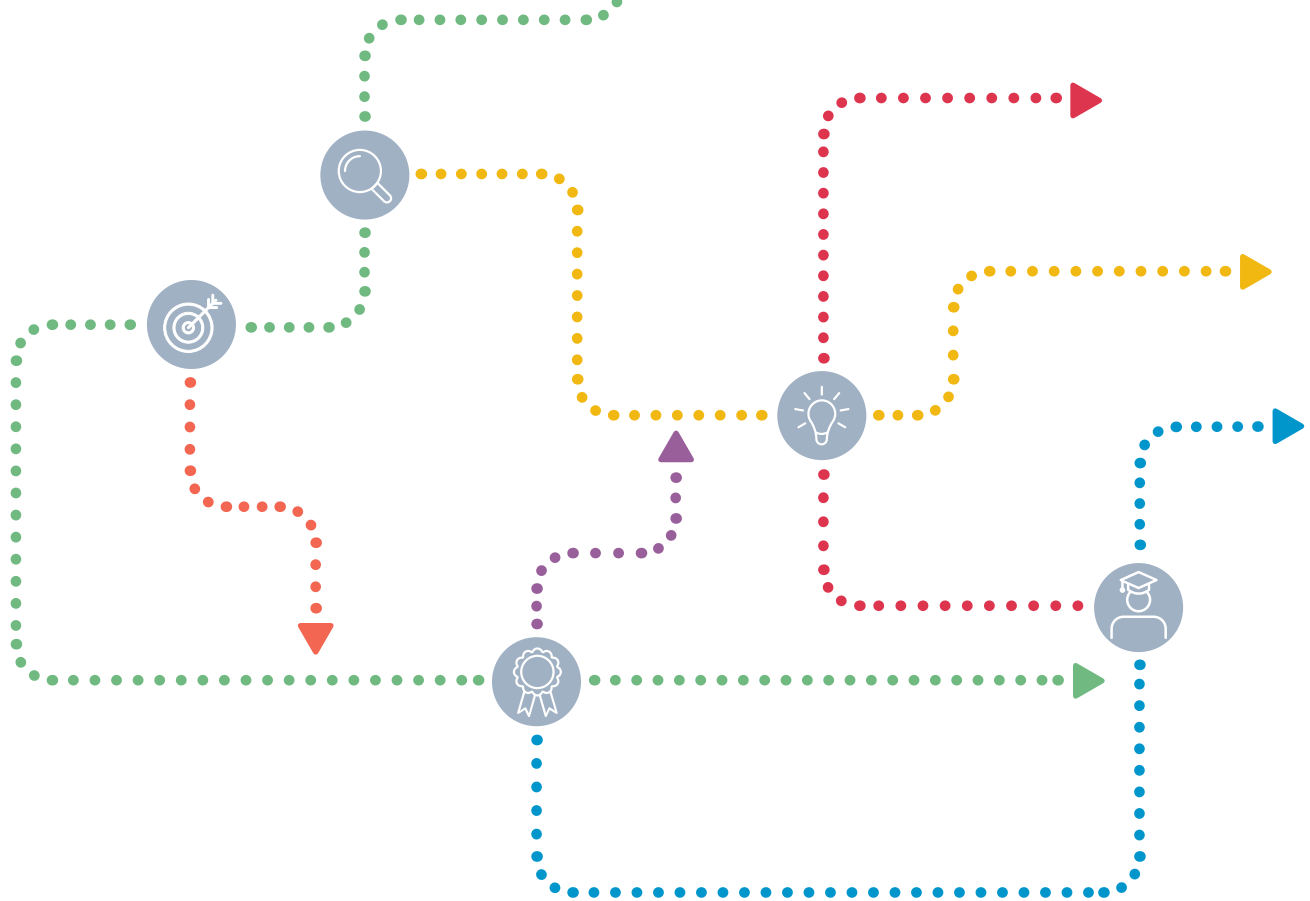


# Pathways Matter to Families

What Parents and Young  
Adults Believe and Want  
to Know About Education  
to Workforce Pathways



RESEARCH FINDINGS TO INFORM FAMILY ENGAGEMENT | JUNE 2021

## About the Project

This report is the latest resource produced as part of an ongoing, comprehensive research project focused on credential attainment and education to workforce pathways. It investigates what parents and students know and perceive about credentials and college and career pathways. The research goal is twofold: to inform policymakers and to improve parent and student access to relevant, actionable information about pathways and credentials.

To see related publications and research from *ExcelinEd*, please visit: [CredentialsMatter.org](https://CredentialsMatter.org) and [PathwaysMatter.org](https://PathwaysMatter.org).



Launched by former Florida Governor Jeb Bush in 2008, the Foundation for Excellence in Education (*ExcelinEd*) supports state leaders in transforming education to unlock lifelong opportunity and success for each and every child. From policy development to implementation, *ExcelinEd* advances student-centered solutions that close learning gaps, empower families with opportunity, strengthen pathways to college and careers, bridge the digital divide and reimagine learning. Learn more at [ExcelinEd.org](https://ExcelinEd.org).



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# Foreword

**O**ur K-12 and postsecondary education systems are built and sustained on the premise that they will prepare students for a successful future. When that future comes, though, too often high school graduates discover that they lack the knowledge and the skills needed to succeed in college and/or a career. It doesn't end there: too many college graduates find themselves unprepared for the demands of the contemporary workforce. And too many parents find a lack of quality information about educational opportunities available in high school and college inhibits them from helping their children chart a path that leads to success.

This report is intended to help state policymakers and education leaders better assess how they can empower students and families in their state by providing the types of support and information that they need to successfully navigate available pathways. Using the findings and solutions presented in this report, policymakers can coordinate efforts among key stakeholders—including educators, employers, intermediaries, government agencies and community members—to develop comprehensive policies and resources that create opportunities and support students in meeting their career goals, no matter what route their educational journey takes.

## What is an education to workforce pathway?

An education to workforce pathway is a structured sequence of educational opportunities, work experiences and connected programs that help students develop the skills, experience and knowledge they need to meet their career goals. Policymakers can ensure that every student has access to high-quality pathways that are aligned with high-wage, in-demand occupations by engaging stakeholders to implement comprehensive policies across learner journeys.



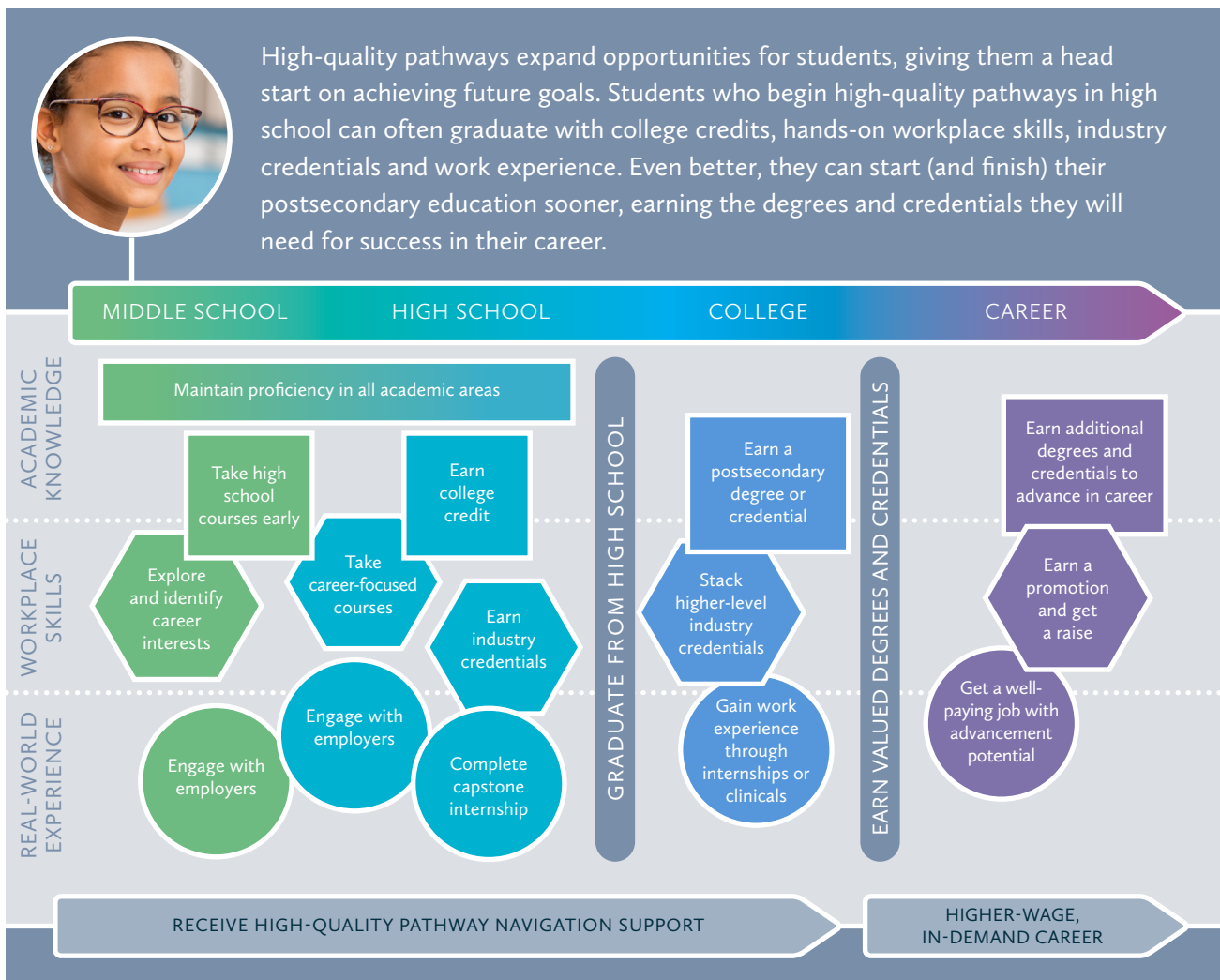
# The Opportunity

## Paving the Way for Success After High School

No two students take the same educational journey. While some students progress seamlessly from high school through postsecondary and into a career, other students may use on- and off-ramps and stackable learning opportunities—a sequence of experiences and credentials that can be acquired over time—as they advance along their education and career journey.

State policies are fundamental to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality education to workforce pathways that meet their individual needs. Strong, coherent policies can make it significantly easier for students and families to navigate along a pathway that enables students to build relevant skills, gain valued experiences and earn valued credentials across K-12, postsecondary and workforce systems.

**Figure A. How can high-quality pathways help students meet their college and career goals?**



## The Problem

# Too Few High-Quality Pathways, Too Little Understanding of Opportunities

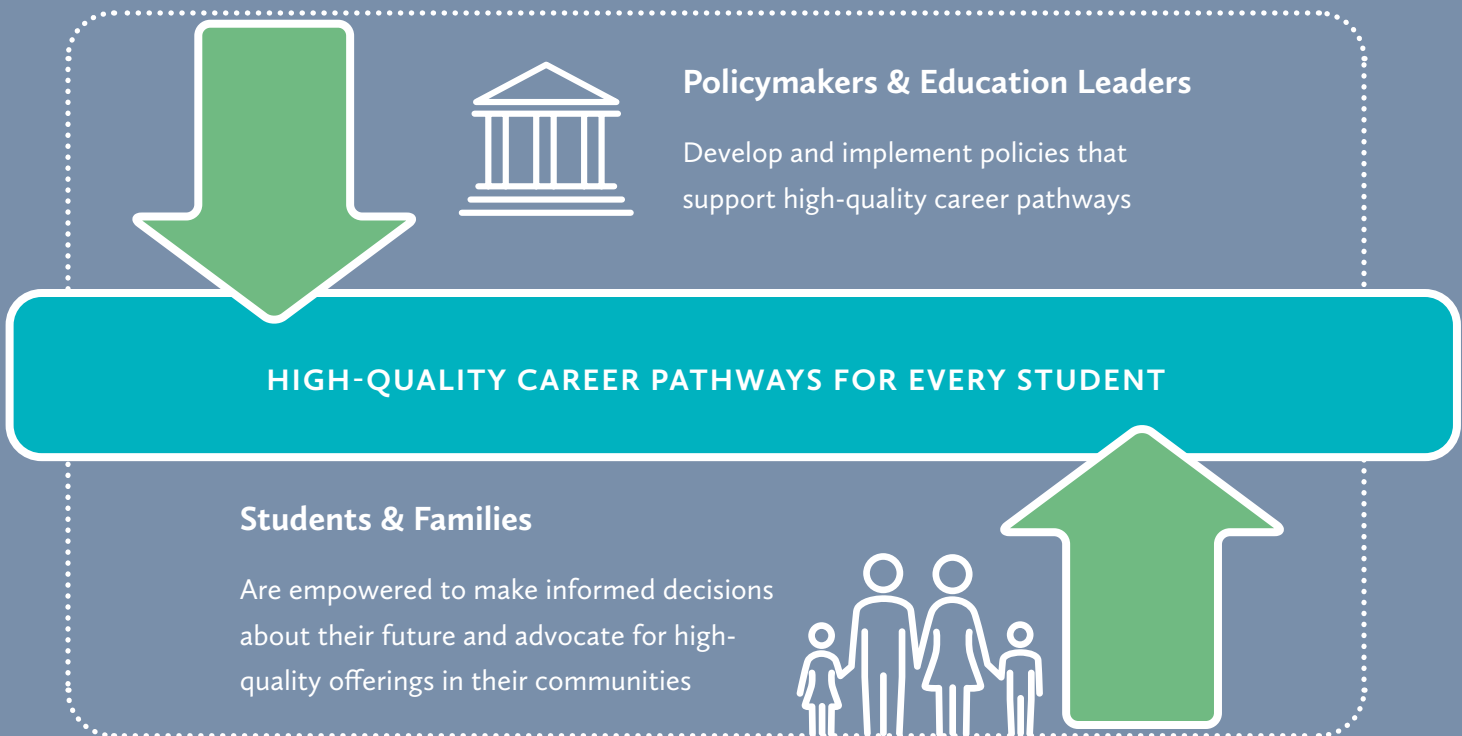
The absence of comprehensive and coherent state policies can complicate the education journey for students or, at worst, thwart it altogether. Regrettably, this absence of coherent policies—and, more broadly, a lack of focus on the quality implementation of education to workforce offerings—is common.

*In many states, education to workforce systems are still collections of misaligned and disconnected policies—with wide variations in the quality of implementation—that serve neither students nor employers well.*

While state policies are critical to ensuring that high-quality pathways are equitably accessible, students and families cannot wait for these policies to be developed and implemented. They are making critical decisions about their pathways and their futures now—without the information they want and need.

**When empowered with information about pathway experiences and quality, students and families can advocate for high-quality offerings in their communities.**

### Top-Down and Bottom-Up Levers for Change



## What We Believe

Every student—whether they know it or not—is preparing for a career, but for too many students, their K-12 experiences are disconnected from, or even counterproductive to, their long-term goals. Even as some states endeavor to establish and expand access to high-quality education to workforce pathways, one of the most significant challenges lies in ensuring that students and their families know about and understand the learning opportunities available to them. Equally important is that they are empowered to make informed decisions in navigating pathways leading to their postsecondary and career goals.

**In particular, it is essential to communicate that high-quality pathways do not posit a choice between preparing for postsecondary education or a career.** Rather, pathways represent a “both/and” proposition that enables students to accelerate their progress toward postsecondary degree completion while, if they wish, simultaneously acquiring skills and credentials valued in the labor market. This is why it is imperative that policymakers understand what students and families know and believe about education to workforce pathways—as well as what specific kinds of information they value and where they get it. High-quality pathways that expand opportunities for students cannot be established without informing, engaging and empowering the very people these policies and programs serve.

### Quentin Suffren

Senior Advisor, ExcelinEd

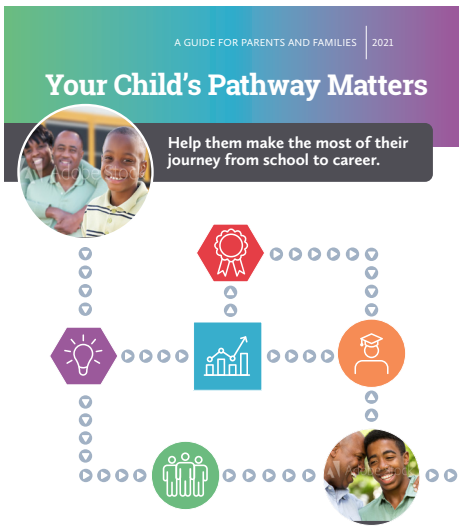


## Pathways Matter from ExcelinEd

Pathways Matter establishes the first comprehensive learner-centered education to workforce continuum for state policy. It represents a powerful framework for thinking about education to workforce policies that already exist in a state, and what policies are necessary to create a robust continuum that ensures that learners have on- and off-ramps as they transition from high school and postsecondary education to their future careers.



Learn more about how state policies help build a skilled, educated workforce and about how policymakers can strengthen their state's education to workforce systems at [PathwaysMatter.org](https://PathwaysMatter.org)



Our research shows that parents and families want more and better information about pathway options and quality. The accompanying resource, *Your Child's Pathway Matters*, is designed to help parents and families identify the information, questions and support they can use to help their child make pathway decisions—and succeed on their journey.

[DOWNLOAD THE PARENT GUIDE](#)



# Our Research

A review of research<sup>1</sup> about education to workforce pathways revealed limited information about how parents understand what constitutes a quality pathway option for their children, in terms of their general understanding of the pathways concept as well as actual options available at their school. We also found limited studies about attitudes toward education to workforce pathways that included the views of students, young adults and parents. Instead, much of the existing research on awareness, attitudes and perceptions focuses on specific pathway experiences—such as career and technical education—as opposed to pathways as a whole.

Existing research does provide some key insights into parents' (and to a significantly lesser extent, students') understanding and attitudes about career pathways and experiences. Parents value opportunities for their children to learn about career options and gain “real-world” experience while in high school. However, parents hold many misconceptions about what educational opportunities are available (such as the type, the amount, who is eligible for them and/or where they will lead) and how those opportunities can be an important part of every student's educational journey.

Importantly, there is comparatively little research regarding how young adults perceive the educational opportunities and pathways available to them in high school—and how well those opportunities and pathways prepared them (or are currently preparing them) to meet their postsecondary and career aspirations. **The perceptions of young adults—the very people for whom pathways and educational opportunities are created—are particularly important. They illustrate where the reality of their own educational experiences may diverge from their parents' perceptions about program and pathway quality.**

## Our Guiding Questions

Given the importance of communicating effectively with students and parents about the quality of pathways and the learning opportunities included in them, we designed our study to collect information and insights that illustrate:

- How parents and young adults characterize their learning opportunities, career interests and aspirations;
- How parents and young adults perceive education to workforce pathways, even if they do not conceive of them as such;
- What kinds of information parents and young adults currently receive in middle and high school about educational opportunities and pathways—and whether this matches the kinds of information they need and want; and
- How different information and messages impact their attitudes.

## Methodology

Our study<sup>2</sup> used a multi-method research design to gather breadth and depth of insights from the sample audiences. This included a national survey and online qualitative bulletin boards, which are focus groups conducted in an online format with an interactive moderator. Survey respondents completed the online questionnaire between March 18 and April 2, 2021 (26 cases were refiled between April 12 and April 18, 2021).

The participants in the online qualitative bulletin board answered questions, responded to moderator follow-ups for additional information and provided feedback about their understanding and perceptions of various concepts and illustrations. These sessions occurred from March 23–25, 2021, with 30 participating individuals from key demographic groups.

**Figure B. Who did we engage?**

Qualitative and Quantitative Participation

|   | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults (age 18-24) |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| National Survey<br><b>Total: 1,111</b>                | 204                         | 450                       | 142                     | 315                      |
| Online Qualitative Bulletin Board<br><b>Total: 30</b> | 10                          | 10                        | 10                      | n/a                      |

Respondent Demographics

| Race                                  |     | Annual Income       |     | Geography |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|-----------|-----|
| White (Non-Hispanic)                  | 60% | Less than \$25,000  | 20% | Rural     | 19% |
| Black/African American (Non-Hispanic) | 12% | \$25,000-49,999     | 21% | Suburban  | 54% |
| Hispanic (any race)                   | 18% | \$50,000-74,999     | 17% | Urban     | 25% |
| Asian (Non-Hispanic)                  | 6%  | \$75,000-99,999     | 13% |           |     |
| Other (Non-Hispanic)*                 | 4%* | \$100,000-\$149,999 | 15% |           |     |
|                                       |     | \$150,000+          | 14% |           |     |

\*The N-size for Other (Non-Hispanic) is too small to report on any findings.



# Our Findings

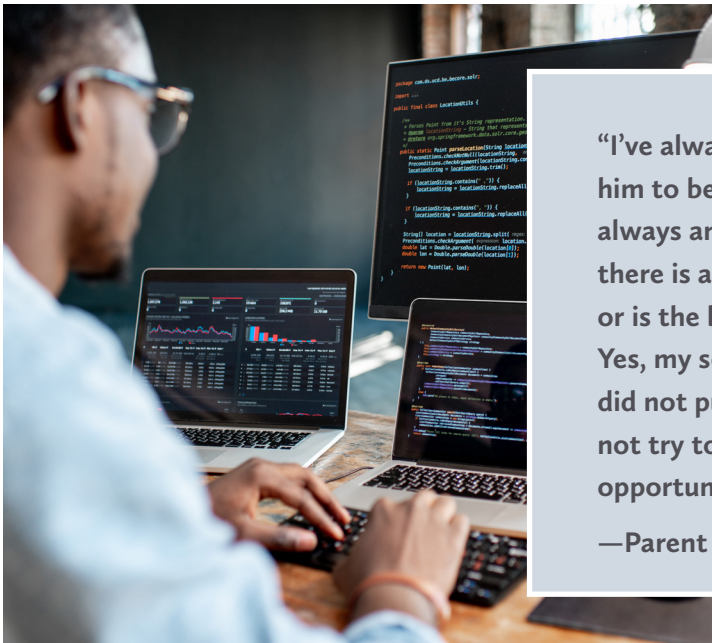


## FINDING 1.

### Parents and young adults clearly prioritize important career outcomes but have doubts about whether they will be achieved.

Parents and young adults prioritize longer-term career outcomes over immediate post-high school outcomes. More than 75% of respondents believe it is very important to find a career path that leads to happiness. Most parents and young adults also report that it is very important to achieve financial independence after college or university, find a job right after college or university and find a career path that provides a high wage.

Conversely, less than half of parents and young adults rate immediate post-high school outcomes as very important. In fact, only 25% of parents and young adults believe it is very important to find a job immediately after high school. This implies that parents and young adults alike view postsecondary completion as a critical step toward achieving their career aspirations.



“I’ve always made it clear to my son that I wanted him to be happy in his career, and salary is not always an indicator of happiness. I think that there is always a push that college is for everyone or is the best choice always, and I don’t agree. Yes, my son did choose a four-year degree, but I did not push that decision on him, just as I would not try to direct him away from a non-degree opportunity.”

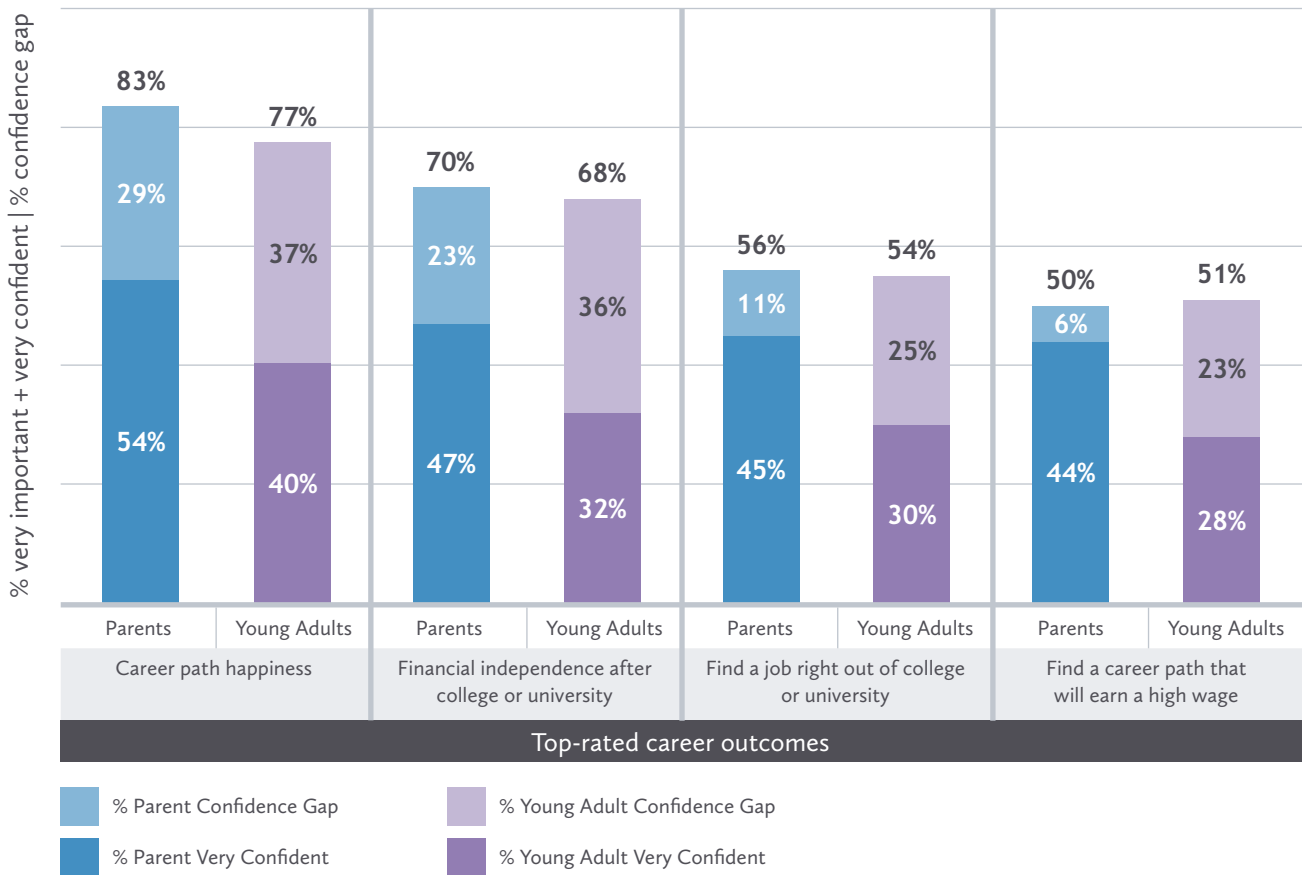
—Parent of Young Adult

**Young adults are much less confident than parents that they will achieve their career aspirations, suggesting that their K-12 and postsecondary experiences may not meet their expectations.**

Both parents and young adults report significant gaps in confidence in their ability to achieve the career outcomes they rate as very important. The fact that confidence gaps exist across career outcomes points to a clear disconnect between what young adults and parents hope they will achieve—and how well education systems prepare them to do so.

**Figure C. How confident are parents and young adults that they will achieve important career outcomes?**

How important is it that you/your child achieve the following? How confident are you that you/they will achieve it?



Although sizable for young adults and parents, confidence gaps are significantly wider for young adults. This is especially true for the two outcomes—career path happiness and financial independence after college or university—that both young adults and parents are most likely to identify as “very important.” **This difference may reflect that students are more attuned to the reality of their educational experience, and its shortcomings, than parents.**



### What is a confidence gap?

A confidence gap is the difference between the percentage of respondents that rate a career outcome as “very important” and the percentage that are “very confident” they will achieve that outcome.

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#### Confidence gaps might imply:

- A lack of trust in education systems to prepare students to achieve their goals
- Uncertainty about labor market opportunities
- Disconnects between degree attainment and employment potential
- Lack of clarity about career path “happiness”
- Young adults may be “savvier consumers” than parents

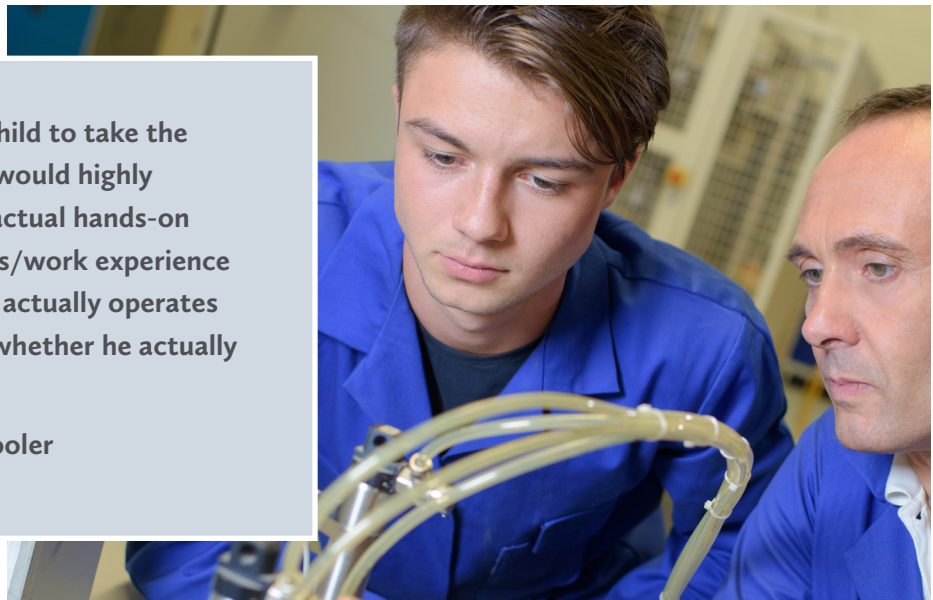


## FINDING 2.

Parents and young adults agree that developing “real-world” skills, gaining work experience and completing career-focused coursework will set learners up for success after high school—but there is likely a significant gap between what parents believe schools are providing and what they are actually delivering.

I would encourage my child to take the classes necessary, but I would highly encourage him to seek actual hands-on experience in internships/work experience to see how the industry actually operates and more to the point, whether he actually enjoys it.

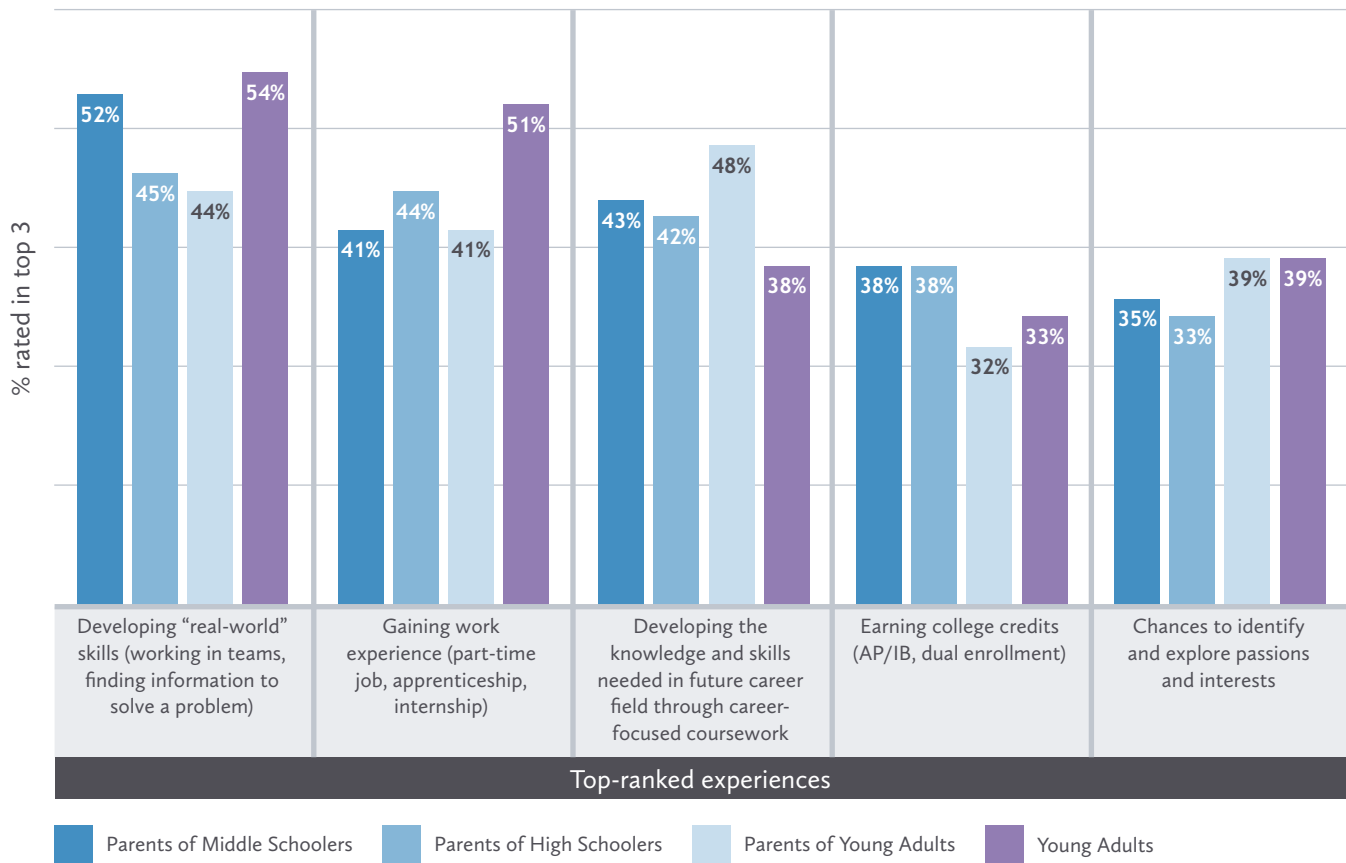
—Parent of Middle Schooler



### Parents and young adults agree on the importance of “real-world” skills, work experience and career-focused coursework.

When asked to prioritize the experiences that set students up for success after high school, parents and young adults both viewed opportunities to gain skills and work experience as more important than opportunities to earn either college credit or credentials. Young adults in particular view gaining work experience as a valuable opportunity for post-high school success.

Figure D. Which experiences are most likely to prepare students for success after high school?



### Key Differences Among Demographic Groups

- Higher-income respondents are more likely to value opportunities to earn college credits and opportunities to study high-level or complex material.
- The lowest-income respondents are more likely to value opportunities to explore their passions and interests.
- Black respondents are more likely to value personalized support and advice about college and career options but are less likely to value opportunities to explore passions and interests as important for success after high school.

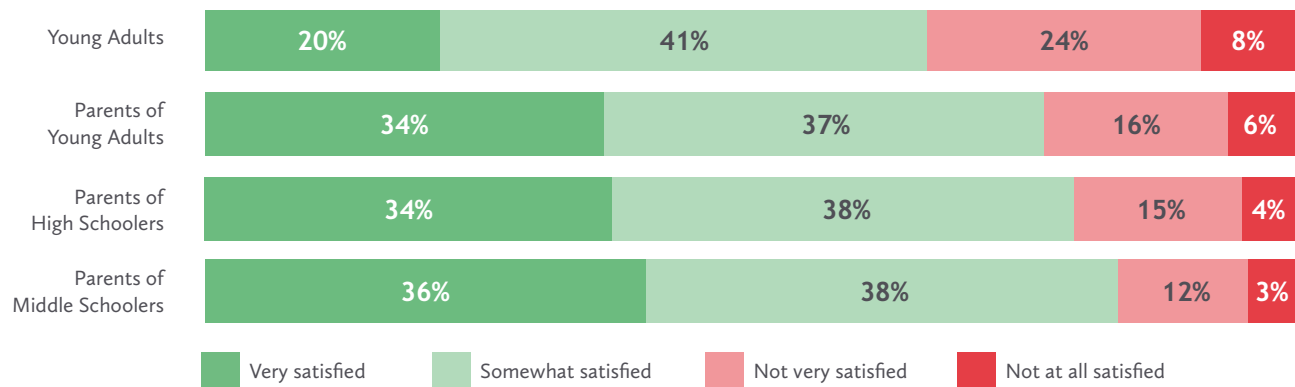


“I just feel like I got the bare minimum set of skills. Enough to get by but not enough to stand out.”  
—Young Adult

**Compared to parents, young adults are less satisfied with the quality of their educational experiences, particularly in relation to developing “real-world” skills.**

Far fewer young adults than parents report that they are satisfied with their opportunities to acquire “real-world” skills. More than 33% of parents indicate that they are very satisfied, compared with 20% of young adults. The primary reason young adults cited for their dissatisfaction was an overemphasis on textbook learning. This highlights an opportunity to intentionally integrate—and more explicitly highlight to students and parents—opportunities to develop “real-world” skills in learning experiences across content areas both in and outside the classroom.

**Figure E. How satisfied are parents and young adults with opportunities to develop “real-world” skills?**

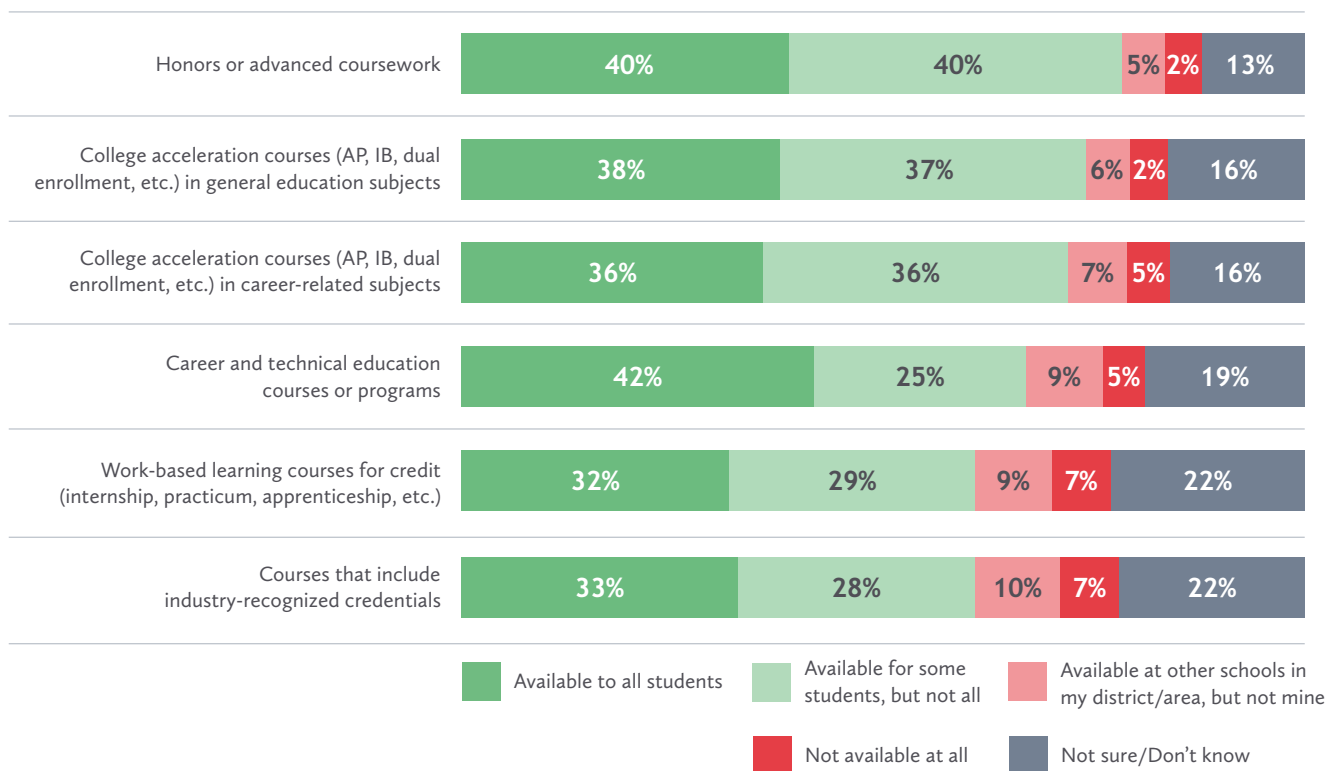


## Parents and young adults report gaps in awareness of and access to critical pathway experiences—especially those they rate as most important.

Large **awareness gaps** regarding the educational experiences available are common among parents and young adults. About 20% of parents and young adults are “not sure” or “don’t know” if CTE, work-based learning or industry-recognized credentials are available in their school or district—even though those types of experiences provide the work experience and skills that are highly valued for success after high school.

More concerning are the **access gaps**; even when parents and young adults are aware of different pathway opportunities, they do not believe that those opportunities are available to all students. The perception that some experiences are available only for some students suggests that, at best, schools are not proactively ensuring that students and families understand all the opportunities available—and, at worst, schools are “tracking” some students into certain (potentially lower-quality) opportunities.

**Figure F. How available are critical pathway experiences in your community?**

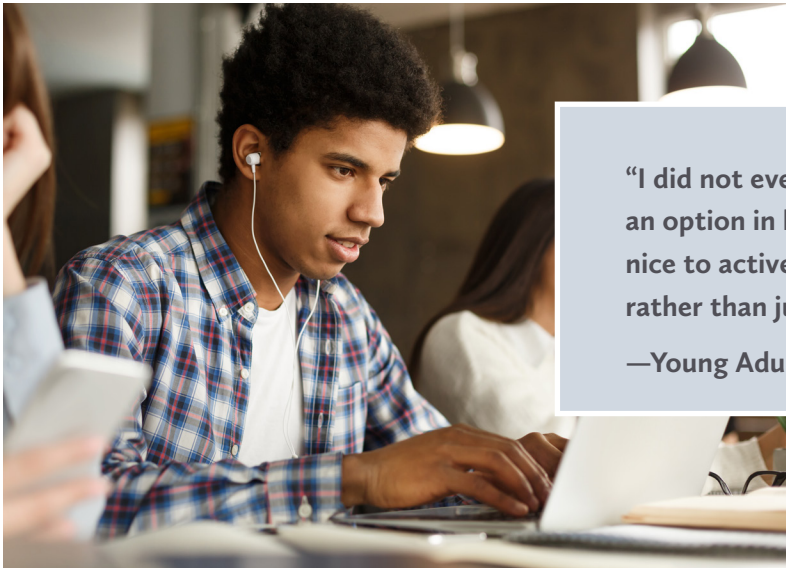


## School Limitations May Constrain Perceived Availability of Different Educational Experiences

Parents and students alike frequently cited school limitations as reasons they might perceive limited access to various educational experiences. Factors like scheduling, class availability and teacher influence are key barriers students face when trying to explore courses or programs at school that might expand their career interests.



**In well-articulated pathways, college-level and honors/advanced courses are integrated with opportunities to develop “real-world” and technical skills—and available to all students.** Policymakers and local education leaders have the opportunity to change these perceptions by more clearly demonstrating how all students can access and combine a variety of different types of educational opportunities, and the potential advantages of doing so. They can also make it a priority to ensure that such pathways are, in reality, feasible and that common barriers to access (again, scheduling conflicts, limited program or class availability) are mitigated if not eliminated.



**“I did not even know that these programs were an option in high school. It would have been nice to actively learn about different careers rather than just hearing about them.”**

**—Young Adult**

**FINDING 3.**

**Schools may be unwittingly reinforcing the false narrative that pathways are still an “or” decision between separate tracks (college vs. career) of unequal value.**

“I wish I knew more about all the opportunities provided for my child and how it works for school credit.”

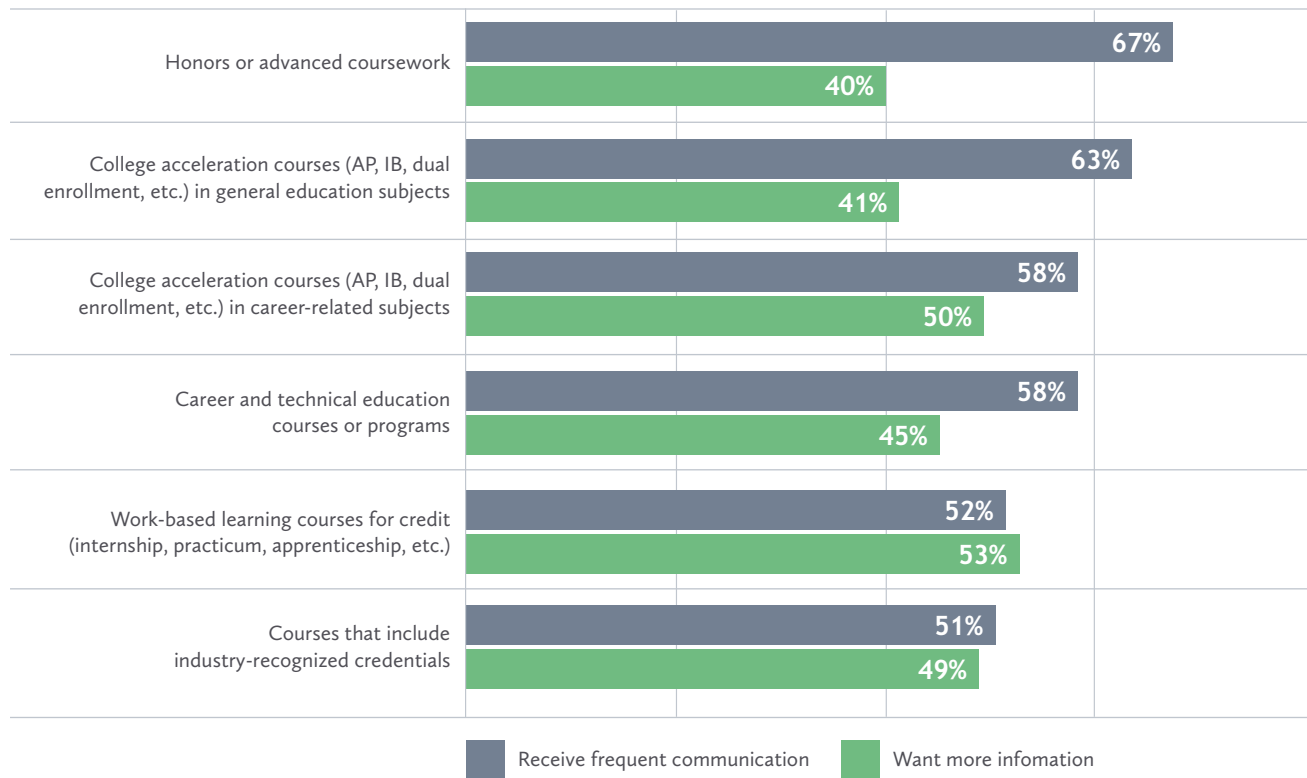
—Parent of Young Adult



**Schools do not communicate all opportunities equally. Parents and young adults want more information about the educational opportunities that schools communicate the least. This leads to inconsistent awareness and understanding of the value of available opportunities.**

The patterns of school communications about different types of educational opportunities may skew how parents and young adults value different pathway opportunities—and may limit access to information about opportunities that parents and students most value. Parents and young adults indicated that schools most frequently communicate about honors or advanced coursework and college acceleration opportunities—but they want to learn more about career-focused educational opportunities, especially work-based learning and CTE. These differences in communication frequency also suggest that schools’ communications about different types of experiences are siloed, further complicating parents’ and students’ abilities to fully understand and access their pathway opportunities.

**Figure G. How often do parents and students receive information about different pathway experiences?**



### Key Differences Among Demographic Groups

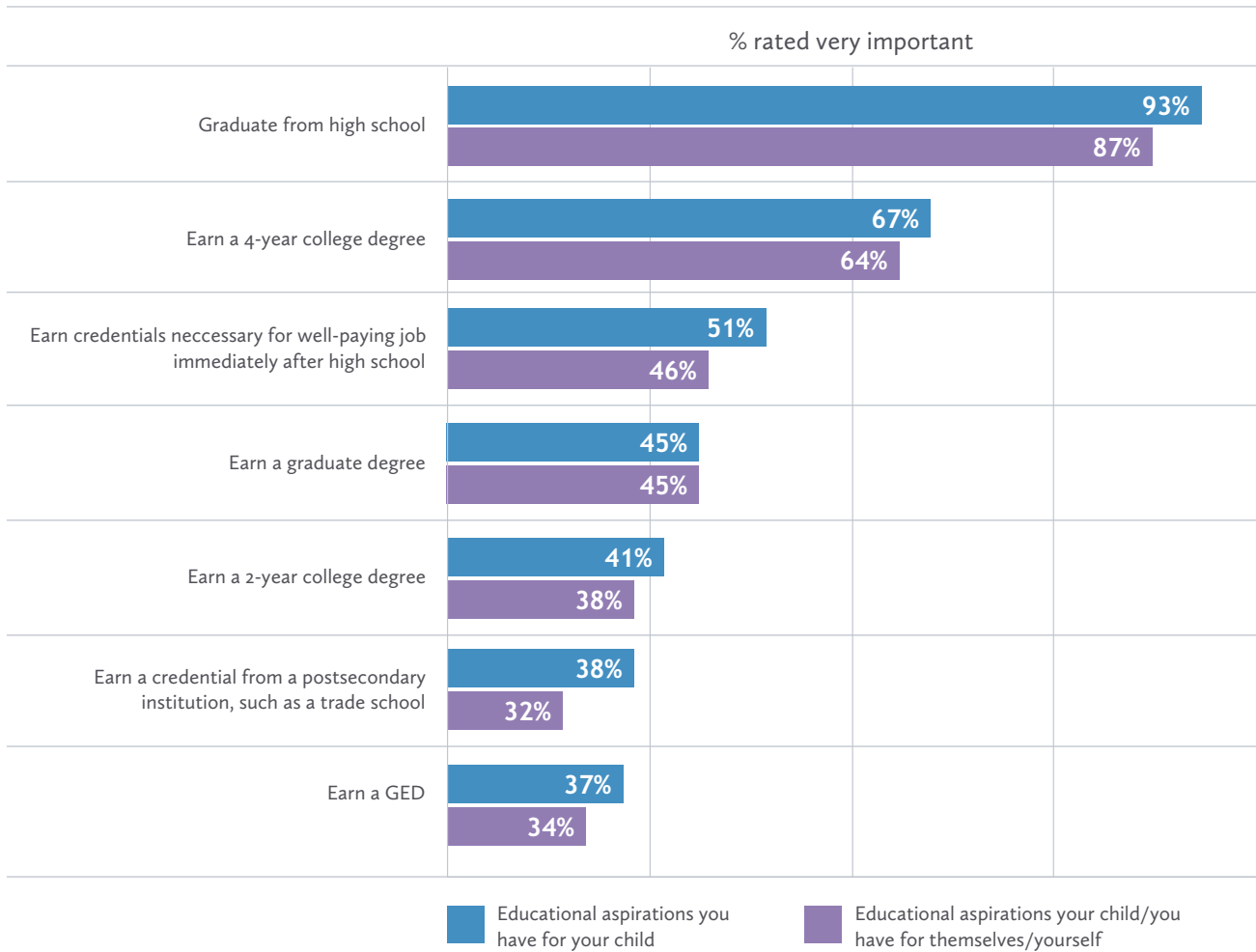
- Parents and young adults in urban areas receive more frequent information about various types of educational opportunities than families in rural areas.
- Parents in lower income brackets (<\$50k) are significantly more likely than higher income parents to say they do not seek or receive information about their child’s future career choices.

In prioritizing information about advanced coursework and college acceleration in core academic subjects, schools inherently promote those opportunities and pathways as being more widely available and more advantageous. Consequently, parents and students may believe that those opportunities are somehow better, or that they represent a “preferred track.” The value of opportunities that are less frequently communicated may not be fully understood—and perceived to be “lesser than.” As a result, students may forego opportunities that would have been a good fit for their learning needs and aspirations. In fact, those who most frequently receive information on honors/advanced coursework are least likely to enroll in CTE, industry certification or work-based learning courses.

**The trends in schools' communication about different opportunities are reflected in—and may impact—the types of educational aspirations parents and young adults believe are very important.**

Almost all parents and young adults view graduating from high school as a very important educational achievement—but do not view it as sufficient as a terminal credential. Reflecting the prevailing narrative that privileges college over career preparation, both parents and students are more likely to indicate that it is very important to earn a four-year degree than other types of postsecondary degrees or credentials. Most rate earning at least one type of postsecondary credential or degree as very important; they are less likely to say that it is very important to graduate from high school with a diploma and credentials that lead to a well-paying job.

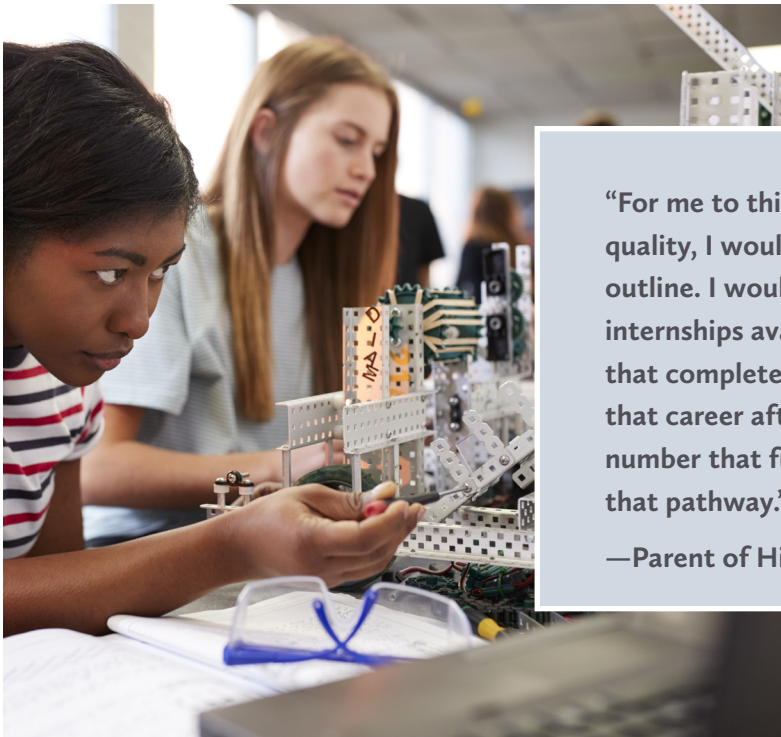
**Figure H. How do parents and young adults prioritize educational achievements?**



### Key Differences Among Demographic Groups

- Black parents and young adults are more likely to consider a variety of educational aspirations to be very important.
- Lower-income respondents are more likely to believe that it is very important to graduate from high school with credentials that can lead to a well-paying job.
- Higher-income respondents are more likely to rate four-year degree and graduate degree attainment as very important; respondents from rural areas are less likely to rate these aspirations as very important.

The importance that parents and students place on earning a high school diploma **and** a postsecondary credential or degree cannot be overlooked. It emphasizes the need to provide high-quality information and support as students navigate pathways that traverse from K-12 through postsecondary to the workforce so that they are aware of all opportunities available to them as well as how those opportunities can help them progress toward their goals.



“For me to think our school offering was high quality, I would want to see a very specific outline. I would like to know the types of internships available, the number of students that complete the program, the number still in that career after five years, ten years, and the number that further their education within that pathway.”

—Parent of High Schooler



**FINDING 4.**

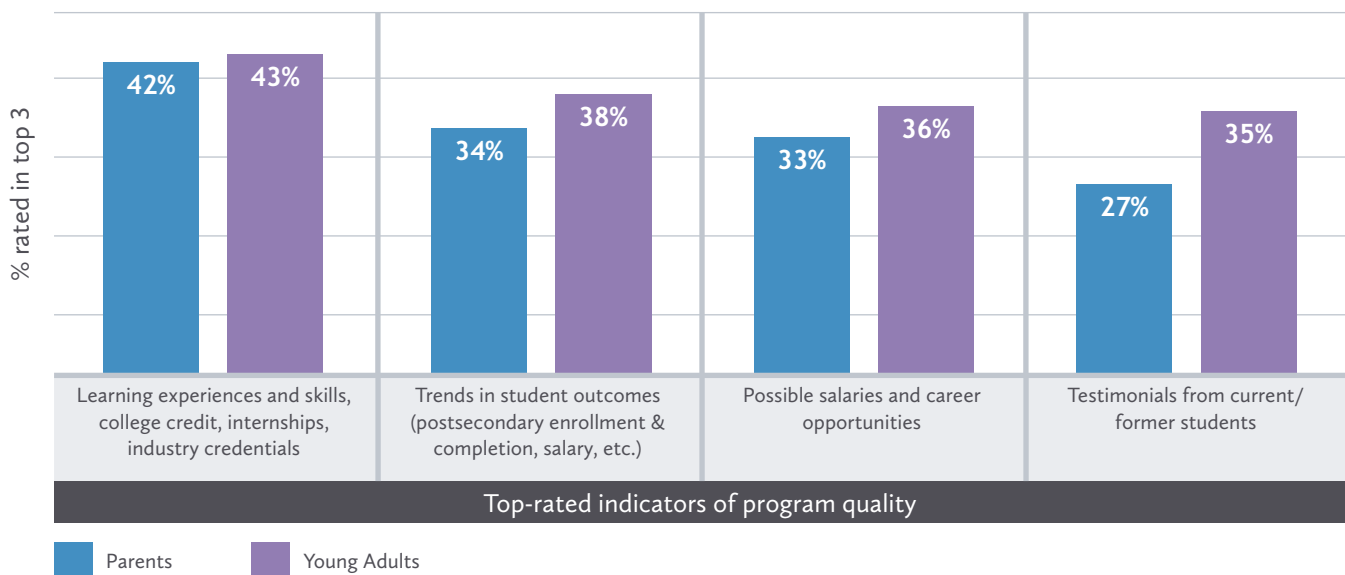
**There is an information gap in how parents and young adults evaluate the quality of CTE pathways and the information schools currently provide.**

While the frequency of information about pathway experiences can have far-reaching consequences, this does not mean that all information is helpful or that it provides insights into the quality, benefits or trade-offs of pathway options and experiences. Simply increasing the frequency of information is not likely to help students and families ensure that the pathways and experiences they choose are high quality.

**Parents and young adults lack transparent information about the quality of pathways and experiences, limiting their ability to make informed decisions.**

When evaluating CTE program quality, parents and young adults prioritize information about learning experiences and student outcomes. In other words, they want to understand the skills and experiences they will develop—and how students who have completed those experiences in the past fare in postsecondary and career. However, very few states or schools currently monitor or provide information about education and employment outcomes for students who complete a CTE pathway or other critical career pathway experiences like college acceleration or work-based learning. **This presents an opportunity for policymakers to ensure all students and families have access to the information they need.**

Figure 1. What types of information help parents and young adults understand whether a pathway is high-quality?



Instead of the specific information they want, parents and students indicate that they are more likely to receive no information from their school regarding CTE programs and pathways (33%) or else general information about all offerings in the course catalog (31%). Just 29% indicate that they receive information about learning experiences and skills for specific programs.

**What Parents and Young Adults Seek in Pathway Opportunities**

Parents and young adults want pathways that provide opportunities to identify a career match, learn necessary skills and gain experiences that will help them in their future careers. Pathways should be accessible to all, regardless of timing, and have extensive resources online for parents and students to learn about key information, including student outcomes and opportunities to earn postsecondary credit.

| Topics   | Communication  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Future-focused</li> <li>● Job preparation, including resume writing, cover letters, interviews, job shadowing</li> <li>● “Adulting”—personal finances (taxes, loans, etc.)</li> <li>● College vs. trade school</li> <li>● Identifying passions</li> <li>● Connecting areas of interest to career paths</li> <li>● Emphasizing individualized paths</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Integrates college preparation and career preparation experiences: Does not require students to choose between college-prep and career-prep courses or experiences (e.g., students can take AP and CTE)</li> <li>● Leverages partnerships: Testimonials from guest speakers, including industry professionals and college admissions staff</li> <li>● Provides information about quality: Includes an online database with information related to program success rates, career path information (salaries, demand) and resources for key topics</li> </ul> |

**Parents and young adults lack precise, timely ways to measure progress toward readiness for success after high school.**

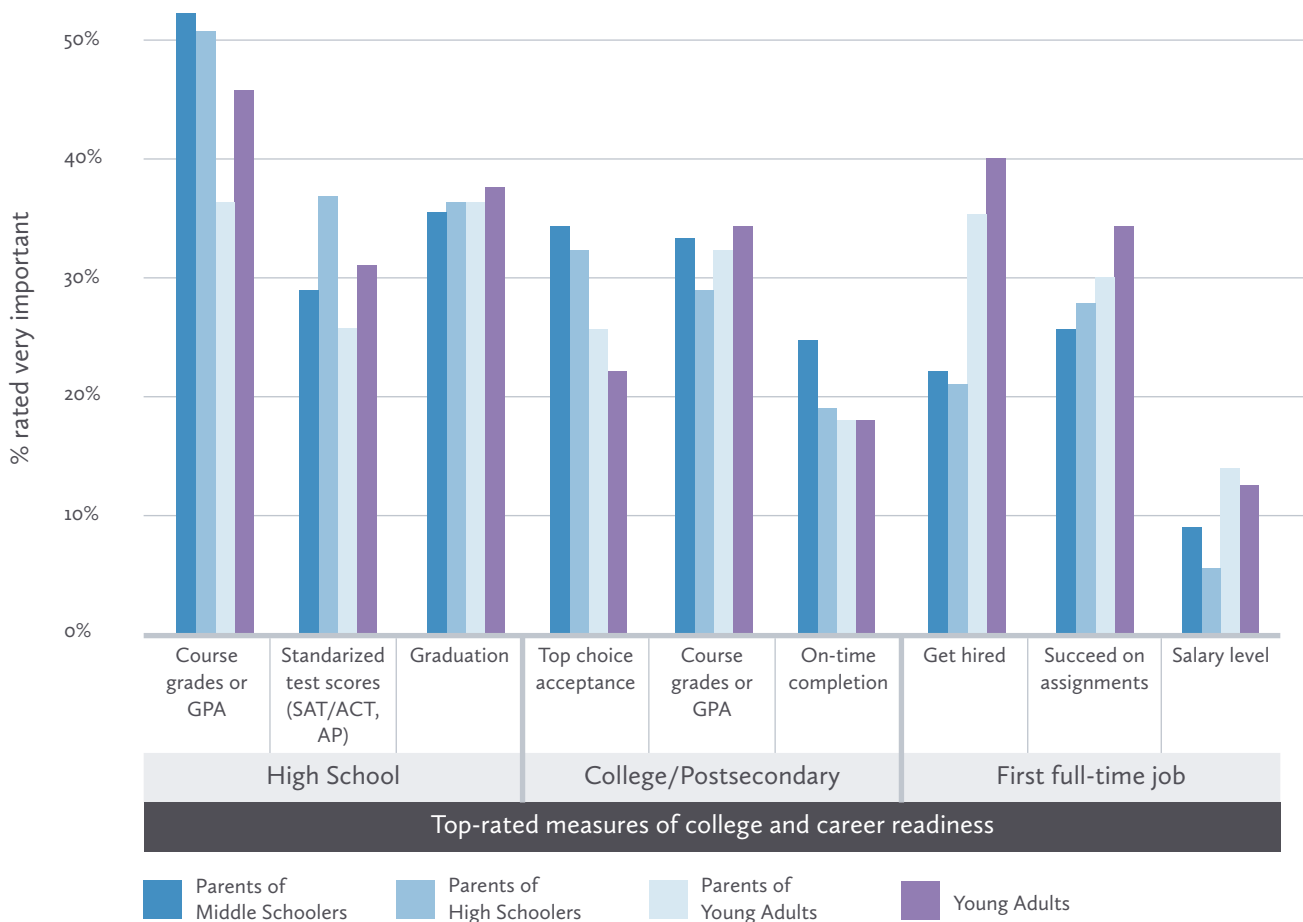
Parents and students place substantial value on educational opportunities that build “real-world” skills and provide work experience and exposure to different career paths. But when it comes to determining how prepared their children are for success after high school, parents rely on measures that do not necessarily reflect the skills and experiences they hope their children will acquire. Overall, parents are more likely to rely on high school and postsecondary course grades and GPA and graduating from high school as measures of readiness for success.

While these measures of success can—and should—be considered, they have some significant limitations. Course grades can provide frequent feedback loops for parents and students, but they are inherently subjective and may not reflect consistent expectations<sup>3</sup> for the knowledge and skills needed for success—especially for historically underserved students. The majority of the other measures are summative; they do not allow students and parents to measure interim progress and to course-correct, if necessary.

However, the importance of the measures parents and students use may change over time. For example, young adults and parents of young adults are more likely to identify the “ability to get hired for first full-time job” in their top three markers of success (40% and 35%, respectively). This is likely due to their proximity to the job market, which typically places less emphasis on grades and test scores than K-12 and postsecondary education systems do.

This suggests that parents and students need better ways to assess progress toward their goals and to benchmark that progress. Grades, test scores and other outcomes all have their place in evaluating how prepared a student is, but they are insufficient, on their own, as measures of progress toward readiness for success in college and a career.

**Figure J. How do parents and young adults measure readiness for college and career?**



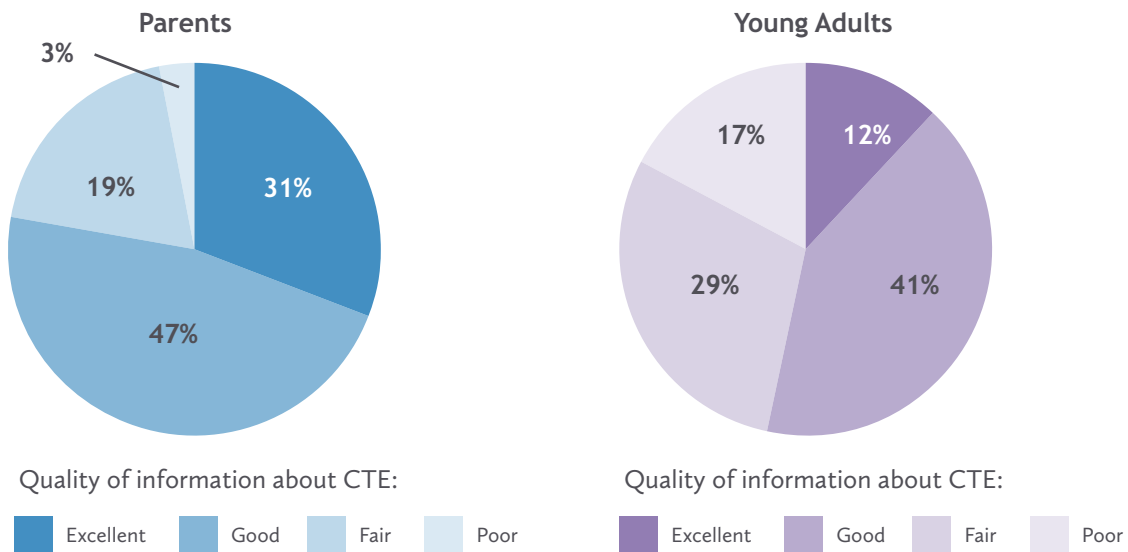
**A shortage of quality information limits awareness and understanding of CTE courses and programs.**

One-third of parents and students indicated that they do not receive any information about CTE programs from their school, and many are likewise unaware of the broad range of CTE programs that can prepare students for careers in fields as varied as architecture, finance, teaching and healthcare. Once informed, however, parents and young adults alike see the potential value that CTE can provide in preparing for college and a career.

**Parents are nearly three times more likely than young adults to say the quality of CTE information they received is excellent. Young adults aged 18-24, who are closer to being in high school themselves, are less satisfied with the CTE information they received from their school.**

As with the quality of CTE experiences, young adults are also more likely than parents to be dissatisfied with the quality of information they receive about CTE, suggesting that policymakers have the opportunity to both improve CTE quality and to improve how stakeholders communicate information about CTE in terms of detail, frequency and relevance to the information needs of parents and students.

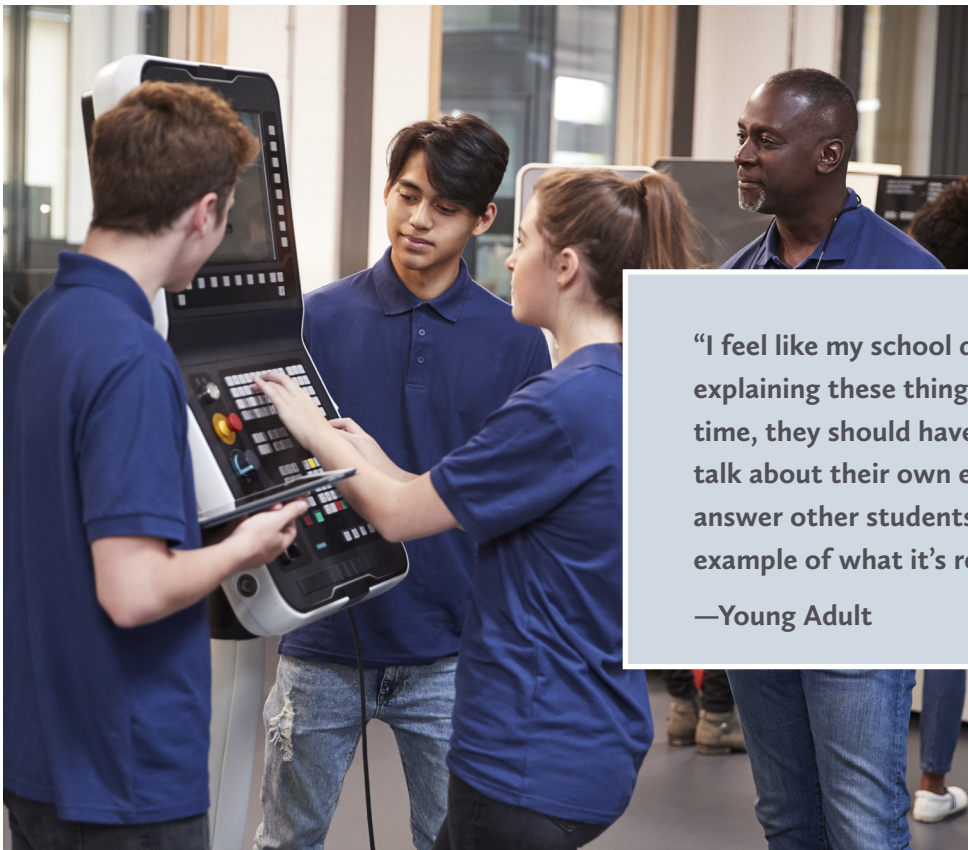
**Figure K. How satisfied are parents and young adults with the quality of information about CTE?**



**Once informed about CTE, parents and young adults see its potential value—but also raise some concerns.**

Almost half of parents view CTE as an opportunity that could help their child meet their college and career goals. However, 31% indicate that while they see the value in theory, they question whether CTE is right for their child. This may reflect persistent negative perceptions of CTE as a non-college “track.”

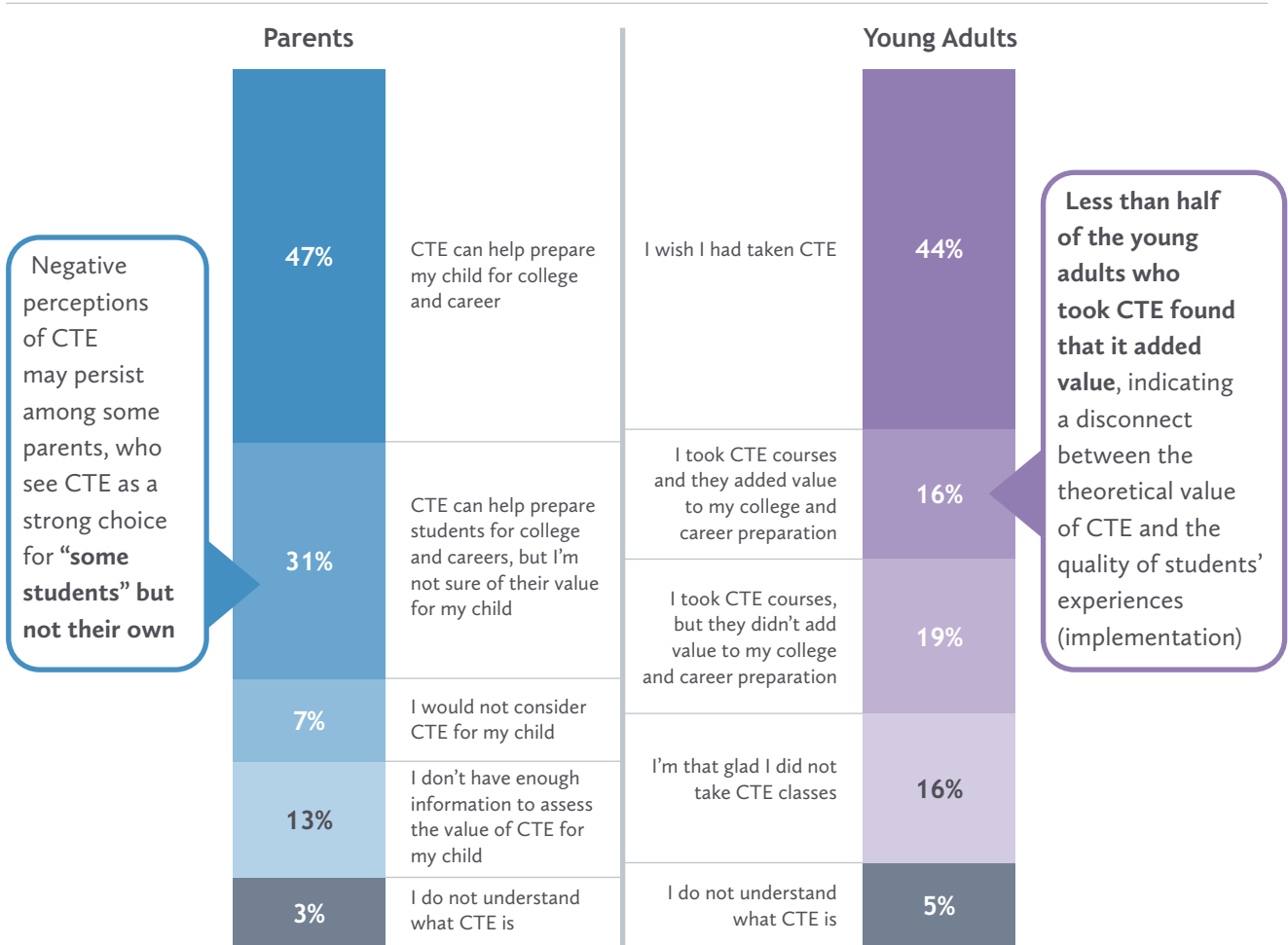
Young adults provide important insights into the difference between the theoretical promise of CTE and its implementation. 44% of young adults reported that in retrospect, they wish they had taken CTE—a significant percentage in light of young adults’ confidence gaps and dissatisfaction with their experiences. However, young adults who actually took CTE courses in high school have a more complicated view: Fewer than half of the young adults who took CTE courses believe they provided value.



“I feel like my school did okay on explaining these things, but at the same time, they should have had more students talk about their own experiences and answer other students’ questions to set an example of what it’s really like.”  
—Young Adult

This is likely attributable to the wide variation in CTE program quality and delivery, which is largely determinative of students' educational experience. Even if a program is high-quality in principle and design, poor implementation can cause students to be justifiably skeptical of its value. For CTE to be seen as a pathway experience that adds value for students, it is vital to ensure that CTE programs are available, equitably accessible, consistently high-quality and promoted adequately to students.

Figure L. How do parents and young adults perceive the value of CTE?



**FINDING 5.**

**There may be a circular process of too little and too low-quality information that hinders parents' and students' ability to advocate for opportunities that meet their learning needs (college vs. career) of unequal value.**



My parents helped me figure out what career would be best suited to my personality and has opportunities for growth.

—Young Adult



**Information relevance and quality matter more than quantity when it comes to equipping parents and students with the capacity to evaluate available education opportunities and pathways.**

Parents and students are frequently bombarded with information from schools and then left to figure out how to interpret and use that information to make decisions about educational opportunities. At other times they receive minimal information about programs or courses that they may value highly. It is clear that schools need to communicate more effectively.

**Parents of high schoolers report that the information they seek regarding career paths and related educational experiences include:**

- Salary information
- Financial aid information
- Degrees that match career interests
- Job shadowing opportunities
- Career outlook/types of jobs within the field

**When asked to review a range of materials that illustrate education to workforce pathways, parents identified five key characteristics that would make those materials useful to them in terms of helping their child plan their educational journey:**

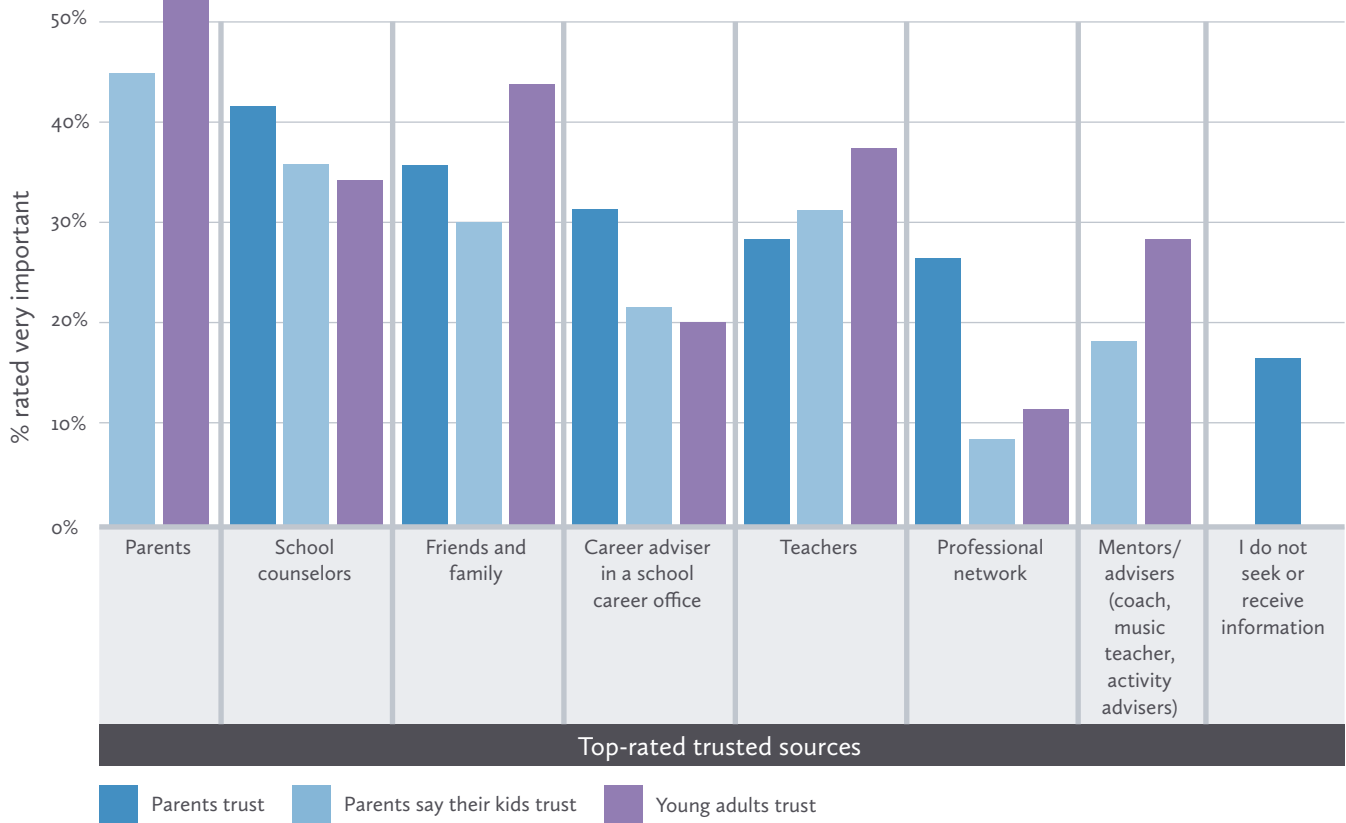
- Clear salary information for different careers
- Level of education/credential required for each career option
- Highly structured, clear paths for each grade
- Specific examples of opportunities for hands-on learning
- Clear ties between education and skills

Aggregating these data and mapping potential educational journeys in clear, concise presentations is a powerful way to ensure that parents and their children have the information they need to make confident decisions about students' career pathways from K–12 to postsecondary and through to the workforce.

### **Parents are critical to helping students identify and understand career pathways, but lack the resources to do so.**

Parents cited school counselors as their main source of information about career pathways. But they also reported that they were largely dissatisfied with the information provided by counselors. This is not surprising: Consider that the average school counselor is responsible for supporting 424 students (significantly higher than the recommended 250), is often assigned various non-counseling responsibilities—and may not have access to information and training to support high-quality pathway navigation for every one of their students. However, understanding the many demands placed on school counselors does not diminish the fact that it is likely **many parents receive too little and too low-quality information, either from school counselors or other trusted adults. This hinders their ability to support their child's pathway navigation.**

**Figure M. Who do parents and students trust for career information?**



**Key Differences Among Demographic Groups:**

- High-income parents tend to use their professional networks, reflecting a social capital gap.
- Lower-income and rural parents are less likely to receive or seek career information.
- White young adults are significantly more likely to cite their parents as sources for career information than Black and Hispanic young adults.

Ensuring that parents are well informed is especially important given the outsized role they play in providing students with guidance about potential careers. Young adults are more likely to cite their parents as sources of career information than any other people in their lives, followed by friends and family and their teachers.

Young adults cite their parents as a main source of information about career pathways. Parents may underestimate how much their children trust them to provide information about future careers and pathways. They also may not realize the extent to which students rely on other trusted adults like friends and family, mentors and advisers.

**Young adults also seek advice and information outside the education system—presenting an opportunity to improve resources and information for all community members who support students’ pathway navigation.**

Parents’ and young adults’ observations about what factors influence their career interests can be grouped into four broad categories: family and friends, school courses/work experiences, natural talents and potential earnings. These categories make clear that students seek information and inspiration from a wide range of sources—not to mention their own experience—such that it is imperative to disseminate relevant and timely information widely. Ensuring that community members are well informed about career options and the pathways leading to them can help ensure every student receives high-quality pathway navigation support.

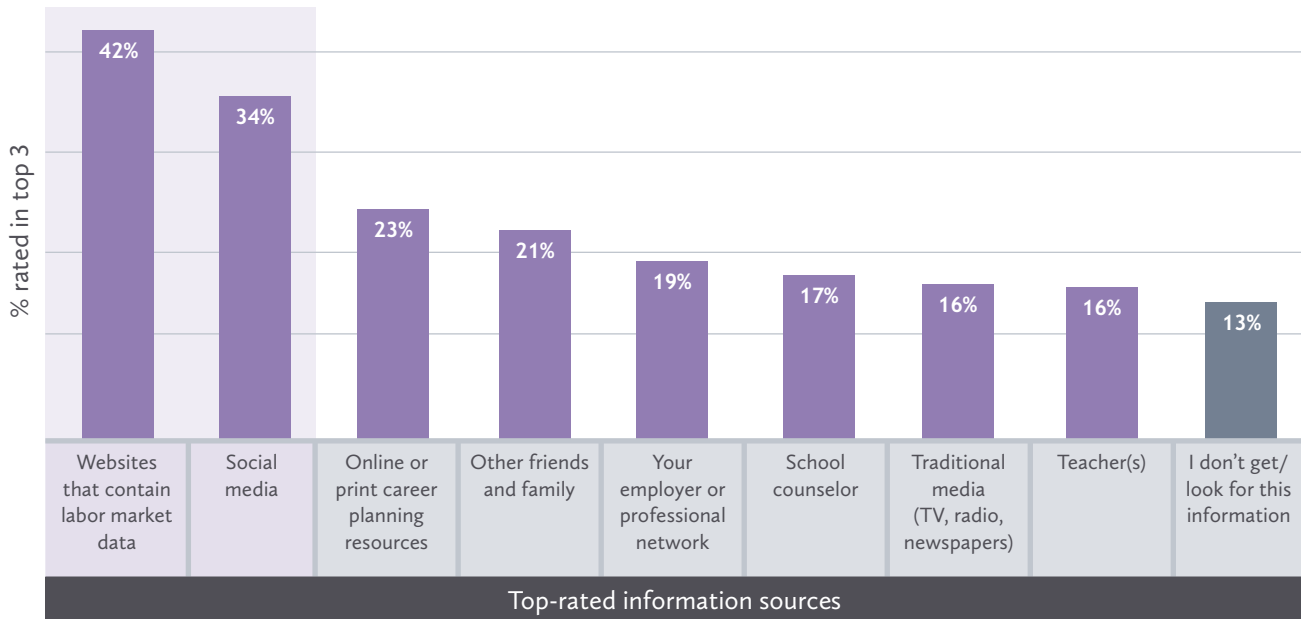
**Online Sources of Information for Students**

Young adults are significantly more likely than parents to turn to social media and websites with labor market data, suggesting these may be important places to reach students with information about career opportunities, especially if they are not receiving sufficient information from sources within the education system.



Similarly, recognizing and engaging with parents' and young adults' patterns of information consumption enables schools and policymakers to provide resources and information that correspond with those patterns. In particular, young adults are more likely than parents to seek out information on their own, noting a strong preference for social media and websites with labor market data.

**Figure N. Where do young adults seek information about demand and wages for different career options?**



Given that young adults rely on these self-directed information gathering activities, schools, policymakers and other stakeholders have an opportunity to compile and present labor market information for students in ways that will better reach them. In doing so, they also have the potential to help students learn how to evaluate the information they gather and to contextualize it with available education opportunities and pathways.

# Solutions for States, Districts and Schools

## SOLUTION 1.

**Answer parent and student questions about pathway outcomes. Establish a clear vision, shared definitions and success metrics for high-quality pathways—and collect and share the data associated with them.**



*Students and families want information about pathway outcomes. However, in many states this information does not exist—or is incomplete, disconnected or difficult to find. As it stands, most state policymakers and district/school leaders cannot address basic questions about how well local pathway offerings are working for students in the long term.*

**States** are uniquely responsible for collecting and reporting information about pathway quality, equitable access to pathway opportunities and student outcomes. To do this, policymakers must first establish a clear statewide vision and policy foundation for pathway alignment, experiences and outcomes. For all pathways, including those offered through CTE programs, this means going beyond baseline federal program requirements to ensure that pathways are aligned to high-skill, high-wage and high-demand occupations that include postsecondary credentialing—and collecting associated data beyond what is required in Perkins V statute to know whether they are delivering results.

At a minimum, states should publicly report pathway experience and outcome data that can be disaggregated by district, school, postsecondary institution, student group(s), long-term student outcomes (degree/credential attainment, employment and wages) and labor market information (occupational demand, wages and growth projections).

**Districts and schools** should not wait for states to act on their own. They play the critical role in setting expectations for, designing experiences within and continuously improving their pathway offerings. After all, pathway development and implementation are regional and local by nature—as are many of the outcomes outlined above. Local data and outcomes can help inform program changes and ensure that all district and school students are being prepared for success in postsecondary and career.



To serve students and families interested in pathway offerings, policymakers and educators first need to know the answers to their questions.

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**When this information is publicly available, students and families can:**

- Understand the components of high-quality pathways—and weigh the benefits and trade-offs of experiences within pathways;
- Determine which pathway(s) and experiences can help them meet their postsecondary and career goals;
- Evaluate the quality, alignment and equity of pathways and experiences in their schools/communities; and
- Advocate for their school and/or district to improve pathway offerings and information to support their success.



## SOLUTION 2.

### Empower students and families with comprehensive information about pathways—in language that resonates with them.

*Students and families want information about pathways that include a range of experiences and opportunities, such as earning college credit, learning “real-world” skills, engaging in work-based learning and transitioning to postsecondary programs. Instead, they report receiving low-quality information about different types of experiences at different times and from different people—or simply no information at all. At best, this leaves them hoping that some of these disparate offerings “add up” to preparation for college **and** career; at worst, it perpetuates the tracking of students into either college or career pathways.*

**States, districts, schools, educators and trusted adults** all have a responsibility to help students and families understand that every student is on a pathway—whether they know it or not—and to provide timely, actionable information to help them make the best decisions about their individual pathway journey. Communication about pathway options and decisions can also influence students’ and families’ perceptions about the quality and accessibility of different pathway options—and may also contribute to confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. All organizations and adults who communicate about pathways should approach this work strategically and in an integrated, student-centered way.

**States** should lead this shift by providing communications tools and resources that integrate pathway options—intentionally breaking down siloes that traditionally exist across organizational structures, content areas or types of experiences. **Districts and schools** should build on this foundation to provide students and families with comprehensive information about local pathway options on an ongoing, frequent basis, not just during annual course selection.

**Students and families can make the best pathway decisions when they have clear information that connects:**

- Possible pathway outcomes such as salary, demand and degree/credential requirements for different careers;
- Structured and progressive pathway experiences for each grade level with information requirements or prerequisites;
- Clear ties between education experiences and skills—with examples of opportunities for hands-on learning, work-based learning and opportunities to develop “real-world” skills; and
- Ways they can determine whether they are on track to meet their goals (or not).



### SOLUTION 3.

## Ensure every student—and family—receives high-quality pathway navigation support.

*All students (and their families) deserve pathway navigation support to ensure their choices help them meet their postsecondary and career goals—but many do not receive the support they need. This responsibility has historically fallen on school counselors, who often do not have the capacity to provide ongoing, personalized support and advisement to each student. Further, students seek pathway navigation advice from a wide variety of trusted adults, most of whom receive no training or resources to help them support students' pathway decisions.*

Building capacity to provide high-quality pathway navigation support for every student requires commitment and leadership at both the state and local levels.

**States** should set expectations for high-quality pathway navigation—and provide resources and tools to support this important work. They can invest in helping all educators develop pathway navigation skills through professional development, educator preparation programs, licensure endorsements and/or microcredentials. States should also consider developing open-access resources to help all trusted adults provide high-quality pathway navigation support in their communities (parents, family members, community organizations, etc.).

**Districts and schools** should proactively ensure that the trusted adults in their communities have the skills and resources to support student pathway navigation. They should build or leverage relationships with local partners (community organizations, nonprofits, postsecondary institutions, employers, etc.) to offer pathway navigation support training. Most importantly, they should provide parents and families with pathway navigation support and resources that support long-term planning as well as grade-specific decisions (with appropriate data).

**When each student and family can rely on many trusted adults to provide high-quality pathway navigation support, they:**

- Make informed pathway decisions with data-driven support from a variety of trusted adults;
- Develop pathway navigation skills to support their (or their child's) unique pathway journey; and
- Have clear expectations for pathway navigation support and know who to turn to for help.

# Key Takeaways

## Findings



Parents and young adults clearly prioritize important career outcomes but have doubts about whether they will be achieved.



Parents and young adults agree that developing “real-world” skills, gaining work experience and completing career-focused coursework will set learners up for success after high school—but there is likely a significant gap between what parents believe schools are providing and what they are actually delivering.



Schools may be unwittingly reinforcing the false narrative that pathways are still an “or” decision between separate tracks (college vs. career) of unequal value.



There is an information gap in how parents and young adults evaluate the quality of CTE pathways and the information schools currently provide.



There may be a circular process of too little and too low-quality information that hinders parents’ and students’ ability to advocate for opportunities that meet their learning needs.

## Solutions



Answer parent and student questions about pathway outcomes. Establish a clear vision, shared definitions and success metrics for high-quality pathways—and collect and share the data associated with them.



Empower students and families with comprehensive information about pathways—in language that resonates with them.



Ensure every student—and family—receives high-quality pathway navigation support.



# Appendix A: Methodology

## Online Bulletin Board

Compared with in-person focus group conversations that would take place at a single, designated event, the online bulletin board format encourages deeper, ongoing engagement by allowing respondents to participate at their convenience over a longer period of time. This format facilitates the scheduling of questions, tasks and activities so respondents remain focused on the topic at hand, are sure to answer every question and provide additional information through their responses to personalized follow-up questions from the moderator.

### Online Bulletin Board Participants

|   | <b>Parents of Middle Schoolers</b><br>Parent or guardian of a child in grades 6-8 at a public or charter school | <b>Parents of High Schoolers</b><br>Parent or guardian of a child in grades 9-12 at a public or charter school | <b>Parents of Young Adults</b><br>Parent or guardian of a young adult (aged 18-24) who attended a public or charter high school | <b>Young Adults</b><br>Young adult (age 18-24) who attended a public or charter high school and has no children |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| Online Qualitative Bulletin Board<br><b>Total: 30</b> | <b>10</b>   | <b>10</b>  | <b>10</b>   | <b>n/a</b>  |

### Participant Demographics

- **17** women, **13** men
- **6** people from rural areas
- **6** Black/African American, **5** Hispanic, & **2** Asian parents
- **5** with income < \$25k, **12** with income < \$75k per year

## Survey Limitations

This study was designed to focus on a narrow set of questions about how parents and young adults perceive available education opportunities and how they get (and prefer to get information about them). As such, it is not a comprehensive accounting of attitudes about pathways or the opportunities that constitute them. Additionally, while we fielded a diverse national sample of respondents from a range of racial, socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds, the overall sample is not nationally representative. Relatedly, small sample sizes for some population segments (e.g., certain combinations of race and income level) precluded intersectional analysis or conclusive findings.

### Qualitative and Quantitative Participation

|  | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| National Survey<br>Total: 1,111                | 204                         | 450                       | 142                     | 315          |
| Online Qualitative Bulletin Board<br>Total: 30 | 10                          | 10                        | 10                      | n/a          |

## Survey Weighting

Survey responses were weighted to be representative of the composition of the U.S. national population by race, income and rurality.

### Race/Ethnicity

| Target % in Population | Race/Ethnicity         |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 60%                    | White (Non-Hispanic)   |
| 12%                    | Black/African American |
| 18%                    | Hispanic (any race)    |
| 6%                     | Asian (Non-Hispanic)   |
| 4%                     | Other (Non-Hispanic)   |

### Income

| Target % in Population | Income                |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 19.6%                  | Less than \$25,000    |
| 21.2%                  | \$25,000 - \$49,999   |
| 17.4%                  | \$50,000 - \$74,999   |
| 12.6%                  | \$75,000 - \$99,999   |
| 15.0%                  | \$100,000 - \$149,999 |

### Geography

| Target % in Population | Rural/Non-Rural |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| 19%                    | Rural           |
| 81%                    | Non-rural       |

The final sample was categorized into the following geographic types, based on zip code: Rural (19%); Suburban (54%); Urban (25%).

## Survey Respondent Demographic Characteristics

### Gender

| Please identify your gender. | Weighted Base | All Parents | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|------------------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Weighted base                | 1,111         | 769         | 198                         | 433                       | 138                     | 342          |
| Male                         | 42%           | 45%         | 48%                         | 44%                       | 47%                     | 33%          |
| Female                       | 57%           | 54%         | 52%                         | 56%                       | 52%                     | 64%          |
| Non-binary                   | 1%            | 0%          | 0%                          | 0%                        | 0%                      | 2%           |
| Prefer to self-describe      | 0%            | 0%          | 0%                          | 0%                        | 0%                      | 0%           |
| Prefer not to answer         | 0%            | 0%          | 0%                          | 0%                        | 1%                      | 0%           |

### Age

| What is your age? (Coded into age groups) | Weighted Base | All Parents | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|---|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Weighted base                             | 1,111         | 769         | 198                         | 433                       | 138                     | 342          |
| 18-24                                     | 34%           | 4%          | 1%                          | 1%                        | 17%                     | 100%         |
| 25-34                                     | 6%            | 8%          | 14%                         | 6%                        | 4%                      | 0%           |
| 35-49                                     | 35%           | 50%         | 59%                         | 51%                       | 32%                     | 0%           |
| 50-64                                     | 22%           | 31%         | 21%                         | 35%                       | 36%                     | 0%           |
| 65+                                       | 5%            | 7%          | 5%                          | 6%                        | 11%                     | 0%           |

## Survey Respondent Demographic Characteristics

### Income

| What is your annual household income? | Weighted Base | All Parents | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Weighted base                         | 1,111         | 769         | 198                         | 433                       | 138                     | 342          |
| Less than \$25,000                    | 20%           | 11%         | 11%                         | 8%                        | 18%                     | 40%          |
| \$25,000 - \$49,000                   | 21%           | 20%         | 16%                         | 18%                       | 30%                     | 25%          |
| \$50,000 - \$74,999                   | 17%           | 18%         | 24%                         | 17%                       | 14%                     | 15%          |
| \$75,000 - \$99,999                   | 13%           | 14%         | 10%                         | 16%                       | 15%                     | 9%           |
| \$100,000 - \$149,999                 | 15%           | 19%         | 17%                         | 22%                       | 12%                     | 6%           |
| \$150,000+                            | 14%           | 18%         | 22%                         | 18%                       | 11%                     | 6%           |

### Geography

| Zip Code      | Weighted Base | All Parents | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|---------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Weighted base | 1,111         | 769         | 198                         | 433                       | 138                     | 342          |
| Rural         | 19%           | 18%         | 8%                          | 17%                       | 33%                     | 22%          |
| Non-rural     | 81%           | 82%         | 92%                         | 83%                       | 67%                     | 78%          |

### Race

| What is your race?                   | Weighted Base | All Parents | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Weighted base                        | 1,111         | 769         | 198                         | 433                       | 138                     | 342          |
| White, Non-Hispanic                  | 60%           | 65%         | 71%                         | 63%                       | 64%                     | 48%          |
| Black/African American, Non-Hispanic | 12%           | 10%         | 10%                         | 9%                        | 11%                     | 17%          |
| Hispanic                             | 18%           | 16%         | 13%                         | 17%                       | 15%                     | 24%          |
| Asian, Non-Hispanic                  | 6%            | 6%          | 6%                          | 6%                        | 7%                      | 6%           |
| Other, Non-Hispanic                  | 4%            | 4%          | 0%                          | 5%                        | 4%                      | 5%           |

## Survey Respondent Demographic Characteristics

### Education

| What is the highest level of education you have completed? | Weighted Base | All Parents | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|--|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Weighted base  | 1,111         | 769         | 198                         | 433                       | 138                     | 342          |
| High school or less  | 24%           | 16%         | 15%                         | 14%                       | 25%                     | 42%          |
| Some college   | 21%           | 16%         | 13%                         | 14%                       | 25%                     | 33%          |
| College grad or higher                                     | 55%           | 68%         | 72%                         | 72%                       | 50%                     | 25%          |

### Employment

| What is your employment status?                | Weighted Base | All Parents | Parents of Middle Schoolers | Parents of High Schoolers | Parents of Young Adults | Young Adults |
|--|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Weighted base                                  | 1,111         | 769         | 198                         | 433                       | 138                     | 342          |
| Employed for wages (full time)                 | 48%           | 59%         | 62%                         | 63%                       | 43%                     | 21%          |
| Employed for wages (part time)                 | 12%           | 8%          | 4%                          | 8%                        | 10%                     | 23%          |
| Military                                       | 0%            | 0%          | 0%                          | 0%                        | 0%                      | 0%           |
| Completing internship or apprenticeship        | 1%            | 0%          | 0%                          | 0%                        | 0%                      | 4%           |
| Self-employed/<br>Freelance                    | 6%            | 5%          | 5%                          | 4%                        | 7%                      | 7%           |
| Out of work and looking for work               | 9%            | 3%          | 5%                          | 2%                        | 2%                      | 21%          |
| Out of work but not currently looking for work | 8%            | 6%          | 6%                          | 4%                        | 13%                     | 13%          |
| Homemaker                                      | 11%           | 15%         | 15%                         | 14%                       | 16%                     | 2%           |
| Unable to work                                 | 6%            | 5%          | 2%                          | 4%                        | 10%                     | 8%           |



# Appendix B:

## Review of Existing Research on Education to Workforce Pathways

### Parent Understanding and Sources of Information

Most of the existing research on parents' access and understanding of information about career pathways focuses narrowly on career and technical education (CTE).

- Only 47% of parents surveyed in a 2017 national study conducted by AdvanceCTE knew what the term “CTE” meant, with slightly more reporting that they knew what a career center was. However, a majority (67%) were familiar with the term “vocational education.”<sup>4</sup>
- Similarly, in a 2016 Mississippi State University survey, a randomized sample of adult respondents in the state found that only 45% could name a CTE program in their local high school.<sup>5</sup>
- Parents and students reported in the AdvanceCTE survey that they are most comfortable hearing information about college and career pathways from trusted sources, including counselors, educators and other students who are participating in CTE programs. They viewed counselors as the most trusted source of information, with teachers a close second.<sup>4</sup>

While parents may not always be as familiar with specific terminology such as CTE or “career pathways,” it is clear that the impact of educational choices on future college and career options is a subject that is on their minds. **In a nationally representative survey, three out of four K-12 parents surveyed believe that middle and high school is the best time for students to begin thinking about their future career; 90% of all respondents believe that every high school in America should offer CTE courses and programs.**<sup>6</sup> Nearly all survey respondents also said that CTE could be a good option for both college-bound students as well as those who want to start a career immediately after high school.

## Expectations for Program Quality

Parents and students have high expectations for the quality of career preparation programs and their outcomes.

- 90% of parents who have a child enrolled in a high school CTE program report being highly satisfied with the quality of their student’s education, compared to about half of parents whose children are not in a CTE program.<sup>4</sup>
- In a 2019 study, 80% of parents surveyed believe their child would be more prepared for a career if there were more chances for them to study skilled trades in high school—indicating that the expectations for these programs are high.<sup>7</sup>
- At the same time, however, this does not translate to the number of students who are currently considering participating in these programs. The 2017 AdvanceCTE survey found that student enrollment in CTE programs has stagnated over the past decade.

## Perception of Value

While there is general consensus among the general public and high school parents on the value of career preparation and CTE programs, most K-12 parents report that they prioritize four-year colleges and universities as the preferred next step after their child completes high school. A 2021 poll found that 54% of parents would prefer that their child pursue a four-year college degree.<sup>8</sup>

More broadly, parents agree on the value of postsecondary education, even in uncertain times when the postsecondary sector has been significantly disrupted. In a 2020 report examining K-12 parent attitudes about education during the COVID-19 pandemic, 76% of respondents said that their child completing postsecondary education is “absolutely essential” to them as parents.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is still the perception of a stigma among some parents around whether career pathways programs lead to college. For example, in the Mississippi survey, when K-12 parents were asked whether CTE would be beneficial for students who are college-bound, only 48% of survey respondents answered in the affirmative.<sup>10</sup>

Both parents and students say they value the “real-world” benefits of career preparation programs. AdvanceCTE found that parents value the fact that CTE enables students to graduate from high school already possessing “real-world” skills in fields such as information technology, business management and health care.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, most survey respondents said they value the fact that many CTE programs allow students to earn college credits while still enrolled in high school.

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# Endnotes

- 1 A high-level summary of a review of the literature can be found in Appendix B.
- 2 Complete information about the research sample and methodology can be found in Appendix A.
- 3 See TNTP The Opportunity Myth, 2018
- 4 AdvanceCTE - [The Value and Promise of Career Technical Education: Results from a National Survey of Parents and Students](#), 2017
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