

Your Child's Pathway Matters



Help them make the most of their journey from school to career.





About *Your Child's Pathway Matters*

Full of helpful information and advice, this guide can help you make knowledgeable decisions about your child's educational journey. It is a go-to reference for you and your child as you build toward a happy and successful future and can help you answer the following questions (and so much more!):

- **What is a pathway? Who are pathways for—and how can they help your child?**
- **What makes a pathway high quality?**
- **What are the different types of experiences and options that make up a high-quality pathway?**
- **Who can you ask for information to help your child succeed on their journey?**
- **How can you support your child as they explore different educational pathways and career options?**



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SECTION ONE

Why High-Quality Pathways Matter for Your Child

In this section:

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An Introduction
to Pathways
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Benefits of
High-Quality
Pathways
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An Introduction to Pathways

Helping your child prepare for success, no matter what that looks like for them, may be one of the most important roles you have as a parent. There is no single “right way” to do this; every student has a unique educational journey. What matters most is that your child’s journey includes opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills, experiences, degrees and credentials that will help them enjoy a fulfilling life and rewarding career. High-quality pathways can help your child succeed in college *and* their career.

What is a pathway?

A pathway is a structured sequence of courses, work experiences and related learning opportunities that help your child develop the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in the career of their choosing.

High-quality pathways:

- Lead to higher-wage, in-demand careers.
- Begin in K-12 and continue through college.
- Provide a structured sequence of courses and experiences from K-12 through college.
- Support continued career advancement with degrees and credentials.
- Include supports that help students understand and navigate different decisions and pathway options.

How can my child benefit from starting a pathway in middle or high school?

Students who begin a high-quality pathway in middle or high school can:

- Make the most of the opportunities available with an intentional pathway of courses and experiences.
- Earn college credit in high school.
- Learn workplace and real-world skills through career-focused coursework, industry-recognized credentials and work-based learning.

Who are pathways for?

Everyone!

High-quality pathways can help every student prepare for—and succeed in—college AND career.

From kindergarten through college and beyond, anyone from any background or with any career aspiration can participate in a pathway that helps them progress in their educational journey toward a fulfilling career.

Are pathways the same as tracks? Do quality pathways limit my child’s options?

No! High-quality pathways expand students’ options and offer many ways to learn academic, workplace and real-world skills at the same time.

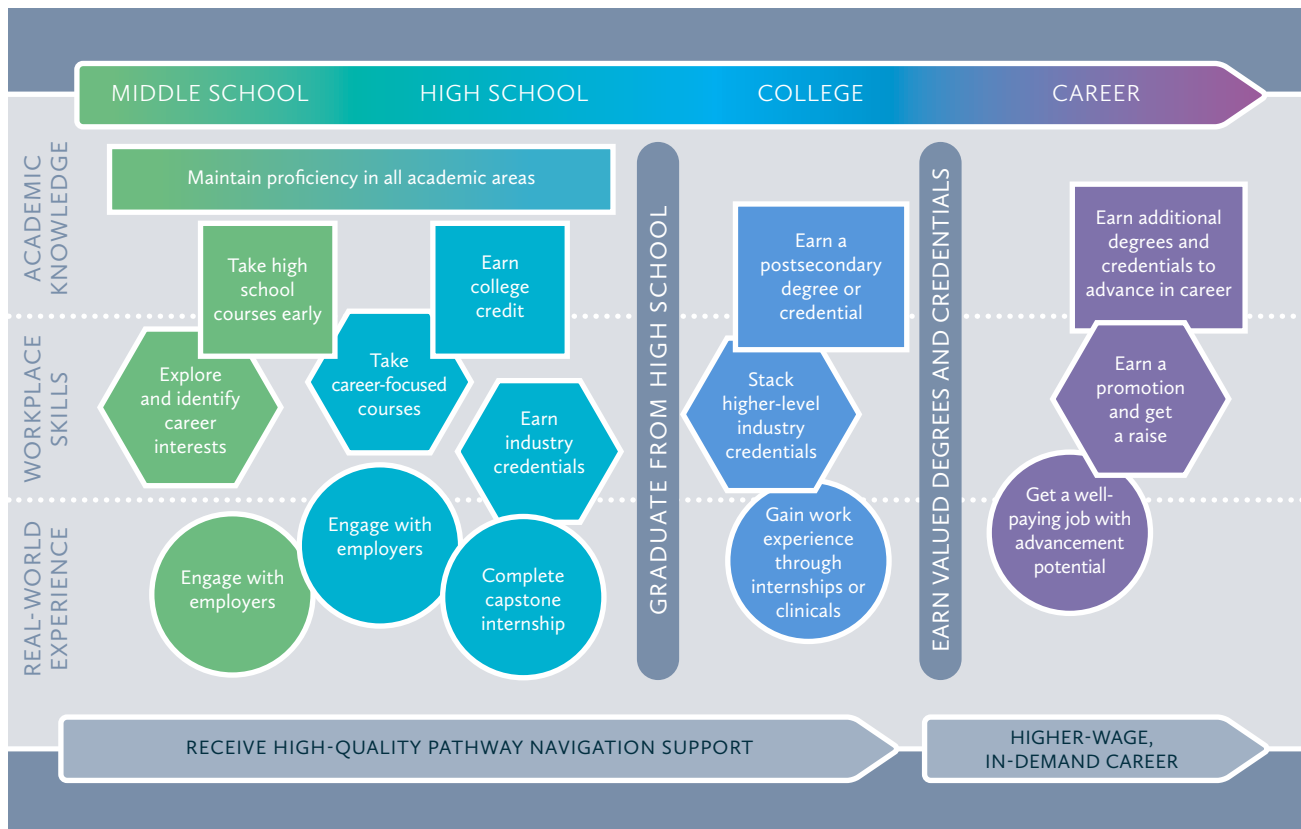
High-quality pathways do not put students on a “college track” or a “career track.” Instead, every student’s unique journey prepares them for success in college and career, enabling them to pursue many different routes to a successful career that makes them happy.



Pathways: It's Your Right to Know

It's not always easy for families to get a full picture of the educational options and experiences in their schools and communities. Too often, they do not receive the information they need to make important decisions, such as which courses and experiences can best help their child achieve their college and career goals. **This guide will help you identify the information, questions and support you can use to help your child make pathway decisions—and succeed on their journey.**

How can high-quality pathways help students meet their college and career goals?



At their best, pathways expand the range of options—from academic classes to hands-on learning experiences—available to your child at every stage of their educational journey without restricting them to one “track” or forcing them into “either/or” decisions about the types of educational opportunities they pursue.



Benefits of High-Quality Pathways

High-quality pathways expand opportunities for students, giving them a head start on achieving future goals. Students who begin high-quality pathways in high school can often graduate with college credits, hands-on workplace skills, industry credentials and work experience. Even better, they can start (and finish) their postsecondary education sooner, earning the degrees and credentials they will need for success in their career.

In addition, high-quality pathways provide the supports and structures that enable your child to overcome potential barriers to success – such as tuition, fees, scheduling, transportation, etc. – and ensure that their educational achievements and experiences align and lead to further opportunities.

If your child begins a high-quality pathway in high school, they can:

1. Make the most of the opportunities available with an intentional sequence of courses and experiences.

Every state and school sets graduation requirements in core academic areas (including English language arts, math, science and social studies). High-quality pathways can help your child meet those requirements with courses that support their college and career goals—and make the most of their elective credits.

2. Earn college credit in high school (college acceleration).

College acceleration experiences help students prepare for the rigors of college, while making college more accessible and affordable. These courses and exams can be used to meet high school graduation requirements or to advance in areas of interest (electives).

Students who participate in college acceleration opportunities are more likely to graduate from high school, go on to college, earn college degrees on time and have reduced college costs.

3. Take career-focused courses.

High-quality career and technical education programs (commonly just called CTE) help students get a head-start on preparing for success in a meaningful, well-paying career – and earning the degrees and credentials required for advancement in their chosen field. CTE programs are sequences of courses that allow students to learn hands-on skills in a real-world context, and they often include opportunities to earn industry credentials and college credit and to gain work experience. CTE programs can help prepare your child for **almost any career**.

Students who complete high-quality CTE programs in high school are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in and complete community college, and earn higher wages.



4. Earn industry-recognized credentials.

Industry-recognized credentials (certifications or licenses) **that are valued by employers** can open doors to middle- and higher-wage careers. Some credentials can also count for college credit, allowing students to earn an income while also advancing in their career through additional education.

Students who earn an industry-recognized credential in high school are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in and complete community college, and earn higher wages.

5. Gain workplace experience (work-based learning).

Work-based learning (WBL) helps students explore career options and develop the workplace and real-world skills needed for success in their future careers—and also helps students build relationships with employers. In earlier grades, work-based learning experiences focus on industry awareness and career exploration (such as industry tours or guest speakers). In later grades, work-based learning experiences allow students to develop their knowledge and skills in the workplace, gaining valuable work experience (such as job shadowing and internships).

Participating in a work-based learning experience such as an internship or apprenticeship is associated with increased job quality—in terms of wages, benefits, work hours and job satisfaction—for at least 10 years after high school.

The rest of this guide will help you and your child understand the pathway options available in your community, choose the experiences that offer the most benefits—and avoid those that may limit their future options.



SECTION TWO

What to Look for at Your School



This section provides information and questions to help you determine whether a pathway will help your child get a head start on achieving their goals—or might hold them back from achieving their full potential.

In this section:

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How do you know if a pathway is high-quality?
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What does a high-quality pathway look like?
.....

How can pathway decisions impact students' journeys?
A side-by-side comparison
.....



How do you know if a pathway is high-quality?

Not all pathways are created equal. Being able to identify the elements of high-quality pathways can help ensure that you child can expand their college and career options, as opposed to limiting them. As you and your child compare the different pathway options available, look for pathways that have **ALL** the characteristics of a high-quality pathway:

Lead to higher-wage, in-demand careers.

High-quality pathways prepare students for success in the most promising career opportunities in their communities. They should *not* lead students to low-wage jobs—or prepare students for jobs with low or declining demand.

QUALITY CHECK

- What career opportunities does this pathway lead to?
- How many jobs are available (demand), or projected to be available in the future, in our community?
- What do those jobs pay?
- Which employers are involved with this pathway?

Begin in K-12 and continue through college.

High-quality pathways start in K-12—but *do not end with high school graduation*. Instead, they help students understand the different careers they can pursue within a pathway and which colleges and postsecondary institutions can help them earn the degrees and credentials they need for success in each possible career.

QUALITY CHECK

- How can this pathway help my child transition from high school to college?
- Which colleges and postsecondary institutions offer majors or programs as part of this pathway? What degrees and credentials do they offer?
- For each college degree/program, what is the completion rate, employment rate and average earnings for students who have completed this program?



Provide a structured, intentional sequence of courses and experiences from K-12 through college.

High-quality pathways help students prioritize the courses and experiences that will help them accelerate toward their college and career goals. This allows students to build progressively on the academic, workplace and real-world skills they need—and avoid spending time and money on experiences that do not add value to their journey.

Note: more detailed information about quality pathway experiences in K-12 schools can be found in the next section.



QUALITY CHECK

- What opportunities are available to help my child explore and identify their career interests?
- How can my child pursue their goals and interests while meeting graduation requirements?
- How can my child leave high school with a head start toward their future (college credits, workplace and real-world skills, industry credentials, etc.)?
- How can I know whether my child is gaining the knowledge and skills that will be needed in their future career?

Support continued career progression with stackable degrees and credentials.

High-quality pathways help students advance in their careers by ensuring that previously earned credentials and degrees count toward the requirements for related degree or credential programs. This allows students to “stack” degrees and credentials as they build skills needed to grow in their careers—and use each new credential or degree as an on-ramp to further education or an off-ramp to employment. Stackable degrees and credentials can range from industry-recognized credentials to doctoral degrees, depending on the industry and occupation.



QUALITY CHECK

- How can my child stack degrees and credentials within this pathway?
- Which colleges and postsecondary programs award credit for each credential/degree? Which do not?
- How much credit is each credential/degree worth? Does it help meet program requirements, or is it considered elective credit?



Include pathway navigation support.

High-quality pathways provide each student with ongoing support and resources to help them navigate—and adjust, as needed—their unique pathway journey. Pathway navigation support can help students (and families) set short- and long-term college and career goals, make informed decisions about the courses and experiences they pursue and avoid any potential roadblocks that could interfere with their progress. This support can come from a variety of trusted adults, including school counselors, teachers and advisers.

 **QUALITY CHECK**

- What pathway navigation support and advisement will my child receive in this pathway?
- What resources are available to help my child (and our family) make choices about this pathway and their journey?
- Who can we ask for help—and what kinds of information and support can we expect?

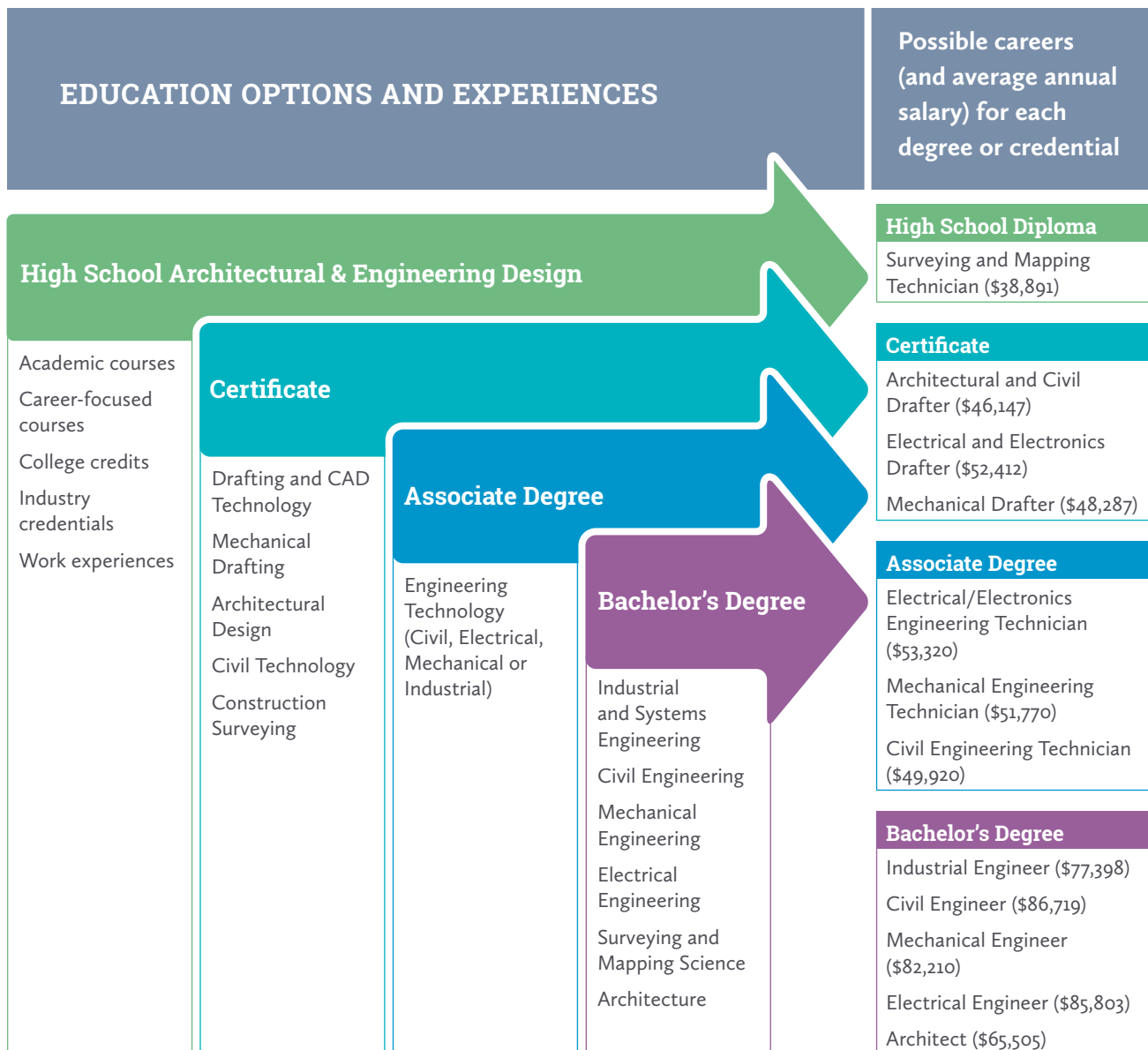




What does a high-quality pathway look like?

Imagine that your child is interested in architectural engineering and design. The pathway below illustrates:

- The various career opportunities and related salaries within this pathway—and the educational experiences, degrees and credentials needed for success in each career.
- How your child could advance along this pathway over time by “stacking” degrees and credentials throughout their career.
- The intentional sequence of courses and experiences your child could take each year of high school to accelerate toward success in this pathway.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics



**Pathway Opportunities and Experiences in High School:
An Intentional Sequence of Courses**

	8th Grade	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade	Leave High School With:
Core Academic Courses	Algebra 1	All required courses for high school graduation, such as math, English language arts, science, social studies, history and foreign languages				High school diploma
Career-Focused Courses	n/a	Architectural and Engineering Design 1	Architectural and Engineering Design 2	Architectural and Engineering Design 3	Engineering Practicum	4 high school CTE credits
College Acceleration	n/a	n/a	n/a	Dual Enrollment Drafting and Design	AP Calculus and AP Physics	9 college credits (from 3 courses)
Work-Based Learning	Career Fair	n/a	Job shadow	n/a	Engineering Internship	1 internship (work experience)
Industry Credentials	n/a	n/a	n/a	Certified Solidworks Associate and AutoCAD User		2 industry credentials



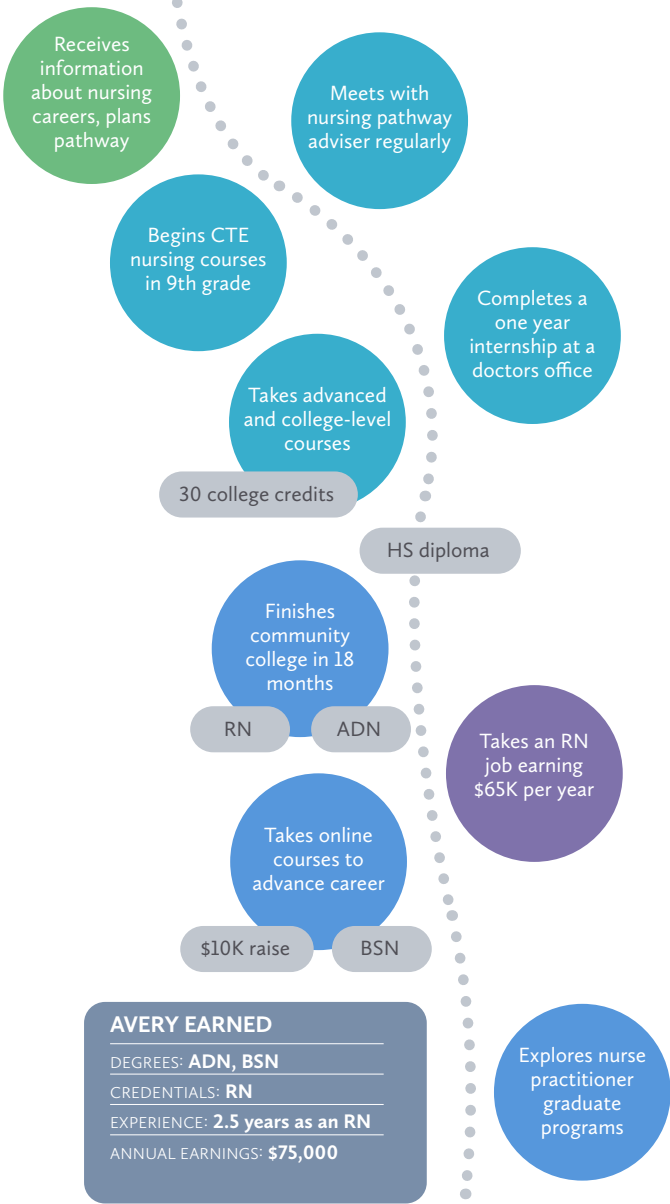


How can pathway decisions impact students' journeys?

Avery and Corey are cousins who are the same age. They are both good students who enjoy helping people—and have decided they want to be nurses when they grow up. Over the years, it becomes clear that their schools do not provide the same pathway opportunities and navigation support—leading Avery and Corey to very different outcomes.



Avery started the nursing pathway early with clear information and ongoing pathway navigation support. Avery was able to leverage structured academic, workplace and real-world experiences to accelerate along the nursing pathway.



AVERY EARNED

DEGREES: **ADN, BSN**

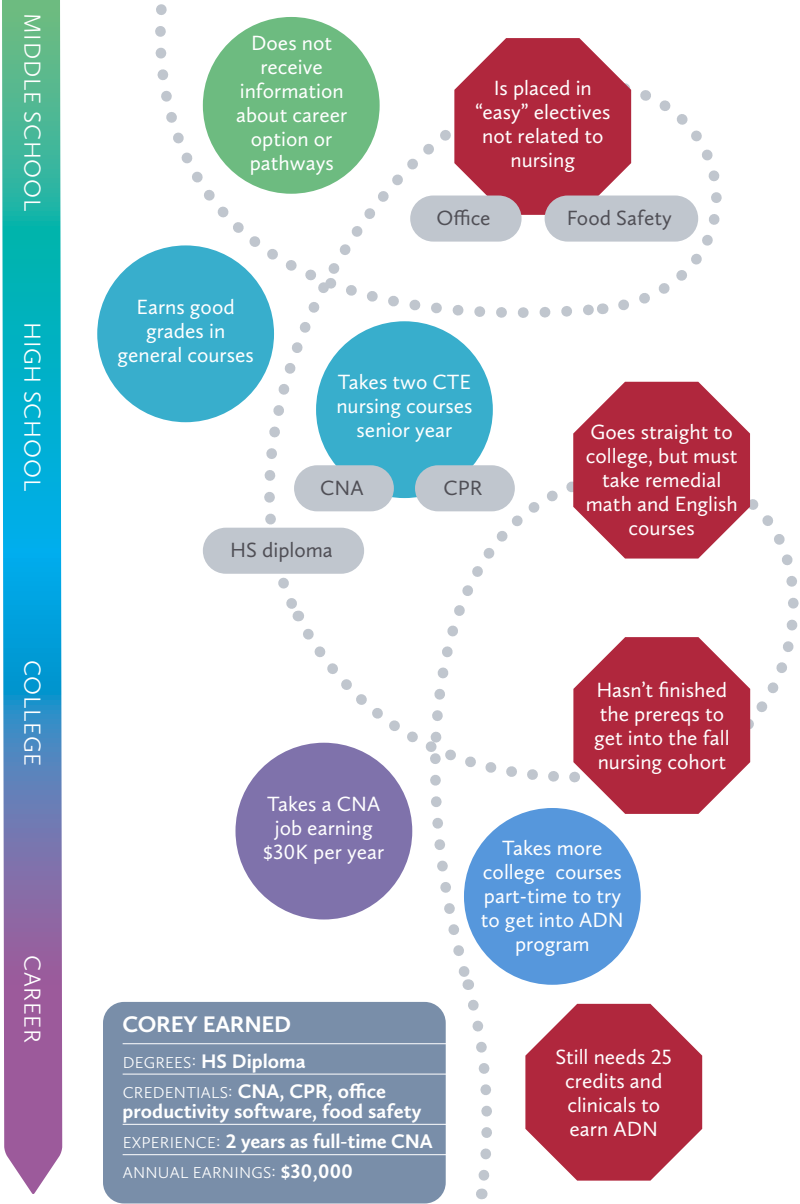
CREDENTIALS: **RN**

EXPERIENCE: **2.5 years as an RN**

ANNUAL EARNINGS: **\$75,000**



Corey had a variety of experiences in high school, but very few were intentionally chosen to help meet Corey's goal of becoming a nurse. She did not have the opportunities, information or support needed to become a nurse.



COREY EARNED

DEGREES: **HS Diploma**

CREDENTIALS: **CNA, CPR, office productivity software, food safety**

EXPERIENCE: **2 years as full-time CNA**

ANNUAL EARNINGS: **\$30,000**

Nursing Acronyms | **ADN** Associate Degree of Nursing | **BSN** Bachelor's of Science in Nursing | **RN** Registered Nurse | **CNA** Certified Nursing Assistant

Supporting and Advocating for Your Child



This section provides tools to help you support your child's educational journey—and make informed decision about the benefits and trade-offs of the pathways and experiences available.

In this section:

How can you guide conversations with your child about careers?
A step-by-step approach.

What information can support decisions about your child's educational journey?



The eyeroll when you offer your child a piece of advice about their educational journey? You may not believe that your child is listening —but they are! In fact, a 2021 survey¹ found that 52% of young adults said their parents were the source of information they turn to most for advice about careers and career options.

¹“Pathways Matter to Families,” ExcelinEd 2021.

Parents and families are pivotal in helping their child navigate pathways effectively and confidently. But many parents do not receive information about their child’s future career options that is as frequent or as helpful as they would like —and 16% of parents say they do not seek or receive any information at all.

How can you guide conversations with your child about careers? A step-by-step approach.

Exploring potential career options and pathways can be an exciting learning experience for you and your child. But it can be difficult to know where to begin and what questions to ask your child to consider when it comes to identifying their interests and strengths, and how those relate to different careers. The following step-by-step approach can help you support your child’s career exploration and facilitate planning an educational journey that leads to career in which they are happy and have opportunities to advance. A blank template can be found on page 24.

CAREER EXPLORATION

Step 1: When you think about your future career, what matters most?

Reflect on your priorities.

- What talents, interests, passions and skills would you like to use in your future career?

Not sure where to start? Many free career interest inventories and career exploration tools are widely available online (such as [Career OneStop](#), [Career Aptitudes 123Test](#), [Your Free Career Test](#) and [Career Explorer](#)).

- What are the most important things to you about your future career?

Factors to consider: daily tasks/activities, work setting, schedule/hours, potential impact, etc.

- What other priorities do you have that may affect your career choices?

Factors to consider: place(s) you want to live, family demands, hobbies, etc.



Step 2: How can you use your priorities to explore possible careers?

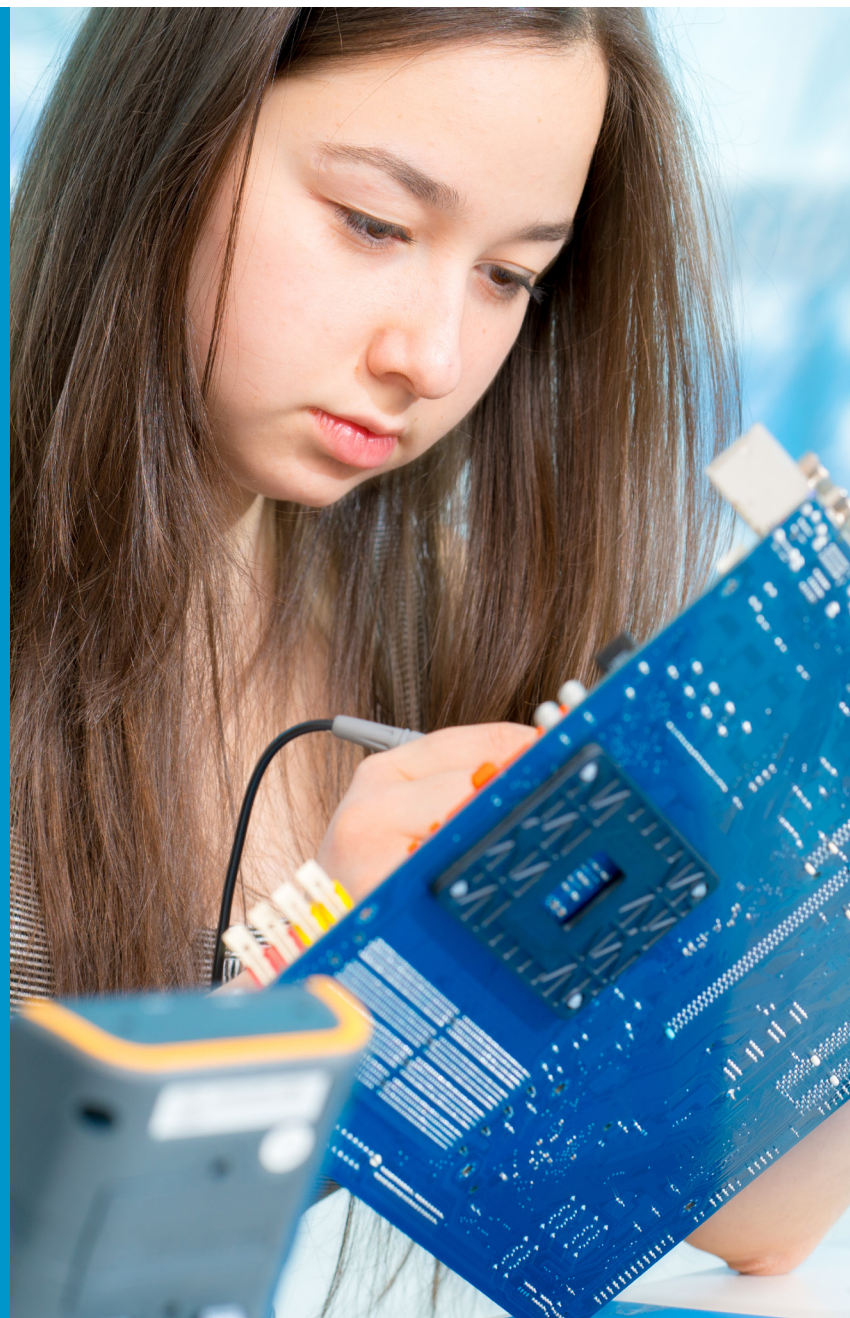
Identify your career interests.

- What fields or industries are you most interested in – and why?
- What are the different careers (jobs/occupations) in each of those fields that most interest you – and why?
- How do each of those careers align with your priorities?

Finding Reliable Information about Career Options

Your child's school may be able to provide some of the information about wages, demand and opportunities for advancement in various industries and careers. If not, or if you want more in-depth information, there are many great resources that you and your child can use to better understand the labor market and compare potential career paths. These include sources for local labor market information, such as your local chamber of commerce and workforce development board. For a broader, state-level perspective, your state's department of employment can be helpful. For even broader, national-level information, the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) is a reliable resource.

It is important that the labor market information you and your child use is as localized as possible (factoring in where you live or where your child may want to live), as wages and demand vary significantly from one area to another.





CAREER PLANNING

Step 3: What would choosing this career mean for your future?

Compare possible career outcomes. *For each career of interest, consider:*

- **Would this career allow you to financially support yourself (and possibly a family) in the place you want to live?**

Wage Information: salary/hourly wage ranges, starting pay, median pay

- **How easy or hard might it be to find a job in this career (in the areas you would want to live)?**

Demand Information: new job openings, current employment, growth/decline projections

- **Does this career provide opportunities for promotions or advancement in terms of building skills/expertise, leadership and/or compensation? Or might it eventually feel like a dead end?**



Step 4: What would you do after high school to prepare for this career?

Understand your postsecondary options. *For each career of interest, consider:*

- **What are the education and training requirements for this career?**

Factors to consider: Entry-level education/degree requirements, required licenses or preferred industry certifications

- **What college/postsecondary programs would help you meet those requirements?**

Factors to consider: Program offerings, outcomes (completion rates, graduates' employment rates, etc.)

- **How much time and money would you need to invest to meet those requirements?**

Factors to consider: Tuition rates, financial aid options, average student debt, length of program



Step 5: How could you get a jump start on preparing for this career now?

Make the most of your high school options.

- **Could you take courses to earn college credits or industry credentials in high school? Which of those opportunities would count toward the education degree/credential requirements for this career?**

Options to consider: Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), dual enrollment, industry credentials

- **Could you take any courses or programs that are related to this career – or provide the knowledge and skills needed for success?**

Options to consider: career and technical education programs, high-level math/science for STEM fields, etc.

- **How could you gain real-world experience related to this career – and learn more about what this career is really like?**

Options to consider: internships, job shadowing, volunteering, apprenticeships, etc.

Want Information About Pathway Options and Experiences? Here's Who to Talk To

School counselors are often the people that parents turn to first for information about college and career planning. While counselors can be great resources, they don't always have all the specific information you might want or need about the classes, programs and learning experiences that your child's school offers—or the college and career opportunities available. In addition to speaking with counselors, you can turn to other school personnel and members of the community, including:

- Teachers
- School and district leaders, including CTE directors
- College admissions counselors and career advisers
- Staff at your local chambers of commerce and workforce development boards
- Recent graduates and current students





What information can support decisions about your child's educational journey?

The questions below can help you understand how the opportunities offered at your school can help your child progress in their educational journey. This information can also help you assess the quality of those opportunities and the value they each could add to your child's journey. Information like course completion/pass rates, graduation rates, college success, employment outcomes and other details illustrate how well those educational opportunities are preparing students to succeed in college and career.

Questions to ask your school about the availability and quality of pathway experiences—and how they can help your child meet their goals.



Pathways, core academic courses and graduation requirements

- How can my child customize their high school courses to have as many experiences as possible that prepare them to meet their future goals?
- Are there any courses my child can take early to expand the options available to them?
- What pathways are available, and what courses and experiences do they include? How could each pathway connect my child to college and career success?

College acceleration

- What opportunities are available for my child to earn college credit?
- Which colleges and universities will accept this credit? Which will not?
- How will this credit help my child earn a college degree/credential faster? Will the credit count toward college major/program requirements, general education requirements or elective credits?
- What percent of students who participate in this course/exam actually pass and *earn college credit*?



Career-focused courses

- What career-focused courses and programs are related to my child's college and career goals? What knowledge and skills will my child learn that will help them succeed in the future?
- What job(s) does the CTE program lead to? How many jobs are available (demand)—and what do those jobs pay?
- What college and credential programs can my child complete after high school to be prepared for this career?
- How can my child earn college credit, industry credentials and work experience through this CTE program?

Industry-recognized credentials

- What credential(s) offered relate to my child's career goals?
- What jobs require or prefer each credential? How many jobs are available (demand)—and what do those jobs pay? Do employers in my community value this credential? Tip: You can explore the demand for different credentials in your state at [CredentialsMatter.org](https://www.credentialsmatter.org).
- Will colleges and postsecondary institutions award credit for this credential? Which ones?
- What percent of students who participate in this course actually take the exam? How many pass the exam and earn the credential?

Work-based learning (WBL)

- What role do real-world and workplace skills play in classroom instruction – both in academic and career-focused courses?
- How can my child explore careers and workplaces in our community?
- How can my child earn credit for work experience in industries related to their career goals?
- How can I tell whether my child has the real-world and workplace skills they need for success—and which skills they need to keep working on?



Questions about what happens to students after high school

Student outcomes provide important insights into the quality of pathways and experiences. Use the questions below to understand how other students at your school have fared in college and career— for all students and for students who complete each type of experience:

College enrollment

What percent of students enroll in college, by type of institution and most frequent institutions?

College remediation

What percent of students need to take remedial courses?

College completion

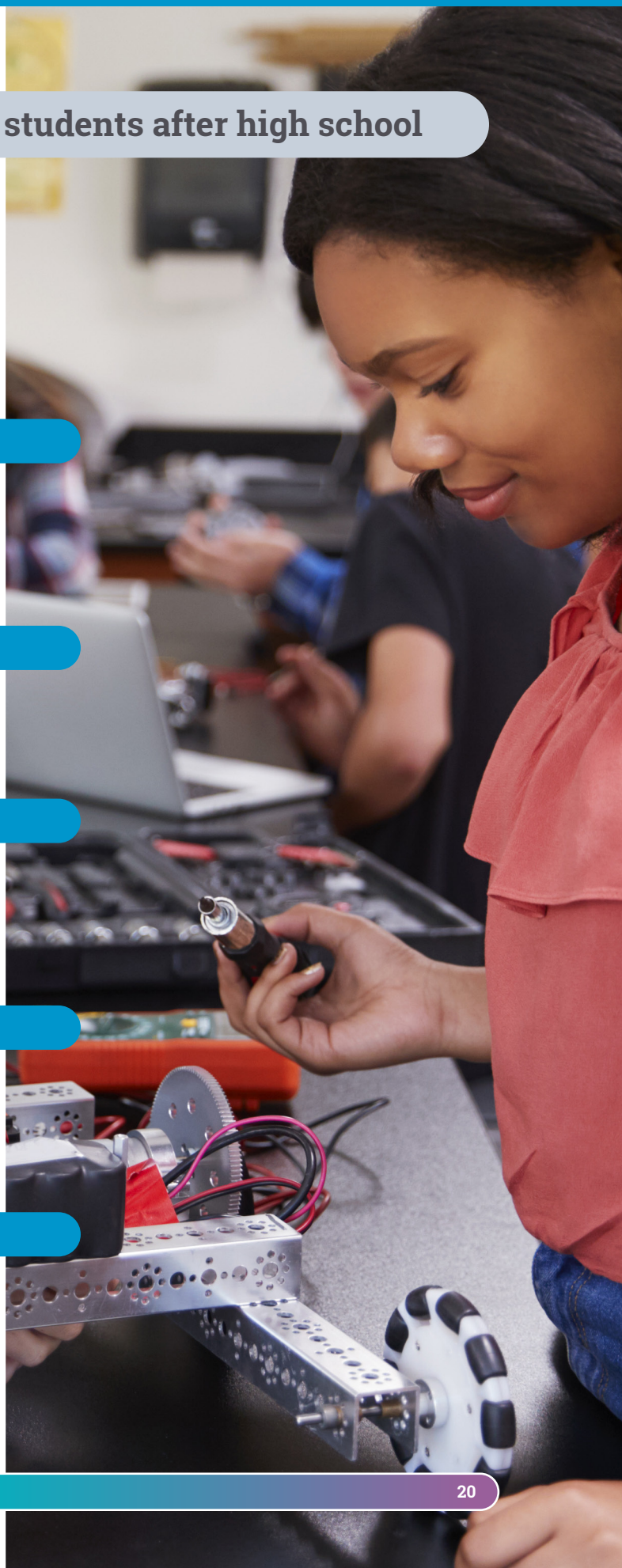
What percent of students earn their college degrees/credentials on time? What percentage do not complete college at all?

Employment

What percent of students get hired in their field after completing a particular high school/college pathway?

Wages

What wages do students earn after completing a particular high school/college pathway?



SECTION FOUR

Additional Resources for Parents



In this section:

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Example Pathways

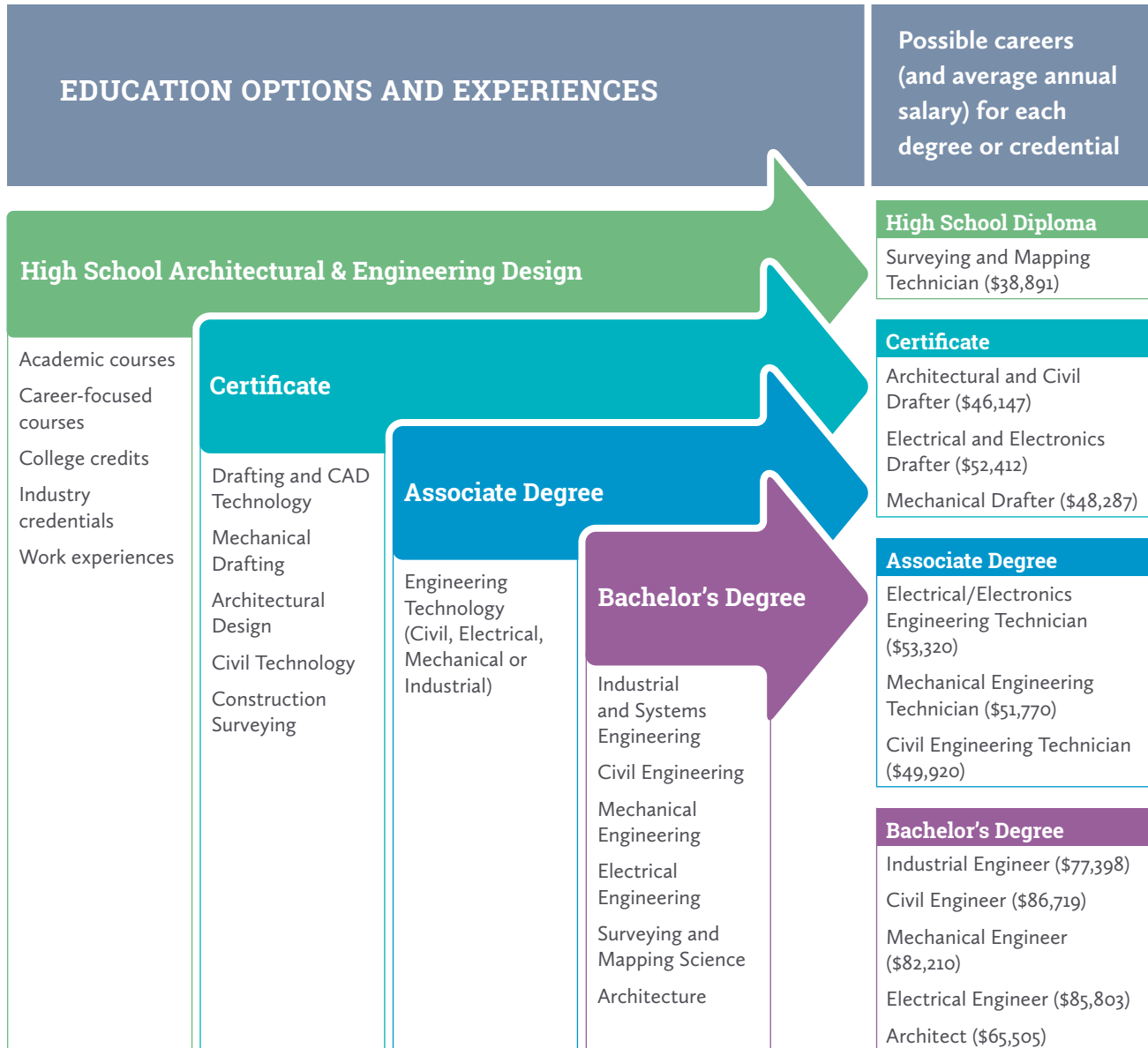
.....
Pathway Planning Templates

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Career Conversation Template



Examples of High-Quality Pathways

1. Architectural Engineering and Design Pathway



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics



2. Cybersecurity Pathway

The following example of a Cybersecurity Pathway shows the way that different types of learning experiences can build on one another to expand the opportunities available. Importantly, it highlights how foundational skills, knowledge and awareness can help students identify their interests—and accelerate toward their college and career goals.

Knowledge, Skills and Experiences Leading to Career Readiness

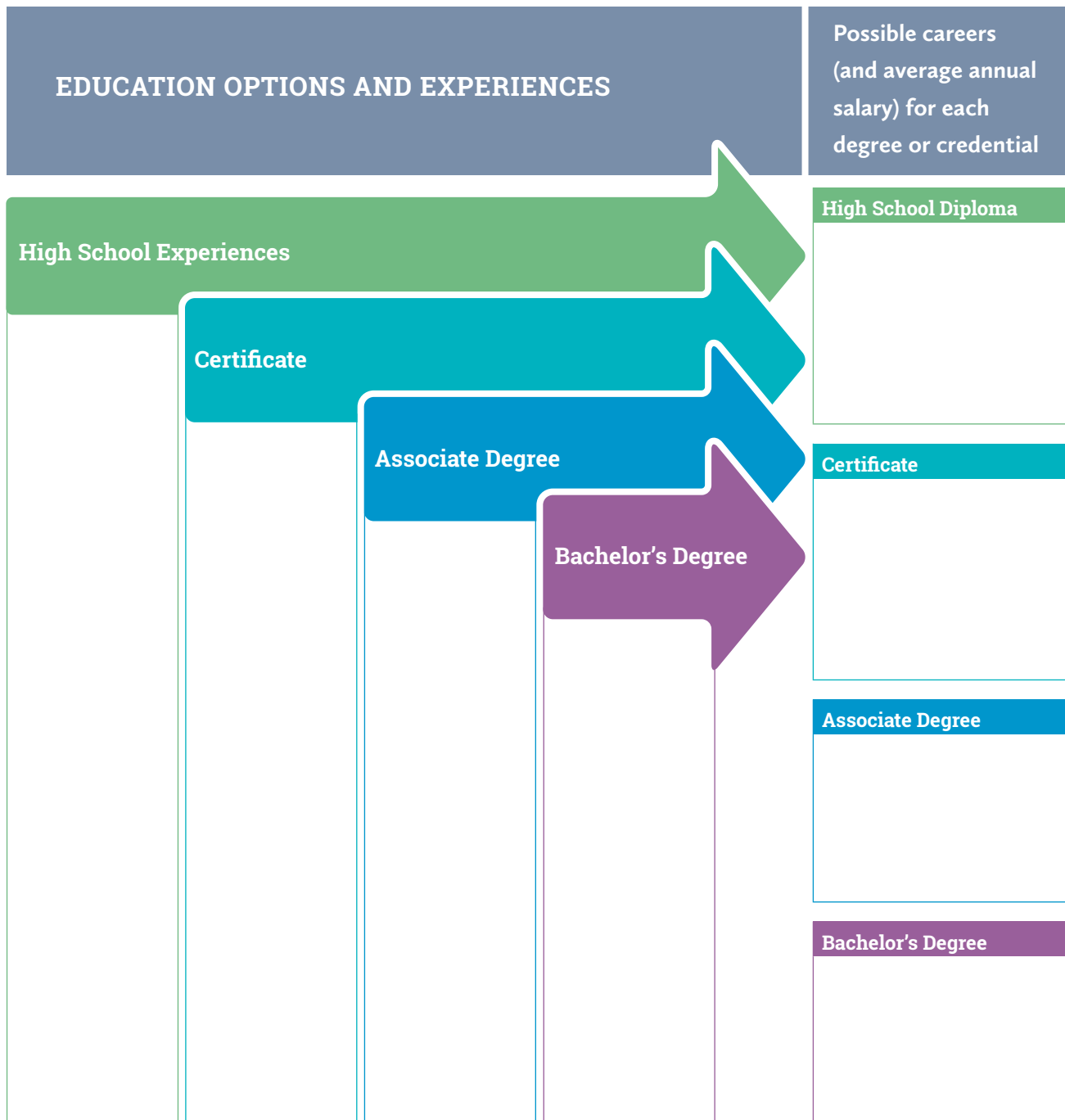
	Academic	Career-Focused	Work-Based Learning
Elementary School	Develops grade-level proficiency in math and reading.	Develops basic digital literacy skills. Participates in Code.org's Hour of Code.	Joins worksite visits and employer presentations. Conducts informational interviews. Identifies IT, Engineering, and Healthcare as areas of interest.
Middle School	Completes Algebra 1. Maintains proficiency in all content areas.	Builds digital proficiency. Learns basic app-building programming.	Job shadows at a local company. Creates a 10-year education-to-career goals plan.
High School	Earns college credit through AP math, science and computer science courses.	Completes a Cybersecurity CTE program of study. Earns CompTIA Network+ and Security+ industry certifications.	Completes industry-led projects in CTE courses, resulting in presentations to employer partners. Builds relationships with IT-industry mentors. Completes a capstone internship with a local cybersecurity company.
Postsecondary	Earns an A.S. degree early because of credits and certifications earned in high school.	Earns higher-level cybersecurity industry certifications valued by employers.	Works for local companies through the campus IT co-op program. Creates a portfolio of projects completed and skills developed.
Career Advancement Opportunities	Begins career at an above-entry level position because of credentials and work experience and advances within the company. Earns a dual B.S. in cybersecurity and M.B.A. in business administration with plans to open a cybersecurity consulting company.		



3. Blank Career Pathway Template

Use this to help your child map the career options and related educational requirements in their field of interest.

Note: This is a great resource to think about the spectrum of options that are available and to discuss what type of pathway interests your child. Pathways can be linear—go straight from high school to an associate or bachelor’s degree. But pathways can also be “stackable”, for example earn a certificate and enter the workforce and then go back to get an associate degree.





3. Blank Career Pathway Template (continued)

	8th Grade	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade	Leave High School With:
Core Academic Courses		All required courses for high school graduation, such as math, English language arts, science, social studies, history and foreign languages				
Career-Focused Courses						
College Acceleration						
Work-Based Learning						
Industry Credentials						



4. Blank Career Pathway Template

Use this to help your child map the courses and experiences that will help them achieve their college and career goals.

	Academic	Career-Focused	Work-Based Learning
Elementary School			
Middle School			
High School			
Postsecondary			
Career Advancement Opportunities			



How can you guide conversations with your child about careers? A step-by-step approach.

Use this to help your child consider their career and pathway options.

CAREER EXPLORATION

Step 1: When you think about your future career, what matters most?

Reflect on your priorities.

- What talents, interests, passions and skills would you like to use in your future career?

- What are the most important things to you about your future career?

- What other priorities do you have that may affect your career choices?

Step 2: How can you use your priorities to explore possible careers?

Identify your career interests.

- What fields or industries are you most interested in – and why?

- What are the different careers (jobs/occupations) in each of those fields that most interest you—and why?

- How do each of those careers align with your priorities?



CAREER PLANNING

Step 3: What would choosing this career mean for your future?

Compare possible career outcomes. *For each career of interest, consider:*

- **Would this career allow you to financially support yourself (and possibly a family) in the place you want to live?**

- **How easy or hard might it be to find a job in this career (in the areas you would want to live)?**

- **Does this career provide opportunities for promotions or advancement in terms of building skills/expertise, leadership and/or compensation? Or might it eventually feel like a dead end?**

Step 4: What would you do after high school to prepare for this career?

Understand your postsecondary options. *For each career of interest, consider:*

- **What are the education and training requirements for this career?**

- **What college/postsecondary programs would help you meet those requirements?**

- **How much time and money would you need to invest to meet those requirements?**



.....
Step 5: How could you get a jump start on preparing for this career now?

Make the most of your high school options.

- **Could you take courses to earn college credits or industry credentials in high school? Which of those opportunities would count toward the education degree/credential requirements for this career?**

- **Could you take any courses or programs that are related to this career – or provide the knowledge and skills needed for success?**

- **How could you gain real-world experience related to this career – and learn more about what this career is really like?**



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://www.ExcelinEd.org).



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