



Why It's Important to Plan for College as Early as Middle School

By EducationQuest Foundation

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John entered middle school with visions of a future career as an engineer – and he was determined to get there. Science was his favorite class, but he had difficulty with other classes and started falling behind. Throughout high school, he continued to struggle with academics and became more aware of the cost of college. By the time he was a senior, he gave up hope that college was possible due to his poor grades, his confusion about how to get to college, and the financial worries of paying for it.

What if someone had provided John with college planning information and guidance when he was in middle school? According to research, that type of intervention would have positively impacted John's chances of going to college.

Middle school students expect to graduate from high school and attend college. But of the 87.5% (2019-20, NDE) of Nebraska students who graduated from high school, 69.6% (2018-19 class, CCPE) continued onto college.ⁱ Over one-quarter of Nebraska students are not furthering their education to obtain skills for a career and are missing out on the benefits of education beyond high school. According to The College Board, there are "Five Ways Ed Pays:" Students will make more money over their lifetime, are less likely to be unemployed, are less likely to be obese and will exercise more often, will read to their children more often, and are more likely to vote and volunteer.

Parents also have aspirations of a promising future for their children – but may not know how to provide actions needed to help their student get to college. With no education beyond high school, John's mother didn't know how to support him – and was very concerned about how to pay for college. Parents may lack knowledge about what it takes to get to college, and are financially unprepared in that they're not saving enough or don't know about types of financial aid.

Factors that impact the ability to plan early for college:

Students lack knowledge of and the ability to plan for college

- "Although students said they were prepared for and would not drop out of high school and that they intended to attend college, 83% of students surveyed also said that they know nothing or very little about the high school courses that are required to graduate."ⁱⁱ
- Students from low-income families have limited access to college planning and career information.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, families that lack college information or resources are less likely to help plan for and eventually send their children to college.

Students lack preparedness

- Only 34% of Nebraska high school students meet three or four ACT benchmark scores – the minimum necessary for students to succeed in first-year college courses.^{iv} The middle grades are an essential time to focus on academic achievement. **Students' level of academic attainment in 8th grade has a greater impact on college and career readiness by the time they complete high school than anything they do academically in high school.**^v
- **Students need at least a 3.0 GPA in the middle grades to be college-bound; a 3.5 GPA gives them at least a 50% chance.**^{vi} In a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University, "sixth graders who failed math or English/reading, or attended school less than 80% of the time, had only a 10% to 20% chance of graduating (high school) on time."^{vii} And 40% of middle school students who say

there's a good chance they may drop out of high school also say that low grades or their inability to keep up with coursework would be the primary reason.^{viii}

- This concern is for every student, even though socioeconomic status tends to impact who is prepared for college.^{ix} Who was not on target to be ready for college-level reading by the time they graduated from high school? 60% of eighth graders whose annual family income was less than \$30,000 and whose parents did not attend college, and 25% of eighth graders whose annual family income was greater than \$100,000 and whose parents both attended college.

Students and parents are concerned about cost

- “Equally troubling is that 92% of students who said there’s a chance they might not attend college said the reason was that it costs too much.”^x
- One-third of middle school students and their families have not considered how they are going to pay for college.^{xi} Many students and parents overestimate college costs and are unaware of the availability of financial aid.^{xii}

Early college planning is important. Students who start planning early are more likely to attend college than those who don't, regardless of other barriers.^{xiii} ACT recommends middle-level efforts, citing the importance that “we expand college access and readiness programs no later than the middle grades to monitor, support, and accelerate the academic growth” – especially of low-income students.

What should middle schools do?

Develop a strong college-going culture

Students choose college if they are educated and raised in a culture where college is valued and emphasized. Educators in effective middle schools help students explore future options, set goals, and choose high school classes.^{xiv} Patricia McDonough at the Center for Educational Outreach at the University of California-Berkeley has identified nine principles of a college-going culture:^{xv}

1. College Talk
2. Clear Expectations
3. Information & Resources
4. Comprehensive Counseling Model
5. Testing & Curriculum
6. Faculty Involvement
7. Family Involvement
8. College Partnerships
9. Articulation

Motivating students for college is an important part of creating a college-going culture. Harvard researchers Savitz and Romer recommend four major steps:^{xvi}

1. Help students see themselves as college capable by facilitating activities where they explore their identity and discover their strengths.
 - a. Ask current college students who have similar traits as your students to speak in a student panel format, or make a bigger commitment, like mentoring or tutoring.
 - b. Give opportunities for students to experience college life, like going on a campus visit.
2. Help students internalize the benefits of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, and build on their interests to tap into intrinsic motivation for college.
 - a. Start with offering a tangible reward for a behavior, then transition into students continuing the positive behavior because they believe it will help them reach their goals.
 - b. When an athlete learns that hard work and dedication results in success, those same talents can be transferred to using hard work and dedication to work hard in school.

3. Help students set goals and overcome barriers by teaching them to manage their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Specifically, help them:
 - a. find short-term benefits in the college-going process.
 - b. identify multiple pathways to overcome obstacles.
4. Utilize the power of relationships. Students are four times more likely to go to college if their peers talk about and plan to go to college.^{xvii}
 - a. Get the family involved by finding opportunities for students, families, and the school to work together. This can include guiding families in: providing a place for their child to study at home, helping their child to be organized, and questions to ask their child to understand and encourage their goals – and information to help them plan for the future.

Support early academic preparedness

- Academic readiness for college and career can improve when students develop behaviors known to contribute to successful academic performance, especially in the upper elementary grades and middle school.^{xviii} Improving academic discipline (work and study habits) and orderly conduct were found to have the greatest impact on 8th grade course success.^{xix}
- Because grades are better predictors of eventual success, schools should focus on improving course performance, and less time raising test scores. Strategies to do this include:^{xx}
 - Develop five-year plans (grades 8-12) or seven-year plans (grades 6-12) so students can see and work toward a future.
 - While working on weaker skills, provide educational experiences that provide short-term success while showcasing strong skills students have, like drama or debate for students with strong verbal skills.
 - Develop an effective plan to provide extra help. Providing intentional support for concepts students are struggling with will payoff better than after-school program study time or an ill-focused study hall.
 - Teach self-management skills, like note-taking and time-management.
 - Always take action early! Early intervention is key.

Stress the importance of attendance^{xxi}

Strategies aimed at attendance improvement could have more of a pay-off for high school and college graduation as efforts aimed at improving test scores.

Consider taking the following actions:^{xxii}

- Measure attendance in informative and actionable ways: every absence should elicit a response so students know they are missed. Then solve any issues impeding their ability to get to school.
- Recognize strong attendance on a regular basis – both individually and through the positive peer pressure of collective success (by homeroom/classroom/grade level).
- Prioritize making your school a safe and engaging place for students to enter.

Inform students and parents about ways to pay for college

- In a University of Michigan study, children as young as eleven planned to devote more time to schoolwork and have bigger goals when they viewed college as a realistic outcome for them – because of financial aid. However, this effect was not seen in children with already struggling grades, implying financial aid information should be given to families early, before a student falls behind.^{xxiii}

- Families will be more likely to plan ahead and encourage their child to prepare for college if they understand that grant aid will cover a significant portion of the cost of college.^{xxiv}

How EducationQuest Foundation supports middle-level efforts

EducationQuest Foundation, a nonprofit organization with a mission to improve access to higher education in Nebraska, provides **free** college access programs and resources for middle-level students and educators.

Look2College

EducationQuest’s *Look2College* program introduces initial college-going language and concepts students should consider, starting in 6th grade. This program helps students think about:

- **What do you want to be?** Explore career options.
- **How will you get there?** Make good choices that will lead you to be your best self.
- **How will you pay for it?** Learn how to earn and save money – including saving some of it for college.

KnowHow2GO

KnowHow2GO is an early college planning program that provides steps 7th and 8th grade students can follow:

- **Find the right fit.** Explore careers that fit your interests and skills – and then research colleges that are a good fit for you.
- **Push yourself.** Take tough courses in high school – and get involved in extracurricular activities.
- **Put your hands on some cash.** Money is available to help you pay for college, but you have to apply.

EducationQuest provides free resources to guide students in these steps. Find these in the [“Professionals” section](#) at EducationQuest.org.

ⁱ [2021 Nebraska Higher Education Progress Report](#). Nebraska’s Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education.

ⁱⁱ “A Voice from the Middle,” National Association of Secondary School Principals and PDK, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brand, B & Valent, A. 2014. Career and College Exploration in Afterschool Programs. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved July 2015, Middle Grades Research Series from College & Career Clubs.

^{iv} [“The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2018: Nebraska.” ACT, 2018.](#)

^v “The Forgotten Middle,” ACT, 2008.

^{vi} [UChicagoCCSR “Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools,” Nov. 2014.](#)

^{vii} [Balfanz, Robert. “Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path: A Policy and Practice Brief.” Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, Philadelphia Education Fund, National Middle School Association. June 2009.](#)

^{viii} “A Voice from the Middle.”

^{ix} “The Forgotten Middle,” ACT, 2008.

^x “A Voice from the Middle.”

^{xi} Wimberly, G. & Noeth, R. 2005. College Readiness Begins in Middle School. Iowa City, IA: ACT. Retrieved July 2015, Middle Grades Research Series from College & Career Clubs.

^{xii} Ibid.

Longanecker, D. & Blanco, C. 2003. “Student Financial Assistance.” Student Success: Statewide P-16 Systems. Boulder, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers. Retrieved July 2015, Middle Grades Research Series from College & Career Clubs.

^{xiii} Cabrera, A., La Nasa, S., & Burkum, K. 2001. Pathways to a Four-Year Degree: The Higher Education Story of One Generation. Retrieved July 2015, Middle Grades Research Series from College & Career Clubs.

^{xiv} Wimberly, G. & Noeth, R.

^{xv} [Friedman MacDonald, M. & Dorr, A. 2006. Creating a College Going Culture: A Resource Guide. BEST Collaboration in Los Angeles County.](#)

^{xvi} Savitz-Romer, M. and Bouffard, S. “Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success.” Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012.

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- ^{xvii} Choy, S. 2002. *Access & Persistence: Findings from 10 Years of Longitudinal Research on Students*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. Retrieved July 2015, Middle Grades Research Series from College & Career Clubs.
- ^{xviii} "The Forgotten Middle," ACT, 2008.
- ^{xix} UChicagoCCSR." Balfanz.
- ^{xx} Balfanz.
- ^{xxi} UChicagoCCSR.
- ^{xxii} Balfanz.
- ^{xxiii} [Destin, Mesmin and Oyserman, Daphna, "From Assets to School Outcomes: How Finances Shape Children's Perceived Possibilities and Intentions," *Psychological Science*, 20.3 \(2009\), 10 March 2009](#)
- ^{xxiv} [Baum, Sandy, Minton, Sarah, Blatt, Lorraine. *Delivering Early Information About College Financial Aid: Exploring the Options for Middle School Students.* July 2015.](#)