

Site Visit Summary: Cross-District Findings

How do students explore and develop career interests in middle and high school? To answer this question, RTI International and the University of Delaware, in consultation with partners including the Delaware Department of Education and Rodel of Delaware, are conducting a 4-year study of career development opportunities in school districts in the Wilmington, Delaware area. This work is part of the national Career and Technical Education (CTE) Research Network, which is supporting concurrent research projects on career readiness in six U.S. cities with funding from the U.S. Department of Education. The study's first year was dedicated to an exploratory study of the opportunities available to middle and high school students in three Wilmington school districts: Colonial, Red Clay Consolidated, and New Castle County Vocational Technical (NCCVT). The research team met with over 150 administrators, teachers, advisors, students, and employers virtually and during on-site visits to the three districts in spring 2025. For more information about the study, visit https://decdstudy.rti.org/.

Cross-Site Findings

This brief summarizes what the team learned about career development opportunities across the districts and schools visited, including participants' perceptions and experiences. To protect confidentiality, the content focuses on perspectives shared by multiple participants. The site visit findings will inform further data collection and analysis, and district members are invited to provide feedback on the information shared in this brief.

The site visits focused on the career development opportunities available to students and how these opportunities are structured and delivered. The cross-district analysis indicates that high school pathway programs are the cornerstone of career development in each of the districts visited. These programs provide students with structured opportunities to prepare for specific industries or occupational fields such as health care or information technology (IT). While program design varies by district, school, and career area, all programs offer courses with instruction in academic and technical skills and may include

options for students to attain industry certifications, participate in work-based learning, or earn early college credit. The sections that follow provide additional detail on the districts' career development opportunities, student experiences, and challenges and recommendations shared by participants.

Career Development Opportunities: The research team asked district and school administrators, counselors, and teachers to describe their approach to career development and available career readiness programs and activities.

Although pathway programs are central to career development in each district, district and school staff members described an emphasis in recent years on career exploration and advising, including supporting students' decision-making regarding high school and pathway choices. In recent years, Red Clay and Colonial have expanded pathway options and strengthened career exploration in middle school, and all three districts have enhanced supports for ninth-grade career exploration. As a result, students increasingly engage in career development activities from middle school on, typically completing all or most of the following **career development milestones** from grades 6 through 12:

- Middle school:
  - Classes on career development and career and technical education (CTE) exploration
  - Introduction to activities such as interest inventories, student success plans, and financial literacy exercises, sometimes using online platforms
- Transition:
  - High school and pathway program choices
  - CTE program rotations in grade 9
- High school:
  - Pathway course completion
  - Options for pathway-aligned, industry-recognized credentials; work-based learning; and dual credit coursework

In addition, pathway programs may be delivered alongside other programs that provide general college and career readiness to students needing extra support, such as Jobs for Delaware Graduates (JDG) and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Center.

In their conversations with the research team, district and school staff members described the following the **key features and priorities** that shape the career development and pathway programs:

Career advising: Career advising begins in middle school with classroom instruction and one-on-one sessions with school counselors. At this stage, students explore career interests using structured curricula and, in some schools, develop student success plans, which are updated annually throughout high school, sometimes using online platforms such as Naviance or Pathful. Middle school students learn about high school options through visits by high school staff and high school tours and open houses for students and their families. Teachers and counselors described these activities as helpful in guiding students to select an appropriate pathway program and high school.

In high school, most schools offer exploratory rotations for ninth graders, allowing them to sample multiple pathways before committing to one for the remainder of their studies. Participants emphasized that these rotations improve student satisfaction and retention, although administrators and teachers noted they require careful scheduling and coordination.

Career awareness and exploration: During middle and high school, students participate in career awareness and exploration activities such as career fairs, workplace tours, employer visits, and field trips to career-relevant locations, including training institutes and colleges. In addition, students have the chance to apply classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios through career and technical student organization (CTSO) memberships and competitions. Teachers described CTSOs as building students' confidence, public speaking skills, and professional etiquette but noted that funding and travel costs can sometimes limit student participation.

Career immersion activities: All students participate in career awareness and exploration activities, and most participate in pathway program coursework. Not all students experience more intensive, immersive, work-based learning activities, although NCCVT has high rates of participation. These activities include co-ops or internships held at employer worksites for students attending vo-tech high schools. At comprehensive schools, work-based learning practicums may include volunteering, paid work opportunities, and job shadows. Several schools run student-led businesses such as auto service shops or retail stores, which school staff described as practical alternatives when transportation or employer partnerships limit off-site work experiences.

Industry credentials: Many pathways incorporate industry-recognized certifications such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) 10, phlebotomy, and ServSafe. These certifications may be integrated into pathway coursework or require additional coursework or clinical hours and are sometimes supported by district or grant funding to reduce cost barriers. Administrators and teachers shared that credentials give students a competitive edge for employment and validate their technical proficiency before graduation.

Early college credit: Pathway students can earn college credits through dual enrollment with local colleges like Del Tech or Wilmington University in all three districts, and through advanced course work (e.g., Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate) in comprehensive high schools. Many of these courses meet general education requirements for college degrees, but some pathway teachers described pathway-aligned dual credit courses that also meet the requirements of or provide advance standing in an occupational program such as nursing. Teachers described these courses as a way for students to get a head start on postsecondary education while reinforcing the skills taught in the pathway.

Students' Perceptions and Feedback: During focus groups, the research team asked students to describe their career plans and the influence of their school and pathway experiences on their career interests

- **Career influences:** Students said they primarily rely on pathway teachers and counselors for career advice, with teachers often being the most influential because of their industry experience and daily interactions with students. Ninth-grade rotations were described as critical for making decisions, allowing students to experience multiple pathways before committing to one. Family members also play a role, especially when students had relatives in certain trades or careers, while peers occasionally influence choices based on shared interests. Overall, students emphasized that hands-on exposure and personal conversations matter more than formal presentations or online resources when shaping their career interests.

> *"My mom and almost every female in my family are nurses or home health aides, so I was thinking about allied health. But I was also thinking about law. Touring high schools helped me decide because they showed me the different programs and what they offered."*
>
> — Pathways student

- **Middle to high school transition:** Middle school students described their transition to high school with a mix of excitement and uncertainty, shaped largely by the need to select both a high school and then a pathway. Some students described pathway availability as a factor in choosing a high school, but school reputation, school visits, and the advice of family members were mentioned as influences more often. In terms of pathway choice, high school students described ninth-grade pathway rotations as helpful, but some noted that limited time in each program and the difficulty of switching later created pressure to "get it right" early.

- **Career exploration:** Students described attending career fairs at school, visiting college campuses, and hearing presentations from employers and military recruiters. These events exposed them to a variety of career and education options and provided networking opportunities. Some students highlighted specialized experiences such as touring hospitals, banks, or automotive training centers, which helped them understand workplace environments. Although students appreciated these opportunities, they wished such events occurred more frequently and earlier in their school years.

> *"In junior year, we had to go shadow medical assistants and nurses. It really helped because I was low key in a nurse's shoes for a day—I even took somebody's blood pressure, and it helped me get over the fear of explaining what I'm doing to people."*
>
> — Pathways student

- **Industry certifications:** Students frequently mentioned earning certifications including ServSafe, Certified Nursing Assistant, and Microsoft Excel, especially in their junior and senior years. They described the preparation process, exam timelines, and importance of these credentials for employment and postsecondary advancement. Students appreciated that schools often covered initial costs but noted that retakes could be expensive, creating pressure to pass on the first attempt.
- **Early college credit:** Students mentioned dual enrollment less than other activities, but those who participated found it highly beneficial. They described earning credits through partnerships with local colleges and noted the rigor of these courses. Students saw dual enrollment as a way to save money and get ahead academically but noted that doing well required strong time management. Students described counselors and teachers as playing a key role in advising students about these opportunities and giving them the confidence to try college coursework in high school.

Challenges and Future Directions. In their conversations with the research team, participants noted challenge and areas for future development in their efforts to expand and improve career readiness opportunities for students.

- **Time for career development:** Teachers and students shared that early and consistent exposure to career options helps students make informed choices about their futures. However, school schedules, largely driven by academic requirements, limit the time devoted to career development. Many students, teachers observed, lack clear long-term goals and need tangible connections between school and the real-world to stay engaged. Students often frame their career interests in terms of earning potential rather than alignment with personal strengths or passions. Several teachers attributed this mindset to a culture of instant gratification and the influence of social media, which can make sustained effort toward future goals less appealing. State and district staff highlighted recent initiatives to expand career development in middle school as steps toward addressing this challenge.

- **Balancing flexibility and decision-making in career development:** Teachers, advisors, and administrators described a tension between providing students with career development choices and students' developmental readiness to make career decisions. Teachers especially noted that students who are unhappy in their pathway may become disengaged or risk not meeting graduation requirements if they try to change pathways after 10th grade. To prepare students, middle and high schools are working to provide them with more information and support earlier in selecting a pathway that they will persist in and meet graduation requirements. Participants described trying to strike a balance between providing students with meaningful exposure to careers but not locking them in too early.
- **Transport for work-based learning:** Participants identified transportation as the most significant obstacle for students' participation in workplace experiences, such as co-ops and job shadowing. Many students lack reliable access to cars or public transit, making it difficult to attend work-based learning opportunities. Teachers explained that, even when employers are willing to host students, logistical challenges often derail placements. This barrier disproportionately affects students from low-income families, limiting equitable access to career development. Schools attempt creative solutions such as scheduling during the school day or arranging district-provided transport, but these efforts are resource intensive and not always feasible.

> *"Having somebody from outside come in gives [students] a better perspective on what it looks like out there, as does having the equipment that they're going to use out there. We've got [some of the] best technology out there right now. They get excited about that stuff because they hear from the seniors that that's what they're using outside, and now they get to use it in the lab. The hands-on bit is very engaging, and they get excited about the treatment portion of it."*
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> —Pathways teacher

- **Pathway access:** State and district staff members recognized variations in career development and pathway program resources across schools and districts, such as the number of programs available and the availability of seats in those programs. Schools and programs also vary in the availability of employer connections for work-based learning. They also noted that aspects of pathways, such as industry-recognized credentials and materials, can entail costs that can create barriers for students. While schools often subsidize or fundraise to offset expenses, these solutions are not always sufficient or sustainable. This financial burden disproportionately affects students from low-income families, limiting equitable access to high-value credentials.
- **Industry partnerships:** High school staff reported difficulty securing enough employer partners to provide meaningful work-based learning experiences. While relationships have grown over time, schools remain dependent on what industries are willing and able to offer, which can fluctuate based on economic conditions and liability concerns. This challenge is especially acute in specialized fields like health care, where strict

regulations and age restrictions limit student access. Participants emphasized the importance of district-level staff and Memoranda of Understanding to provide employers with a clear point of contact, to equalize employer partnerships across programs and schools, and to sustain employer partnerships over time.

- **Professional development for CTE instructors:** CTE teachers consistently emphasized a need for field-specific professional development. Because most schools or districts employ only a few teachers per career area, they recommended statewide professional learning opportunities that bring together pathway teachers from similar or related fields across multiple schools. Participants also observed that field-specific professional development is essential for delivering relevant, high-quality instruction aligned with current workforce demands.

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