



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Requirements and Challenges for a Junior Year Career Day

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Authorizing Legislation: [Senate Bill 5600 \(2022\)](#)

Rebecca Wallace

**Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education
and Pathway Preparation**

Prepared by:

- **Stephanie Thompson**, Career Connect Washington Program Specialist
stephanie.thompson@k12.wa.us | 360-434-3730
- **Kim Reykdal**, Director of Graduation & Pathway Preparation
kim.reykdal@k12.wa.us | 360-870-8563

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary3

Introduction4

Challenges5

Recommendations.....6

Conclusion & Next Steps8

Acknowledgements.....8

References8

Legal Notice9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Section 11 (1) of Senate Bill 5600 (2022) required the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), in collaboration with Career Connect Washington (CCW), to submit a report to the Legislature detailing the requirements for, options for, and any barriers to Washington's high schools having a Career Pathways Day once per year for students in their junior year. This includes any recommendations on necessary legislative actions.

Research has shown that to maximize total benefit, students' career development should begin early and extend throughout their K–12 educational experience. In Washington, K–12 career connected learning activities currently supported by the CCW initiative are both important to and highly compatible with the High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) graduation requirement, which provides the framework for advising and guiding all students through their secondary educational experience and into further education and training or employment after high school.

Based on recommendations from career and technical education (CTE) staff and feedback from partners representing the Career Connect Washington statewide initiative, this report concludes that waiting until junior year to host a career day is too late. Instead, any directive to provide a career pathways day for students should be re-considered in light of timing recommendations found in research and best practices for students' overall career development.

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that career development should occur throughout the K–12 education experience. Support should begin in the elementary years with developmentally appropriate career awareness and career exploration opportunities that increase students’ understanding of possible occupations of interest.¹ Career exploration support would continue in earnest during the middle school years. By high school, students should be moving from exploration to preparation, aligning their course choices with career preparation interests and their postsecondary education and training goals. This K–12 continuum is supported nationally and by organizations across Washington state.

Nationally, current efforts to ensure that students receive timely exposure to career awareness and exploration opportunities align well with Washington’s High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) process. The national Coalition for Career Development Center (CCDC) is an industry-led coalition comprised of leaders from education, business, government, and non-profit organizations. Just as districts must begin students HSBP development in seventh or eighth grade, the CCDC asserts that “career development activities should begin no later than middle school and require all students to develop and maintain a personal Career and Academic Plan that aligns career and life goals to academic, post-secondary, and career pathways.”²

Within Washington, the Washington Association for Career and Technical Education (WA-CTE) strives to support Career and Technical Education (CTE) staff to provide high quality CTE opportunities for all students. Based on the collaboratively developed [Career Exploration in Middle School: Setting Students on the Path to Success](#) report conducted by the national organizations Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) and Career Cruising (now Xello), the WA-CTE also promotes the research-backed assertion that middle school is a critical time when students can benefit the most from career exploration. In this report, career exploration is defined as “a process of building self-awareness, learning about potential careers, and developing a plan for reaching future goals.”³

The Career Connect Washington (CCW) statewide initiative is collective impact coalition that encompasses local, regional, and statewide partnerships between public and private entities including, but not limited to, education (K–12 and higher education); government agencies; business and labor; regional Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) networks; and other community-based organizations. This composite of statewide and regional partnerships works collaboratively to elevate the provision of a comprehensive K–20 approach to ensuring that all students are connected to information and opportunities that can help them identify and prepare for post-secondary education and training or employment.

¹ Mariani, M., Berger, C., Koerner, K., Sandlin, C., (2016). *Operation Occupation: A college and career readiness intervention for elementary students*. Professional School Counseling, 20 (1), 65-76.

² Coalition for Career Development Center. (2021). Career Readiness Engagement Policy Forum Pillar 1: Prioritizing Career Planning. Retrieved from www.ccd-center.org/career-readiness-engagement-policy-forum-pillar-i-prioritizing-career-planning

³ Association for Career and Technical Education and Career Cruising. (2018). *Career Exploration in Middle School: Setting Students on the Path to Success*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Specifically, CCW partners work to support the development and implementation of Career Connected Learning for all students, with particular emphasis on creating equity and access for student populations who have been historically underrepresented in postsecondary metrics. Activities are designed to bring students into career awareness at a younger age, then provide more career exploration opportunities in late elementary and middle school. Common career exploration activities, which often tend to be one-time events, can include career speakers, taking the career interest inventory that begins a student's HSBP, career and college fairs, field trips, and career connected classroom activities. By high school, students are supported to engage in career preparation activities specific to their interests and goals. These can include but are not limited to available CTE courses, work-based learning in particular occupations or industries, and career launch opportunities that include paid worksite learning, pre-apprenticeship, or apprenticeship programming.

Washington state strongly encourages early use of the High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) platform with middle school students as they begin using the HSBP guidance framework to identify personal interests and strengths, and receive increasing exposure to career exploration activities, such as guest speakers, hands-on workshops or classroom activities, industry-led competitions, worksite visitations and field trips, career and college fairs, speaker forums, and so on. With educator support, students use the HSBP to align their interests with career pathways. This working portfolio evolves as the students' understanding of their local, regional, and global economies expand, industry sectors are identified, and specific occupations of interest become known. Additionally, the HSBP can influence a student's academic coursework, so when a student completes high school, they have a clear understanding of next steps, are prepared for work, and/or are engaged in pursuing continued education and training through college or apprenticeship pathways.

CHALLENGES

While hosting a career day provides students an invaluable opportunity to engage in career exploration, waiting until the junior year is too late in their educational experience. A junior year career day would afford students only a short window of opportunity to apply what was learned at that event to engage in relevant course choices, school clubs and activities, community service, a possible job or internship, and postsecondary planning and application processes during their senior year. Having an event only for junior year students minimizes the return on investment for staff time and for potential impact on students' postsecondary planning and preparation.

This type of career and college exploration exposure should not be limited to one grade nor just one time during a student's K–12 education. However, regardless of when in the K–12 educational experience a career day is hosted, there are additional challenges related to the amount of staff time expended for the design, planning, coordination, and facilitation of a career day event. Teachers, school counselors, career center specialists, and other non-instructional support staff need training to ensure understanding of the multiple pathways and postsecondary options available to students in preparation for their career goals. Both time and training often require additional financial investment or the reallocation of existing training requirements and resources.

Additionally, district-level career day events can be challenging for regional and statewide colleges, local and statewide employers, and other partners to attend, depending on how many events are hosted in the region/state, at what time during the year, and their location. Current reductions in enrollment have left many colleges with smaller numbers of outreach staff to attend career and college fair events. The same staffing reductions persist across many employment sectors within the economy, making it more difficult to recruit local, regional, or statewide employers to participate in hundreds of events taking place at the district level. Whenever possible, smaller, more remote districts should consider a regional approach to meet students' needs and maximize attendance from college staff, apprenticeship and military representatives, and employers.

Finally, across Washington each year, approximately 50,000 of the state's 16- to 18-year-old students engage in a paid work experience, with the majority working in entry-level positions within the retail, grocery, or food service industries. Waiting until junior year is too late to offer a career day event that could inspire students to pursue work in other industry sectors and entry-level job opportunities that could better align to their postsecondary goals. The aspiration and intention of the statewide CCW initiative is to increase student participation in career-connected learning opportunities that include paid work experience and either the completion of college credit or an industry recognized credential. Working through the partnerships already established through the CCW collaborative, districts could be supported to collaborate across K–12, higher education, and business and industry to provide students with a comprehensive K–12 career and college readiness system of support that includes career awareness and exploration in elementary grades, career exploration and preparation throughout middle school and high school and career launch opportunities for students entering their junior year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since career development within the K–12 system is ideally an iterative process, career day events should not be limited to only one grade level nor only one time in a student's educational experience. Planning, organizing, and facilitating a career day should maximize the return on investment of participants' time and effort and district resource spent. In addition, there should be sufficient opportunity for a variety of career and college representatives to participate, and for students to have significant time to apply what they learn through career exploration events. Therefore, staff from OSPI and the CCW statewide initiative recommend the following:

1. Career awareness should begin in early elementary school, with state guidance developed and distributed to promote the use of best practices for providing initial district and regional career exploration events to take place in the late elementary years.
 - Spokane Public Schools is a model of this recommendation through their provision of a [Fall T24 Elementary Career Fair](#) for 5th and 6th grade students from all elementary schools, held as a regional event in the Spokane Convention Center.
2. Career exploration events offered during middle should be directly tied to the initial development of HSBPs, which must begin by 7th or 8th grade with the completion of a career interest inventory or assessment.

- Ideally, districts would use the collective results of their middle school students' career interest inventory to determine which colleges, employers, trades, and other organizations best match their students' interests and postsecondary plans.
 - State HSBP guidance and resources should be updated to promote the use of best practices for providing a HSBP-informed middle school career exploration event open to at least 7th and 8th grade students.
3. Career exploration events offered during high should be informed by aggregate data showing students' saved careers and colleges within the HSBP platform. Regional events should take place in the fall for grades 9–12 and include the required Financial Aid Advising Day established in [RCW 28A.300.815](#). Fall career day events would provide students ample time to apply what they learn to their course decisions, engagement in activities, and pursuit of paid work experiences for the following school year.
 - State HSBP guidance and resources should be updated to promote the use of best practices for HSBP data-informed career and college exploration events for grades 9–12 and inclusive of the required Financial Aid Advising Day.
 4. Additional fiscal support should be provided for a transportation budget enhancement available to district consortiums who, due to the small size of their student population and/or remote location, collaborate to offer regional career and college exploration events and therefore need to provide transportation in order to ensure equitable access.
 5. Legislative change to [RCW 28A.230.091](#) (High School and Beyond Plan – Best Practices) and/or [RCW 28A.230.215](#) (High School and Beyond Plan – Electronic Platform) is needed to mandate a multi-year transition to a single statewide online HSBP platform in Washington.
 - Using a single HSBP platform across Washington could enable districts to share relevant data that could inform the invitations to career and college representatives and incentivize their participation with evidence of student interest.
 - Development of a shared portal within a statewide HSBP platform for scheduling career day events statewide could support the maximum representation from college staff, apprenticeship and military representatives, and employers.
 6. Legislative change to [RCW 28A.415.445](#) (Professional learning days – mental health topics – cultural competency, diversity, equity, and inclusion) is recommended to include best practices for developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive career and college readiness (CCR) training for K–12 administrators, teachers, school counselors, and appropriate non-instructional school staff to reinforce school-wide CCR support.
 - Inclusion of CCR training could be developed as an extension, or practical application, of both the social emotional learning training and the newly required training about the cultural competency, equity, diversity, and inclusion standards of practice developed by the Professional Educator Standards Board.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

The recommendations outlined in this report will require continued collaboration between OSPI, Career Connect Washington (CCW) and other partners to develop new guidance and resources for grades K–6 and to update and expand existing High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) guidance and resources for grades 7–12. Ideally, all students would receive ongoing guidance and deepening exposure to culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate career and college readiness activities. This would include access to multiple Career Day-type events occurring during the late elementary, middle school and high school years, and a school-wide approach to where all relevant staff are trained to support students’ exploration and preparation journey.

In support of the policy recommendations, OSPI is working with legislators to introduce in the 2023 session an option for consideration that would move Washington in the direction of adopting a single statewide online platform for the HSBP. Adopting a single platform would enable OSPI and partners across K–12, higher education, labor and industry, and community-based organizations to share relevant HSBP data related to students’ interests and postsecondary aspirations. This would ultimately improve both student engagement and understanding of the connection between their education and work while increasing their participation in available career and college exploration and preparation opportunities. A single platform would also allow for provision of more direct and universal staff training to better support HSBP implementation and shared learning of best practices. Moving Washington toward a comprehensive, data-driven approach to high school and beyond planning where students get multiple opportunities to engage in career days and other career exploration events will ensure maximum benefit and access for all students.

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REFERENCES

- Mariani, M., Berger, C., Koerner, K., Sandlin, C., (2016). *Operation Occupation: A college and career readiness intervention for elementary students*. Professional School Counseling, 20 (1), 65-76.
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Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Chris Reykdal | State Superintendent
Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
Old Capitol Building | P.O. Box 47200
Olympia, WA 98504-7200