EducationWeek® | SPOTLIGHT 2026

What Works: How District Leaders Are Redefining Student Readiness



Luca D'Urbino for Education Week

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Preparing students for life after high school has never been more complex. As expectations shift beyond the traditional college pathway, schools are **rethinking academic rigor, career and technical education, AI, and the skills students need to succeed**. This collection of articles explores how schools are balancing **college and career preparation**, why **workforce-focused learning** is gaining momentum, what it takes to build **career pathways that serve every student**, and what **emerging technologies** mean for student success. Together, these stories offer a timely look at the future of college and career readiness.



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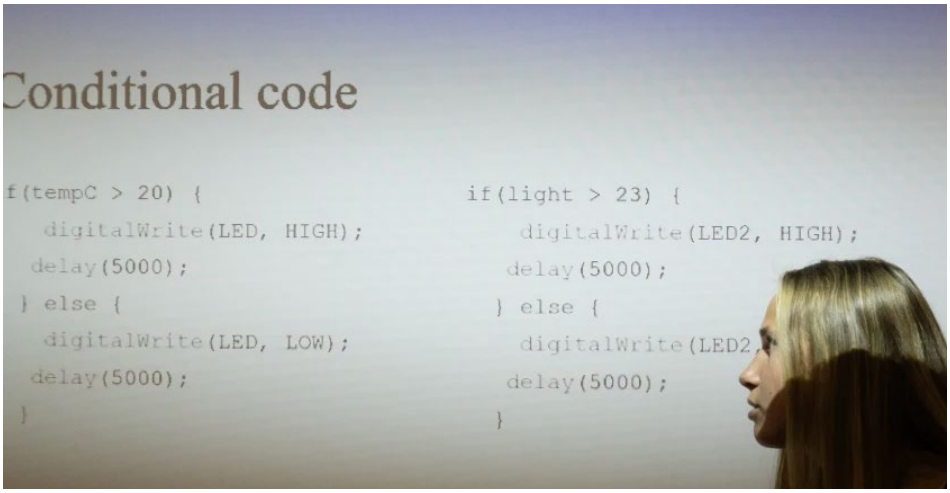
OPINION

There's a New AP Business Course. College Board's CEO Explains Why 16

Published May 12, 2026

Interest in Career and Tech. Ed. Has Jumped. Which Fields Will See the Biggest Growth?

By Mark Walsh



Thomas Hammond for Education Week

A 9th grader presents her AI-powered project during a high school's Introduction to AI class in Greer, S.C. K-12 and college officials both expect to introduce new technology-based, career-focused classes in the years ahead.

Strong majorities of educators in K-12 and college say their students' interest in work-based learning has increased in recent years—and many of them expect their institutions to introduce new technology-based courses in the years ahead.

Those are some of the core findings of a pair of EdWeek Research Center surveys, which offer a comparative look at the direction of career-focused coursework in K-12 schools and colleges.

The survey finds that more than 3 in 10 of the K-12 officials surveyed predict that the number of courses they offer in digital technology, IT, AI, and cybersecurity will increase over the next five years. More than 4 in 10 college-level officials indicated the same thing.

The survey of K-12 educators was conducted by the EdWeek Research Center from Sept. 18 through Oct. 27 last year. A total of 472 educators participated, including 144 administrators in schools that offer career and technical education, and 114 district-level administrators who had some connection to CTE.

The survey of postsecondary educators was conducted from Nov. 6 to Dec. 16 last year and included responses from 592 faculty members or instructors, 51 administrators, and three respondents who identified as "other."

Overall, 71% of the pre-college educators surveyed say that interest in CTE among their students has increased in the past five years, either a little (37%) or a lot (34%). Just 7 percent think students' interest has decreased a little or a lot during that time.

The results are similar among postsecondary educators, with 58% of respondents at that level saying student interest in work-based learning has increased a lot or a little, while 12 percent said student interest has declined.

When the K-12 educators were surveyed on which types of CTE offerings they expect to grow over the next five years, the largest portion, 31% selected the broad category of digital, AI, and cybersecurity offerings. The next-largest areas are construction, including civil engineering (18%); advanced manufacturing (also 18%); education (17%); and physical and behavioral health and human/personal services, including cosmetology (17%).

Only 14% of educators responded that they expected no such growth in CTE over the next five years.

Categories for potential five-year growth on the low end of responses included financial services, which was grouped with real estate (9%), and marketing, at 8%.

Postsecondary educators expect work-based learning course offerings to increase the most in digital technology, IT, AI, and cybersecurity, cited by 41% of respondents; followed by physical and behavioral health and human/personal services, a category that includes cosmetology (22%); advanced manufacturing, including engineering (20%); and education, 18%.

The opportunity to get job experience while in school

Experts on career- and work-based learning said the survey results underscore the emphasis many education institutions are placing on giving students access to on-the-job skills that employers are likely to value.

"The results make sense," said Artem Gulish, senior federal policy advisor at Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. "Employers increasingly want candidates with at least some work experience, even at entry-level."

It follows that students will seek out that training, and schools and colleges want to deliver it, Gulish said. In addition, work-based learning courses present opportunities for students to "develop professional networks and find mentorship," he said.

Gulish said he was somewhat surprised that fields such as marketing and finance were on the low end of predicted course growth at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels.

"Some institutions may already offer work-based learning experiences in these areas, while others may not see as much student demand" for those courses, he said.

But he was not surprised that classes focused on technology, including artificial intelligence, appeared poised to grow.

"These align closely with the greater demand for work experience, especially as AI becomes more capable of performing tasks previously assigned to entry-level workers," Gulish said.

Anne Stanton, president of the Linked Learning Alliance, a San Francisco-based group that advocates for stronger workforce readiness and partners with school districts and colleges , said the survey findings "affirm what we've long known: Learning comes alive when students can see—and experience—how the classroom connects to real careers.

"That's illuminating and motivating for every learner, from K-12 through college," she said.

Stanton says she urges educators to focus "not only on what they offer, but how they implement career-connected learning. Better outcomes depend on high-quality, well-supported experiences." ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts

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Published December 18, 2025

Do Schools Put College Prep and CTE on Equal Footing? We Asked Educators

By Alyson Klein


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Many high schools for years have maintained two separate tracks for students: the college-bound path for students who took traditional academic classes and the "vo-tech" path for kids who spent at least part of their day training for a career—in a field like culinary arts, cosmetology, or manufacturing—that they could transition to soon after graduation.

But things are changing. These days, many schools strive to blur the line between college preparatory coursework and the type of workforce-based, job-connected learning that's typically been the hallmark of career and technical education.

But how widespread is this relatively new practice?

Just over 1 in 6 educators with some connection to CTE—17%—report that CTE and college-prep are so seamlessly combined that it's hard to tell which gets more attention and resources in their districts, according to an EdWeek Research Center survey conducted this fall.

And a little more than a third of CTE-connected educators—36%—say their schools devote about equal resources and focus to CTE and college prep, according to the survey.

Still, roughly the same percentage—35%—say that college prep receives more resources and emphasis than CTE, the survey found. Meanwhile, 12% report that CTE gets more focus and resources than college prep.

Amy Loyd, the chief executive officer of All4Ed, a nonprofit focused on educational equity and preparing students for life after high school, said it's important for people not to think of CTE and college prep as separate tracks.

"CTE is college preparation," Loyd said. "CTE is some of the best pedagogy for student learning, not just acquisition of knowledge, but application of knowledge and practice. It leads to stronger outcomes in high school and persistence and completion in post-secondary coursework."

And she said that these courses shouldn't be seen as easy A's, either.

"There's a core of rigorous academics" in CTE, Loyd added.

Some educators who took the survey confirmed that CTE is put on equal footing with college prep in their districts.

"Our career and technical education center is excellent," said one survey participant in response to a question asking for additional insights. "Students are encouraged to consider CTE as a viable alternative to college."

Others wished for stronger connections with postsecondary institutions so that students could get college credit for their CTE coursework.

"Our CTE is very valuable to all of our students," another survey participant wrote. "I believe local colleges and outside colleges should work together and accept students from CTE programs without adding more courses in order to be accepted into their college or university."

College-prep focus is stronger in suburbia

Educators working in rural districts are more likely to say their districts steer more resources and put greater focus on CTE, compared to their urban and suburban counterparts.

Fifteen percent of educators working in rural districts said that CTE gets more focus and resources, compared with 10% of urban educators and 7% of suburban educators.

On the flip side, more than half of suburban educators surveyed—57%—say college prep gets a bigger spotlight and more resource than CTE. That's compared with nearly a quarter of rural educators and more than a third of urban educators.

Loyd said she doesn't believe rural students are necessarily less interested in college than suburban and urban kids, but their communities might lack nearby access to colleges and universities.

Jaycie Homer, a middle school CTE teacher in a rural New Mexico district, said she tries to talk to her students about a range of careers, including some that require postsecondary training.

"They kind of have tunnel vision," Homer said. Many of the students' parents do physical labor in the oil and gas industries and "they think that's the only industry that there is, and it's not. I want them to see you don't have to go out and work on a rig. You could sit in an office and do [work on] AI or technology, instead of having to do hard, physical manual labor."

The EdWeek Research Center survey of 472 school and district leaders and teachers whose jobs include at least some work in CTE was conducted from Sept. 18 through Oct. 27. ■

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Published January 30, 2026

Rising Demand for Career Education Prompts College Board to Expand Its Footprint

By Lauraine Langreo



Ileana Najarro/Education Week

The College Board, known for its suite of college-entrance exams and AP courses, will work to provide more work-based learning experiences for high school students. The organization's CEO, David Coleman, speaks at the organization's annual conference in Austin, Texas.

The College Board is making more moves into the career exploration and preparation space, driven by growing demand by students for more opportunities to build job-related skills.

The nonprofit organization, which runs major programs aimed at students who plan to attend college, announced a partnership with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in December to expand the teacher pipeline for career-connected coursework. Then, in January, the College Board announced that it acquired nonprofit District C and its flagship work-based learning program Teamship.

These ventures come on the heels of the College Board's announcement in late 2024 that it was expanding its Advanced Placement program into career and technical education classes.

The organization's investments highlight the need to expose all students to the many careers and pathways available to them so they can make informed decisions about what career paths to pursue, said Alisha Hyslop, the chief policy, research, and content officer for the Association for Career and Technical Education. Similar organizations, such as the International Baccalaureate and the Cambridge International Education, have created career-focused programs, too, she said.

These developments are happening as a growing number of students are feeling disengaged with traditional high school and students and parents are questioning the return on investment of a four-year college education. There are persistently high rates of chronic absenteeism in K-12 education, low rates of college readiness among high school seniors, and declining college enrollment.

"If you think of high school as the time where kids need to—in order to stay engaged—get more actively involved in their learning, what should probably happen?" asked David Coleman, the CEO of the College Board in an interview with Education Week. "You want them to take a step closer to college. You want them to get closer to a career."

Many school districts are shifting away from an exclusive focus on college preparedness and are providing opportunities for students to explore and engage with a broad range of post-high school pathways.

Hyslop hopes that with a big player like the College Board entering the CTE space, it "reinforces that CTE and that career-related experiences are important for every student, regardless of what path they're on," she said. It will also draw attention "to blending academics and CTE in new and innovative ways, so that all students have access to that full spectrum of educational opportunities."

The partnership between the College Board and the Carnegie Foundation will launch a multi-state coalition and support states as they redesign teacher pathways, update certification systems, and expand access to career-connected courses in high-demand fields, according to a College Board news release.

"If we hope and expect young people to learn new things in the changing world of work, our teachers need to, too," Coleman said. "We have to make it much easier for high school teachers to learn new things, but we don't have many good ways for them to learn new things."

Filling open CTE positions has been a big concern for school districts, Hyslop said. Twenty-eight states reported CTE teacher shortages to the U.S. Department of Education for the 2023-24 school year. Administrators responding to a national 2024 Brookings Institution survey said they had trouble filling CTE positions 57% of the time, compared with 39% of the time when recruiting teachers for traditional academic positions.

"CTE teachers have to have even more skills, in some cases, than teachers in other areas," Hyslop said. "They have to have the pedagogy and the content knowledge, but the content is constantly changing."

The College Board and Carnegie Foundation partnership is focused on "a lighter-weight mechanism," in which all teachers could learn to teach a new course in an area that's interesting to them, Coleman said.

The organizations are eyeing a system that's more adaptable than a graduate program or the traditional teacher-certification system, Coleman said.

The most in-demand careers—in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, business—are evolving quickly, Coleman said. "That means

we have to invest in our teachers adapting quickly."

The work that the College Board and Carnegie Foundation are doing "fits right in" with what states are already thinking about, Hyslop said.

States are looking for certification systems that can be flexible, Hyslop said. Generally, teachers are certified in their specific CTE course, but with "the way new careers are coming out all the time, states can't possibly create a certification for every single possible combination of career fields," she said.

The College Board wants work-based learning for all students

The College Board's acquisition of District C builds upon its career-readiness work.

Part of the student disengagement problem is that kids can't always see how what they're learning in traditional academic subjects connects to the real world. To keep students actively engaged in their learning, it's not just about taking them a step closer to college and career, Coleman said. It's also about giving them work-based learning experiences.

District C's Teamship product is a work-based learning program where small teams of students tackle real problems for real businesses, building the meaningful problem-solving skills that will help them in the future, according to the College Board.

With Teamship, Coleman envisions every student, regardless of the courses they're taking, gaining workplace experience.

"Someday, wouldn't it be cool if kids in an AP Business/Personal Finance class were developing business plans and—adding workplace experience—they could learn what happens to a business plan when it hits the reality of working a business? Sure would," Coleman said.

Work-based learning has been harder to scale up, Hyslop said, especially in classes that aren't traditionally CTE classes, such as biology, physics, and calculus, she said.

"If this [acquisition] is an effort to embed those [career-ready] skills and provide students who may not have thought about a work-related experience with more opportunities, then I think that's a real positive," Hyslop said. ■

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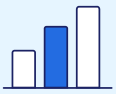
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"The SAT Suite provides a consistent, connected assessment system that tracks student progress over time and identifies areas where additional support is needed."

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Caprock High School, Texas



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Superintendent, Yonkers Public Schools, New York



"SAT School Day truly levels the playing field for all our students. It has driven our participation rate from 20%–30% to 95%."

Lydia Alvarez
Director of Assessments, Newark Public Schools, New Jersey

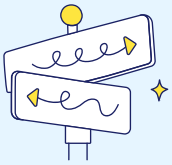


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Published June 02, 2025

3 Ways Leaders Develop College and Career Pathways Designed to Serve All Students

By Sarah Schwartz

In many schools, rigorous academic coursework—Advanced Placement classes, dual-enrollment programs, or career-technical electives—is reserved for only the highest-achievers.

What does it take for a district to make those options available to the majority of the student body?

Answering that question has driven the work of Jennifer Norrell, the outgoing superintendent of East Aurora schools in Illinois, and Lazaro Lopez, the associate superintendent overseeing curriculum and instruction for the Township High School District 214 outside of Chicago.

Norrell and Lopez, both recognized as 2025 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From, discussed how they transformed their districts' approaches to college and career readiness in a May 6 panel during Education Week's Virtual Leadership Symposium.

In East Aurora, Norrell vastly expanded the district's AP program, more than doubling the percentage of high schoolers taking these courses over the past six years, while holding the pass rate steady.

Lopez led the creation of what he calls a "college-ready by design" framework in District 214 that allows students to explore and pursue career interests through coursework and work-based learning. In the 2023-24 school year, 84 percent of the district's graduating seniors earned early college credits.

"Our theory was, if the school had a purposeful place in a student's self-discovery of their future, ... and if we can design a system that revolves around that individual, then we get them to not only be at school but to be fully engaged with school," said Lopez.

He and Norrell spoke about the logistical and pedagogical challenges involved in building a college- and career-ready approach from the ground up. Read on for three takeaways for school and district leaders from the conversation.



Jamie Kelter Davis for Education Week

Jennifer Norrell, the superintendent of East Aurora School District 131, meets with district leaders for the School Leadership Team's weekly meeting to discuss a college-readiness presentation for students at East Aurora High School in Aurora, Ill. She has led efforts to expand and enrich the kinds of post-high school pathways the school offers, both in core academics and in career-technical fields.

1. Lay the groundwork for students to tackle challenging courses.

In East Aurora, leaders wanted to make sure students could handle more academically rigorous content before they started expanding AP offerings, said Norrell.

"This requires more than just having counselors put kids in new classes," she said. "This was an entire paradigm shift for us as a district."

Norrell and her colleagues started by focusing on shoring up students' reading skills—a necessity if the high schoolers were to take courses featuring college-level texts. The district mandated additional reading classes for most students, including some who were in honors courses.

They also transformed 9th grade classes, and some 10th grade classes, into pre-AP classes, aligning the curriculum to the prerequisite knowledge and skills students would need for AP classes down the line.

Steps such as these set students up for success, Norrell said.

> **"If the school had a purposeful place in a student's self-discovery of their future [...] then we get them to not only be at school but to be fully engaged with school."**
>
> **LAZARO LOPEZ**
> Associate superintendent overseeing curriculum and instruction
> Township High School District 214

2. Support teachers' growth.

In offering advanced coursework, District 214 took an "all of the above" approach, said Lopez. The district has dual-credit courses, student work experiences, and a portfolio of career-related electives.

Putting these courses on the schedule required educators who were certified to teach them.

Building up staff capacity was a "slow and steady transition," said Lopez. The district offered incentives in teacher contracts—covering more of the tuition for graduate school courses if the master's degree a teacher was pursuing would allow them to teach one of the district's dual-credit courses.

District leaders also formed partnerships with local institutes of higher education, negotiating a cohort rate with one university that allowed a group of teachers to earn the MBAs that would certify them to teach college-level business courses.

3. Shift school day schedules to make it easier for students to have deep academic experiences.

Both East Aurora and District 214 are on block schedules, an approach in which students are in fewer classes for longer periods of time each day.

In District 214, students can more easily leave campus during the day to complete their career-related internships, said Lopez—like the students in the district's medical academy, who spend several hours at a hospital once a week.

A block schedule also gives teachers more space to dig into challenging texts or explore complicated topics, said Norrell. It means that students' lunch block is longer as well, opening up a portion of that period for some kids to receive additional intervention services.

"It gives you more flexibility and more time," said Lopez.

To listen to the full panel discussion with Norrell and Lopez, watch the event recording. ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts



Scott Lewis for Education Week

Aiden Montanez Castro, 8, Zayne Mendez, 8, and Violet Ward, 8, work on a lesson in making a topographical map of their hometown at Fulton Elementary School in Ephrata, Pa. The Ephrata district refashioned a school bus into a Maker Bus, which parks at each of the district's elementary schools for hands-on projects. The district has oriented its teaching around projects that allow students to demonstrate skills like empathy and creativity alongside content knowledge.

Published April 30, 2026

Inside One District's Experiment to Anchor Learning Around Career-Ready Skills

By Evie Blad

When students in the Ephrata, Pa., district complete a project, their goal is not just to explain what content they know, but also to demonstrate the skills that will help them succeed after graduation.

As part of a broader effort to rethink expectations, educators in the 4,000-student district about an hour from Philadelphia rewrote the state's learning standards as "I can" statements and detailed a framework of knowledge, skills, and dispositions—like innovation and resilience—students will need to succeed in a rapidly changing workforce.

As a result, teachers grade students on assignments by detailing how well they meet targets like, "I can use text evidence to show how an author supports their opinion," and by completing rubrics that measure how well they demonstrated skills like creativity and problem-solving. Through an online dashboard, families can track the times their children demonstrated those "life ready graduate" skills. They can even see aggregate data by grade or school level that show growth in those skills throughout the year.

"It's important to know things, but with AI, it's getting even more important to be able to do things," Superintendent Brian Troop said. "You have to have content knowledge, but if you can't get it into play by applying those skills, it's like you don't have that knowledge in the first place."

Ephrata's Life Ready Graduate plan has fundamentally changed how teachers think about instruction, how students demonstrate learning, and how schools measure success, he said. After more than a decade of planning, students do more project-based learning and complete year-end cornerstone projects that draw upon their social-emotional skills. And the community holds the district accountable through metrics aligned to a vision of success that's broader than scores on state standardized tests.

The work, which started in 2015, has evolved as districts around the country ask big questions about what their communities expect from them, how to demonstrate their value in an increasingly competitive school choice environment, and what their students need to thrive in the jobs of the future.

A task force of superintendents, educational psychologists, and education policy experts assembled by AASA, the School Superintendents Association, set out to examine these strategies in 2025. In March, they released their first set of recommendations for districts to rethink their own models for defining and measuring success, highlighting Ephrata and other districts that have created "portrait of a graduate" profiles that outline essential skills. The aim is to more clearly articulate and operationalize a concept that has sometimes been criticized as vague without sacrificing academic rigor, leaders said.

"Most districts, though they believe in skill development, will still measure their own improvement through just standardized tests," said John Malloy, the senior vice president of AASA's leadership network who helped lead the task force. "If we do believe that these real skills are important, we have to shift how we measure success."

Employers call on schools to prepare students for jobs of the future

In Ephrata, measures of life ready graduate skills aren't used for the same high-stakes purposes as traditional grades—like deciding whether a student will advance academically or calculating their GPA—but they do serve as an important indicator of student growth and educators' progress in changing instruction, educators said.

As artificial intelligence begins to radically reshape industries, employers say future workers will need to demonstrate skills like resilience and critical thinking to keep pace with the shifting contours of their jobs. Asked in December what skills their young workers need most, executives from U.S. companies pointed to traits like the ability to synthesize information, expand on ideas, and work together to identify challenges.

In a February analysis of "portrait of a graduate" profiles from 270 districts, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotion-

al Learning identified common aims: effective communication, adaptability, and reflection.

Portrait-of-a-graduate boosters say districts must create the profiles with input from local communities, and they must treat the results as more than a "nice to have" or an inspirational poster.

Ephrata schools created its graduate profile with input from families, students, and educators. Leaders met with local employers to discuss what makes a successful employee and offered them certificates to display, demonstrating their support for the work.

Demonstrating learning through cornerstone projects

To encourage more project-based instruction, the district adopted cornerstone projects in 2018, giving students choices in how to demonstrate their learning. Every grade level has a theme that drives projects and field trips throughout the year and becomes the basis of a presentation, portfolio, or other product viewed by educators and external audiences, like city officials or business owners, at its culmination.

In 5th grade, students learn how their community works by visiting government agencies, police stations, and civic organizations to learn about how their work affects people's lives. At the end of the year, they create displays to explain the skills and preparation they will need for the particular roles they want to play in their communities as adults, inviting public officials to see their work. Throughout the year, teachers incorporate content related to the theme in classes, like asking students to analyze local polling data in math lessons.

"It's like a backdrop of relevance every content area has an opportunity to connect to," Troop said.

The cornerstone themes vary in subject matter, and each is anchored to a set of skills. In kindergarten, students spend one year learning about the importance of animals, researching their favorite and reflecting on the responsibility of caring for creatures. First graders learn about maps, globes, and topological features. In 3rd grade, students learn about the importance of water, creating projects to explain how it changes forms through condensation and evaporation and demonstrate empathy by explaining how a lack of potable water affects people who must carry containers long distances to their homes.

In 8th grade, students spend a year learning about entrepreneurship, demonstrating their learning through a year-end idea pitch to real business leaders in the style of the TV show "Shark Tank."

About a third of high school graduates in Ephrata also earn a Life Ready Graduate endorsement that is recognized by local employers as an asset in the hiring process. To earn the recognition, students must fulfill these requirements between 11th and 12th grade: meet minimum requirements for GPA and attendance; avoid any behavior that results in a suspension; complete in-person or online courses in civics and financial literacy; hold a regular job or volunteer position, or participate in an extracurricular activity; and complete a portfolio exploring potential career pathways.

Schools communicate career readiness to the community

To help teachers rethink instruction, the district hired six coaches who help teachers design projects and define transparent learning goals.

Educational psychologists have long debated whether "soft skills" like grit and perspective taking can be consistently and reliably measured, cautioning against their use for high-stakes purposes like school improvement or grade promotion. When students assess their own skills through self-reported surveys, they are prone to biases that may make them over or underrate their own progress, researchers have found.

But researchers are exploring more reliable ways to measure success, said Malloy of AASA. And schools can help students grow in these areas, even if that growth can't be measured as precisely as the correct answer to a math equation, he said.

In addition to their roles in career success, executive functioning skills like working memory, flexible thinking, and the ability to control emotions underlie academic success in core subjects like math and reading, Malloy said. For students, demonstrating growth in those areas is similar to showing they can play a musical instrument or master a sport, he said, adding that proficiency can be demonstrated in a variety of ways.

"Skills get developed by trial and error, learning and failing, and trying again," he said.

In Ephrata, teachers created rubrics with "look fors" that help students understand how to demonstrate skills like creativity and collaboration in their assignments, Troop said.

In a single school year, Ephrata teachers incorporated more than 181,000 opportunities to demonstrate those life ready graduate skills into lessons and projects, AASA noted in a case study.

Schools also sought to give students more of a voice, choice, and creative input in how their schools function. When the district redesigned a school media center, students had so much say in the project that "they probably spent more time with the architects than the adults did," Troop joked.

High school technology students helped design and build a "maker bus," a retrofitted school bus painted bright purple and equipped with tools like a 3D printer, a laser cutter, and a cabinet full of tools. Teachers park the bus outside of elementary schools for a few weeks at a time to give students a space to work on projects and demonstrate creativity.

"Now, that's a living example of us turning the keys over to the students, and promoting instructional changes that increase autonomy and agency," Troop said. ■



Laura Baker/Education Week + Getty

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Kids Are Turning to AI Before Adults for Homework Help

By Arianna Prothero

Nearly a quarter of 9- to 17-year-olds say they would turn to a chatbot for help with schoolwork or homework before seeking guidance from a trusted adult such as a teacher, counselor, or parent.

That shift signals a growing reliance on AI as a first-stop resource for problem-solving and decisionmaking among young people.

Those are among the findings in a new report from Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that researches and advocates for healthy tech use among youth.

Adolescents are regularly using AI for school and emotional support, the survey found. And kids who struggle with schoolwork and socialization report using AI more frequently.

The vast majority of 9- to 17-year-olds use AI. And of those adolescents, 85% have used AI for schoolwork or homework, with about half of them using it weekly, and a fifth using it daily.

Kids are adopting AI far more quickly than they did social media, said Michael Robb, the head of research at Common Sense Media. The report's findings should be an eye-opener for adults, he said.

"AI is already a part of childhood in a way I think maybe people haven't really grappled with yet," he said. "This is not about the future. This is happening right now across different age bands, across gender, across race and income levels as well."

There are also signs of growing AI-dependency among adolescents, especially among the heaviest users of the technology, the report found. A fifth of kids who use AI say it would be very or somewhat hard for them to give it up for a month, with 42% of kids who use AI frequently saying it would be tough to go without AI.

Kids most often encounter AI through automatic summaries from search engines and from the generative AI chatbot ChatGPT.

Many kids struggling with school and socialization use AI more frequently

The nationally representative survey of 1,204 children ages 9 to 17, conducted in March, offers one of the clearest snapshots yet of how deeply AI is embedded in young people's daily lives.

Children who say they struggle with academics and focus are more likely to use AI frequently, as are kids who say they are lonely.

For example, 55% of teens and tweens who use AI and find math pretty or very hard say they use AI weekly for schoolwork, compared with 46 percent of adolescents who use AI but don't find math difficult. More than half of adolescents who say they have a hard time focusing on school assignments indicate they use AI at least once a week for schoolwork.

That trend continues with students who say they feel lonely. Kids who use AI daily were more likely to report feeling lonely at least some of the time compared with kids who use AI less than once a month or not at all. It's unclear if AI use itself makes kids lonely, or if lonely adolescents are more likely to turn to AI, the report states. The survey is not set up to answer cause-and-effect questions about the trends.

Many young people are also drawing on AI for social-emotional support and practice. Overall, 40% of kids who have used AI have utilized it to practice conversations and social skills. Kids who say they are lonely and kids who say they have a harder time making friends are more likely to use AI in this way than kids who say they are rarely lonely and don't find making friends hard.

But teens are also using AI as an educational tool. Ryleigh Turner, who did not participate in the survey, is among the nearly 9 in 10 teens who have used AI. Turner, who graduated this spring from high school, said she was at first hesitant to use AI, but she's since found it to be an indispensable educational resource.

Turner has used AI as a tutor, to research universities and scholarship opportunities, and to help prep for the SAT and ACT.

"While I'm good academically, I struggled with the test taking at first, and so I let [AI] see my [SAT and ACT] results and it created a schedule for me for tutoring," she said.

Nearly half of adolescents who use AI say they have tapped the technology to get advice on their future goals, the report found. About half of kids also think AI will have an equally negative and positive effect on their near- and long-term futures.

Turner believes AI will be a positive technology for her generation. "There's much more to it than just cheating on your math homework," she said.

When it comes to AI, kids need education as well as rules

While three-quarters of kids report that their school or teacher have communicated expectations regarding when students can use AI for schoolwork this year, fewer say that educators or parents have talked to them about using AI safely, or AI's accuracy.

Fifty-six percent of kids say their school has discussed how to use AI safely, and 51% have been told by a teacher or their school how to judge if information from an AI platform is accurate or trustworthy.

A little more than half of kids, 56%, say their parents or guardians have not spoken with them about AI safety.

That leaves a big gap in their understanding of a technology that is already integrated into their lives, Robb said.

"Schools are starting to set some rules, but they're less consistent around teaching AI literacy," he said. "So that's an area where schools could definitely home in on a little bit more closely."

At a bare minimum, students should understand that AI doesn't understand whether the answer it spits out is accurate or not and that it frequently gets things wrong, Robb said. Teachers should also speak with their students about how there are often biases built into AI outputs based on the training data that was used.

Students should also be aware of the privacy concerns experts have over AI, Robb said.

"It's like giving your diary to AI and hoping for the best, but that becomes part of AI's training data and can become a privacy risk because you don't know how that's going to manifest itself later on within the AI," he said.

The findings are part of an inaugural survey that Common Sense Media's newly minted Youth AI Safety Institute plans to conduct regularly. The organization established the institute in May as an independent research and testing group focused on kids and AI safety. ■

OPINION

Published May 12, 2026

There's a New AP Business Course. College Board's CEO Explains Why

Business is "a new liberal art for our time," says David Coleman

By Rick Hess

Advanced Placement exams are one of the most influential (and oft-controversial) forces shaping high schools today. That's why it's a big deal when AP embarks on a new direction, such as launching its newest course, AP Business with Personal Finance, which arrives this fall. College Board CEO David Coleman hopes this new offering will foster financial literacy, career readiness, and an appreciation for America's entrepreneurial economy. Coleman is a guy who gravitates toward big ideas. He was instrumental in developing the Common Core State Standards before taking the reins of the College Board in 2012. Time has named him one of the world's 100 most influential people. I reached out to talk about this new venture, career pathways, and more. Here's what Coleman had to say.

—Rick

Rick: David, the College Board is rolling out a new Advanced Placement course this fall: AP Business with Personal Finance. Tell me about it.

David: AP Business with Personal Finance is one of two new career-focused courses we're rolling out for the coming school year. The other is AP Cybersecurity. Both are rigorous, college-level courses that are deeply practical. In AP Business with Personal Finance, students learn how to think strategically, manage money and teams, and turn ideas into action. Students apply those same principles to their own financial lives to build real confidence and economic agency. I see business as a new liberal art for our time. Whatever students' interests, understanding business and personal finance gives them the tools to bring their passion into the world. Success in business and in life requires constantly adapting to change. Students and families everywhere are concerned about job losses from AI; this course gives them the confidence they need to adapt to a changing future.



Luca D'Urbino for Education Week

> **"Whatever students' interests, understanding business and personal finance gives them the tools to bring their passion into the world."**
>
> **DAVID COLEMAN**
> CEO
> College Board

Rick: How'd the idea for this course come about?

David: We've been developing this course with employers and colleges for the better part of three years. Students everywhere want to know how to make money and keep it, and business is the most popular college major. Yet, just 20 percent of U.S. students take a business course in high school. Students and families demand stronger preparation in personal finance, yet access to quality personal finance education remains uneven. All students need to know how to manage money wisely, how to save and invest, and how to make sound long-term decisions. AP Business with Personal Finance merges those two interests—entrepreneurship and financial capability—while giving students a credential of value for employers and colleges.

Rick: How will this course differ from AP Economics?

David: It's more akin to a business school course on entrepreneurship and financial management. We think many students will begin in AP Business with Personal Finance and go on to take an AP economics course. Combining business and personal finance in one course unlocks a different level of engagement. Students don't just want to know how markets work in the abstract; they want to know how to manage their financial resources and build something. At a time when many young people feel disengaged, let's engage them in building their future.

Rick: You're familiar with conservative criticisms of the AP program, including concerns that it's become easier to pass the AP exams and that courses reflect a progressive bent. Without relitigating all that here, I am curious how such considerations might've factored into course development and what you'd say to those who might look skeptically at this new offering. Thoughts on that?

David: To anyone who's worried about the rigor or content of our courses: Go see for yourself. Visit an AP classroom in any state in the country. Ask a high schooler which of their classes push them the hardest. Talk to an AP teacher about the material they cover. These are among the most engaging and challenging courses you'll find in any high school in America, which is why so many students and families want to take them and so many educators want to teach them. We built AP Business with Personal Finance to meet the same standard. The course and exam were designed by college business professors from MIT, Northwestern, and Vanderbilt, to name a few. It will demand sharp thinking, hard work, and creativity, and students will come away from it with college-level skills and knowledge they'll use throughout their lives.

Rick: Any sense of how widely the course will be adopted?

David: We think there's a place for a course like this in every high school in America. Business and entrepreneurship are always near the top of the list of AP subjects students most want to see. It's been endorsed by the Council for Economic Education, which sets the national standards for personal finance education, and we've designed it to meet state requirements for a high school class on personal finance. We also want this to be an invitation to first-time AP students and to schools that may not have offered a lot of AP options before, like those in rural communities. The course includes case studies on rural small businesses so students can see what entrepreneurship looks like in a local context. Too often, we see AP programs that become walled gardens, with the same small number of students taking most of the advanced courses at a school. We have to break that pattern.

Rick: What kinds of topics will be addressed?

David: The course focuses on core concepts in first-year undergraduate business courses—finance, accounting, marketing, strategy, and management—while integrating personal finance topics and skills throughout the class. What's powerful is how those two sides of the course reinforce each other. Students might analyze return on investment when deciding how to grow a business, then apply that thinking to their own financial decisions. It's designed so students can apply what they're learning in the real world. Students will build a business plan and a family financial plan, read case studies, and practice leading teams. They will give shape to an idea or a dream. We want to show students that education gives you the power to accomplish things.

Rick: You're a guy who thinks carefully about potential problems. With this new offering, what challenges will be on your mind as you watch it roll out?

David: If the only kids signing up are those who are already in AP, we'll see that as a failure. We're using multiple strategies to reach new students, including by forging new partnerships with organizations like DECA, Business Professionals of America, and Future Business Leaders of America, and by engaging more deeply than ever with the CTE community. At the same time, we also know that by inviting new students in, we may draw criticism from those who would prefer a highly elite and exclusive AP program. They'll say AP isn't what it used to be. That's short-sighted snobbery. Research shows the students who benefit most from AP are those who go from taking zero AP courses to taking just one. Let's put more students in that category. There's more talent than we can see today.

Rick: You've argued that financial literacy is as essential as civic literacy when preparing students for citizenship. What do you mean by that?

David: American greatness stems not just from our Constitution and our government but from the resourcefulness of our people. We are a nation built by entrepreneurs. Just as you need to understand government to be a confident citizen in a democracy, you need to understand business and personal finance to be a confident participant in a dynamic economy. Economic confidence is life confidence. You need it to make big choices, like pursuing a new job, launching a venture, or starting a family. Too many young people delay those decisions because they don't feel economically secure. Education cannot solve every cost-of-living challenge, but it can replace fear with understanding and give students the tools to choose their future on their own terms.

Rick: You're making this case at a time when Gen Z is voicing distrust with capitalism and big business. Does that make it an awkward time to launch this course?

David: It makes it the perfect time! I'm deeply troubled by how pessimistic many young people feel about their prospects for achieving financial security. In poll after poll, Americans say the American Dream no longer works—that hard work may not pay off. Our economic thriving depends on a generation of Americans who see business and entrepreneurship as healthy ways to build a meaningful life. But our students won't have faith in markets if they feel powerless to participate. Students are growing up in a world of content creation; let's give them the tools of wealth creation.

Rick: There's much interest in career readiness and employer partnerships. Where do you see the College Board's—and this course's—role in that conversation?

David: The College Board has always had a unique position spanning K–12 and higher education, helping align those sectors for the benefit of students. Now, employers must take on a similar role. For too long, schools and employers have been disconnected, with too few shared definitions of skills and poor feedback loops. We're working with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and employers like IBM, Cisco, Nissan, and Provalus to help shape courses and credentials that reflect in-demand competencies. For example, Provalus, an IT services company that hires talent from rural communities to serve major national firms, is endorsing our AP Cybersecurity course as a signal of workforce readiness. We want to give students skills that carry currency beyond the classroom.

Rick: More generally, any thoughts on the tension between college-track coursework and CTE-aligned coursework in high school?

David: Let's abandon the stupid and unproductive separation of college or career. We must build coursework and assessments that prepare students well for both. Kids should never have to choose between being educated and being employable.

Rick: You're in the business of gauging college and career readiness. How has that changed in the age of AI?

David: AI has reinforced the core value of what we do: delivering rigorous, secure, fully proctored assessments of what students have learned. On an SAT or AP exam, you can't rely on a chatbot. Trusted assessments matter more than ever, which is why we are investing heavily in advanced security and technical improvements to ensure our assessments always provide credible reflections of what students know. More broadly, we are building tools and guidance

that promote the safe and responsible use of AI, ensuring it powers learning rather than short-circuits it. We're constantly learning from AP teachers about how they're navigating AI in the classroom. They are clear that the core skills emphasized in AP—interrogating sources and mastering background knowledge—are even more vital as students wade through questionable AI content. We did not abandon math because of the calculator and we will not abandon reading and writing because of large language models.

Rick: If you had one piece of advice on preparing students to be financially literate citizens, what would it be?

David: Take students' interest in money seriously and use it to open doors to students who have never been in AP before. As I said, students everywhere want to learn how to make money and how to keep it. School leaders should channel that energy into rigorous learning about how the economy works, how value is created, and how financial decisions shape a life. Personal finance should be an invitation for all students to become builders of our economy, not just bystanders.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity. ■

Rick Hess is the director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of Education Week's Rick Hess Straight Up *opinion blog. He is the creator of the annual RHSU Edu-Scholar Rankings.*

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