



# RETHINKING MIDDLE GRADES:

Preparing Students for Success

CASE STUDIES 2025



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## Overview

# RETHINKING MIDDLE GRADES: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

In January 2022, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) and Rodel launched the [Middle Grades Exploration Initiative](#), a visionary program designed to transform the middle school experience for all students across the state. Recognizing middle grades as a critical time for students to explore interests and build self-confidence, this initiative aims to equip students with the support, exploration opportunities, and skills they need to thrive in high school and beyond. Equitable and student-centered approaches to explore careers are foundational tenets of this initiative. This ensures that students from all backgrounds have the chance to discover personal interests and connect their learning to future aspirations in meaningful and engaging ways.



*This initiative aims to equip students with the support, exploration opportunities, and skills they need to thrive in high school and beyond.*



A diverse steering committee of 29 Delawareans – including system leaders, educators, employers, parents, students, community-based organizations and more – played a key role in developing this initiative. Their work included establishing a clear vision for middle grades career exploration, defining the skills and knowledge students should possess by the end of eighth grade, and creating a set of career exploration standards. This resulted in the development of an [equity framework, the profile of a high school ready student, a standards writing framework, the career exploration standards](#), and additional resources available on our [Delaware Pathways Middle Grades website](#).

To bring this vision to life, DDOE and Rodel launched a pilot program in the 2022–23 school year. Ten schools, known as Cohort 1, were selected to develop and implement programs aligned to the new career exploration standards and high school-ready profile. These schools include:

- Las Américas ASPIRA Academy
- Appoquinimink School District (Redding and Meredith Middle)
- Bryan Allen Stevenson School of Excellence (BASSE)
- Capital School District (Middle School of Innovation and Middle School of Excellence)
- Colonial School District (George Read Middle)
- Kuumba Academy
- Red Clay Consolidated School District (Stanton and A.I. DuPont Middle)

The partnership with Cohort 1 schools continued into the 2024–2025 school year, building on key lessons from the initiative’s first year. Schools received customized support to deepen implementation, strengthen systems, and expand opportunities for students to explore their futures. At the same time, a second group of pilot schools—Odyssey Charter School, Milford Central Academy, and Cantwell’s Bridge Middle School—joined the effort. Throughout the 2024–25 school year, these Cohort 2 schools engaged in a planning year focused on internalizing the standards, aligning systems and preparing for full implementation in 2025–26.

**As a result of this phased continuous improvement approach, Delaware is building a strong foundation for equitable, student-driven career exploration in the middle grades—rooted in real-world experiences that are relevant to their lives in and out of school.**



# Introduction

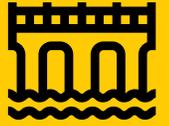
Last year, we highlighted the work of [Alexis I. duPont Middle School](#) and [Kuumba Academy](#) as they began integrating career exploration into the middle grades. This year, we turn our attention to two schools offering powerful examples of how innovative design can meet the diverse needs of Delaware’s students: [George Read Middle School](#) and [Las Américas ASPIRA Academy](#).



**George Read Middle School** stands out as an example of a career exploration program scaling district-wide through a collaborative leadership model. The Colonial Compass initiative, which started at George Read, now spans all three of the district’s middle schools. Each school has a dedicated “**Compass Captain**” team—typically a counselor and a teacher—who lead school-based implementation, serve as key liaisons with high school work-based learning partners, and connect closely with building and district leadership. This collaborative structure ensures consistent support for students and staff alike. Through weekly lessons in grades 6–8, the **Colonial Compass course aims to help students build foundational career awareness, employability skills, self-motivation, and stronger academic habits**. Leveraging free, high-quality resources from the Delaware Department of Education and digital tools like Major Clarity and Pathful Connect, the course seeks to empower students to explore career pathways and envision their futures with clarity and confidence.

**Las Américas ASPIRA Academy** offers another leading example of how career exploration can be culturally responsive while investing in teacher professional learning and support. Serving a majority Latinx student population, ASPIRA's program is designed to honor students' cultural identities and expand their view of future possibilities. Daily 45-minute career exploration classes, delivered over 10-week cycles, to students in grade 6-8 provide the consistency needed for deeper learning as well as student-student relationships, resulting in a classroom community. **Supported by Junior Achievement and Pathful Learning, the course aims to blend career-connected learning with transferable skills development, while centering cultural pride and student agency.** At the same time, ASPIRA invests in its educators by leveraging partnerships to provide the tools, training and support needed to deliver career exploration experiences that are culturally affirming, relevant and empowering.

**These spotlights represent just two of the innovative approaches underway across Delaware's pilot schools. By elevating these examples, we hope to inspire and equip all middle schools to empower students to explore, plan, and achieve bright futures.**



# Building bridges to bright futures: GEORGE READ MIDDLE SCHOOL'S APPROACH TO CAREER EXPLORATION

**At George Read Middle School**, the journey toward future success isn't a haphazard crossing; it's a deliberately engineered passage. The school's Colonial Compass initiative functions as a carefully constructed bridge, its foundations rooted in a shared vision, its structure reinforced by collaboration, and its purpose to guide every student toward a landscape of opportunity.

**The journey to college and careers doesn't begin in high school. The initial groundwork is laid much earlier, as students enter middle school.** These formative years represent the construction site where possibilities are explored, new skills become the building tools, imaginations expand like blueprints, and students begin to envision themselves not just as learners, but as the future professionals, creators, and changemakers who will traverse this bridge.



Like any enduring structure, the Colonial Compass bridge is built upon a bedrock of equity and inclusion. Its foundation rests on a belief that all students deserve the skills, confidence, and exposure needed to make informed choices about their futures. Aligned with equity-centered middle grades CTE standards, Colonial Compass at George Read Middle aims to embed career exploration into the culture and curriculum of the school.



*The result is more than a standalone program; it's a district-wide commitment to construct bridges toward brighter futures, ensuring every student has what they need to cross successfully.*

The following profile explores how George Read's collaborative leadership model – a strategic alliance of teachers, counselors, district and high school staff – demonstrates **what's possible when school communities unite to build inclusive, student-centered systems**. As the Colonial Compass program extends its reach district-wide, the groundwork intentionally laid at George Read offers a robust foundation for continued growth and innovation.

# Laying the first stones: LEADERSHIP THAT ANCHORS THE BRIDGE

**“This is not a CTE program. This is career readiness, career exploration, and high school readiness for everyone.” – Principal Nick Wolfe**

Every bridge needs a solid foundation, and at George Read Middle, this stability begins with strong, shared leadership. In the Spring of 2023, George Read Middle assembled a leadership team to launch the Colonial Compass career exploration pilot program. The team included George Read’s Principal, two William Penn High School Work-Based Learning (WBL) coordinators and the Colonial District CTE Supervisor. Their goal was to embed a foundational vision to **embed career exploration as a core part of every student’s middle school experience**. As Principal Nick Wolfe explained, *“This is not a CTE program. This is career readiness, career exploration, and high school readiness for everyone.”*



To begin translating that vision into a tangible structure, the leadership team decided that every teacher at George Read would participate in delivering the weekly Colonial Compass course. The message was clear: this initiative wasn't a temporary addition but a foundational component of how George Read would operate. As with any major shift, there was some initial hesitation among staff. But rather than push forward unilaterally, the leadership team created intentional feedback loops, listening to concerns, adjusting the blueprints, and inviting genuine input. Over time, hesitation transformed into engagement. Principal Wolfe noted, ***"The feedback loops that we embedded within the process have helped increase buy-in. Teachers see that they have ownership and empowerment in how they go about the evolution and the delivery of the program."*** His commitment to feedback and continuous improvement helped ensure the program grew with integrity and inclusion.



From the pilot's inception, the Colonial Compass curriculum was treated as a dynamic blueprint, one that would be refined through teacher feedback and adjusted to align with the Middle Grades (MG) CTE standards and the evolving needs of the students. With support from the high school WBL coordinators, who assisted in the curriculum's design, George Read teachers introduced lessons that encouraged students to reflect on their strengths, interests and career goals. Student feedback, gathered throughout the initial construction phase, also played a vital role in shaping lesson design, making them more interactive, engaging, and directly relevant for students.

**These early efforts laid the first stones of a bridge that would empower students to see the future not as something distant and abstract, but as a navigable path they're already beginning to walk.**

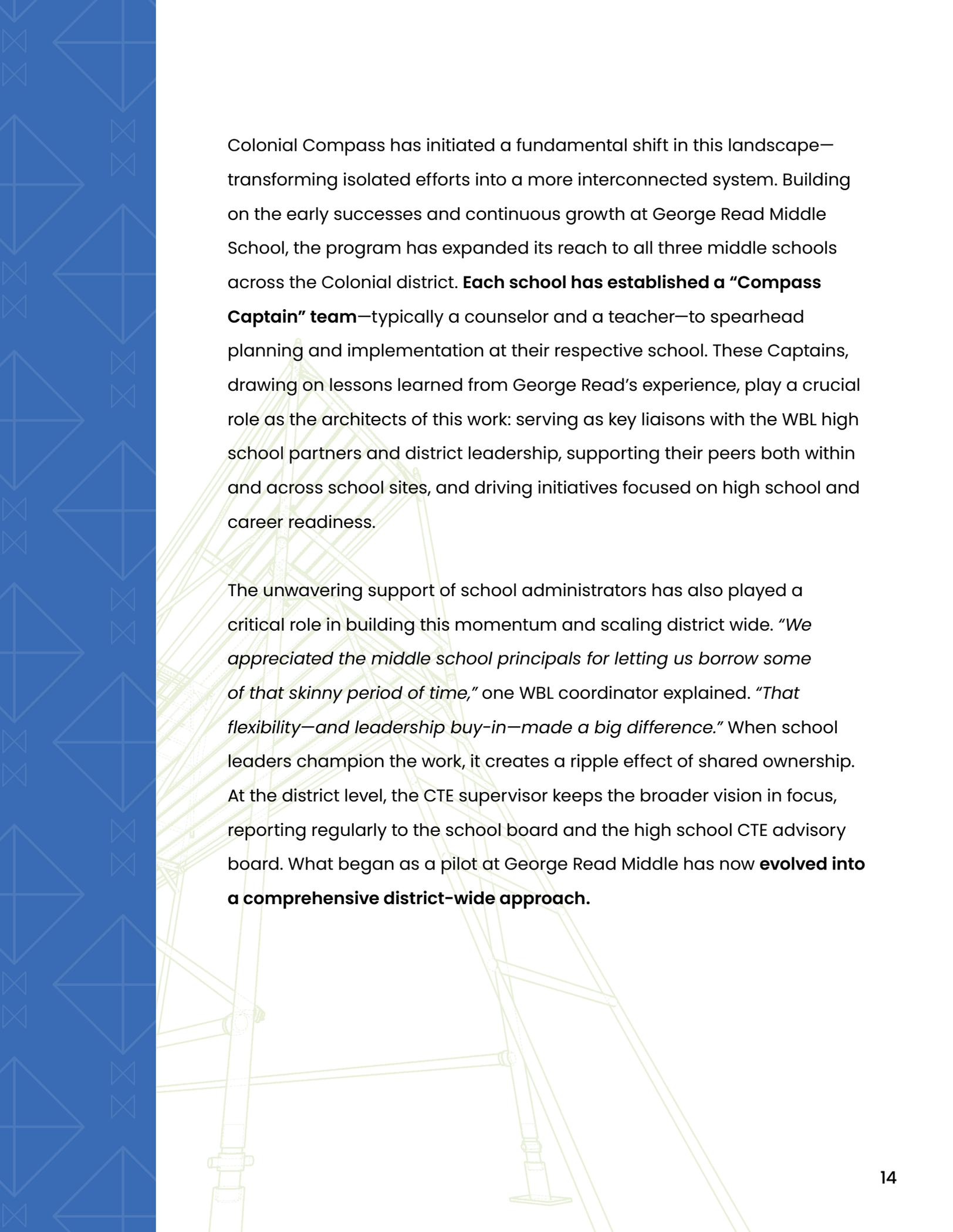


## Constructing a Cohesive Plan: FROM SILOS TO SYSTEMS

**“We’re trying to broaden the discourse... increase the opportunities that kids have to speak and to respond.” - Principal Nick Wolfe**

A truly transformative bridge does not merely provide a connection; it unifies previously isolated points. Before Colonial Compass, career exploration at George Read occurred in isolation, limited to exploratory arts classes or one-off events. There was no consistent structure to help students forge connections between what they were learning to who they might become. As Principal Wolfe shared *“We’re trying to broaden the discourse... increase the opportunities that kids have to speak and to respond.”*





Colonial Compass has initiated a fundamental shift in this landscape—transforming isolated efforts into a more interconnected system. Building on the early successes and continuous growth at George Read Middle School, the program has expanded its reach to all three middle schools across the Colonial district. **Each school has established a “Compass Captain” team**—typically a counselor and a teacher—to spearhead planning and implementation at their respective school. These Captains, drawing on lessons learned from George Read’s experience, play a crucial role as the architects of this work: serving as key liaisons with the WBL high school partners and district leadership, supporting their peers both within and across school sites, and driving initiatives focused on high school and career readiness.

The unwavering support of school administrators has also played a critical role in building this momentum and scaling district wide. *“We appreciated the middle school principals for letting us borrow some of that skinny period of time,”* one WBL coordinator explained. *“That flexibility—and leadership buy-in—made a big difference.”* When school leaders champion the work, it creates a ripple effect of shared ownership. At the district level, the CTE supervisor keeps the broader vision in focus, reporting regularly to the school board and the high school CTE advisory board. What began as a pilot at George Read Middle has now **evolved into a comprehensive district-wide approach.**

At George Read specifically, counselor and Compass Captain Mr. Rivera has emerged as a key advocate for equity and inclusion in the bridge's design. *"Mr. Rivera's life experience has been invaluable,"* one team member shared. *"He brings a unique perspective and helps us address equity blind spots."* His role highlights the importance of distributed leadership in ensuring the bridge is built for all students.

While significant progress has been made in connecting previously isolated efforts, the leadership team recognizes that integration must extend further. *"Are these concepts showing up in exploratories as well?"* one team member asked—an acknowledgment that career learning must move beyond a single class. While time and staffing constraints currently limit full integration, the conversation signals a shift in mindset. The school is actively looking for ways to ensure that career readiness doesn't exist in a silo but is reinforced **across multiple beams of the academic structure.**

**The once-disconnected landscape of career exploration is now coalescing into a purposeful bridge—intentionally constructed, increasingly cohesive, and aligned across schools to support every middle schooler's journey toward their future.**

## Tools of the Trade: TEACHER AND COUNSELOR EMPOWERMENT

**“The district supervisor and WBL coordinators, have helped us every step of the way—from surveys to logistics.” – Compass Captain Mr. Rivera**

Behind the construction of every robust bridge are the skilled hands of dedicated craftspeople. At George Read, the teachers and counselors are the expert builders who bring the Colonial Compass vision to life. But even the best builders need the right tools, training, and ongoing support to succeed.

**The success of Colonial Compass** is deeply rooted in the people behind it and the systems designed to support them. Compass Captain Mr. Rivera shared, *“The district supervisor and WBL coordinators, have helped us every step of the way—from surveys to logistics. Even as more schools joined, the support never dropped off.”* One WBL coordinator added, *“We recognized we’re not in the schools every day. Each school has its own personality. Having leads embedded in buildings—boots on the ground—has been essential.”*





**District-wide professional learning (PL)**, co-facilitated by the high school WBL coordinators, provides all middle school staff involved in Colonial Compass with valuable opportunities for shared learning, collaboration and strengthening their tools. Captains at each middle school also receive year-round coaching and support, including bi-weekly meetings where they can review data, share strategies, and problem-solve with other captains, ensuring consistent building practices. These structured supports ensure a clearer throughline from middle to high school, reinforcing shared goals across all grade levels of the educational bridge.

**Flexibility has also become a defining feature of the Colonial Compass model's construction.** Instead of confining teachers into a rigid week-by-week schedule, the curriculum is now offered as a set of 30 lessons—with required core topics marked—providing educators the autonomy to adjust pacing and content to match the diverse needs of their students. As one WBL coordinator explained, *“We wanted teachers to tailor it to the kids sitting in front of them.”* This adaptability ensures the lessons resonate—and stick.

Looking ahead, the high school WBL coordinators are exploring platforms like *You Science* to gain deeper insight into student strengths and connect them with targeted opportunities in the curriculum. Career readiness is also now being elevated as a K-12 priority in the new district strategic plan, signaling a future layer of systemic support for educators in this work.

**At its core, Colonial Compass represents more than just a curriculum. It's about empowering educators with the tools, unwavering support, and shared sense of purpose to help students clearly see and confidently seize their future opportunities. What's being built at George Read and across the district isn't just a program but a lasting bridge to equity, opportunity, and possibility.**

## Scaffolding Student Success: STRUCTURES THAT SUPPORT READINESS

With robust scaffolding already firmly in place and a clear blueprint for growth, George Read is diligently reinforcing every essential beam needed to support student success.

No bridge is erected all at once. It takes careful scaffolding and essential supports to guide each phase of the construction process so that there is stability, strength, and consistent forward progress. At George Read, **Colonial Compass serves as that crucial scaffolding**, providing students with consistent, structured opportunities to explore their identities, imagine their futures, and begin to identify a path forward.

Delivered weekly to students in grades 6–8, Colonial Compass focuses on foundational elements of career exploration, key employability skills, self-motivation and improved academic performance — the very materials needed for a successful journey across the bridge. The entire course is organized and accessible via Schoology, giving students, teachers, and families a shared view of the road ahead. This transparency supports collaboration and makes career exploration a shared responsibility across the school community.

The curriculum also draws on robust, free resources from the Delaware Department of Education, ensuring high-quality, developmentally appropriate content across grade levels of the middle school bridge. Sixth graders embark on their exploration with “Career Heroes,” a resource designed to build foundational awareness through stories of real-world careers. Seventh and eighth graders build on that foundation through “Career Compass,” which helps them explore specific career clusters and begin aligning their interests with postsecondary pathways. Digital tools like Major Clarity and Pathful Connect facilitate deeper exploration into career fields, connecting students with local industry partners and providing insights into what education and training different careers require.

**Two key areas remain under active construction: hands-on learning and family engagement.** While the current curriculum offers strong scaffolding for self-reflection and exploration, school leaders recognize that more hands-on, experiential opportunities—like career days and field trips—are needed to anchor learning in real-world relevance. Likewise, while families have access to the Schoology platform, active engagement remains an area for growth. The high school WBL coordinators are planning more engaging career events that draw families into the conversation and reinforce the idea that future readiness is a shared construction project involving the entire community.

## Listening to the Builders of Tomorrow: DESIGNING WITH, NOT JUST FOR, STUDENTS

This deep commitment to understanding student perspectives, combined with their collaborative leadership model, ensures that as these bridges to the future are built, the students who walk them are seen, supported and invited to imagine what's possible.

To ensure a bridge serves those who will walk it, it is essential to listen to the travelers. At George Read, this means not only delivering programming to students but also actively listening to them as co-architects in shaping their own futures. Just as engineers routinely inspect a bridge during construction, **George Read's leadership team regularly uses student feedback as a tool to assess, refine and reinforce the structural integrity of the Colonial Compass program.**

**A central pillar of this continuous improvement process is the collection of real-time, meaningful data.** Through student surveys administered three times a year and daily, informal conversations in classrooms, both students and educators contribute to identifying the load-bearing beams of the program and the places where more support is needed. This feedback loop enables the team to make timely, student-centered adjustments to the bridge's design and construction. As one WBL coordinator shared, *"We've been very responsive to feedback from both students and faculty... and that we've changed the lessons so much from year one to two. That's really contributed to the buy-in."*



**The students aren't just giving feedback—they're actively contributing to blueprinting the future of the program.** They have emphasized how they explore careers matters just as much as what they're exploring. Their message was clear: less screen time and more meaningful human connection. One team member added, *"We heard from students that they wanted conversations. They wanted to be off the Chromebooks... I mean, everyone said that: 'I'm so tired of technology and I just want to be talking about this.'"* In response, the team has incorporated more interactive, relationship-based activities into career lessons. One example is the addition of a budgeting lesson modeled after The Price is Right game, creating a fun, engaging experience that gets students actively discussing real-world financial decisions. Through these adjustments, student voice is helping blueprint a more engaging learning experience.

Across grade levels, middle schoolers expressed a strong desire for hands-on, experiential learning that would make potential careers feel tangible and real. One 8th grader explained, *"I think the best way to learn is to physically see. I'd rather physically see something than keep hearing about it."* Another offered a playful vision: *"If you want to be a doctor, you can get the board game where you got the little squeezers and you can do the operations."* From healthcare and engineering to real estate and architecture, **students called for immersive activities that help them imagine themselves in these roles.**

They also expressed a strong preference for hearing directly from professionals—people who had walked the career paths they might one day follow. *“It’s always better to hear from a real, like, perspective that actually experienced that,”* one student said. Another suggested a rotating schedule highlighting career guests: *“Every Wednesday... they should highlight and change up the career person. This Wednesday a doctor, next Wednesday a construction worker. And they can tell us the benefits or the negatives or the positives of that job.”*

As George Read looks ahead to year three of this programming, the district plans to further strengthen and scaffold this bridge—laying planks of practical skill-building, diverse career exposure, and student voice/co-design. Real-world constraints like transportation logistics, substitute coverage, and staffing remain, but they are not deterring the ongoing work. The team’s commitment to actively listening to students and building this bridge collaboratively with them at every stage remains a guiding force.

**Students are the builders of tomorrow, already sketching their innovative blueprints. George Read is not just listening—they’re laying the foundation, beam by careful beam, together with their students.**



Cultivating roots of identity and branches of opportunity:

## MIDDLE GRADES CAREER EXPLORATION AT LAS AMÉRICAS ASPIRA ACADEMY

At **Las Américas ASPIRA Academy (ASPIRA)**, the journey of growth begins the moment students step through the door—where the roots of cultural pride ground them, and the branches of future possibility begin to stretch outward. Over the past two years, ASPIRA’s middle grades Career and Technical Education (CTE) pilot program has evolved into more than just a course offering—it has become a vital space for students to explore career interests, develop a deeper sense of identity, and cultivate skills that prepare them for high school and beyond.

ASPIRA’s CTE program is rooted in **cultural responsiveness to help middle schoolers embrace their heritage and explore career opportunities that expand their worldview.** Much like a tree’s roots that provide the grounding for new growth, the program provides students with a strong foundation to understand who they are while encouraging them to branch out into possibilities they may never have considered.



Aligned with the equity-centered middle grades CTE standards, the pilot program empowers students in grades 6-8 to explore and imagine careers through experiences that are hands-on, relevant, and shaped by student interest. Through student-centered design and strong family engagement, **ASPIRA creates a dynamic environment where students can grow as individuals and seed their potential as future professionals.**



*Equally important, the program invests in professional development to equip educators with the tools to be skilled gardeners that nurture student growth with care, insight and purpose.*

The following profile explores how ASPIRA's approach to cultural responsiveness, educator support and career exploration provides a powerful model for nurturing both the roots of identity and the branches of future success.

## The Roots:

# A FOUNDATION GROUNDED IN CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

**“We expect more because we care more.”**

At ASPIRA, the roots of career exploration begin forming long before a middle school student steps into the CTE classroom. They take hold in the hallways, in the values shared by educators and families, and in the visual reminders of growth all around the school. Each year, a new mural greets students and families as they enter the building—a living reflection of the school’s evolving identity. This year’s mural, designed by Principal Avilés and art educator Mrs. Flachier, features the school mascot, the wolf, and carries a simple but powerful message: *“We expect more because we care more.”*

That message is more than a motto. It underscores a core belief at ASPIRA that holding high expectations of students is an act of deep care. It’s a direct reflection of how **empathy can empower and how students are challenged to grow not only in knowledge but in self-awareness and resilience.**



It's within this rich soil of culture, care, and community that ASPIRA's middle school CTE pilot program has taken root. **The program's design is deeply informed by the cultural context of its predominantly Latinx student population.** It aims to counter limiting beliefs—especially those shaped by generational struggles, immigration journeys, and the urgent need to provide. *“Due to the challenges faced by many Hispanic families coming to the United States,”* one team member reflected, *“unconsciously, messages of obtaining a job and looking for quick opportunities to provide for your family might be shared with students.”* These messages, while grounded in love and survival, can sometimes narrow a young person's view of what's possible.

ASPIRA's career exploration program seeks to expand that view. By blending cultural responsiveness with exploration, students are empowered to see their heritage as a source of strength and their future as wide open. With every lesson, they gain the language, knowledge and confidence to talk about career paths and possibilities.

Families, too, are essential to this ecosystem and ASPIRA has made intentional efforts to grow their involvement. Through bilingual weekly newsletters, CTE informational sessions and the launch of the [Parent Camp](#) partnership, the school creates space for caregivers to actively engage in their children's career exploration. As one educator shared, *“Our students are learning so much in CTE, but when they talk about it at home, it's not always a positive conversation or parents don't have the knowledge to engage. We want to change that.”* **Parent Camp sessions -- offered both virtually and in person several times a year—are designed to empower families with the tools and knowledge to support their children's goals.** These sessions cover topics like the role of CTE, financial literacy and key transferrable skills, helping parents to guide their children to think more expansively about their futures.



Early feedback from families has been enthusiastic and affirming. In one session, a parent who works at Delaware Technical Community College shared information about the [SEED tuition program](#), generating excitement and requests for more resources on college access and affordability. Caregivers also shared reflections on the importance of encouraging students to dream broadly about their futures without limiting their options – emphasizing the need to support, not pre-determine, their children’ aspirations. These conversations surfaced both a growing awareness of new opportunities and important differences in family interests shaped by ethnicity and socioeconomic background. To ensure that every family feels supported and able to participate fully, **the program provides essential supports like food and childcare as part of the Parent Camp experience.**

The school's commitment to community goes even further. A dedicated page on the school's website will go live this summer to highlight local family-owned businesses to create connections between school, home, and neighborhood. **These efforts aim to deepen trust, reinforce cultural pride, and extend the roots of learning beyond the classroom.** As the CTE program continues to grow, ASPIRA is laying the groundwork for even stronger partnerships and community engagement. Future plans include job shadowing, internships, and volunteer opportunities with local businesses to help students apply what they've learned during CTE class in real-world settings.

**Together, these efforts cultivate a thriving ecosystem where students are not only firmly grounded in who they are but also prepared to grow into who they want to become.**

## The Trunk:

# STRONG LEADERSHIP, TEACHER GROWTH, AND A CLEAR PATH FORWARD

**“It’s one thing for [educators] to follow the CTE program implementation but another for them to understand the WHY behind this work.” - Principal José Avilés**

Just as a tree’s trunk provides structure and channels strength from its root to branches, ASPIRA’s CTE program stands firm because of **committed leadership, a dedicated educator and a clear, student-centered vision.**

A cornerstone of the leadership’s approach to this pilot program has been building school-wide buy-in and helping every educator in the building see themselves as integral to this work. Principal José Avilés notes, *“It’s one thing for [educators] to follow the CTE program implementation but another for them to understand the WHY behind this work.”* His leadership has focused on ensuring all teachers understand the program’s purpose and their role in connecting classroom learning to future possibilities.



Hiring Mr. London as the CTE instructor in January 2024 was another pivotal decision, one that planted the seeds for a thriving program. *“Mr. London has a passion for this work and develops strong relationships with students to support them in achieving their goals”* noted Principal Avilés. Before his arrival, the role had seen turnover, but Mr. London’s fresh perspective and deep care for students brought both consistency and a renewed excitement that helped CTE take root as part of the school culture.

Like any skilled gardener, Mr. London not only tends to the needs of each learner but continues to grow himself. To nurture his development, ASPIRA’s leadership team is committed to investing in professional learning, offering strategic support at each stage of his journey. As he transitions from paraeducator to certified teacher, Mr. London receives targeted mentorship and co-planning support, with future plans for biliteracy training to better serve multilingual learners. These investments reflect ASPIRA’s **deep commitment to both high-quality instruction, career exploration and cultural responsiveness.**



Mr. London's classroom is a space where growth is mutual and learning feels organic. *"As a coach, I say coaches have to be coachable—the same applies to teaching. Teachers have to be teachable. **You have to learn from the people you're teaching.**"* That philosophy is evident in how students describe their experience in the CTE class. One student shared, *"In Mr. London's class, it feels more like you're being heard... he'll stop what we're doing and talk about our interests, and then others start talking too. It gets you thinking about your future."* Another added, *"I want teachers to know it's okay for them to ask questions and make it so the kids in the class can ask more questions. That's what I like about the CTE class. Mr. London talks about each and everything and still makes it interesting and entertaining."*

For one student, this approach sparked interest in a new passion: *"We were talking about space, and he mentioned astrophysics. I didn't even know that was a thing. He stayed after class and explained more, and now that's what I want to do."*

A final turning point came when the leadership team restructured the CTE schedule, shifting to a trimester block model. Instead of once-a-week sessions, middle-grade students now engage in daily 45-minute classes over 10-week cycles. This structural change, sparked by student and staff feedback, provides the consistency needed for deeper learning, stronger relationships and greater engagement.

These moments of change aren't just bright spots—they're growth rings, marking the steady expansion of a program that's rooted in identity, **supported by thoughtful leadership and committed to helping students branch out into their fullest, most confident selves.**

## The Branches:

# EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS

**The impact is clear: students are more engaged, more curious, and more aware of the paths ahead.**

As ASPIRA's CTE program grows stronger, its branches are reaching ever farther, stretching toward the future through experiences that are hands-on, relevant, and shaped by student interest. Each new opportunity is like a budding branch, **helping students grow in confidence and curiosity as they explore what's possible.**

At the heart of this expansion is student voice. From selecting career interest surveys to choosing field trips and curating portfolio work, **students are active participants in their learning.** Their input directly informs program design—including which industry partners to invite to campus for ASPIRA's annual Career Expo. The impact is clear: students are more engaged, more curious, and more aware of the paths ahead. One team member shared, *"This one student didn't talk in my class. Now she says, 'I want to be a veterinarian. How do I get there?' Students are asking questions like that. It's clear that they're listening and becoming more curious about their future."*



Importantly, ASPIRA's approach doesn't box students into predefined pathways—it opens doors. As Mr. London puts it, *"I always tell them, 'choose what you might want to do for your future.' But I also stress it's not set in stone. If you have to change, that's fine."* In a community where immediate employment often feels like the safest postsecondary choice, this emphasis on flexibility and self-discovery is powerful. **Students are encouraged to follow their interests and values**, knowing that their path may evolve—and that's not only okay, it's expected.

The daily CTE classes for grades 6–8 provide consistent exposure to career readiness skills and future planning. With support from Junior Achievement and Pathful Learning, **ASPIRA weaves real-world scenarios into its curriculum, fostering cross-curricular connections that make learning stick.** These partnerships make learning more connected across subjects too. Mr. London noted, *"We pull from the Junior Achievement curriculum for Finance Park, which the Social Studies teacher also uses. So there's some cross-curricular connection."*

By eighth grade, students have curated a personalized portfolio—complete with a resume, high school course plan, interest survey data, postsecondary goals, and a career research project. **This portfolio serves as a tangible representation of their exploration journey and helps them visualize the path ahead.**

Equally important is the emphasis on transferable skills. *“It’s about building these skills from the start—teaching sixth graders soft skills in a way that’s relevant to them now”* shared Mr. London. *“I try to adapt the curriculum so students can see how skills like communication and teamwork apply to their everyday lives. For example, when teaching teamwork, I connect it to situations they face now, even though the lesson might be framed in a job setting. It’s about helping them understand these skills in the present, while also showing how they’ll transfer to their future careers.”*

Looking ahead, the team is focused on strengthening two major areas: **deeper collaboration between the CTE teacher and school counselor, and expanded access to college visits and work-based learning.** These aren’t just logistical tweaks—they’re new branches forming. By linking academic progress, interest inventories, and career planning, the counselor-CTE partnership could offer a more personalized support system. And though transportation and scheduling remain hurdles, the team is exploring flexible models for college tours, job shadowing, and internships.



ASPIRA continues to offer meaningful out-of-school learning experiences. Seventh graders tour local high schools. Eighth graders visit nearby colleges. The Career Expo brings professionals from a variety of industries directly to students. Every interaction is a new limb on the tree of possibility—showing students that **their dreams are not only valid, but within reach.**

**As these branches grow and multiply, they carry with them the strength of strong roots, a sturdy trunk, and the belief that every student deserves to explore a future they can truly own.**

## The Leaves: STUDENT FEEDBACK, GROWTH, AND THE FUTURE

**“Active listening can help you in the real world. So, people want to actually listen to you and take you seriously because you’re actively listening.” – ASPIRA Student**

Just as leaves reflect a tree’s health and changing seasons, student feedback offers a living snapshot of ASPIRA’s CTE program in motion—capturing what’s working, what’s growing, and where the next season of learning might lead.

In conversations with students, they consistently highlight the value of learning real-life skills. One shared, *“Active listening can help you in the real world. So, people want to actually listen to you and take you seriously because you’re actively listening.”* Another appreciated how the CTE teacher supported their college and career planning: *“For eighth grade, he’s always willing to help you find what high school you want to go to based on what you want to be. Helps you figure out scholarships you can get for when you’re older.”*





**They're also eager for more hands-on and creative learning**—especially in fields like engineering and architecture. *“More activities where you build things or come together and create ideas for stuff would be really interesting,”* one student explained. Others asked for more real-world connections in class, like exploring how current events intersect with future careers: *“I want to see more of real-time things that happen in the world and how we can make that better with what we want to be.”* Unsurprisingly, field trips remain a top request. Students understand that firsthand experiences spark deeper learning.

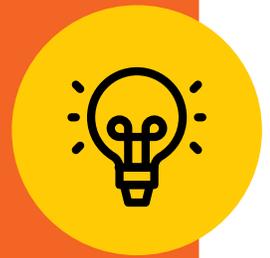
In response, ASPIRA's leadership is strengthening structures for feedback. Principal Avilés described a simple but effective idea: *“Pulling five students out of class one day and hearing those honest initial reactions, because that's usually where the truth is hidden.”* These check-ins, along with more student panels and reflection sessions, **ensure that student voice remains central.**

**And students know their voices matter.** Their suggestions are helping shape what and how they learn. *“The kids were kind of like, you know, taxes and budgeting—they're like ‘Mr. London, there aren't any movies or anything about this,’”* he recalled. *“So I started doing my research and began incorporating some movies about financial literacy.”*

Each piece of feedback is like a leaf catching light—evidence of a vibrant, growing ecosystem where students are not only learning, but leading. And just like the leaves that change with the seasons, ASPIRA's CTE program continues to evolve, driven by the voices of the students it serves.

**Together, ASPIRA's approach affirms what the roots, trunk, and branches already suggest: when students are seen, supported, and invited to imagine what's next, they don't just grow, they flourish.**

# Closing



As we reflect on the progress made in Delaware’s Middle Grades Exploration Initiative, it’s clear that transformative change is not only necessary for equitable outcomes but possible through innovation and partnership.

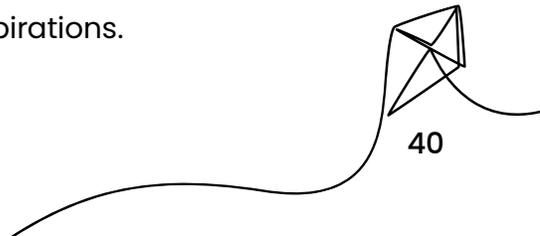


This collaborative effort between DDOE, Rodel, and local educators has already begun to shift the landscape of career exploration in middle schools, guided by principles of equity, student voice, and continuous improvement. The lessons learned along the way provide valuable insights for schools and districts across Delaware and beyond, offering a roadmap for creating meaningful, student-centered career exploration programs. The lessons from the first year still hold strong—and students’ outcomes and voices deepen their importance:



## Plan with Purpose

Effective implementation requires thoughtful, intentional and innovative planning. Success hinges not only on setting clear goals and milestones but also on building the flexibility to adapt as the work unfolds. A strong foundation of continuous evaluation and feedback ensures that the program evolves in ways that best support students’ needs, identities and aspirations.





### **Build Trust and Shared Ownership**

Change is a gradual process, and success moves at the speed of trust. As we've seen in our pilot schools, trust-building must be nurtured through consistent communication, collaboration, and celebrating incremental wins. When all stakeholders feel heard and valued, they become champions of the work, fueling momentum for deeper, sustained transformation.



### **Shifting Mindsets for Equity**

Central to this initiative is a commitment to challenging entrenched beliefs and structures that limit students' potential. By shifting our mindset to one that prioritizes equity and dismantles barriers, we create liberating opportunities for all students—especially those who have been historically underserved—to envision and pursue careers without limitation.

Looking forward, the work doesn't end with a successful pilot. Instead, it marks the beginning of a long-term commitment to reshape middle school education, creating a pathway for every student to identify their passions, explore their interests, develop the skills they need and prepare for a bright future. We invite educators, leaders, and communities to join us in this endeavor—

**—how will you help transform career exploration in your schools?**



# Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the following groups for their invaluable contributions to this work:

## **Community of Practice Pilot Schools:**

We are deeply grateful to the leadership and educators of each school for their unwavering commitment and dedication to the vision of middle grades career exploration. Your willingness to participate in this pilot program and share innovative practices is truly commendable.

## **Steering Committee and Standards Writing Committee:**

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to the members of the Steering Committee and Standards Writing Committee who played a pivotal role in building the vision for this program. Their expertise, guidance, and tireless work in developing the standards and foundational resources were instrumental in shaping the direction of this initiative.

## **Junior Achievement:**

A special thank you to Junior Achievement (JA) for being a valuable partner. Their collaboration with several pilot school programs through BizTown and Finance Park programming is providing students with critical financial literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and work readiness –

preparing them for bright futures. JA's ongoing support through teacher training and resource development has been instrumental in supporting pilot program success.

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