



It's Never Too Early to Learn About Careers

by Annette Miller

Public education is a lot more than the sum of the classes students take.

Students are learning to be prepared to function and thrive in the adult world. A big piece of that preparedness is career education, where students have the opportunity to explore how they will use all the knowledge they are gaining to achieve financial independence.



Across the nation, educators and policy-makers are increasingly recognizing the importance of preparing both college- and career-ready students. In Montana, Jobs for Montana's Graduates is a highly successful program preparing students to become college- and career-ready. Recently, the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation has provided \$650,000 for the iGraduate Montana initiative which aims to create a more seamless pathway for students to continue their education beyond high school. At the iGraduate Montana kick-off meeting, the consensus was that career development activities need to start well before students enter middle school.

Why Should Career Education Start Earlier?

Kids in grade school are busy learning the basic building blocks of education: reading, writing, math, and socialization. Why on Earth would we want to interrupt these important subjects to teach about careers, a subject they won't need to worry about until several years down the road?

Just like the traditional school subjects, the basics of career education should be learned early so students can build upon that knowledge over time. Learning is cumulative, and a well-designed curriculum provides a firm foundation in the lower grades for the lessons of the upper grades to build upon.¹ For topics such as mathematics, it is easy to see how that works. Young children first learn to recognize numbers and to count. Next comes addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, geometry, algebra, calculus, etc. The simpler knowledge must be mastered to move on to the more complex topics. The same holds true for career education.

Even before starting school, children often have a vague awareness that people have different types of jobs, but they may have

no concept of what those jobs entail. A curriculum in career education that builds upon itself starts by filling in those details. Students learn about specific occupations and reflect on which ones appeal to them. Once they have a broader base of knowledge about what people do in their jobs, they can begin to understand how different occupations are interconnected, and how all of them play a larger role in society.

Students will also begin to see themselves in these future roles. As they form opinions on which types of jobs they might like, students begin to understand the concept of job matching—how one chooses a career that suits their interests, talents, and personality. They will begin to understand that different types of jobs require different skills, allowing teachers to show them the connection between job skills and the subjects they are studying in school.

In the upper grades, students will need this base of knowledge to choose the courses that will help them achieve their career goals. Montana has a wealth of career information

¹ ACT: College and Career Readiness: The Importance of Early Learning. www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/ImportanceofEarlyLearning.pdf



publicly available to help people make decisions about their future, but without a solid foundation in career education, students may struggle to make sense of it. Labor Market Information (LMI) can be extremely useful, but only if you understand how to use it.

By high school, students should have a basic feel for the career areas that interest them and know how to research occupations that look promising. Learning to use LMI can help them discover which occupations are in demand so they can avoid disappointment and wasted effort seeking jobs that are in decline. Once they find their passion, they can use LMI to research education requirements, schools and training programs, and even scholarship opportunities.

Simply put, the reason to start career education early is because there is so much to know. Unfortunately, most career education doesn't happen until a student reaches middle or high school. If they have not been exposed to earlier career education, middle school students may not have given their future career much thought and may feel overwhelmed at having to choose high school courses that can determine their future path.

When early career education is neglected, the source of children's knowledge about careers is often limited to what they see on TV or in their immediate family,

further emphasizing the importance of career education in public education. Children living in poverty have less exposure to the career choices available to them, which can in turn impact a person's preparedness later in life to take advantage of opportunities for income mobility. O'Bryant and Corder-Bolz (1978) established that children as young as five years of age learn to gender stereotype occupations based on the gender of a television role model.²

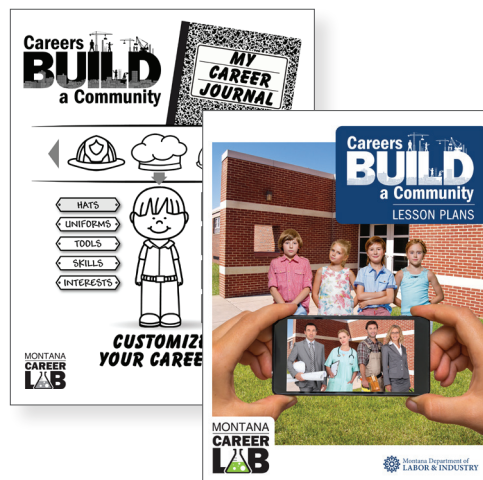


² M Watson, M McMahon: *Children's career development: A research review from a learning perspective.*
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S000187910500062X



Our Newest Career Education Resources

The Montana Career Lab of the Montana Department of Labor & Industry (DLI) has been providing career development resources for students and educators for decades, with emphasis on high school and middle school career planning tools such as the Montana Career Information System (MCIS). The recent increased emphasis on early career awareness spurred DLI to create tools for even younger students and the Montana Career Lab recently launched curriculum and resources for Pre-K through 3rd grade students.



The Pre-K to Kindergarten materials are called “I Can Be...” The “I Can Be...” series introduces 56 careers, showing both a boy and a girl in each occupation. The worksheets tell students what school subjects they will use in each occupation and some basic information about the career. The materials include teacher instructions, 112 worksheets, and flash cards that allow teachers to match careers to subjects being studied and incorporate career education into their regular curriculum. For instance, careers that use math (such as an accountant) might be introduced in the context of a math lesson. The “I Can Be...” materials form the first step in career awareness.

For first through third graders, we offer “Careers Build a Community.” The curriculum and resources build on the “I Can Be...” series. There are several key goals to Careers Build a Community:

1. Deepen earlier knowledge of the 56 careers.
2. Show that all careers have value.
3. Represent all careers in a non-gender stereotypical fashion.
4. Connect students with careers in their own community.
5. Connect what students learn in school with the world of work.
6. Integrate career activities within the subject matter portions of existing curriculum.
7. Provide the resources at no cost to schools and community-based organizations.
8. Encourage students to reflect on each career by journaling.

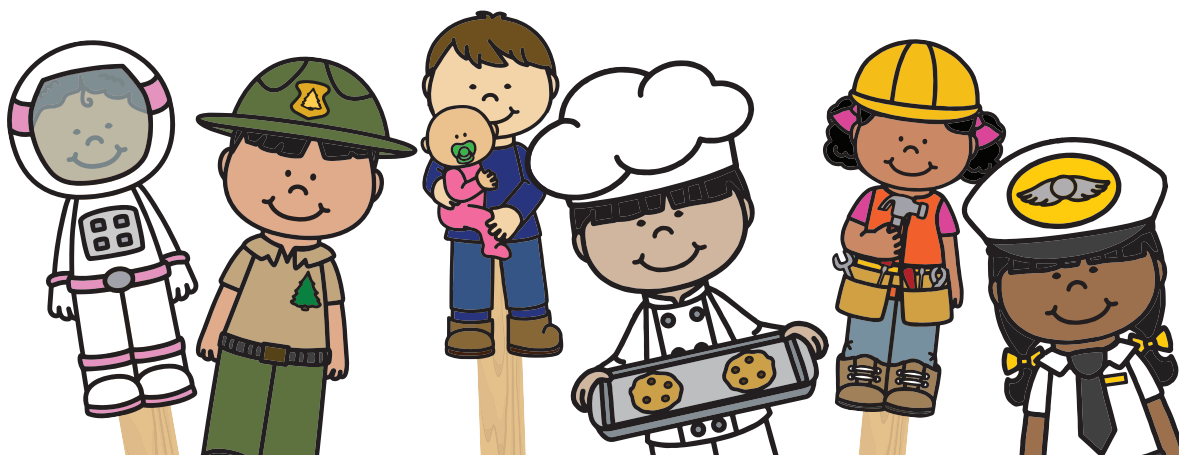


Careers Build a Community takes the original 56 careers from “I Can Be...” and deepens students’ understanding of them with hands-on activities. Each lesson features a classroom activity, three independent learning activities, and a workplace connection. All of the activities require minimal outside resources.

The careers included run the gamut from trash collector to surgeon. Some of the reflection questions for students to consider are “What would happen if your town didn’t have a trash collector (or surgeon etc.)?” For our rural communities, this question would be followed by “What does our town do to make up for the fact we don’t have a trash collector (surgeon

etc.)?” This encourages students to think about how important different careers are to the functioning of their community.

The final culminating activity is the Community Day, when students will build their own community by choosing a career to share with other students, parents, and other visitors. Each student will create a puppet to help them explain how their chosen career helps the community. Teachers are encouraged to invite real-life community members who work in the careers discussed so that students can ask questions and add to their knowledge. It is a great way to get the community more involved with their local school.



More Career Education Resources from Montana Career Lab

“I Can Be...” and “Careers Build a Community” are only the newest additions to the resources available from Montana Career Lab. Our career development resources cover all age groups, so school districts can implement career education from Pre-K through high school.

In addition to our newly-launched “I Can Be...” series, Montana Career Lab also offers Pre-K and Kindergarten students the Career Peeks Alphabet Pages, which introduces students to one career for each letter of the

alphabet and helps them practice writing. For 1st and 2nd grade students, there is Career Peeks: A Career Awareness Activity Book that contains short activities related to careers.



For 3rd and 4th grade students, we have Career Heroes. Career Heroes introduces careers based on the Holland career types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. Career Heroes includes a student workbook filled with short activities, trading cards for teacher-led activities, and a teacher's guide.

Designed for 5th and 6th grade students, Jacob and Emily Skip School introduces the concept of career clusters by telling the story of a set of twins who spend the day learning about careers in their community.

Middle school is where MCIS Jr. is introduced. MCIS Jr. is a version of the Montana Career Information System that is especially geared to middle school students, who will be learning more about their interests through online assessments. MCIS Jr. has an e-portfolio that stores their assessment results and occupational exploration. A workbook is available to guide students through the program. The publication What to Pack expands on what students learn in MCIS Jr. and has budgeting exercises to show them how far their money will go in the real world.

Finally, for high school students there is the MCIS program, which contains additional tools for students as they plan for their post-high school goals. The portfolios created in MCIS Jr. can follow students into the high

school version (and ultimately to the adult version). Montana-specific information is included in the occupational, educational, and financial aid sections of the system. MCIS is a comprehensive career planning tool, including features such as a high school course planner, resume creator, school and financial aid search, application tracker, and other tools help students create a plan that can form the roadmap for their future.

Other resources for high school students include the Montana Career Guide, Soft Skills Checklist, Pocket Resume, and Dollars & Sense, a financial literacy publication created by the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education.

All of the Montana Career Lab resources are available for download at www.careers.mt.gov (select publications are available in a printed version that can be ordered from lmi.mt.gov/Publications/PublicationOrders). Schools that implement the career development activities starting with the earliest grade levels through graduation should see better student engagement in what they are learning, better retention and high school completion, better connection with their community, and students well-prepared for their lives after high school. Helping children learn about careers and the important role they play in the world in which we live will benefit all of us and our workforce of the future.