

12.3 Taking Charge of College and Career Planning

How do we know we are doing a good job developing a college and career-ready culture in our schools? One indicator is that students are able to be their own advocates when it comes to college and career planning. That doesn't mean they know everything, but they've thought enough about post-secondary planning that they know what questions to ask, how to monitor their progress and how to assess their readiness for post-secondary life.

So what can we do to help our students be the "take charge" type, not the "oops, I missed the boat!" type? It might seem crazy, but taking charge means to talk seriously about college while students are in middle school.

Think about it—middle school is when students in Texas will start to take career interest inventories, the perfect opportunity to begin making connections to possible career pathways and the courses they require.

Let's listen in on a conversation between an educator and a student who needs a little help getting focused on the future.

Tyrus: *Mr. Myers, did you see that gaming winning shot I hit?*

Mr. Myers: *I did see that game winning shot! I mean, you guys looked smooth! How many points did you have last night?*

Tyrus: *I had, like, sixteen points.*

Mr. Myers: *Sixteen points? How long have you been playing ball, Tyrus?*

Tyrus: *I've been playing basketball for about four years.*

Mr. Myers: *"Man, y'all were gelling out there; you were phenomenal. I saw that "three" you made too, with two minutes left. That was clutch!"*

I'm glad I'm getting to talk to you today, Tyrus. I notice not only how well and how great you are as an athlete on the court, but I've seen how great you are in the math class. And so I was going to ask you, "Have you thought of anything besides, probably college basketball, that you would like to do if you go to college?"

Tyrus: *"I've been thinking, maybe a physical trainer."*

Mr. Myers: *"Well, what I want to talk to you about is not only the great things that I've seen you do on the basketball court, but what I think you can also do in life as far as mathematics and science when you go to college. So let's talk about a physical trainer. Look at this figure real quick. I'm just going to use mathematics. What shape is this?"*

Tyrus: *"It's a rectangle."*

Mr. Myers: *“It’s a rectangle! It’s like a basketball court, right? You said “physical trainer,” and that was one of the occupations that was on my mind that I wanted to talk to you about. You’ve got physical trainers, occupational therapists; those are people that use mathematics or science every day, right? But physical trainers not only are using math or science but they’re also there because they love the game, right? And I was thinking to myself, “Has Tyrus thought of something outside of the basketball court?” Meaning, have you thought about something you can do in your college life that involves a career in mathematics or science?”*

I know you are a phenomenal athlete, but life throws curve balls at us sometimes, right? If that doesn’t happen, I want you to have a backup plan like that because you are great in mathematics. And I not only want to see you excel on the basketball court, it would also be great to see you excel in something in life too, when Mr. Myers is an old man and I see you 10 years, or 20 years from now, all right?”

Tyrus: *“Yes, sir.”*

Mr. Myers: *“So, have a great day. Keep up the great work and I’ll see you later, all right?”*

Middle school is also a time when study habits are becoming solidified, allowing us the opportunity to help our students become better at self-management and more self-reflective about their own abilities and goal setting around grades and test scores. It is also a time when students are taking on more complex academic projects, so why not have them assemble a portfolio of research and longer-term assignments? It is a great way for students to track and measure their growth against college-level work.

Another important way educators can help our students take charge is by avoiding the temptation to peg them as “college material” or not. Instead, we need to be creative and work closely with students to help them maximize their strengths and interests and address their challenges.

Think about the difference between the way these two teachers talk about Josiah, a student who is struggling with school engagement.

Teacher 1: *“I have this student, Josiah, who is not doing very well at all. He never listens and is always doing something off task.”*

Teacher 2: *“Does he have any interests?”*

Teacher 1: *He likes cars, so I’m guessing he’ll go into auto mechanics. We have some CTE courses that are for “non-college bound” students where they learn to fix cars. I’m guessing he’ll wind up there.”*

Teacher 3: *“Have I told you about that student in my class, Josiah?”*

Teacher 4: *No. What about him?”*

Teacher 3: *Well, he's a little bit confused about what he wants to do after high school. But he's interested in auto mechanics and I think he'll need some assistance with reading. But if he could get it together, it could really lead to other areas such as engineering.*

Teacher 4: *True.*

Teacher 3: *I know a program in Lubbock that has a great pathway program where students in a high school automotive technology program can continue their education leading all the way to a master degree in mechanical engineering. I'm going to suggest it to him."*

Teacher 4: *That's a great idea.*

Holding our students to high expectations from the early years on can help them expect more from themselves—and have that “take charge” attitude that colleges and employers like to see! Could your middle and high schools be doing more to coordinate college and career-readiness efforts?