Career exploration and development needs to start right at the beginning – with elementary school students.

BY JENNIFER CURRY, PH.D.
A few years ago, I was giving a presentation to graduate students from various education disciplines. I asked, “At what grade level should we start to promote career and college readiness in schools?” The group’s consensus was that career and college readiness should begin in high school. I was disappointed, although not surprised, by this answer.
After introducing students to the tools of the trade, you can give each student a picture card with a career and a can of Play-doh and ask them to sculpt a tool of the trade the community helper uses. At the end of the activity, have students walk around the room and view the tools their classmates sculpted.

Teachers: The key message to share with early elementary school teachers is that careers matter and are an essential part of the overall curriculum—and that children can realistically understand careers as early as kindergarten. Teachers may help by connecting classroom content to careers. For example, most early elementary teachers have a science unit on weather. Teachers might include weather careers as part of the unit, such as meteorologist and climatologist. Ideally, school counselors and teachers can co-facilitate lessons integrating career and content.

A great example is a kindergarten engineering unit. Engineering combines math and physics concepts. Start by introducing what an engineer does and why an engineer’s work is important. Then, work with the teacher on facilitating an engineering activity. One fun activity is to have students build mazes and structures. Place students in groups, and challenge them to see who can build the

Start Young: Pre-K–1st Grade

Students: In the early years of elementary school, introduce students to careers in their community. Community helpers are some of the most logical and easy careers to introduce. Some examples include: doctors, firefighters, police officers, cashiers, bakers, EMTs, mail carriers, construction workers, teachers, librarians, trash collectors, etc. All of these individuals help communities prosper.

There are many books, games and activities to help young students identify community helpers, such as “Career Day” by Anne Rockwell. Or use career puppets or coloring pages to help students identify community careers.

Once students have mastered identifying community helpers, introduce tools of the trade community helpers use, vehicles they drive and clothes they wear. This helps students better understand the work helpers do and how it connects to what they are learning in school. For example, a baker uses measuring cups and measuring spoons. Measuring is a math skill. You can bring myriad tools of the trade to the classrooms and have students connect the tools to what they are learning. Another tool example is a doctor’s stethoscope. This tool relates to health, a subject most pre-K–1 students learn about in their classes.

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The misconception that high school is the time to begin career and college preparation is nothing new but vastly incorrect. Like any area of development, career development is sequential and builds over time. We don’t expect students to arrive to high school and take algebra without prior math courses. Can you imagine how they would react? Yet, there are some schools and districts where exactly that happens with career and college development; some students don’t receive a cohesive career curriculum until they are in their final high school years and are still expected to know how to make thoughtful career and college choices.

To properly prepare, students need access to quality elementary career and college curriculum consistently delivered through a comprehensive school counseling program. Indeed, students in elementary school love career exploration. Their natural curiosity, imagination and sense of adventure perfectly mesh with creative investigations of the world of work, allowing elementary school counselors to make career and college exploration fun and exciting. Following are some essential ways to engage students, parents and teachers in the most formative years of career development—pre-K through fifth grade.
For example, they understand that planets are different from stars or meteors but that all of these objects are found in space. Similarly, they know there are animals that live in the dessert, animals that live in the ocean, polar animals and animals that no longer exist. Swiss child development expert Jean Piaget called this ability to classify objects “seriation,” and it is useful in career and college development.

Second- and third-grade students understand the connections between groups of careers and the differences, or nuances, between careers, making these grades an ideal time to introduce career pathways and clusters. It is also a great time to add depth to students’ career understanding and diversify their knowledge of careers.

For example, students in early elementary school likely recognize the career of doctor. During second and third grades, teachers, including P.E. teachers, and school counselors can introduce specializations in the medical field. A great way to do this is to look at standards for a particular grade. In reviewing the health standards for third grade, you may discover that in your state third-graders learn about nutrition, the food pyramid, the importance of exercise and healthy weight, and the skeletal and muscular systems.

During this unit, you can share with students some specialized careers in the health sciences career cluster, including nutritionist, dietitian, orthopedist and orthopedic surgeon. To help students begin to understand the connection between careers and college, highlight the career pathway of one of the careers in this cluster. For example, explain how someone chooses a career, such as nutritionist, and that a pathway is the process one takes to become a nutritionist through ongoing education.

At the end of the unit, consider a fun, culminating game such as career Jeopardy with pathway and cluster questions, career baseball (answer questions to move your team through the bases) and career tic-tac-toe. Including movement and fun into your lessons always helps with elementary school children. When I was an elementary school counselor, I was fortunate to have a classroom, so I would actually turn my classroom into a game board for games like career tic-tac-toe,

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careers as well as the careers their children see when they go to the grocery store, the doctor’s office, the post office and more. In our home, we encourage our son to “try on” different careers in everyday life. When we are cooking I will ask him if he would like to be a chef. I give him an apron, a chef’s hat and have him do as much of the cooking as possible (e.g., adding seasonings, stirring, running the mixer). Afterward, I ask him what he learned about being a chef, and we discuss what he liked or didn’t like about being a chef.

Keep Going: 2nd–3rd Grade

Students: Second- and third-grade students are particularly adept at understanding how objects relate to each other.
and the students were the game pieces. I made large X’s and O’s that they carried to their spots as they answered questions. If the weather is good, you might also consider drawing the game board outside with sidewalk chalk. The possibilities are endless: career hopscotch, career checkers. Remember, the point of the game is to learn but to have fun while learning.

**Teachers:** Because learning career clusters is crucial to future career development and understanding future career pathways, it is important that students connect school and the world of work as much as possible. Partner with teachers before the school year begins to help teachers determine links between their curriculum and career clusters.

Many schools are beginning microsocieties, and second- and third-graders can learn a lot about citizenship, careers, social responsibility, entrepreneurship and financial literacy from these types of activities. Microsocieties may be developed in the whole school or in a classroom (www.microsociety.com). The concept is that for a time period each school week, students run their own society. Students are assigned jobs, and they earn a “wage” based on the kind of work they do. This might be fake dollars or credits of some type. Students try out different types of work throughout the year and earn various wages. They can save up their wages and then visit a “store” to make purchases at select times throughout the month. Ask community partners to donate items for the store.

There are also opportunities for students to be entrepreneurs. For example, at one school, a student wanted to sell brownies. His mother agreed to help him, but his teacher insisted the student had to pay for his own materials for the brownies, and if his mother helped, he had to pay her a wage. He also had to compensate his parents for overhead as he used their kitchen and oven to cook the brownies. The student did make a profit, but he also learned about business expenses.

Another teacher had a class garden, and her students took turns working as gardeners. They sold the vegetables, fruits, and flowers they raised to parents, teachers, and staff. Other students who weren’t

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gardening ran the store and made change for customers (customer service work). Some students ordered supplies (i.e., make supply lists for seeds, soil, lime, fertilizer), and others served as accountants who budgeted (estimating costs of needed materials, determining how much to charge for products, projecting potential profits).

Parents: Second and third grade is the ideal time to host family night activities. For example, consider co-hosting a family fun night with teachers, and have students and parents rotate through “Fun with Fractions” games. Game examples include the Connect Four fractions game, fraction pizza (art activity with parents), fraction domino war, equivalent fractions spoons game, equivalent fractions missing numerator board game and so on (all available on Pinterest). If possible, get local businesses to provide door prizes for students and parents, dinner and child care for smaller siblings.

Start the evening with a short presentation (10 minutes) on the importance of fractions for career development. Who uses fractions in their daily work? Lots of workers including architects, construction workers, doctors, pharmacists, musicians, bakers and chefs, stock traders, etc. There are some short YouTube videos demonstrating various careers (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nU_kdjeGACI).

At the conclusion of the night, families might be able to make their own delicious recipe for fraction success such as no-bake cookies or small dessert pizzas using fractions if the school can secure donations for these items.

Build in Crucial Years: 4th-5th Grade: Fourth and fifth grade are crucial to career and college readiness. In terms of career development, students need to develop the mindset that learning is lifelong, and they’ll probably need to pursue some type of postsecondary training for any career they pursue. In classroom presentations, help students understand the progression of K–12 schooling and what postsecondary options are generally available to students. At this time, it is ideal to have students begin to investigate careers using technology. Introduce them to the Occupational Outlook Handbook or O*Net. To engage students personally and meaningfully, choose an interactive activity such as placing students in groups of four and having each group watch a video about entering a specific career. For example, here is a video about how to become a doctor: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kskWZSRaoeg.

Then, students list the skills, training/education, exams or competencies, physical requirements, personality or dispositions a person with this career should have and ways to learn more about the career. Next, have students look up the career in the Occupational Outlook Handbook or O*Net to fill in any missing information. Next, have students in each group mind map collaboratively, using markers and chart paper, everything they’ve learned about the career and present it to the rest of the class.
Who uses fractions in their daily work?
Lots of workers including architects, construction workers, doctors, pharmacists, musicians, bakers and chefs, stock traders and many more.

of the class. Hang the mind maps in other classes so other students also get the benefit of learning as they pass by the mind maps. Learn more about using mind maps at www.mindmapping.com.

Other activities include having students develop career posters and having a student-run career fair with the types of information listed above. Or, have students develop career trading cards of three to five careers they explore online, listing the information they learn on the cards. For the trading card activity, have students take five minutes to trade cards with other students in the room, with the goal of trading at least two cards.

**Teachers:** Fourth- and fifth-grade students should be pushed to develop self-regulatory habits as they begin the transition to middle school. Self-regulation includes stress and time management and the ability to organize their own materials. Academic progress monitoring should also begin at this age, with students understanding the need to monitor their own grades and adjust their performance to pursue greater competence in their academics. Work with teachers to brainstorm ways to help students take greater responsibility for their academics, including setting academic goals at the beginning of each grading period, identifying students with difficulty organizing materials and seeking opportunities to encourage students to think about promoting leadership, conflict-resolution skills and time management. One ideal way to foster better time management is to have students implement their own time-on-task strategies for homework. Often, in late elementary school students and parents complain that homework takes hours every night. By helping students break down their work into time-on-task segments (i.e., work for 15 minutes with a three-minute break), students are better able to focus for shorter periods of time.

**Parents:** Working with parents of this age group means preparing them for the middle school transition and the changes to come. Helping parents recognize their students will need to take greater self-responsibility and that middle school comes with a host of interpersonal, academic and social nuance is critical to helping students develop as future employees. Parent workshops should include information on middle school success skills and how middle school academics are crucial in preparing students for high school. Some specific parent workshop topics may include: middle school and social media (covering cyberbullying, setting boundaries for your child’s social media participation, determining how much and how often to monitor your child’s social media use); middle school and changing academic expectations (covering study skills, organizational skills, personal responsibility); and recognizing signs of stress (covering the balance between helping your child too much and too little and recognizing when to step in and assist).

As you can see, the elementary school years are an ideal time to focus on career and college readiness. Elementary students love to be engaged in a variety of hands-on activities, and their natural curiosity and creativity make career exploration so much fun. Elementary school years are about expanding students’ career knowledge and opportunities. If elementary school counselors focus on providing a developmental, sequential career curriculum for students, then middle school counselors are able to naturally transition these students to the next phase of career development: making meaning of their personal interests, aptitudes and skills as they relate to careers.

Jennifer Curry, Ph.D., is a professor at Louisiana State University and a former elementary school counselor. She can be reached at jcurry@lsu.edu.