An innovative, well-thought-out college- and career-planning program can help elementary students take the first steps toward turning their career dreams into reality. She wants to be a doctor; she is interested in science and research; he excels at writing; she wants to be a doctor.
An innovative, well-thought-out college- and career-planning program can help elementary school students take the first steps toward turning their career dreams into reality.

My first job as a school counselor was at a high school. Here, I met many high schools students who were just starting to navigate the world of career and college. Clearly this was too late to begin the planning process. And many of them were graduating with no plan for the future at all. Others were headed off to college or the workforce without knowing what they wanted to do when they got there. No one had talked to them about their strengths or interests.

What concerned me most were the kids who didn’t succeed in college and came home defeated. Sometimes it was
because of a lack of effort or distractions, but too many times it was because they weren’t truly prepared for life beyond high school and didn’t have a clue about what they really wanted to do when they grew up.

So I moved to the middle school level and started college and career exploration with eighth-graders, which still wasn’t early enough. Too many times students were already closing doors because they didn’t know what was required of them to create opportunities for their future. I then moved to the elementary school level, which I believe is the perfect place to start talking to students about college and career planning. There wasn’t a college- and career-readiness program in place at my new elementary school, so I made it my mission to develop one.

Kids were already dreaming about being professional dancers and football players. Others wanted to be teachers and doctors. I set out to help these young students find a way to make their dreams a reality.

Starting Early

Elementary-school-age kids have big dreams. Their future is wide open, and it’s the perfect time to develop a plan to meet those dreams. Time is on their side. When I start talking to kids about careers, the younger students are really a blank canvas. The problem is that, in most cases, we wait until students are in high school and are picking colleges before we start having these conversations. What concerned me over the years was watching older students still in that dreaming phase. I had a high school student talking about wanting to be an engineer even though he had failed every math class he attempted. I had a girl decide she wanted to get into nursing only to find out she did not prepare herself with the right courses in high school.

We need to expose students not only to career options but also help them develop an academic plan that will allow them to turn their dreams into a reality. The elementary school level is the first place where we can build students’ foundation in every subject area, including what school counselors teach students.

For students to be transformational leaders, school counselors need to make them aware of the knowledge and skills needed for future success. This is the time to get them excited about their futures and the possibilities and teach them why it is so important to excel in school. Students need to understand why it is important to read and write and understand mathematical concepts. The “why do I have to learn this” question students so often ask can be answered by talking about college and career readiness.

When I teach career exploration in the classroom, I explain to students that they need to have these skills to get them ready for jobs or college. They learn how what they’re learning now helps them pursue their dreams. If they want to become a police officer, they need to know how to write tickets and fill out reports. If they want to become an accountant, they need to know how to do math. If they want to become a chef, they need to know how to read a recipe and understand fractions when they measure the ingredients. They discover that the grades they earn today will affect them when colleges are deciding which students they want in their school. They also discover the importance of showing up to school on time and not missing too many days because employers aren’t going to hire people with this kind of pattern.

Start a Program

When I started working at the elementary school level, my goal was to create a college- and career-readiness culture with students, staff and parents. I researched what it meant to have a college-readiness program, read a lot of articles, learned what other school counselors were doing around the nation and incorporated several ideas into my evolving philosophy.

Pinterest became my one of my best friends as I learned more about what other school counselors were doing. It was amazing what great lessons school counselors were offering around the country. As I started gathering strategies and ideas, my next step was to gain buy-in from the administrators and faculty. Fortunately, they were all able to see how incorporating college and career readiness into our school culture benefited the students so getting them all on board was easy.

Next I found community partners to help implement many of my strategies. I discovered College in Colorado, a local program with a mission to instill in parents the belief that all children can go to college. I have had their representatives come to the school for many years to do presentations with parents on career, college and financial aid planning.

We have a partnership with University of Colorado in Colorado Springs Pre-Collegiate Program, which invites elementary school students to participate in their program designed to motivate and prepare first-generation college students.

I borrowed ideas from other school counselors and began hosting a college week. During the week, students dress in college gear or school colors of where they want to go to college. The second-grade students write letters to colleges requesting any college donations for our special week, and we have daily trivia questions related to college and careers where one student from every class wins a prize from a college.

The fifth-grade students complete a career interest inventory and then
research their career of choice. They look up which colleges offer their program of interest, how much could they make, the outlook for the profession and skills they need to have to do the job. We create a career wax museum where they dress the part and display their information and talk about it to all of the classrooms. In the evening, the students present the same information to all of the parents.

The sixth-grade students create a wall of fame by researching famous people and where they graduated from college, what degrees they earned and the earning potential for their profession. I wanted students to relate to people they look up to and to realize higher education is important for everyone. Fifth- and sixth-graders also visit the local university.

Students in third grade and higher take home an educational journey handout to discuss with their family members. This helps strengthen our college- and career-readiness culture by having students ask their parents questions about their experiences in school: What did you like? Were you encouraged to do well in school? What messages did adults (parents, teachers) give you? Did you go to college? Why or why not? If you had a chance to further your education, what would you study?

Then the tables are turned and parents ask their child a series of questions: What do you like the most about school? Why do you want to go to college? Where do you want to go to college? What job do you want to have when you grow up? They ask their children to explain why college is important and what it entails and develop a plan as a family how students can meet their goals.

The younger students take home a stuffed animal, which then travels with a parent to work. The student then interviews the parent who took the stuffed animal to work.

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“Learn as if you were to live forever.”
Mahatma Gandhi

Helping students head to college?
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parent answer the questions in a notebook that is provided, and most parents will also include business cards, brochures or other souvenirs associated with their job.

We post information about colleges and universities on a bulletin board for students to learn about other colleges across the nation. We also take pictures of every student in the school in their career-wear and post their pictures under the year they will graduate. We hang these pictures up again at the beginning of each year to remind them they need to continue to work hard to get to where they want to be.

I also host a career café throughout the year. I find out what students are interested in through a career interest inventory and invite a community member in that field to come in and speak to the students during lunch. This gets the students excited, and they learn so much with the questions they ask.

Each classroom adopts a college so students can learn more about programs and degrees offered at a particular school. Students in each classroom learn their college’s fight song and perform it at an assembly. They also decorate their classroom doors with everything they have learned about this college.

None of these activities would have been possible without the buy-in and support from the administration and staff. They have not only seen the benefit but have also become excited. We post where our teachers and staff have gone to college, and they are excited to talk about their experiences with students.

There are so many ways to create a college- and career-going culture in your building. At the beginning of each school year, parents, staff and students begin to ask what we’re going to do this year for college week and beyond. I continue to look for new ideas to keep it fresh and fun. I love working with these young dreamers and to help them start the process of turning their dreams into an attainable plan. Who knows, the next Michael Jordan, Carrie Underwood or Barack Obama may be sitting in our classrooms.

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