

TO
Jobs for the Future
and Britebound

FROM
Morning Consult

FIELD DATES
September 10–13, 2026

SAMPLE
2,001 U.S. registered voters

Voters say preparing young people for careers should be a top priority — and it isn't getting enough attention

On behalf of Jobs for the Future (JFF) and Britebound, Morning Consult surveyed 2,001 U.S. registered voters — with oversamples of 501 registered voters ages 18–27 and 500 registered voter parents of children under 18 — to understand voter sentiment regarding whether middle and high schools support young people's career readiness and what more should be done to prepare them for today's economy. Career preparation for young people is already a top-tier issue for voters, and voters see schools and elected officials falling short of what young people need.

82%

of voters say preparing young people to enter the workforce should be a top or important priority for elected officials

89%

of voters say it's important that candidates for elected office talk about preparing young people for future careers

51%

of voters are satisfied with the attention elected officials are currently giving the issue

Career readiness is a top 3 issue for voters

Asked to rate ten issues facing the country, voters put preparing young people to enter the workforce in a tie with reducing the federal budget deficit. 82 percent call each a top or important priority for elected officials. Both trail only health care affordability (88%) and bringing down prices (87%), making career readiness one of voters' very top issues, ranked ahead of protecting the environment (76%), regulating tech companies (71%), and deporting undocumented immigrants (60%).

Career readiness holds up almost identically across the electorate. 82 percent of men and 82% of women call it a priority. Income makes little difference: 79% of voters with household incomes under \$50k, 83% of those earning \$50k–\$100k, and 85% of those earning \$100k or more call it a priority. Among parents, the number climbs to 85%. Career readiness is not a niche issue carved out for one side of the electorate; it sits alongside making health care and the price of goods and services more affordable as a top priority for registered voters.

— Voters see the system falling short based on personal experience

Just 39% of voters are confident that young people leaving high school today are prepared to pursue a career path, and only 13% are very confident. Voters' own experience helps explain why. Reflecting on when they left high school, only 17% of voters say they had a clear plan for their future. Among voters ages 18–27, still early enough in their careers to feel the effects most directly, that figure is just 24%.

Voters also point to gaps in the opportunities that help young people build a plan for their futures. 62 percent agree they had chances to meet regularly with a school counselor or advisor to help them prepare for the future, yet only 23% say a counselor actually helped them feel prepared to think about their career while they were in school. Over a third of voters say they did not have opportunities to explore what they liked doing and were good at (35%), build job-related skills through a hands-on workplace experience (42%), or build a plan for how they would pursue their education, career, and life goals (38%).

Most voters think their schools could have done a better job helping them discover what career they wanted and how to pursue it. 43 percent of voters said their school did not help them, while only 19% expressed strong agreement.

In the face of AI shifts to the economy and careers, a lot of young people report a lack of readiness.

When asked a series of questions about the impact of artificial intelligence on their career path, 38% of young people, ages 18–27 with less than five years of experience working in their current field, say they disagree (strongly or somewhat) that they have the knowledge and skills they need to use AI and other new technology in their job. Moreover, 34% say they disagree (strongly or somewhat) that they have the knowledge and skills they need to adapt or switch career paths as AI and other new technologies change their industry sector. These findings speak to the fact that young people are leaving school and charting out their careers without the skills and supports they need to navigate shifts in the labor market.

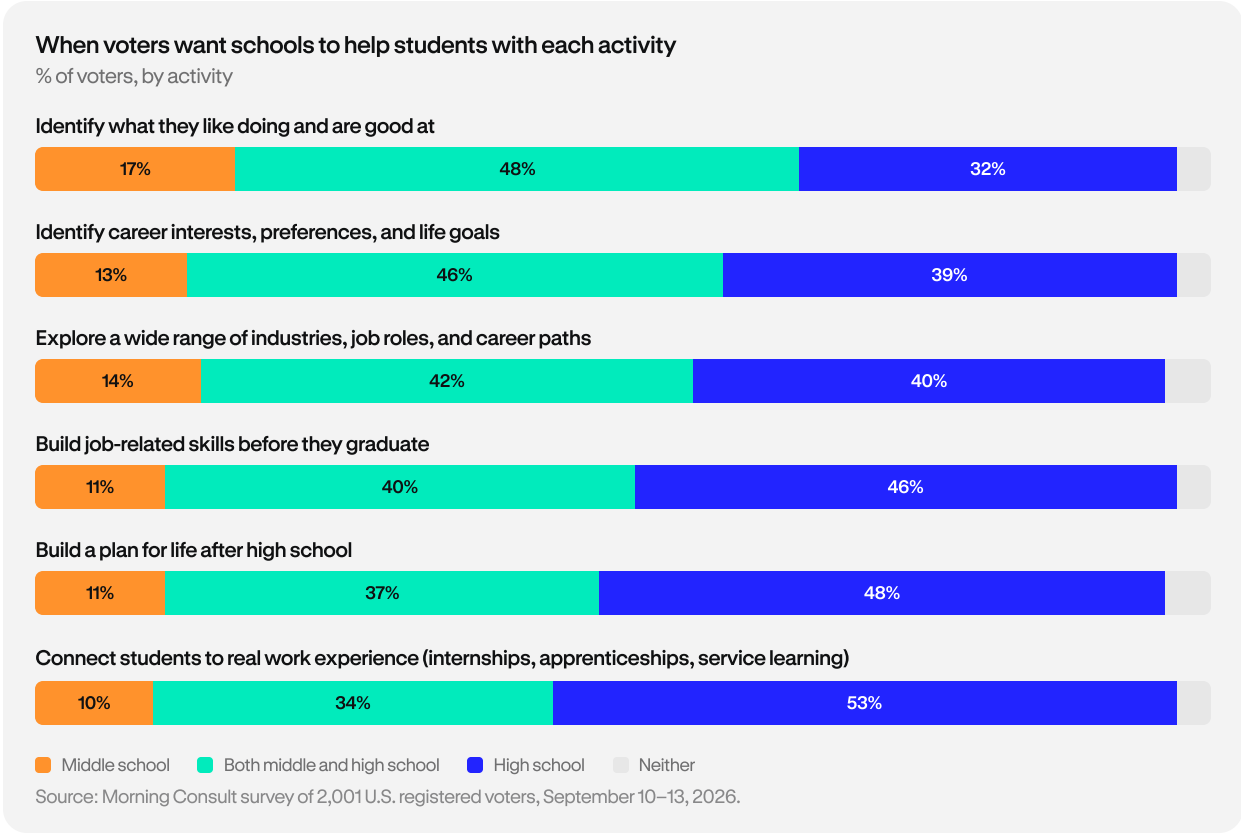
— Voters overwhelmingly want schools to prepare students for careers, and many want this to begin in middle school

When asked about which specific activities they want middle and high schools to undertake, nearly all voters (96–97%) express a desire for schools to help students identify and explore their career interests, build a career plan, and build work-related skills and experiences before they graduate from high school.

Voters' preferences for starting earlier fall into three distinct areas, and in each one, voters want the experience to start in middle school. On **career exploration** — helping students identify their interests and explore industries and career paths — 56% to 65% of voters want schools to start by middle school. On **access to training opportunities** — building job-related skills and connecting students to real work experience — 44% to 51% want it to start by middle school. On **planning and guidance** — helping students build a plan for life after high school — 48% want that to start by middle school as well.

Almost all voters, including parents, want schools to fully embrace the mission of preparing students for their future careers.

Among parents in particular, roughly two-thirds would have career exploration activities start in middle school. Moreover, more than half of parents (53%) think schools should help students start building job-related skills in middle school and continue this skills development in high school, outpacing the percentage of parents who think skill-building should wait until high school (44%). Nearly half of parents (48%) support students getting work-related experiences starting as early as middle school.



Voters want action, not just talk

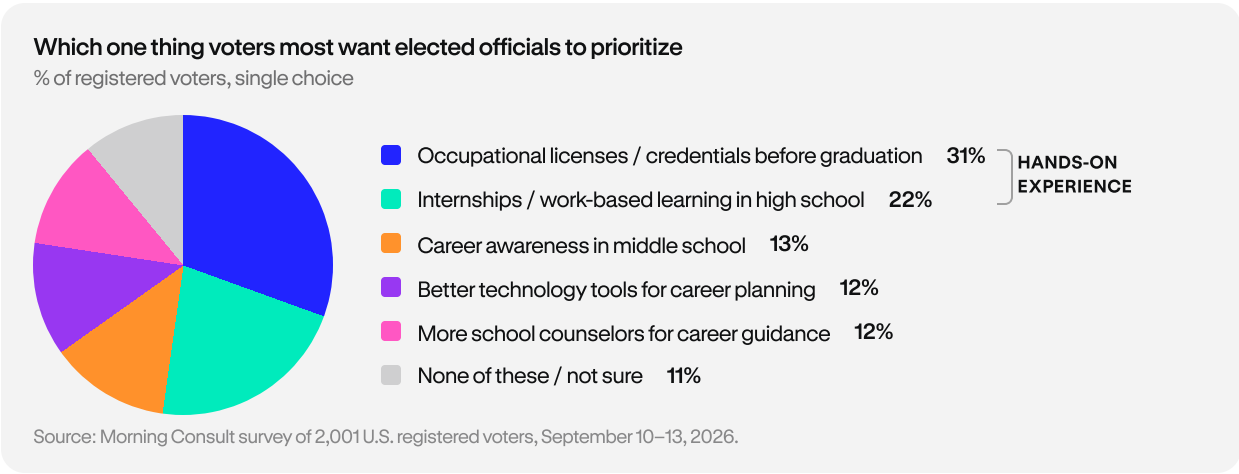
85 percent of voters say it's important that elected officials in their state help young people get the information and guidance they need to navigate shifts in the job market, 84% want them to help young people gain the education, skills, or work experience they need for their desired career field, and 83% want them to help young people learn about the world of work so they can determine their career interests and develop a plan for the future. When asked about the next Congress after this year's midterms, support is nearly identical: 84% on skills and experience, 82% on labor-market information and guidance, and 81% on career exploration and planning.

Specific policies draw the same broad support. Every state and federal career readiness policy tested with voters wins backing from at least 8 in 10 voters, with no clear front-runner — voters are not picking favorites so much as endorsing the whole slate. State policies range from 82% to 88% support, and federal policies range from 81% to 86%, spanning everything from guaranteed counselor meetings to funding for work-based learning and career-planning tools (see Appendix).

89 percent of voters say it’s important that candidates for elected office talk about preparing young people for future careers, but only 51% are satisfied with the attention elected officials are currently giving the issue today. That gap between what voters are asking for and what they think they are getting builds a case for elected officials to prioritize career readiness heading into and following the midterms. The issue is not going unaddressed, but it is not getting the attention voters say it deserves.

— When given one choice, voters pick hands-on experience

Although voters broadly support career readiness activities across the board, they gravitate toward hands-on work-based experiences over general awareness-building when asked to prioritize a single policy. Nearly a third (31%) chose expanding access to occupational licenses or industry credentials before graduation, and 22% chose expanding internships and other work-based learning experiences in high school — together, more than half of all first choices.



— The bottom line

Career readiness already commands broad support among voters, who say it isn’t getting the attention they think it deserves. Over 4 in 5 voters back specific action across the board, whether it comes from state or federal officials. Elected officials at every level can shift policy in the directions voters are already pointing toward, informed by what voters say their own schools did and didn’t deliver.

This memo presents findings from a Morning Consult survey conducted September 10–13, 2026 among a national sample of 2,001 U.S. registered voters, with oversamples of 501 registered voters ages 18–27 and 500 registered voter parents of children under 18. The interviews were conducted online, and the full sample is weighted to approximate a target sample of registered voters based on gender by age, gender by children in household, race by educational attainment, marital status, home ownership, region, and 2024 presidential vote. Results from the full sample have a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points.

Appendix: Support for state and federal policy recommendations

Share of registered voters who strongly or somewhat support each policy if adopted by state or federal elected officials, ordered from highest to lowest support.

State elected officials

% strongly or somewhat support; n = 2,001 registered voters

Ensure each high school student has at least one meeting with a school counselor or other staff to develop their education and career plan for after high school.	88%
Ensure work-based learning experiences like internships, apprenticeships, service learning, job shadows, and simulations offered through schools have quality standards.	88%
Ensure career counseling and advising at the high school level have quality standards.	87%
Provide training for teachers, school counselors, and other school staff to provide college and career advising to high school students.	86%
Establish a technology tool or platform, such as job boards and resume builders, to support students with post-high school academic and career planning.	86%
Provide training for teachers, school counselors, and other school staff in how to guide middle school students in career awareness activities.	86%
Ensure state financial aid is available for short-term programs that lead to an occupational license or industry-recognized credential (e.g., nursing, commercial drivers, food handling, welding, IT specialists) so they are free or low-cost for students in need.	85%
Provide funding so all high school students can access work-based learning opportunities like internships, apprenticeships, service learning, job shadows, and simulations.	85%
Expand funding for high schools to hire additional school counselors or similar staff for college and career counseling.	82%
Expand funding for schools to provide career awareness opportunities to all middle school students.	82%

Federal elected officials

% strongly or somewhat support; n = 2,001 registered voters

Provide funding so all high school students can access work-based learning opportunities like internships, apprenticeships, service learning, job shadows, and simulations.	86%
Provide funding to states to train current school counselors or similar staff in school and community settings.	82%
Provide funding to states to establish a technology tool or platform, such as job boards and resume builders, to support career counseling and advisement.	82%
Provide funding to states to hire additional school counselors or similar staff in school and community settings.	81%
Expand funding for schools to provide career awareness opportunities to all middle school students.	81%