Stride Learning Solutions

Virtual Career Learning Lifts All Students

How virtual career readiness education creates equity: opening access and building awareness of career pathways to reach students who otherwise might not be reached

American parents recognize the value of career learning to address global economic competition, according to findings of an October 2020 survey commissioned by Stride, Inc. (formerly K12 Inc.) and conducted through Qualtrics, a third-party research provider. The survey research found an overwhelming majority of parents voiced a strong desire for career learning programs for their children. Further, there is continued bipartisan belief that early workforce preparation will bolster the American economy. The majority of parents view this type of learning as a potentially vital component to their children's education that can better prepare them to enter a rapidly changing, tech-enabled job market.

"We're witnessing a significant contingent of parents affirming their confidence in the success of career-oriented education," said Dr. Shaun McAlmont, President of Career Learning Solutions at Stride, Inc.. "... Americans agree that we must invest in education systems at the local level to prepare students for a competitive job market, and in order for our economy to compete with China and other emerging economies on a global scale." (Qualtrics, 2020 paras 1,2)

While parents clearly acknowledge the critical importance of career readiness education, access is limited. Students in rural and low-income neighborhoods typically have little or no access to robust career readiness programs.

Virtual career readiness is a game changer for schools and districts looking to make career preparation more equitable.

While a primary goal of high school education is to lay the foundation for students' future paths – whether college, workforce, or career – there is widespread inequity, both in access and awareness, for students from rural and low-income communities.

This significantly impacts their future but also has immediate impact while they are still in high school. Eighty-one percent of high school dropouts report that "seeing the connection between school and getting a job would have kept them in school." It is only natural for students to look around them and base their future plans on the jobs that their family and local community have access to. It is imperative that schools expand this view and help students explore a broader path of options. (Richards, 2020, para 3)

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As reported in *Education Week*, an August 2016 whitepaper by the GE Foundation, *New Dimensions of College and Career Readiness*, identifies five strategies that are particularly important in "making sure that low-income students are ready to thrive in the workplace:

- Fostering mentorship programs
- Offering internships, apprenticeships,
- and jobs
- Turning up the focus on technical
- science skills
- Building STEM skills (science, technology, engineering, and math)
- Developing 'essential skills'' such as higher aspirations, teamwork, grit, perseverance, and adaptability." (Gerwetz, 2016, para 2)

Additionally, "one of the key ideas to emerge ... was the importance of ensuring that students have not only access to postsecondary education, but 'multiple points of entry' into the workforce, through training programs, internships, jobs, and other such options." (Gewertz, 2016, para 4)

While training and mentorship programs, internships, apprenticeships, jobs, technical science and STEM resources are likely limited or unavailable in low-income communities, virtual career readiness can bridge the gap by making these multiple points of entry available to students from all socio-economic backgrounds and communities.

Evidence also suggests the impact of exposure to career pathways for rural students. A study of rural students who participated in residential workshops by Queensland Health to expose them to information about health careers, found that students' awareness of health professions was raised and led to students choosing a course of study related to the health field. (Eley, 2007)

Another study, *School Reform for Rural America: Innovate with Charters, Expand Career and Technical Education*, Education Next, 2015, highlighted the critical importance of exposing students to the best of rural entrepreneurialism and giving them a chance to see how they can create new ventures in their communities. (Fishman, 2015)

An authentic curriculum prepares students for actual jobs.

Another critical component to effective career readiness education is an authentic curriculum that prepares students with the workforce-ready skills they need to thrive in industry. The role of high school in preparing students for future success has expanded to include both technical skills and interpersonal professional skills. While core curriculum and STEM education remain crucial, there continues to be a resounding call for workplace skills, including marketing writing, financial reports, correspondence, research reports, progress reports, executive summaries, and more. (Singh-Gupta & Troutt-Ervin, 1997)

These and other workplace-ready skills, such as collaboration, presentation, communication, problem solving, leadership, work ethic, and creative thinking become the critical foundation for career readiness education. When delivered virtually or in hybrid/blended settings, more students gain access to these vital skills while benefiting from a learning environment that may resemble their future remote or virtual workplace.

According to the World Economic Forum, skills are the new currency of the labor market. In their report, *Strategies for the New Economy Skills as the Currency of the Labour Market*, they describe the importance of closing the skills gap. "Shifting to a system where skills are the core currency of the labour market thus has the potential to tackle existing inefficiencies in job-fit between employers and employees; help prepare for a near-future of greater volatility in the labour market; and enhance opportunity, prosperity and equality for workers. (Centre for the New Economy and Society, 2019. p.5)

Amid the growing call for workforce-ready skills, a report in the *Journal of Career and Technical Education* found that "employers also want employees to possess generic skills, employability skills, essential skills, and applied general education skills. These include knowing how to learn, interpersonal skills (e.g., teamwork, leadership, customer service, negotiation), competence in applying general education (e.g., reading, writing, calculating, computing) to workplaces, effective listening and oral communication skills, information gathering and analysis, problem solving, critical/creative thinking, organizing, planning, decision-making, and personal attributes (e.g., motivation, integrity, dependability, self-management)." (Kraebber & Greenan, 2012, para 1)

Without access to virtual career readiness, wide populations of learners may miss out on developing these critical skills that will better position them for success in the workplace. And a key strategy for developing these essential workplace skills through in-person and virtual career readiness education is project-based curriculum and learning.

Project–based learning creates dimensional learning experiences.

The importance of career readiness learning environments that engage students in a real-world context is clear. The rise of authentic project-based learning brings dimension to the experience as students *play the role* of different workplace jobs.

As described earlier, students from disadvantaged and rural communities often have a narrow scope of what the future might offer them. Their view is narrowed by the jobs they see held in their family and local community. With virtual career readiness, these students can gain access to a greater variety of authentic examples of what work can look like and what jobs are available to them remotely or outside of their community. It also can shift the exploration of careers from a flat experience to one that is dimensional and helps students *try on* different workplace roles.

Picture the difference between reading a text about a specific job role and having the opportunity to execute actual job tasks. For example, in a Stride Learning Solutions project-based learning Marketing course, students assume the roles of a marketing team and solve an actual problem for a client – a fictional sports team. The sports team needs to expand their fan base by attracting new demographics to their events. The students must think through how they can drive more visitors to sporting events using social media, email, direct mail, a website, presentations, event planning, and more. Students have the opportunity to *experience* what it means to be in marketing. In the online career learning platform, students also benefit from exposure to an extensive network of industry experts in diverse career fields, with opportunities for virtual mentoring and job shadowing.

Virtual career readiness education opens doors at Arkansas Virtual Academy.

In 2016, Lisa Short and the Arkansas Virtual Academy (ARVA) team approached the Arkansas State Board of Education for approval to implement a virtual career readiness program. They knew the significance of a program that was not limited by physical boundaries to open up future pathways for students across the state. The success of their comprehensive program is evident in their students and their explosive growth.

Then: In 2016, ARVA offered two career learning pathways: Marketing and Entrepreneurship.

Now: In 2021, they offer:

- Pathway concentrator status for completing a series of courses
- 15 pathways in six occupational areas: Business Marketing, Agriculture, Family and Consumer Science, Career and Work-Based Learning, STEM, and Information Technology/Digital Arts.
- 51 career readiness course offerings
- Preparation for 21 industry certifications
- Work-based learning experiences with Advisory Board members, Nepris, and Junior Achievement
- 5 career clubs: FFA, FBLA, SkillsUSA, FCCLA, and TSA
- Career coaching sessions
- 15 college partners offering dual credit
- 17 career centers across the state
- Middle school career exploration and guidance shadowing.

Project-Based Learning:

> “At ARVA, we work with a non-profit organization in need of help during the pandemic. Since their main fundraising source was face-to-face events, they needed new strategies for marketing and generating donations. Our project-based learning instructors in Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Digital Arts, Microsoft and STEM courses created an opportunity for students to assist the non-profit in several areas. ARVA students have created fundraising mailings and online surveys, maintained web pages, redesigned and maintained social media accounts including Facebook and Instagram, and created new and innovative marketing ideas. When face-to-face is allowed, ARVA students will intern in-person and continue the relationship virtually. This is so rewarding for our students to be working on real projects with real professionals guiding their direction.”

LISA SHORT,
Career Readiness Education Academic Administrator,
Arkansas Virtual Academy

Virtual career readiness education develops student agency.

Recent research shows that beyond the value of providing opportunities for students to experience workplace roles, project-based learning is a critical aspect of career readiness. A study that looked at the impact of flipped project-based learning on self-regulation in higher education in the *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, found that project-based learning can improve the self-regulated learning skills of students, such as cognitive and metacognitive functioning, both individually and when collaborating with others. When applied to career readiness education, students are soundly at the center for their learning journey supported by both local influences (family, teachers, local community, local industry in-person and online) and regional/global influences (via virtual/online learning). Because self-regulated learning is a strong predictor of overall academic achievement and is shown to have a positive impact on lifelong learning, the benefits reach far beyond just career preparation. (Zarouk et al., 2020)

Awareness of career pathways can result in future higher wage earning.

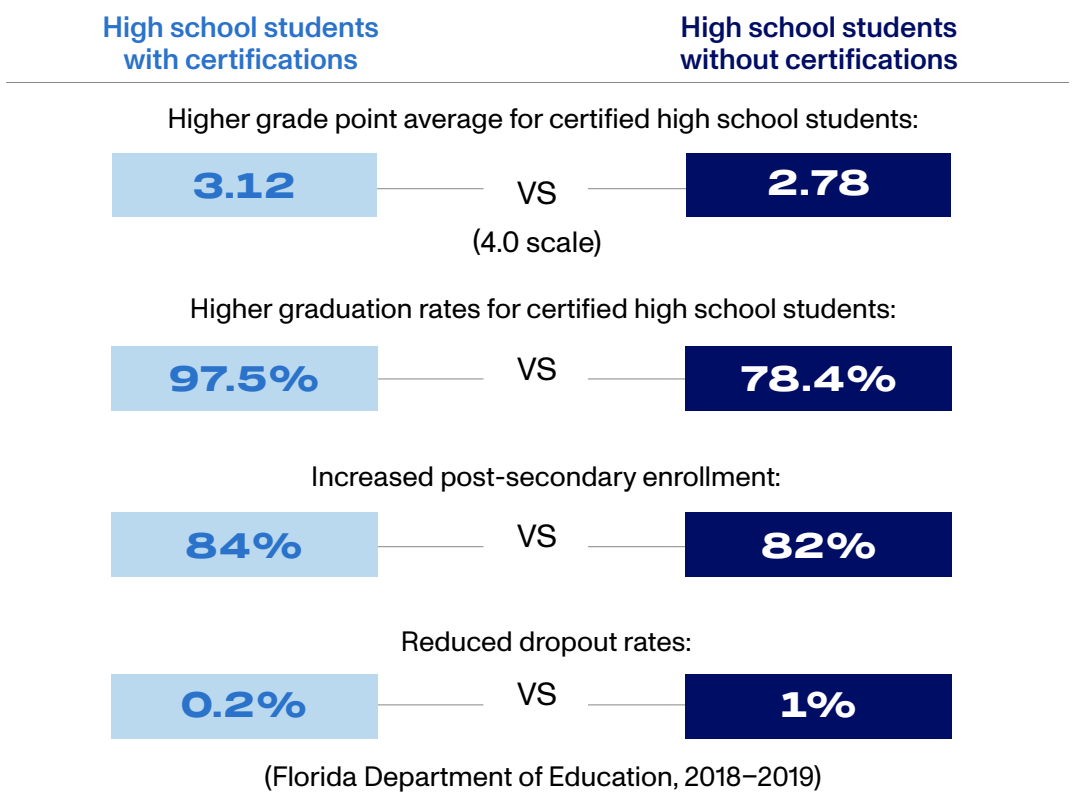
In addition to the critical benefit of increasing equity through access to career exploration that virtual career readiness education provides, increased awareness and exposure to career pathways often results in higher wage earnings. In a 2019 study that looked at the connection between participation in career technical education (CTE) and future wage earning, it was found that 30 percent of high school students do not pursue any additional post-secondary education. However, of these students who do not pursue post-secondary education, those who do participate in a CTE program earn higher wages than students who do not participate. (Plasman, 2019) Virtual career readiness education can help put more students on a pathway to better-paying jobs when they enter the workforce.

Access to certifications, while in high school, has far–reaching benefits.

In a fast-growing, competitive job market, students need access to earn industry-relevant certifications that help prepare them for the workplace. Certifications provide a third-party evaluation of skill mastery and knowledge, and typically align with job industry growth areas. Heather Buskirk, Director of Instruction for Career Readiness Education at Stride Career Prep, shares how they identify and develop career pathways to set all students up for a better future. "Our pathways are built based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics job growth projections to ensure students are in pathways that will lead to jobs now and in the near future. We also look at the types of jobs students can have right after high school to make sure they can earn a decent living as soon as possible. We want to open opportunities and possibilities for all students – so that they are not choosing between further education and career opportunities – but able to use their education to thrive in their future careers." Virtual career readiness education programs open access to certification prep for more students, regardless of income level or location.

The benefits are far-reaching, while in school and once out.

Certification Results in Improved Academic Performance



(Florida Department of Education, 2018–2019)

Certification Provides Significant Advantages to Professionals and Job Candidates

In the U.S. and Canada, professionals with certifications have an average salary of **$111,334**, which is **7%** more than non-certified professionals. (Day, 2019, para 5)

As more and more students are exposed to career pathways and workplace skills through virtual career readiness, their view broadens and they can begin to envision themselves in new and enthralling roles for their future. This opportunity only happens when students have access to:

- Explore career pathways in high school that are outside of their local job scope
- Develop the workforce-ready skills that are the true currency of today's global job market
- Try on different workplace roles as they experience real-world, project-based learning
- Opportunity to learn about and pursue pathways that lead to high wage earning
- Learning experiences within local, regional, and global industry

As career readiness practitioner Lisa Short, CRE Academic Administrator at Arkansas Virtual Academy notes, "Career readiness education is vital to all students' education. ARVA has the opportunity to provide a robust pathway offering and quality education without boundaries of zip codes."

About Stride Learning Solutions

Since 2000, Stride Learning Solutions has been a leader in strategic solutions to solve district challenges. Today, our solutions have expanded to include comprehensive career readiness education programs. Our flexible online and blended career learning options boost modern instruction and promote lifelong student success. With an innovative platform, comprehensive digital courseware, adaptable technology, and extensive support, we are equipped to help your school or district empower a brighter future for learners.

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