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HR HANOVER
RESEARCH

State of College and Career Readiness

Insights for the 2026-27 School Year



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Executive Summary

College and career readiness (CCR) programming across the U.S. has reached a pivotal turning point. Over the past few years, we have seen districts navigate significant challenges: From the post-pandemic staffing shortages of 2022 to the student engagement dips of 2023. Today, however, CCR programming has become more engaging, more intentional, and confidence is soaring among educators when it comes to student readiness.

Educators are actively using CCR programs to design tech-enabled, hybrid experiences that capture students' attention early and help them connect their personal interests to real-world opportunities. Across the country, the mission has evolved:

Districts are seeking to turn short-term engagement into lasting, measurable impact.

Crucially, educators are focused on supporting multiple, flexible pathways and practical future-readiness skills, moving decisively away from one-size-fits-all, college-only outcomes. This shift matters now more than ever. Amidst current workforce uncertainty, changing student expectations, and a generational shift between Gen Z's detailed planning and Gen Alpha's tech-driven demand for flexibility, schools must adapt to effectively prepare the next cohort of graduates.

Key findings

- **Confidence has rebounded:** A resounding 94% of educators now rate their district's current CCR efforts as “Good” or “Excellent.”
- **The timing gap:** More than half of educators say CCR focus currently peaks in Grades 11 and 12, despite identifying Grade 6 as the ideal time to start.
- **Operational roadblocks:** 43% of educators cite insufficient time in school schedules as a major barrier to deeper CCR delivery.
- **High workforce optimism:** 86% of educators feel at least somewhat confident that their students will graduate workforce-ready.

Methodology

Xello partnered with Hanover Research to conduct this report on the state of CCR in K-12. They surveyed 281 U.S. education professionals. Conducted online in December 2025, the survey engaged district leaders, building leaders, counselors, CTE directors, and classroom teachers.

This year's research was designed to deeply understand the current landscape of CCR programming, delivery timing, persistent implementation barriers, generational planning differences, and overall student readiness.

This year's report is brought to you by:



Xello

Xello enables K–12 school districts to deliver sector-leading college and career readiness programming that helps students become future-ready. Its comprehensive and scalable platform empowers educators and supports students in building self-knowledge, exploring post-secondary options, and evaluating potential pathways that inspire actionable plans for a successful future.



Hanover Research

Founded in 2003, Hanover Research is a global research and analytics firm that delivers market intelligence through a unique, fixed-fee model to more than 1,000 clients. Headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, Hanover employs high-caliber market researchers, analysts, and account executives to provide a service that is revolutionary in its combination of flexibility and affordability. To learn more about Hanover Research, visit www.hanoverresearch.com.



PART 1

The current CCR landscape: Strong foundations, growing expectations

Confidence is high and momentum is real

CCR programs have solidified their position as a key piece to creating successful student futures. In 2023, the average grade educators gave their district's CCR efforts had slipped to a “C” (Satisfactory). Today, the narrative has completely flipped: Schools are highly engaged, heavily invested, and remarkably confident in their direction.

According to educators:

94%

rate their CCR programming as Good or Excellent

94%

feel prepared to deliver high-quality CCR over the next 2-3 years

86%

are confident students will graduate workforce-ready

Growth depends on capacity

In 2026, the barrier to deeper impact is bandwidth. Districts clearly want to do more, but 36% explicitly state that placing an increased emphasis on CCR would require additional resources, training, or support.

Top operational constraints for districts:

Insufficient
time in school
schedules

43%

Lack of
training or PD

26%

Technology
limitations

32%

Ongoing
staffing
shortages

33%

Limited
funding

38%

Interesting to note, school-level educators are far more optimistic about their bandwidth for current CCR initiatives: 65% feel fully capable of supporting an increased emphasis on CCR, compared to 42% of district leaders. This indicates a gap in perceived capacity, with educators expressing greater confidence in their ability to take on additional efforts.

Engagement defines CCR success, but there's opportunity for long-term impact

In previous years, student engagement was the leading challenge for CCR tools. Today, it has become the primary metric of success, followed by participation in activities, and completion of plans.

However, far fewer districts are tracking long-term, post-secondary outcomes like workforce entry (36%) or college persistence (30%). The next phase of CCR maturity will require districts to connect the high daily engagement they are achieving now to measurable, postsecondary outcomes.

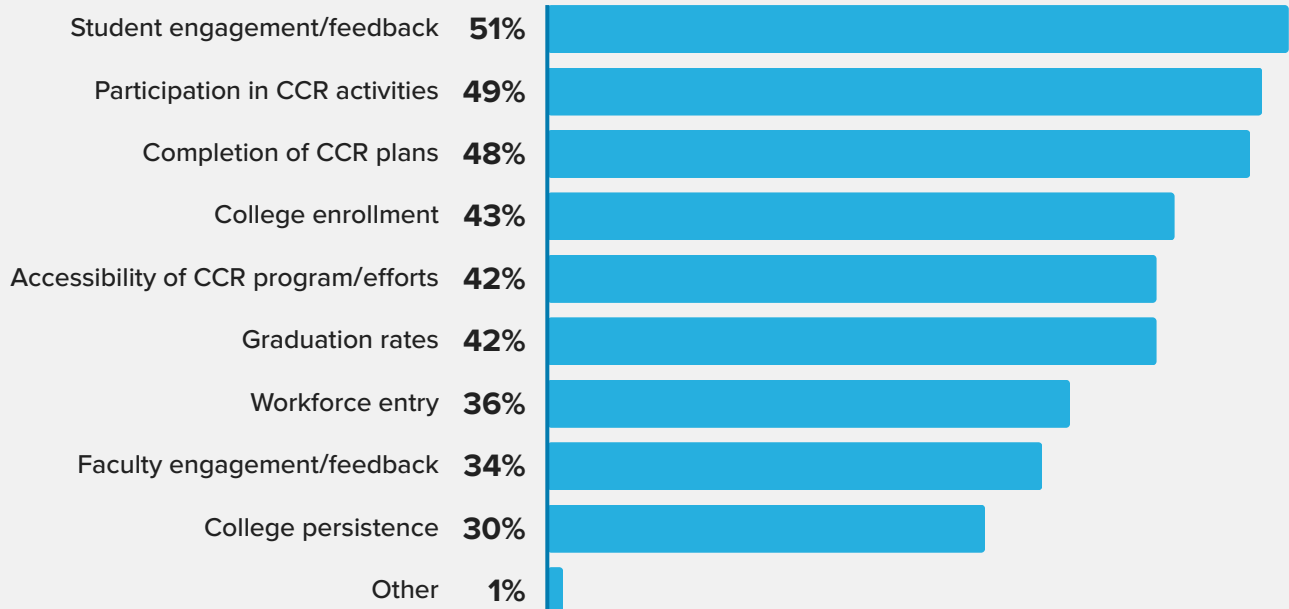
Schools measure CCR effectiveness through:

51% Student engagement

49% Participation in activities

48% Completion of CCR plans

How does your school or district measure the effectiveness of its CCR initiatives?





PART 2

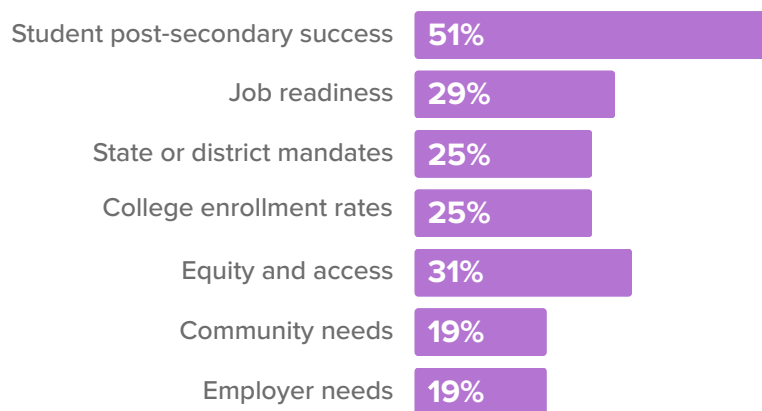
Drivers, motivators, influences: The forces shaping student futures

CCR programs are driven by student success, and students are driven by purpose

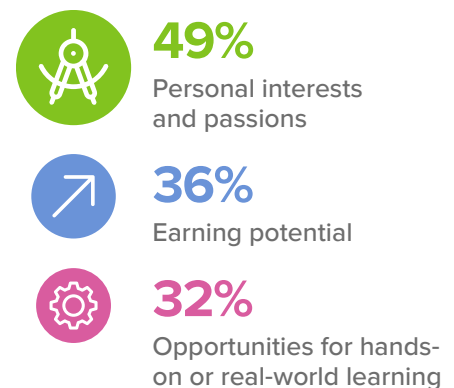
Just over half (51%) of educators say student postsecondary success is the primary driver of CCR efforts, while 31% cite expanding equity and access.

However, students are motivated by identity and immediate opportunity. The most effective CCR strategies are those that connect the district's goals with the student's personal “why”. Nearly half of educators (49%) note that students are most motivated by personal interests and passions, followed closely by earning potential (36%).

What is the primary driver behind your school or district’s CCR efforts?



What motivates your students when planning for their futures?



Families and AI are shaping the future of planning

Student decision-making no longer happens in isolation. Postsecondary planning has become highly collaborative, deeply digital, and more personalized. Almost three-quarters (73%) of educators report that parents and guardians are “very” or “extremely” involved in the postsecondary planning process.

Simultaneously, technology has taken on a new role: 82% of districts are at least somewhat comfortable leveraging AI in their CCR work, and 79% of educators acknowledge that AI is already influencing the career choices and pathways students pursue.



73%

of parents are involved in future planning process



82%

of districts are comfortable using AI in CCR planning



79%

of educators say the impact of AI is influencing student future planning

Generational expectations are shifting

Students remain ambitious, but how they explore their futures is evolving. CCR programs must now balance the structured planning tools that worked for Gen Z with flexible, tech-enabled exploration suited for Gen Alpha.

Note: Because Gen Alpha students are still young, their focus on short-term goals likely reflects their current developmental stage rather than a permanent generational shift, highlighting the need for developmentally aligned CCR scaffolding.

Gen Z (born 1997–2012)

47%

are strongly associated with creating detailed, structured plans for their futures.

50%

show more interest in college vs. alternative pathways.

42%

view financial stability as a top priority.

Gen Alpha (born 2013–2024)

36%

see CTE as a strong alternative to college.

41%

lean toward short-term goals.

38%

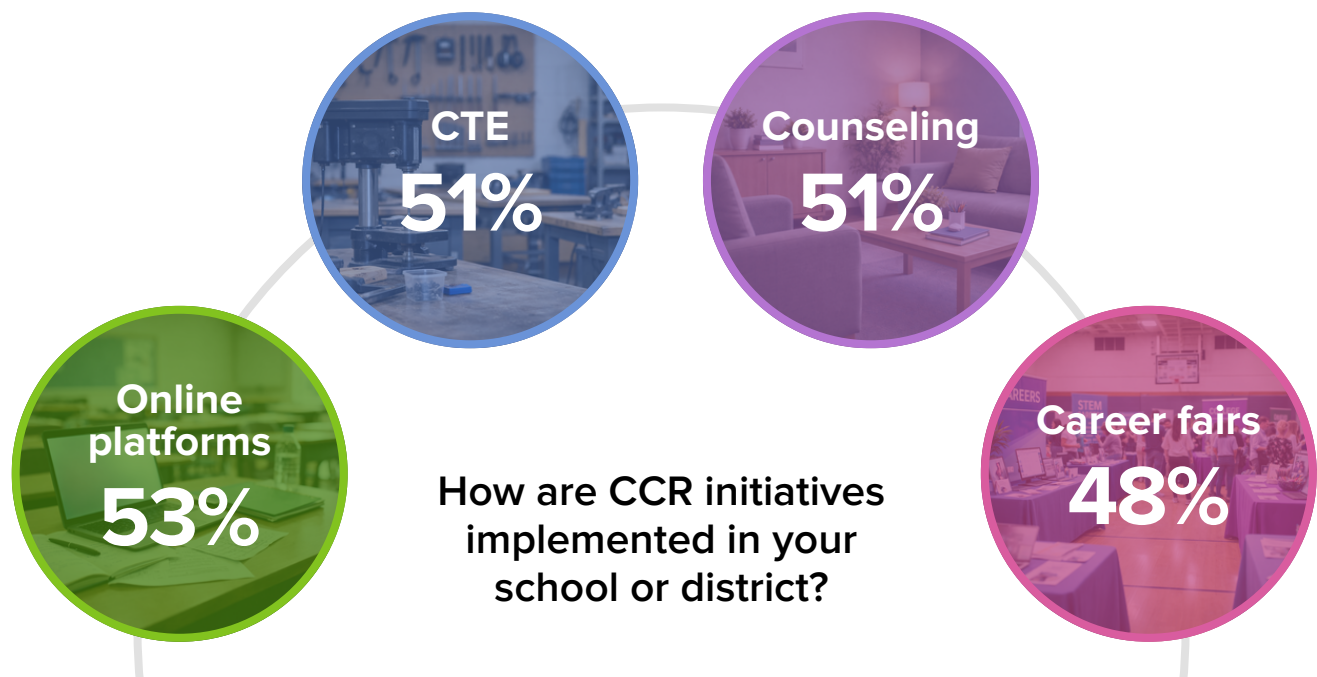
are more tech-driven and desire flexible pathway preferences.

PART 3

The readiness journey: Starting sooner, scaling smarter

Engagement is built through hybrid delivery

CCR is no longer owned by a single department or delivered in a single format. It is a shared ecosystem powered by both technology and human connection. Integrating these elements into a cohesive, scalable system remains an important opportunity. Currently, schools rely on a hybrid mix.



Schools want to start earlier, but high school takes priority

Educators widely recognize the value of early exposure to career concepts, yet implementation intensity still clusters in the final years of high school when decisions feel most urgent. While 21% of educators identify Grade 6 as the ideal starting point, and 23% successfully begin introductions there, the heaviest focus remains overwhelmingly on Grade 11 (53%) and Grade 12 (51%).

Interestingly, district staff are significantly more likely than school-level staff to place the heaviest emphasis on CCR in Grades 8 through 12.

When should CCR start?

21% agree the ideal CCR starting point is 6th grade

23% successfully introduce CCR in 6th grade

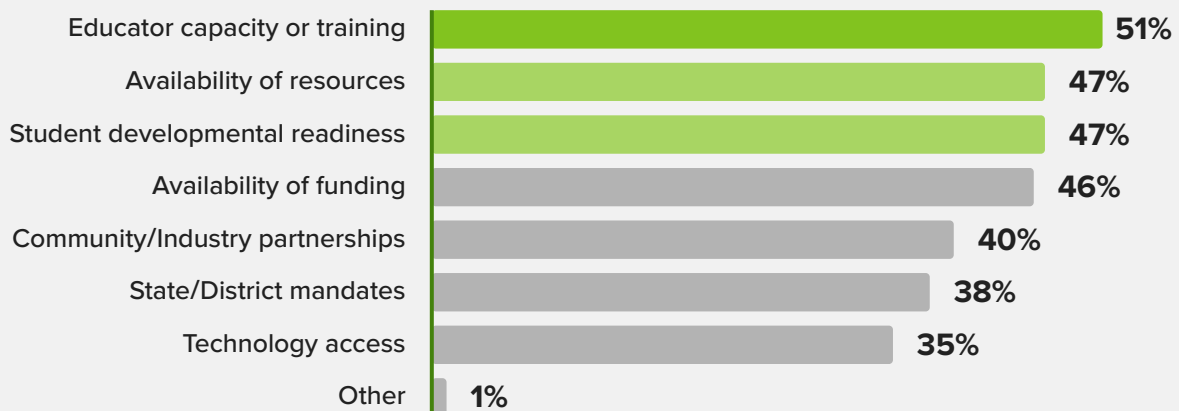
53% of CCR focus peaks in 11th grade

51% focus on CCR continues in 12th grade

Capacity determines when CCR begins

Schools deeply value CCR, but building sustainable systems that begin early without overwhelming staff is a persistent challenge. The timing of when a district rolls out CCR is shaped by harsh operational realities.

Factors influencing CCR start timing



Notably, district-level leaders report greater challenges with staff training and availability, while school-level educators more frequently cite technology limitations.



PART 4

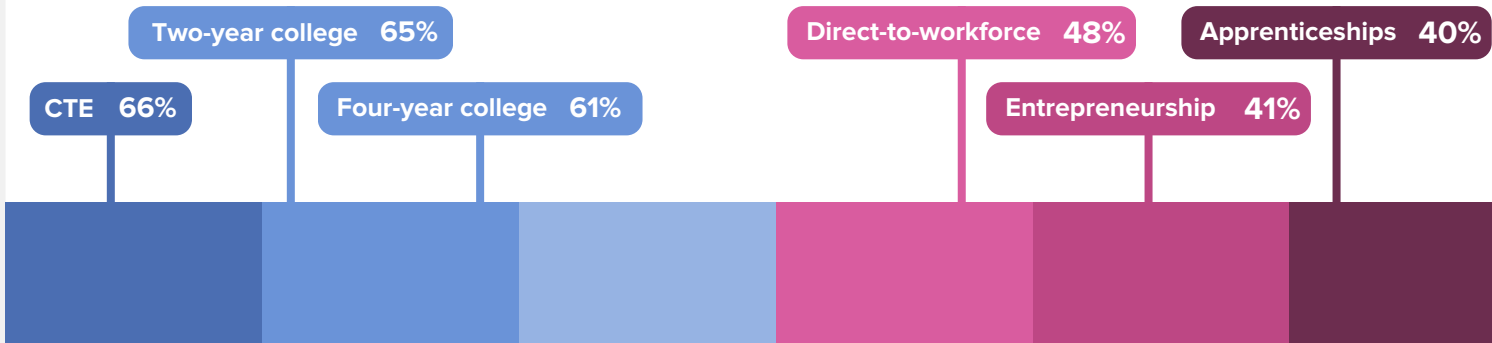
Beyond K-12: Exploring pathways and student readiness

Schools strongly support different postsecondary pathways

Schools are aggressively expanding their definitions of postsecondary success. In 2023, 80% of respondents reported support for non-traditional pathways. Today, that number has grown to 89% of educators reporting that their CCR initiatives actively support pathways outside of the traditional four-year college route.

However, support still leans toward education-based routes over direct-to-workforce options.

Top supported pathways vs. lagging pathways

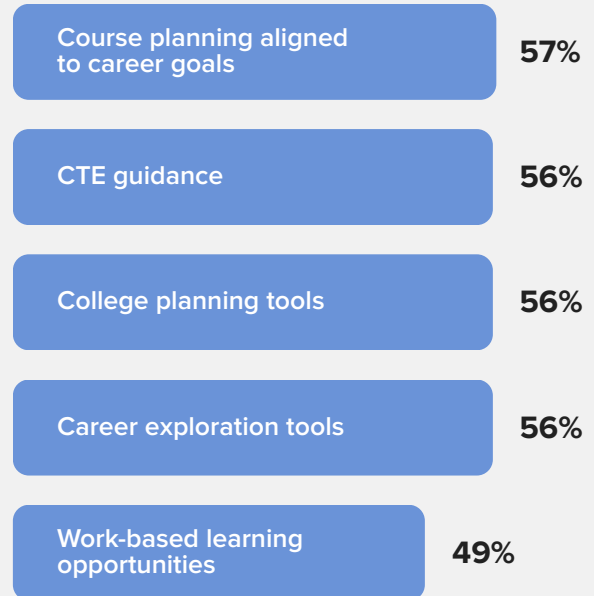


CCR planning is strong, but real-world experience is less consistent

Students are receiving excellent structured guidance on future planning, but hands-on, real-world exposure is not widely implemented.

Only 49% of educators report supporting work-based learning opportunities and there has yet to be a strong emphasis on participation: Among the schools that do offer work-based learning, just 29% report that the majority of their student body actively participates.

Schools excel at providing:



Educators see gaps in future-ready skills

CCR conversations are officially expanding beyond academics to include the practical, transferable skills required to navigate life after graduation. While overall confidence in workforce readiness is high at 86%, educators easily identify consistent life skill gaps.

Students are viewed as least prepared in:



44%

Problem-solving & critical thinking



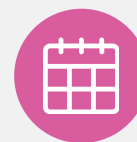
44%

Communication & collaboration



42%

Adaptability & resilience



42%

Time management & organization

Consequently, educators note that teaching everyday life and money skills (47%) and aligning programs with actual job market needs (44%) are their absolute highest priorities for improving student readiness.



PART 5

Looking ahead: The barriers and the breakthroughs

As districts look toward the future of CCR, three distinct themes emerge for the 2026/27 school year and beyond:

1

Structural barriers persist: While engagement issues dominated previous years, operational constraints—namely time, funding, and staffing—are now the primary implementation challenges holding districts back.

2

Schools want deeper integration: CCR is most effective when it is embedded, not isolated. Half of educators see better integration of CCR into the core curriculum as their biggest opportunity for improvement.

3

Engagement and practical readiness are ongoing priorities: Schools are highly focused on making CCR more relevant, practical, and sustainable. By expanding community and industry partnerships (48%) and fostering increased family involvement (42%), districts are striving to bridge the gap between classroom exploration and real-world success.

Redefining readiness for what's next

College and career readiness is moving away from rigid, one-size-fits-all planning toward a more flexible, student-centered journey shaped by personal interests and real-world relevance. While challenges like limited time and funding still exist, growing educator confidence shows there's a strong foundation to build on.

Districts are seeing the importance of starting earlier, expanding pathway options, leaning into more personalized, tech-enabled experiences, and building stronger connections to industry and community partners. By bringing these pieces together, schools can better connect classroom learning to real-world outcomes and help every student graduate with a clear direction, practical skills, and the confidence to navigate what comes next.

So what does this mean in practice?

Key takeaways for district leaders

- **Strong momentum requires sustainable capacity:** CCR confidence is high at 94%, but scaling impact is limited by time, funding, and staffing.
- **Earlier start is critical to long-term outcomes:** Most agree CCR should begin around Grade 6, yet efforts still peak in Grades 11–12, leaving a big opportunity to engage students sooner.
- **AI is quickly becoming part of the CCR toolkit:** With 82% of districts comfortable using AI tools and features to support CCR and 79% of educators seeing its influence on students, leaders should focus on how to scale AI responsibly to support planning and personalization.
- **Integration drives effectiveness, not isolation:** Embedding CCR into core curriculum remains the biggest opportunity, as siloed approaches limit scalability and consistency.
- **Evolve with student motivations and pathways:** Students are driven by personal interests and earning potential, reinforcing the need for flexible, all-pathway CCR strategies.

Key takeaways for school-level educators

- **Educators are central to CCR success:** School-level staff show strong confidence and perceived capacity, positioning them as drivers of implementation.
- **AI is already shaping how students plan their futures:** With 79% of educators seeing AI's impact on the future of work, there's an opportunity to guide students in using these tools thoughtfully and effectively.
- **Relevance drives student motivation:** Students respond most to personal interests and earning potential, making real-world connection essential in CCR.
- **Real-world experiences remain a gap:** Less than half of districts offer work-based learning and participation is limited, showing a need to expand WBL.
- **Adapt to more flexible, tech-driven learners:** As Gen Alpha trends toward flexibility and digital exploration, CCR programs must balance structured planning with personalized, tech-enabled experiences.