

AMERICAN DREAM VS. AMERICAN REALITY:

**How Parents Navigate
and Influence their Kids'
Post-High School Education**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Is the dream of a four-year college education for every child still the ideal for parents, or are parents shifting their thinking due to the ever-growing cost of college and changing needs of the job market? What is the current parental perception of higher education and the higher education planning process? Those are the questions American Student Assistance® (ASA®) sought to answer through a series of focus groups, small discussions and survey research with parents nationwide.

For 21st-century US parents, the American Dream of their children attending a four-year college, and having the ability upon graduation to pursue a good-paying career, is all too often bumping up against the harsh reality of college affordability. College costs have spiked by almost 260 percent over the past 30 yearsⁱ and financial aid hasn't kept pace, leaving families scrambling to make up the difference through earnings, savings or borrowing. Concurrently, employers argue that the current higher education system is not adequately preparing students with the skills needed to enter the job market and fill open positions. A family that may once have been willing to take a chance on sending a student to a four-year college is starting to question if such a chance is wise or even necessary to achieve desired career objectives and life goals. Parents often find themselves torn between hopes for their children and practicality.

Our assumption at the outset of this research was that the push for a four-year college degree is largely driven by

parents and their desire to have their child fulfill a certain higher education dream, complete with a life changing experience and a career at the end of it. Dreams, more than practicality, can play an outsized role in determining the post-secondary path a student takes and they can crowd out consideration of all the other education possibilities that, in actuality, may better align with the student's own career interests and goals.

What our research found is that the dream of a four-year higher education is just that for many parents—it is a goal to shoot for, but when the reality of paying for education hits and their child's academic and career expectations are better understood, parents *may* be open to other forms of post-secondary education, and many parents have already seen older kids go a different higher education route. However, parents are still very hesitant to guide their children down unknown and less widely accepted avenues to secure a degree or credential, and as a result, the default is still a four-year degree. Parents don't feel they have the resources to help their kids through the process of choosing an appropriate post-secondary education. And while they want to embrace new ways of thinking about education after high school, lack of support and knowledge about the options available is holding them back from making anything other than the traditional choices available for their kids.

Parents see college primarily as a means of gaining skills for future employment, and are less concerned about giving their kids a once in a lifetime experience. In general, parents

are still holding on to four-year college as the ultimate higher educational goal. In fact, 72 percent of parents define “college” as **only** a four-year or bachelor’s degree program, and very few parents’ goals shift as their children approach college age. While the parents’ wish for their children to pursue a four-year college education is strongest when the child is in middle school, only 4 percent of parents desired other education options as the child progresses through high school—when decisions must be made based on their child’s interests and financial considerations. Desire and reality don’t always go hand-in-hand, however. Despite parents’ overriding *wish* for their children to pursue a four-year college, *only half* of surveyed parents with children both under the age of 18 and older said their older children had actually attended a four-year school. One quarter attended another type of program, but the remaining quarter skipped higher education altogether.

Overall, parents responded that they are open to the concept of their child attending non-four-year higher education, but despite their tacit acceptance of the concept in an anonymous survey, their actions and current plans for their children don’t seem to support that response. Eighty-three percent of parents think that community college is a cheaper and higher-quality education alternative, but only fourteen percent think a community college is likely to be the path their child will pursue. Eighty-two percent said they were comfortable with the idea of their children pursuing a vocational or technical program, but only 7 percent of parents even classified this type of education as “college,” and only 14 percent (mainly those with a child in a Career and Technical High School) think that this form of higher education is a likely path for their child. There seems to be a lot of open mindedness about different education paths—but it’s not the path MY child will take.

This lack of confidence in a non-four-year education may stem from the fact that only 32 percent of parents agreed strongly with the sentiment, “I have the knowledge I need to guide my child through the application and decision process for post-high school education.” This insecurity is coupled with the fact that their child’s college decisions are deeply personal and reflect their opinion of themselves as a parent. In fact, 61 percent of parents whose children are on the path to some form of higher education would consider themselves parental failures if their children didn’t complete any post-high school education. As a result, although parents say they are open to new ways of thinking about higher education, this lack of confidence and personal pressure in fact may result in parents defaulting to social norms and pushing kids down a known trajectory. In addition, the survey suggested that parents are still willing to pay almost anything to fulfill their higher education dream for their child. Eighty-two percent of parents agree with the statement that achieving the dream of higher education is worth any financial cost.

With divergent attitudes about what is best for every child’s higher education based on personal circumstance and choice, the one common theme for parents is that they are desperate for guidance, support, and assurance that they are helping their kids make the “right” choice about higher education, and currently have very few places to get that support.

That begs the question: **Can changing parents’ perception about what a college education truly is—and should be—shift the paradigm so that more students are exposed to a wider variety of higher education opportunities that could lead to student success?** By giving students more chances to chart their own educational path, rather than adhere to traditional society norms of college “success,” we can increase the number of Americans who complete a post-secondary credential that works for them—and the economy—rather than pursue a higher education and drop out, or skip higher education altogether.

But to change students’ goals and expectations for education beyond high school, we must first change the minds of their most important influencers—their parents.

SURVEY FINDING:

Parental Attitudes About Why Their Child Should Go to College

Parents see college as the launching pad for their children’s career success. Their goals for post-high school education focus more on career preparation and earning capacity to be self-sufficient than on academic exploration. When asked why their children should go to college, the top three responses all focused on employability and learning job skills for future employment. Similarly, parents in focus group discussions viewed post-high school education as an investment in the future, providing credentials that elevated one’s job and salary prospects, and as an opportunity to provide employment stability.

Top Reasons For Your Child To Attend College (Pick 3)



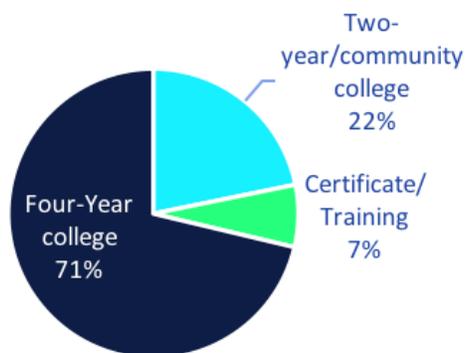
A smaller percentage of surveyed parents emphasized post-high school education as the path to personal growth, allowing children to learn more about themselves and become independent. Thirty-one percent of respondents said their children should go to college to explore academically while 26 percent said children should use college to figure out what to do in the future. Some parents in the focus group discussions also cited college as the opportunity to have “great formative college experiences,” but in the survey, only 15 percent of respondents ranked “once in a lifetime experience” as one of the top three reasons to attend college.

How do parents define “college”?

Most parents perceive college as a four-year institution. Seventy-two percent of surveyed parents said they associated college with a bachelor’s degree program, while fewer than one-quarter (22 percent) see “college” as a two-year or community college, and only 7 percent include vocational or technical training programs in their definition of college. Parents with higher education themselves are more likely to define college as a four-year degree.

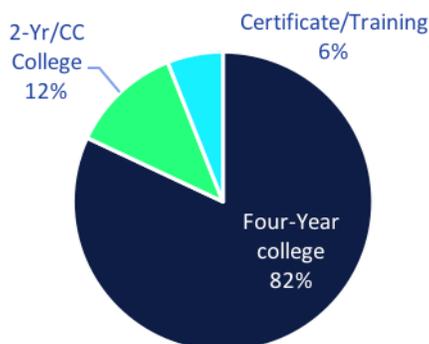
“Seventy-two percent of surveyed parents said they associated college with a bachelor’s degree program”

When You Hear The Word "College" What Does That Mean To You?

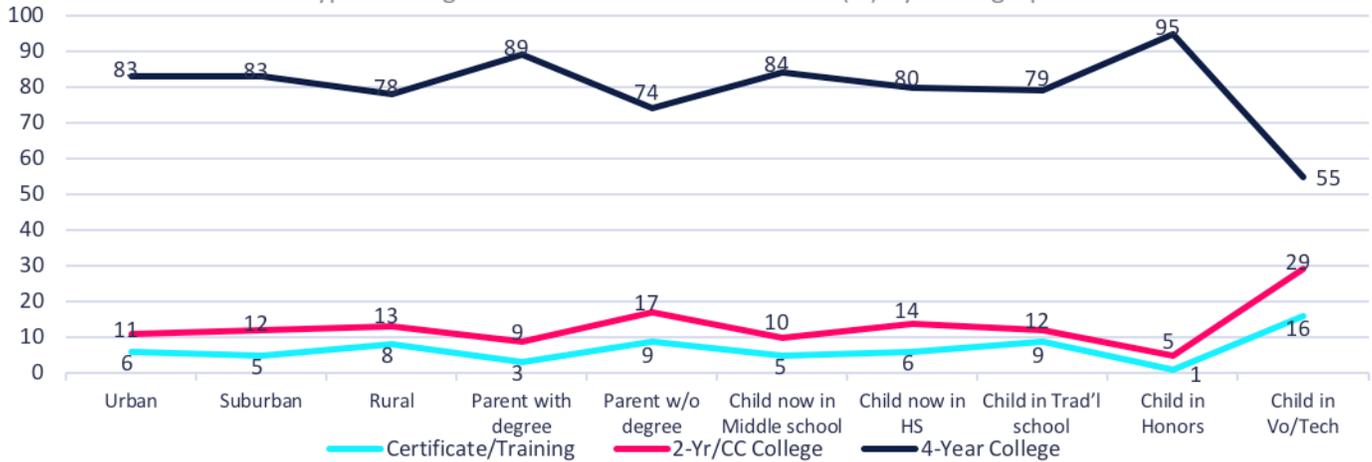


In line with these views, at least eighty-two percent of surveyed parents expressed a *desire* for their middle or high school children to enroll in a four-year college.

Type Of Program You Want Child To Enroll In

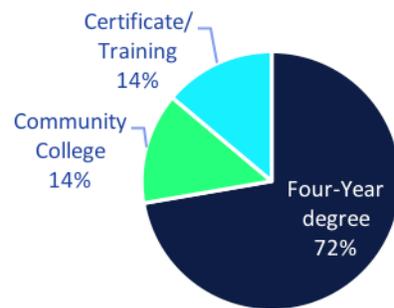


Type Of Program You Want Child To Enroll In (%) By Demographic

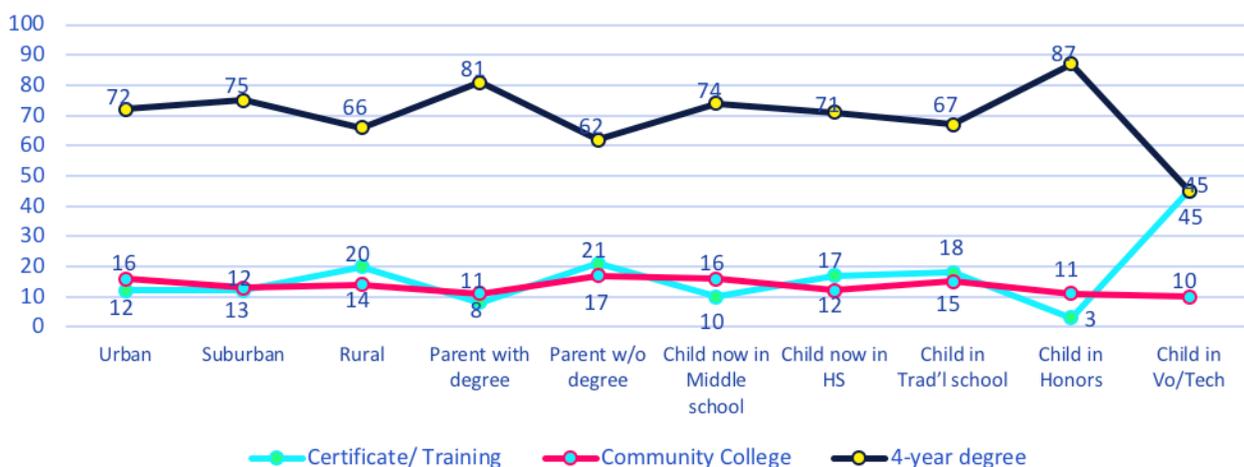


However, despite their desire, a slightly lower percentage (73 percent) thought their child would actually pursue a bachelor's degree as opposed to another post-secondary credential. Parents without a college degree themselves, parents in rural areas, and those with kids now in vocational or career and technical education were more open to their kids following another, non-four-year path. Of note, survey results showed that the four-year college wish seems strongest when the child is in middle school, with a slight softening, but not a significant change, in the opinion toward other education options as the child progresses through high school. High school parents were only 4% less likely to desire their kids to attend a four-year school.

Most Likely Path Your Child Will Take?



What Do You Believe Is The Most Likely Path Your Child Will Take? (By Demographics)

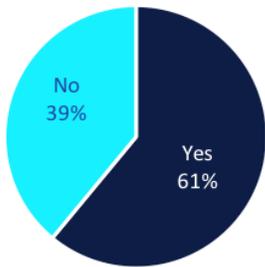


Research also revealed that parents' perceptions of their own performance as parents is intertwined with their children's college decisions: 61 percent of respondents whose children are on the path to some form of higher education would consider themselves parental failures if their children didn't complete any post-high school education. This feeling was especially high among parents with degrees themselves (69 percent) and parents from urban areas (74 percent).

As previously noted, 82 percent of parents overall desire for their kids to go on to a four-year college, but less than half (47 percent) of these parents with a child over 18 had a child or children who are now attending or graduated from a four-year college. Twenty-five percent had a child attend and/or graduate from either a two-year college or a vocational or technical program. Meanwhile, a full 28 percent reported their children did not attend or finish any college or educational program after high school.

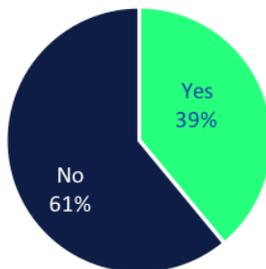
“61 percent of respondents whose children are on the path to some form of higher education would consider themselves parental failures if their children didn't complete any post-high school education.”

Would You Feel Like A Parental Failure If Your Child Did Not Pursue Higher Education?

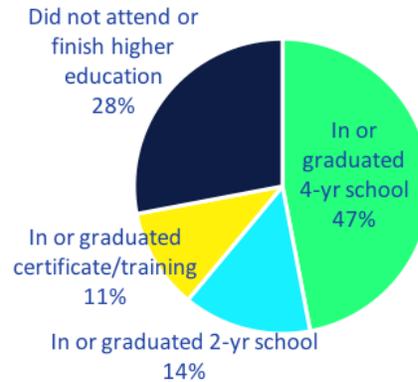


Some surveyed parents had already experienced higher education reality not meeting expectations. In addition to having one child younger than high school graduation age, 39 percent of survey respondents also had a child who had already graduated high school.

Do You Have A Child Older Than High School Age?



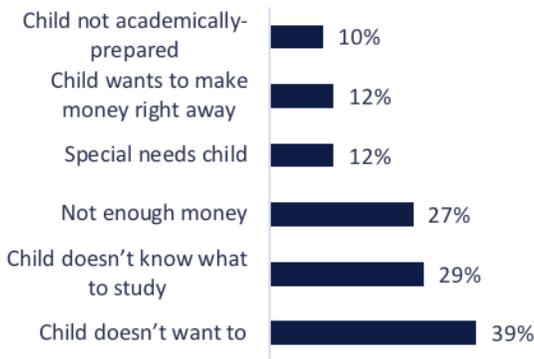
Highest Education Level Of Oldest Child



Focus group parents who aspired to post-high school education for their younger child but also had older children who never went to or completed college, cited multiple reasons, such as the child not suited for college because they didn't work hard enough, or doesn't have the aptitude; the child preferring to make money right away; or the child had unrealistic expectations of where they would go to college and once that did not work out, they did not have an alternative plan. *“My son had his heart set on going to college in California,” said one focus group participant. “When that didn't work out, he just kind of gave up.”*

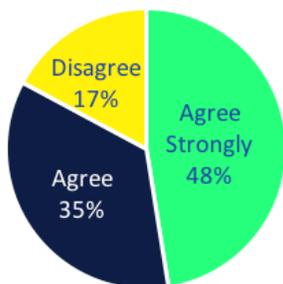
We also questioned a group of parents who believe their children will not pursue a post-high school education program. When asked why they didn't think their child would attend college, more than three-quarters (78 percent) said their child either didn't want to go, didn't know what to study, or was academically underprepared. Twenty-seven percent reported financial concerns.

Why Won't Your Child Pursue Higher Education?



Clearly, realities don't always meet parents' dreams when it comes to their children's experiences beyond high school. Some parents are adjusting their expectations accordingly—especially if the ultimate goal of a bachelor's degree remains in play. The majority of parents (82 percent) responded they were comfortable with the idea of their children pursuing a vocational or technical program after high school.

I Am Comfortable With My Children Pursuing A Vocation Or Technical Program After High School



Additionally, three-quarters of parents said they would be "very supportive" if their child used community college as a stepping stone to a four-year program. In addition, 83 percent surveyed parents agreed that community college would provide their children with a high-quality education for a lower cost. This was especially true of parents who themselves do not have bachelor's degrees.

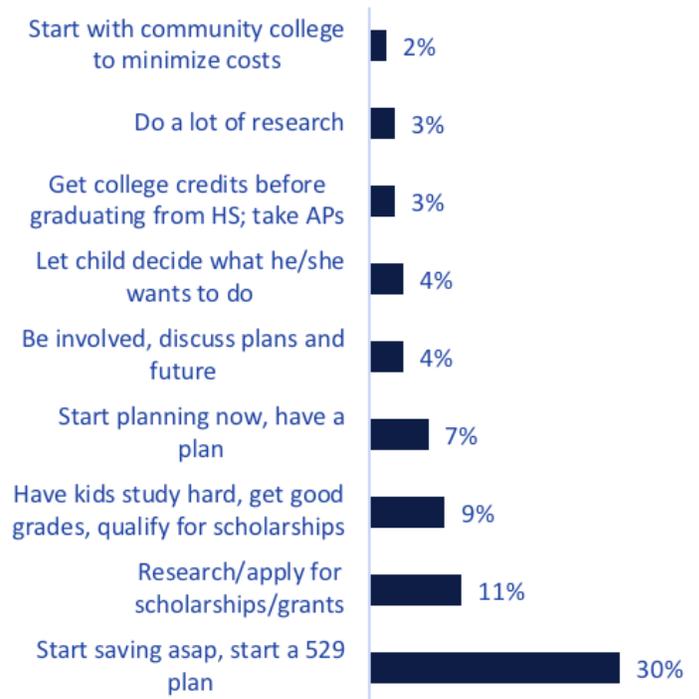
"83 percent surveyed parents agreed that community college would provide their children with a high-quality education for a lower cost."

Focus group participants voiced similar support for less expensive institutions that didn't have a "name brand:" "There are lots of state schools, you don't have to pick a private college that costs \$60,000 per year" ... "On job applications, they ask what degree you have, not where you got it." Still, only 2 percent of the parents in our survey with children over high-school age, when asked what advice they had for other parents, said to start at a community college to minimize costs, indicating that the idea of community college as a first step may still have a way to go before becoming more widely accepted.

What Advice Would You Give to Help with Post-High School Education Planning?

(Open response)

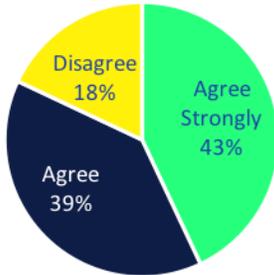
Responses given by 2% or more parents of kids who have gone through the post-HS education planning process



Parental Attitudes About Financing College

Eighty-two percent of respondents believed that achieving the dream of having their children successfully complete college is worth any financial cost.

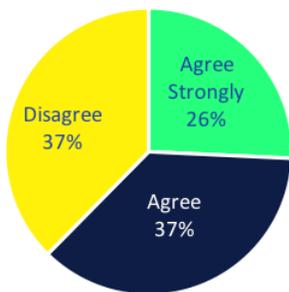
The Dream Of Having My Children Successfully Complete Post- High School Education Is Worth Any Financial Cost To Me



“Eighty-two percent of respondents believed that achieving the dream of having their children successfully complete college is worth any financial cost.”

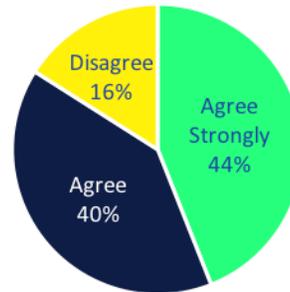
Financial practicality does seem to be tempering this dream a bit. Sixty-three percent also thought that if their child didn't intend to pursue a high-paying profession, they should scale back their college plans and pay less for a degree. However, in a seeming nod to the notion that kids should pursue their passion regardless of earning potential, a significant portion of parents—almost 40 percent—strongly disagreed that the front-end investment in college must always be tied to the back-end return.

If My Child Doesn't Plan To Work In A High Paying Profession, We Should Spend Less To Get Degree



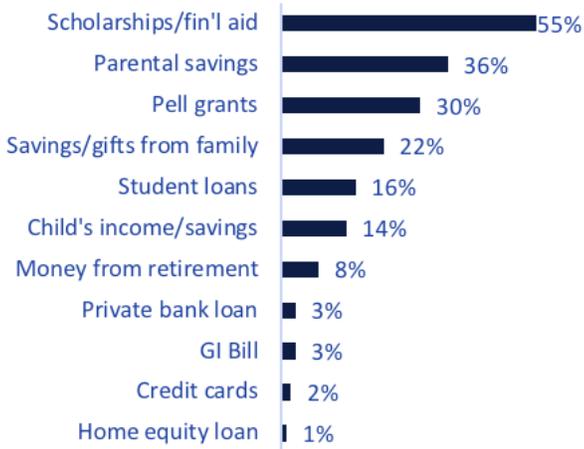
Parents also feel that financial aid is plentiful but not made easily available. Eighty-four percent agreed with the notion that “there is money out there to cover college, if only they know where to look.” Anecdotally, this is a sentiment referenced in focus group discussions—everyone seems to know someone who negotiated their way to a more generous financial aid package, or who knew the secret to filling out the FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid) so as to be eligible for more need-based aid. There's a feeling among parents that there's a way to game the system—if only they knew the rules. Parents blame themselves if they aren't able to uncover the “pot of gold” that others are able to find.

If You Know Where To Look, You Can Find Grants, Scholarships, Fin'l Aid That You Don't Need To Pay Back To Cover Much Of The Cost Of Post HS Education



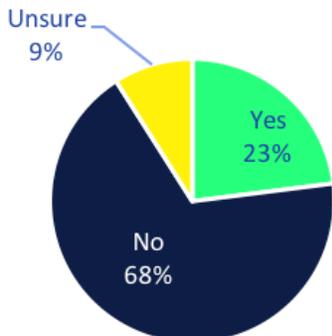
Parents also have an unclear picture about how they will pay for their children's education. Eighty-five percent of the parents surveyed believed scholarships, Pell grants and/or free financial aid would be a major source of funding. In reality, though, few students receive enough scholarships or grants to cover all college costs. One estimateⁱⁱ in recent years found that, of the students enrolled full time at four-year colleges, less than one percent could cover the full cost of attendance with aid that didn't need to be paid back. Surprisingly, in our own survey, a full 59 percent of parents with children already in college reported scholarships as a primary funding source. Another 32 percent said Pell Grants primarily covered costs. However, because of the confusion and lack of uniformity in financial aid award letters, there is often a great deal of confusion in understanding what is actually a grant and what is a loan that must be paid back. Some of the survey parents may have been subject to this confusion or we may have had survey respondents who received more scholarship and grant aid than average.

How Do You Plan to Fund Post-HS Education? (Name up to 5)



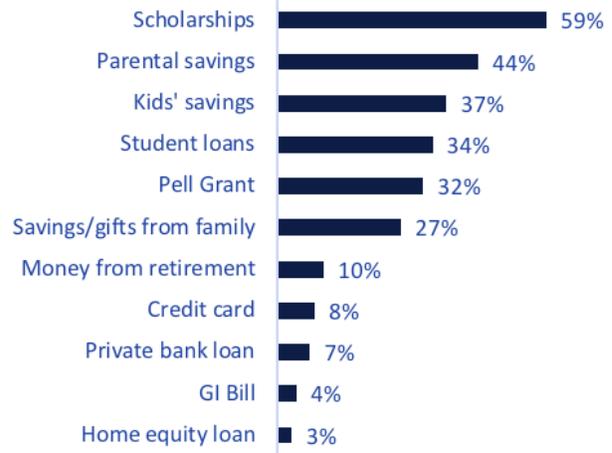
One reason parents may be anticipating such a large reliance on scholarships to cover tuition costs is their unrealistic views of their children’s athletic prowess. A significant number of parents in our focus groups believed that sports scholarships will provide the path to their children’s college education. A couple of parents said they were “investing” in taking their kids to sports camps, tournaments at colleges and elsewhere, with the hope that this will provide the dream of a college education. Among survey respondents, almost one-quarter of parents believed their children had a good chance of being recruited to play a sport at the collegiate level, which is often accompanied by a scholarship. That number nearly doubles among parents from urban areas and when fathers were the survey respondent. Fathers are far more optimistic than mothers (31 percent to 19 percent) about their child’s prospect of an athletic scholarship. The reality is, only about 7 percent of high school athletes nationwide go on to play a varsity sport in college accompanied by a scholarship.ⁱⁱⁱ

Does Your Child Have A Good Chance Of Being Recruited To Play A Sport At The Collegiate Level?



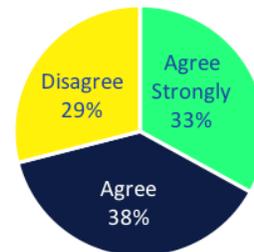
Parents also underestimate the role student loans will play in funding college. Only 19 percent of parents thought student loans (federal and/or private) would be a primary way they would cover costs. However, in our survey, among parents with children already in or through college, 41 percent had already utilized student and parent loans.

How Was Post-High School Education For An Older Child Paid For?



Parents also seemed to disagree on how much their children should or would contribute monetarily to their own education. While the majority of surveyed parents thought their children should pay for at least some college costs, almost 30 percent disagreed that children should bear any of the financial responsibility. Meanwhile, only 14 percent predicted their children’s savings or income would be a top source of funding. Among those who already had a child in college, however, 37 percent ended up turning to children’s savings or earnings. Nationally, approximately half of students put their own money toward the college bill, but their contributions only cover about 11 percent of the total cost.^{iv}

I Believe My Kids Should Take Responsibility For Paying At Least Some Post HS Education Costs.

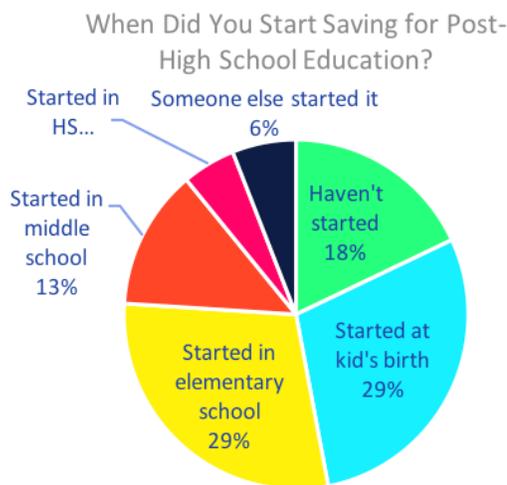


In contrast, a much larger percentage of parents said they would draw upon their own savings or lines of credit as the primary method of funding college. In our survey, 36

percent expected to use parental savings; 22 percent cited gifts from family members; 8 percent would tap into their retirement accounts, 2 percent would use credit cards; and 1 percent would tap their home equity. These numbers generally saw a small rise among those parents with children already in college: 44 percent had actually drawn upon savings, 27 percent benefited from family members' financial gifts, 10 percent used retirement savings, 8 percent turned to credit cards, and 3 percent took out a home equity loan.

Most notably, 18 percent of parents reported they had not yet started to save for college: One quarter (26 percent) of parents of middle schoolers and 13 percent of parents of high schoolers in our survey had not yet started to save. Lower income parents (23%) and those with children on a career and technical education track (41%) were the least likely to have started saving.

“Eighteen percent of parents reported they had not yet started to save for college.”



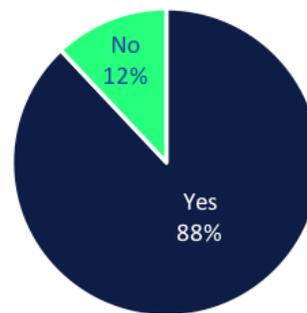
In focus groups, most parents agreed that, while it is important to save for higher education, “life gets in the way of saving,” and, “no matter how much you put in, it is never enough.” Over all, there is a general attitude that “we’ll figure it out when the time comes to pay.”

A late start in saving can be a serious barrier to college dreams, of either the parent or the student—and it can greatly increase the need to rely on loans. In fact, among those parents in our survey who had already gone through the college planning process for an older child, the number one piece of advice they had for other parents was to “start saving asap, start a 529 plan.” (A 529 plan is a tax-advantaged savings instrument designed to encourage saving for college.)

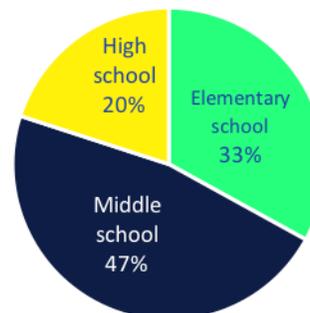
Parents are at least starting the college conversation earlier, even if some are not yet saving. Eighty-eight percent of parents said they had begun the conversation about “life after high school,” including 82 percent of parents of middle schoolers and 92 percent of parents of high schoolers. Of these parents, one-third began the conversation when their kids were in elementary school and almost half started in middle school. However, of notable concern is the fact that 20 percent waited until high school to broach the subject of post-high school plans at all and 12 percent are still not discussing these issues—even with a child in high school.

“Eighty-eight percent of parents said they had begun the conversation about ‘life after high school.’ ”

Have You Started Talking To Your Child About Life After High School?



When Did You Start Talking To Your Child About Life After High School?

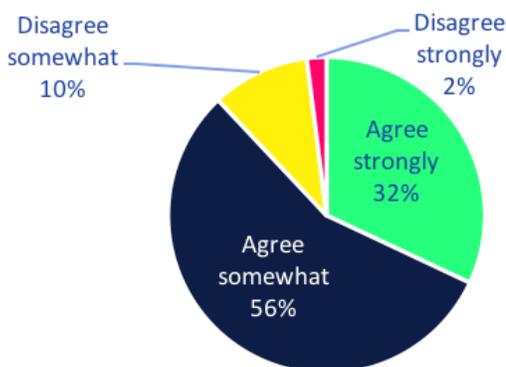


Such a late start in beginning the discussion can put students seriously behind when it comes to charting their path through the maze of post-secondary options. Often, students can begin to prepare for their futures by selecting the appropriate type of high school and accompanying curriculum, whether it be Honors courses, college

preparatory, or Career and Technical Education. Starting the conversation too late means all these options are already off the table. For example, Baltimore focus group participants cited their city’s unique model of magnet schools that each student must apply to, rather than neighborhood high schools. This model encourages middle school families and children to start thinking about their futures earlier, because their interests and their middle school performance drive their high school placement options, which, in turn, influences college decision-making.

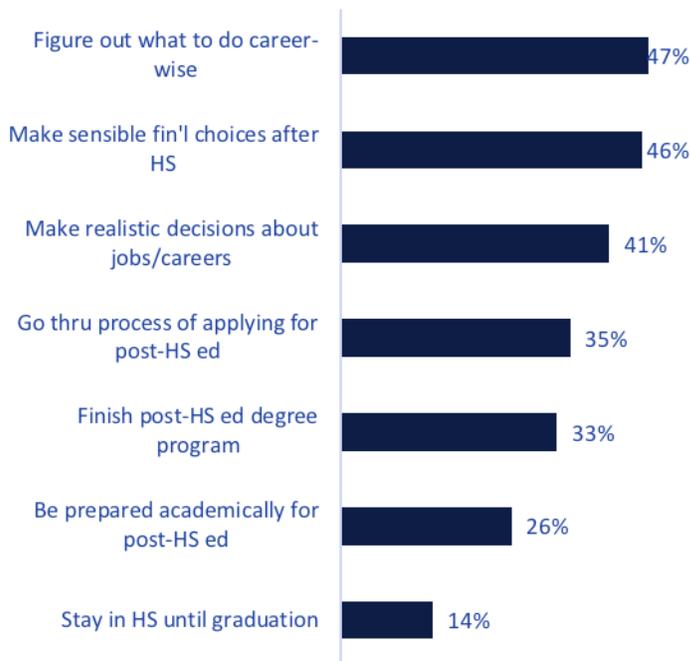
Parents who discussed college with their children reported these conversations were comprehensive, with 83 percent saying they had discussed the details of what to study and how to pay for it. However, despite the fact that these conversations are happening, many parents are not confident in the information they are giving to their kids. Only 32 percent agreed strongly with the sentiment, “I have the knowledge I need to guide my child through the application and decision process for post-high school education.” This percentage was even lower among mothers, families on the lower end of the income range, and parents without a degree themselves.

How Strongly Do You Agree: “I Have The Knowledge I Need To Guide My Child Through The Application And Decision Process For Post-High School Education”



“Only 32 percent agreed strongly with the sentiment ‘I have the knowledge I need to guide my child through the application and decision process for post-high school education.’ ”

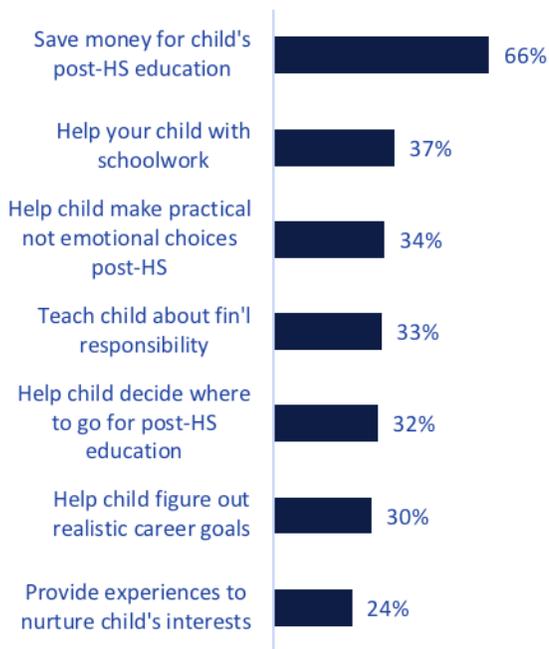
How Difficult Will It Be For Your Child To...
(very/somewhat – 4-point scale)



In addition, parents are not especially confident about their children’s ability to plan for future career and job choices and to make financial decisions after high school, such as understanding budgeting, use of credit cards, living on their own, etc. A substantial percentage of parents also doubt their own ability to adequately counsel their children on planning career direction, taking on financial responsibility, etc., and do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable about the best educational paths to pursue and how to pursue them. Those reporting the most difficulty were fathers (about 10% higher than mothers), urban residents (highest when considering teaching about financial responsibility, decision-making and career goals), and those whose children are currently in a high school career and technical education programs (higher level of difficulty for all factors).

Parent discussion groups expressed concerns in some detail about the ability to teach kids the “practical” skills needed to succeed in higher education. Besides the academic issues and financial concerns, parents want to help their children reach their potential and be happy, productive and independent. They view education as key to achieving those goals, yet they struggle with how to raise their children so that they will share and buy into those same values and aspirations. Parents in the focus groups expressed a desire to get more help to instill and reinforce the skills kids will need to succeed in college—the drive and “stick-to-it-ness” they will need to attain a degree; hard work and understanding tradeoffs like not going to the “perfect” college if it’s too expensive; or postponing things like buying a car or getting married in order to meet education goals.

How Difficult Is It for You To...
(very/somewhat – 4-point scale)

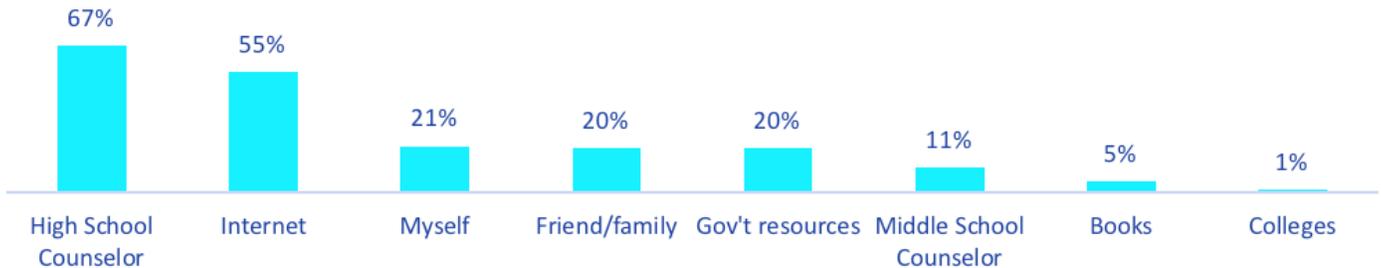


Parents expressed a desire for help reinforcing these issues, and while acknowledging there is no single right choice, parents expressed a sense of helplessness around guiding their children to make good life choices.

Parents' Information Sources

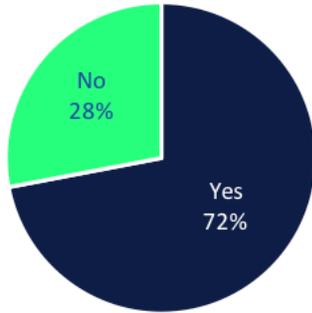
Parents are turning to school counselors to help with many of these issues. In fact, counselors were cited as the number one resource parents turned to for information on post-high school planning, with the internet coming in a close second. Of note, those anticipating their child will pursue a career or technical education were much more likely to rely on web-based self-help than were parents of children pursuing other types of education.

Sources Of Information On Post-High School Planning



Seventy-two percent of parents said their children had been assigned to a counselor or advisor to help them with post-high school education planning.

Has Your Child Been Assigned A School Counselor?



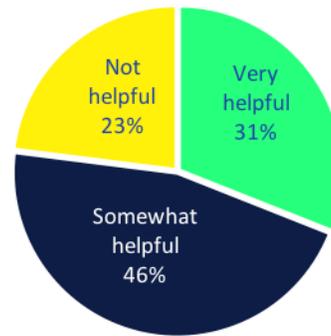
This was particularly true for parents who send their child to school in an urban area (80%) and for students in honors classes (84%). Parents in rural areas and in traditional (non-honors) high school classes reported lower numbers of assigned counselors, at 63 percent and 60 percent, respectively.

	Highest	Lowest	
Urban	80%	Rural	63%
Honors	84%	Traditional classes	60%

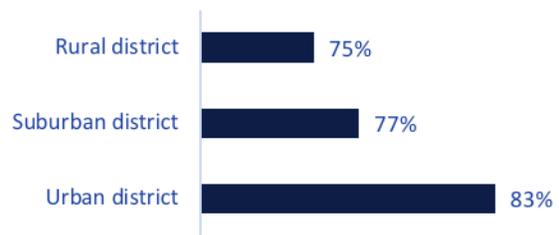
Anecdotally, focus group and small discussion group members expressed frustration about the lack of support for non-honors students and raised concern that it was only the “top” kids in the class that received attention from the school counselors. They felt other students—the B and C student—did not always get the attention needed and often were left behind or had a harder time tapping resources from the school counselor.

However, overall, parents gave school counselors modestly positive reviews. Among those with counselors, 31 percent said they were very helpful and 46 percent somewhat helpful. The ratings were highest among those who thought their child would be heading to a four-year college (79 percent) and lower for those whose kids were on a path to a two-year college (70 percent) or career and technical education (71 percent). Ratings were also highest among urban parents at 83 percent, followed by families from rural areas at 77 percent and suburban at 75 percent.

How Helpful Is Your Child's School Counselor?

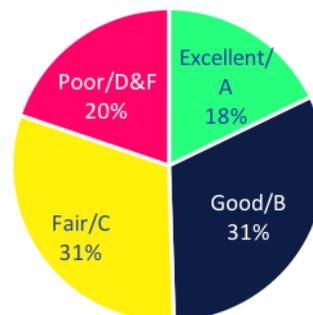


Somewhat/Very Helpful

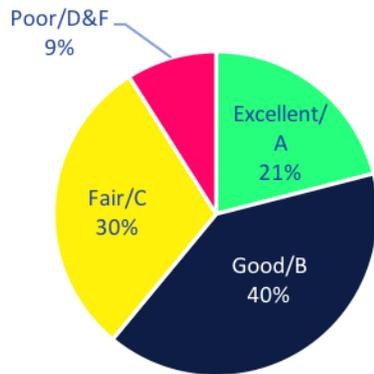


School counselors were rated better for helping children identify career interests and narrowing down which institutions to apply to, then for advising on how to pay for college. These results fall in line with additional ASA research^v that finds school counselors frequently lack adequate training and resources to sufficiently advise students on higher education financing.

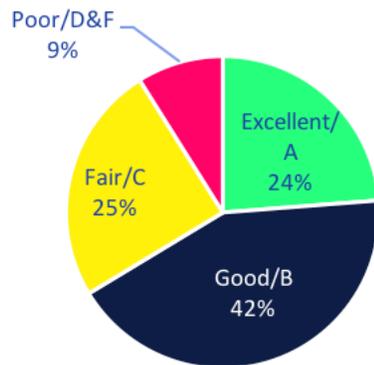
Helping Figure Out How To Pay For Education



Helping Find Opportunities To Nurture Career Interests

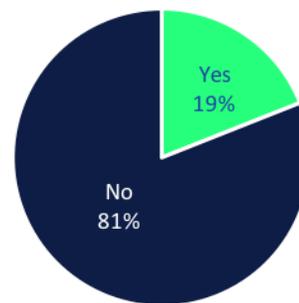


Helping Figure Out Where To Go For Education



In-school counselor discussions could be driven by the fact that many school districts are mandating such conversations take place, although the type of activity varies greatly. Six in ten (59%) high schools require students to take the SAT or ACT test prior to graduation, slightly higher in suburban schools (63%). Sixteen percent of students are required to have a written post-secondary plan, 13 percent are required to complete an internship, and 14 percent are actually required to apply to a post-secondary program prior to graduation.

Have You Worked With A Professional Outside Of School To Help With Your Child's Post-High School Education Plan?



Sentiments about the counselor community were slightly less positive in the group discussions and focus groups. Parents in these settings expressed frustration about the lack of counseling resources available to kids, and that the focus school counselors must put on behavioral issues results in college and career planning often being put on the back burner.

Some parents turn to additional resources, besides school counselors, for a leg up on the college planning process. Eighteen percent of parents in our survey had worked with a college planning professional outside of their children's schools. Often, these educational counselors were identified through a community organization, such as scouts, a sports league, religious organization, or federal college prep program, like Upward Bound, Talent Search or GEAR UP. Among parents whose children participated in such community organizations as the ones listed above, 68 percent thought they would be good resources for educational planning information. The most likely parents to utilize outside resources included urban parents (38 percent), and parents of those in vocational high school programs (61 percent). Half (54 percent) the parents whose children used such professional help paid for the services.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The landscape of college planning is very muddled for parents—they want the best higher education for their kids, but don't quite know what the "best" is anymore—is it what *US News and World Report* says it is, or what their neighbor says it is, or what is right for their child and their circumstances without apology to anyone? Parents seem to have a vision for their children's future that is forced to adjust when the realities of academic ability, personal motivation, career aspiration, and financial reality come into play. And yet they are constantly bombarded by outside pressures and expectations of what they should do and what constitutes a "good" education for their child.

For the overwhelming majority of parents, the dream is for their children to attend a four-year college and have the ability upon graduation to pursue a good career. They will scale back their plans if pressed, but often only if the four-year option is immediately unavailable due to the child's aptitude or desire, or financial constraints. Parents see that there are higher education options available, but they don't know enough about them, and their concern that they must help their child make the "right" choice is pushing most parents to pick the known path rather than risk their child's future on something they don't fully understand.

There seems to be a lot of open mindedness about different education paths—as long as that's not the path MY child will take. Parents may be reluctant to have children consider any options other than the four-year degree because of misperceptions about community colleges, associate degrees, and career and technical education in general. As such, parent and child may make educational plan readjustments too late in the student's high school career, leaving students to forego higher education altogether when they don't have a backup plan, or picking a path that

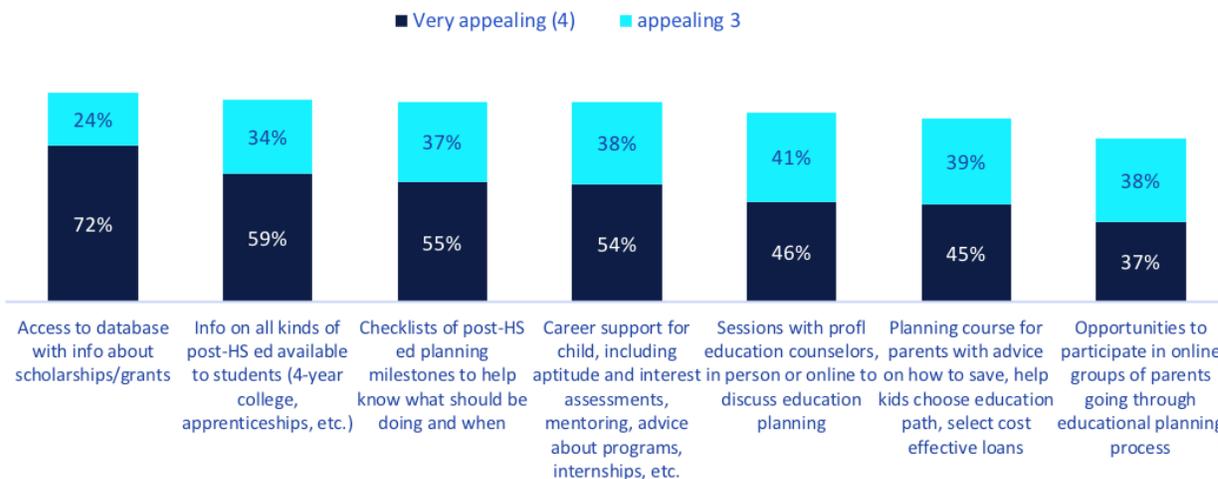
does not really meet their interests and needs.

While there is a muddled picture of what parents actually want out of higher education for their kids, what is clear is that parents don't believe they have the support system to help their kids make these decisions. This is likely a result of the fact that they have a conflicted view of what is right in their own minds as noted above, and they feel the ultimate decision reflects on them as parents. Only 32 percent of parents agreed strongly with the sentiment "I have the knowledge I need to guide my child through the application and decision process for post-high school education." As a result, they see the practical financial choice of a community college and believe it is a high-quality education, but maybe what they really want is someone else—a counselor, teacher, coach—to affirm that thought and be the one that validates that it is acceptable to choose something other than the standard path for their child. Parents are currently not getting that affirmation. They recognize that the options are available, but many parents are still not willing to go against societal expectations and push their child toward a non-four-year higher education path—even if it may be the better choice for them and their family. Better support systems must be put in place to make parents confident in their choice to help guide their child through a higher education credential that meets their aspirations and skills, and change the perception that the only option for higher education is a four-year degree.

Recommendation: Broaden the definition of college.

We can help every child make the best decision for their circumstance by diminishing the stigmas and stereotypes that surround all paths through higher education. A clearer understanding of the viability of other credentials besides the bachelor's degree will help students and parents feel more confident to explore different programs that may better fit their career goals. We should embrace explorations of all paths to higher education and expand the definition of "college," recognizing that there are multiple post-

Seven Different Services Were Tested As To Their Appeal (Scale Of 4=very Appealing Down To 1=not At All Appealing).



secondary pathways toward economic mobility beyond high school, and work to overcome the bias toward certain degree types as not qualifying as higher education.

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce projects the economy will generate 55 million jobs by 2020, and a healthy majority (65 percent) will require some form of post-secondary education.^{vi} However, a closer examination of ‘some form’ of post-secondary education reveals it need not always be a bachelor’s degree or higher; 7 million jobs will require an associate’s degree, 5 million jobs will require a post-secondary certificate, and 10 million jobs will require some college credit. Therefore, our societal goal must be to help all students find successful pathways beyond high school, at all levels of education.

Ultimately, the strength of the U.S. post-secondary system lies in its variety. Students who consciously seek a path other than the traditional notion of college, one better suited to their talents and aspirations, still have the opportunity to carve out a good career, earn a living wage and grab their piece of the American Dream. Parents’ earlier acceptance of this reality can put their children on a faster track to long-term success.

Recommendation: Increase the availability and quality of online tools for planning and paying for college. Parents in our survey indicated a need for more post-high school planning information, and many are turning to the internet to help fill their knowledge gaps. Specifically, parents expressed a desire for helpful tools like databases with information about scholarships and grants and checklists of post-high school education planning milestones to help know what should be done and when. They would also welcome information about less obvious sources of funding (smaller grants and scholarships, including those provided by individual colleges); information about all kinds of post-secondary education available to students; personalized advice for affording college (i.e., given child’s individual academic capabilities, athletic prowess, family finances, etc.); and advice for dealing with their kids—for conveying the importance of college, and explaining the sacrifices and choices that may have to be made. Additionally, online peer-to-peer discussion groups could help parents support and learn from one another through the educational planning process.

Recommendation: Increase the number of school counselors. Parents highlighted a need for additional counseling support to ensure that kids of all academic abilities—not just the highest performer, and not just those most in need of help—receive attention from a school counselor.

There must be a renewed commitment to understanding the value that counselors bring to the daily lives of students and to their long-term success. More than half (54 percent)

of the school counselors in a recent ASA survey responded that they have a student to counselor ratio of one counselor for 300 or more students. Across the nation, that ratio is nearly 500 to 1, a proportion that experts point out has remained virtually unchanged for the past 10 years.^{vii} In order to ensure we are serving all students, there must be an increased commitment of resources to allow for more counselors, and lower the counselor-to-student ratios.

Parents also indicated that assigned school counselors were generally helpful in the college admissions process, but they were not as confident in a counselor’s ability to help with the financial aid process or with students considering an alternative higher education path. Additional research has revealed this may be due to a lack of adequate training and support for counselors, as well as high counselor to student ratios. There should be an effort made to increase training in the areas of college and career counseling—not just add-on training at conferences and events, but as part of the curriculum when certifying a school counselor. In addition, rather than insisting that counselors be a jack-of-all-trades, there should be an effort made to train and hire counselors whose sole function is college and career planning. Because this function is so vital to our students’ future, these functions should not be seen as an afterthought or something the counselor will get to if there’s time, but as a primary job function.

Recommendation: Expand partnerships between school counselors and college planning resources in the community. Counselors’ efforts to comprehensively advise students and families on the myriad post-secondary opportunities available, along with higher education financing, should be buttressed by third-party college access professionals within the community. Working together with local school districts, these college access programs, often administered by nonprofits and higher education institutions, can form an additional layer of personalized support and ensure more students receive vital one-on-one counseling. While federal funding for programs like TRIO are often limited to low-income students, their scope and reach could be expanded to middle-income families through increased nonprofit and/or corporate philanthropic backing. Expanded services could include more intensive career support for students, like aptitude and interest assessments, mentoring, and internship advice, or planning courses for parents.

Recommendation: Work to improve public perception of CTE. “Tracking” students at too young an age into a specific vocation should be avoided, but getting a head start on exploring possible careers, identifying interests and predilections, and building specific skills beyond introductory knowledge can be beneficial. Many parents, though, may be resistant to their children following a CTE track in high school because of long-held stigmas

and misperceptions. For years, academically struggling students or those with behavioral and emotional issues were relegated to career and technical training programs that began and ended in high school. As Kate Blosveren Kreamer, deputy executive director of Advance CTE, an association of state officials who work in career and technical education, [told NPR](#), “They remember ‘voc-ed’ from what they were in high school, which is not necessarily what they aspire to for their own kids.”^{viii}

But as workplace demands have evolved to require a more skilled workforce, so has CTE. The fact is, today’s high school-level CTE is very much a college-bound program and plays an important role in students’ transition from secondary to post-secondary education. In fact, CTE programs today encourage students to complete at least an associate’s degree, with four-year degrees well within reach as well. Research has shown very little difference in college attendance rates between students who concentrate in CTE and the general student population, and CTE students typically earn more once they enter the working world.^{ix} Unfortunately, as career and technical education has expanded to meet the needs of an evolving—and increasingly—technical workforce, public perception of CTE’s brand has not kept up.

CTE administrators at the secondary and post-secondary level, along with policymakers, community colleges, college planning professionals, nonprofits, associations, employers, and more should work together to help build and champion the CTE “brand.”

Recommendation: Increase funding for the federal Perkins Basic State Grant to expand student participation in career exploration and CTE curriculums that expose parents and students to more education paths. Students all along the academic spectrum can benefit from school-based programs that introduce them to the job opportunities of tomorrow and identify different pathways to meet their education and career goals. Practical, hands-on CTE training at the secondary level can connect subject matter to real-life applications and lay a good foundation for all education options beyond high school, be it a certificate program or two- or four-year college. However, although 98 percent of the nation’s public-school districts offer CTE programs to students at the high school level, 50 percent report a lack of funding or high cost hinders their ability to offer such programs; 44 percent said finding or keeping teachers for in-demand industries and occupations is a barrier; and 43 percent cited facilities or space limitations.^x Increased funding for the Perkins Basic State Grant, under the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, could help to alleviate these barriers to existing programs and expand the program to introduce CTE support and counseling earlier in the education timeline—as early as middle schools—so that students can get an even earlier start on thinking about college and career.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

American Student Assistance®, a non-profit based in Boston, Mass., conducted foundational research with middle income parents to identify the range of issues and considerations these families address in their planning for their children’s post-high school futures. The research was divided into three phases:

- Focus groups in Baltimore, Md., and Lancaster, Pa. to develop hypotheses around differences among market segments and critical issues to consider in planning
- Segmented small group discussions in three markets (Charlotte, N.C., Marlton, N.J., and Springfield Mass.) to solidify hypotheses
- Survey research to quantify learnings, conducted nationwide.

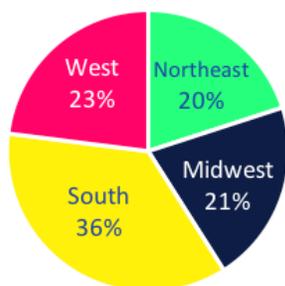
About the survey

ASA conducted an online survey, designed and administered by The Melior Group, with middle income parents with at least one child in middle or high school, using a national panel of qualified respondents. Participants were screened to ensure that their annual household incomes fell between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (according to the U.S. Bureau of Census, one-third of households in the U.S. earn between \$50,000 and \$100,000). Information was gathered from 1,017 respondents; with this sample size, statistical significance is +/-3% at 95% confidence. Best efforts were made to achieve a nationally representative sample. The survey was open from March 5, 2018, to March 9, 2018.

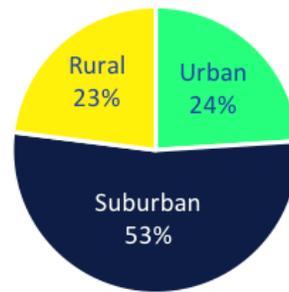
Household Residence and Income

The survey sample included good regional representation. Besides region, respondents were asked to describe their area of residence: 24% described their setting as Urban, 53% Suburban, and 23% Rural.

Area of Country



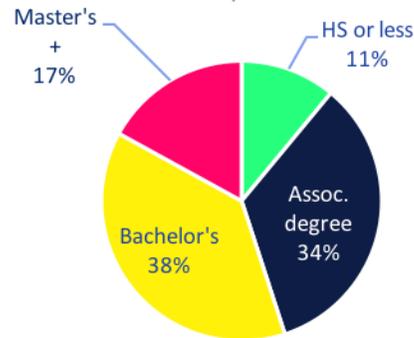
Area of Residence



By design, half the respondents had household incomes of \$50K-\$75K and the other half had household incomes of \$75K-\$100K. Higher income households more often had two wage earners.

Parents' Education

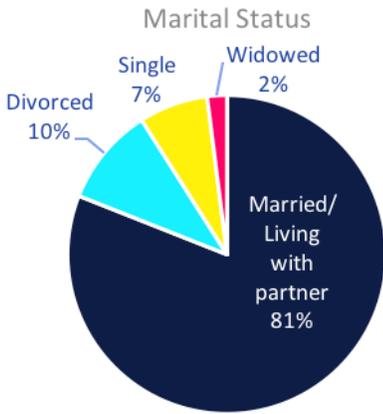
Parent's Highest Level Of Education Completed



Half (55%) of the parents surveyed had at least bachelor’s degrees. Nearly half (46%) of the parents were currently attending or did attend post-secondary education as an adult over age 25. Ten percent of all the parents were currently enrolled in some post-high school education.

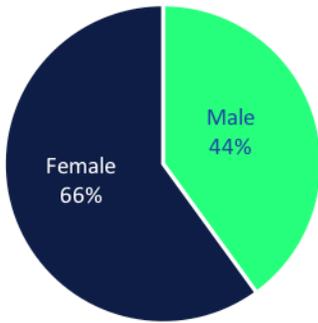
For just under one in 10 (7%) parents, English was not their first language.

Marital Status, Race/Ethnicity, Number of Kids



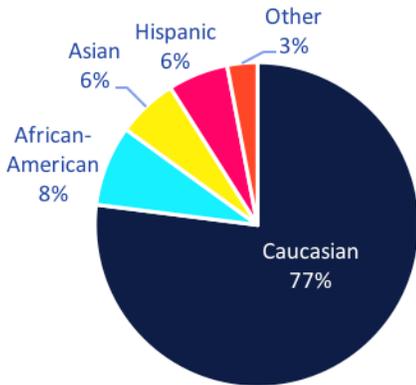
Eight in ten (81%) respondents were married or living with a partner. Ten percent were divorced, with the remainder single (7%) or widowed (2%).

Gender



Two-thirds of parents (66%) were female, typical of survey research respondents.

Ethnicity



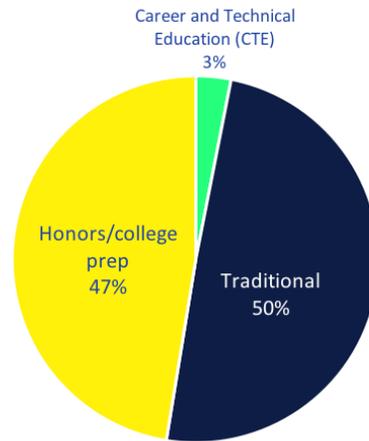
The racial mix skewed Caucasian (77%), followed by African-American (8%), Asian (6%), and Hispanic (6%). This closely

matches U.S. Census data for Middle Income (\$50K-\$100K) households, where 73% White, 10% Black, 4% Asian, 12% Hispanic fall into this income category. Finally, the mean number of children in the households was 2.2. For the purpose of the survey, parents were asked to respond to questions thinking about their oldest child in middle or high school.

Types of Schools and Classes Children Attend

When asked to select the majority of their child’s classes, half the parents described them as “traditional,” while half had kids in “college prep” or “honors” classes. Those living in rural areas were more likely to have children in traditional (than college prep/honors) classes (57%). Children in honors/advanced classes were more likely to reside in suburban areas (31%).

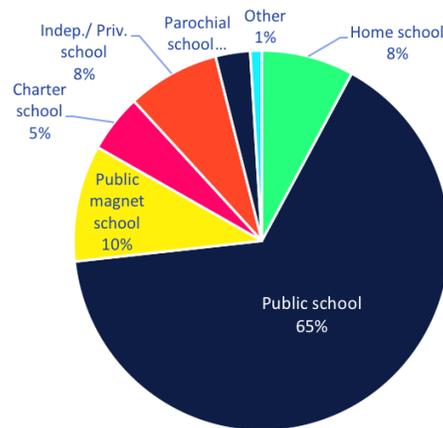
Class Type



Types of Schools Attended

Two-thirds of parents had children in traditional neighborhood public schools.

School Type



ⁱ Abby Jackson, “This Chart Shows How Quickly College Tuition Has Skyrocketed Since 1980.” *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/this-chart-shows-how-quickly-college-tuition-has-skyrocketed-since-1980-2015-7> (July 20, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Michelle Singletary, “Get real on scholarships.” *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/get-real-on-scholarships/2011/03/08/ABM4Lr_story.html?utm_term=.61e8cad3b0d6&noredirect=on (March 12, 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ Scholarshipstats.com, “Odds of a High School Athlete Playing in College.” <http://www.scholarshipstats.com/varsityodds.html>

^{iv} CNN Money, “How the Average Family Pays for College.” <https://money.cnn.com/2017/07/17/pf/college/how-to-pay-for-college/index.html> (July 18, 2017).

^v American Student Assistance, “School Counselors and College Financial Fit.” <https://d9jmqzwnxk1s1.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/14141839/School-Counselors-and-College-Financial-Fit.pdf> (May 2018)

^{vi} Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, “New Study Finds There Will be 55 Million Job Openings by 2020,” https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/3.17.15_RecoveryProjections2020.pdf (June 2013)

^{vii} Elizabeth A. Harris, “Little College Guidance: 500 High School Students Per Counselor,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/26/nyregion/little-college-guidance-500-high-school-students-per-counselor.html> (December 2014)

^{viii} National Public Radio, “High-Paying Trade Jobs Sit Empty, While High School Grads Line Up for University,” *All Things Considered*, Aired April 25, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/25/605092520/high-paying-trade-jobs-sit-empty-while-high-school-grads-line-up-for-university>

^{ix} Michael A Gorrfried and Jay Stratte Plasman, “Linking the Timing of Career and Technical Education Coursetaking With High School Dropout and College-Going Behavior.” <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0002831217734805> (October 2017); and Daniel Kreisman and Kevin Stange, “Vocational and Career Tech Education in American High Schools: The Value of Depth Over Breadth,” <https://aysps.gsu.edu/files/2017/10/17-12-Kreisman-VocationalTech.pdf> (September 2017).)

^x National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, “Career and Technical Education Programs in Public School Districts: 2016–17.” <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018028.pdf> (April 2018).