

# The Role of High School Career-Focused Advising in Students' Postsecondary Planning: A Qualitative Study Research Brief

October 2024

Schools play an important role in preparing high school students for their futures, whether that involves postsecondary education, workforce entry, or both. School-based advising can help students make informed decisions by providing information and guidance, facilitating exploration of opportunities and pathways, and connecting students with resources to meet their transition needs. Much of the research to date has focused on college advising, leaving a gap in understanding around career-focused advising, including advising for students participating in career and technical education (CTE). As interest grows in supporting students through diverse pathways, including CTE, it is important to explore the role that career-focused advising plays in helping students navigate their post-high school options.

Our study examined the level of support high school students receive for college and career planning, the mechanisms through which they receive this support, and how this varies across students and settings. We conducted interviews with 45 staff members and 18 student focus groups across 17 high schools in North Carolina and New York City (NYC), purposefully selected for their diverse CTE programs. These included seven P-TECH 9-14 schools with CTE focus, two non-P-TECH 9-14 schools in NYC with a CTE focus, and one Cooperative Innovative High School (CIHS)<sup>1</sup> in North Carolina with a CTE focus. The study also included seven schools in North Carolina where CTE was available for elective credit, but not a focus of the school. These included six comprehensive high schools and one non-CTE focused CIHS where CTE was available through dual enrollment courses only. At each school, we interviewed counselors and administrators involved in college and career advising. Although student focus groups were planned at each school, recruitment challenges resulted in focus groups at only 10 schools. This brief highlights key findings and implications from our main report.

---

<sup>1</sup> North Carolina's CIHSs, consisting of early colleges and other innovative high schools, are small public high schools, usually located on the campus of a university or community college, which expand students' opportunities for educational success through high-quality instructional programming.

## How Is Advising Structured?

- **Schools used various approaches to advise students.** This included individual and group advising provided by counselors and other staff, advising through advisory, homeroom, and academic courses, online tools, mass communication (e.g., announcements, emails), college/career fairs, and work-based learning (WBL). All schools had multiple counselors, with many schools having counselors who specialized in college or career advising. School counselors played a primary role in advising, but administrators and teachers, including CTE teachers, were often involved.
- **Most students met with counselors at least once or twice a year for one-on-one advising.** State and local policies informed both the frequency and content of these sessions. For example, New York had more requirements in place for conducting and documenting student planning, while the North Carolina schools had fewer requirements in place, but during the study period, the state introduced requirements for high schools to collect formal and structured career development plans from students starting in the 2024-25 school year. As a result, schools differed in their approach to career planning, with some requiring formal, documented plans and regular updates, while others took more informal approaches with less systematic data collection.
- **Many schools used advisory or homeroom periods to engage students in postsecondary advising and planning.** However, schools varied in how they structured college and career advising or the frequency with which advisory time was used for such activities. Also, schools varied in the degree to which online resources were integrated into advisory periods. In general, some schools set aside time for formalized postsecondary advising while others offered less structured time for advising or focused advisory time on general academic support (e.g., tutoring, registration).

---

*“It’s [career preparedness] ingrained in everything we do from freshman bootcamp we’re continually preparing them for the workforce relating in all subject content areas situations that may come up in the workforce regardless of whether that’s an English class a history class or our CTE classes. We’re continually reinforcing the career preparedness across the curriculum from day one.”*

-Counselor at a CTE-focused CIHS

---

## How do students get information about connecting courses to college and careers?

- **Schools used various strategies to help students make connections between coursework and college and careers.** Many of these connections were made through one-on-one advising sessions with counselors or during advisories or homeroom, particularly during enrollment or registration periods. Advising staff made use of available information on students' interests and postsecondary plans to guide students in selecting their courses. In some schools, this information came in the form of student surveys or reviews of career plans, but in others advising and course recommendations were based on informal discussions during registration where students' current aspirations and interests were matched to available course opportunities during enrollment periods.
- **Staff and students often reported that coursework itself helped students see connections to future opportunities.** These courses included dual enrollment, CTE, as well as WBL opportunities both within and outside of CTE. Students who took part in these courses, or courses that prepared them for these courses, often reported that the teachers and course activities exposed them to college and career information that shaped their interests and plans.

## How does the school culture and structure influence advising?

- **The type of school model influenced advising.** CTE-focused schools tended to have a dual focus on career and college advising, resulting in more integrated planning, a strong focus on career readiness, and use of hands-on learning opportunities aligned with CTE pathways. These schools invested in specialized staff and used advisory periods for career exploration, supplemented by events like college fairs and career days. In contrast, comprehensive high schools tended to prioritize advising for general academic achievement and college preparation. These schools focused on ensuring students met graduation requirements and encouraged students to explore a wide range of academic and career options, often without guiding them toward specific pathways. A key distinction in advising was that comprehensive schools offered a broader range of opportunities without a singular focus, whereas CTE-focused schools centered advising around CTE as an organizing force, leading to greater alignment between advising and curriculum offerings.
- **Postsecondary expectations among staff could influence advising.** Staff at most schools, regardless of model or focus, emphasized the importance of students having a

postsecondary plan as an important goal of advising, whether it be college, military, or entering the workforce. However, in some schools, staff and students were more likely to report an emphasis on postsecondary education, particularly four-year college, as a goal for students, which could tilt advising focus toward college over career preparation. For example, a student at a comprehensive school shared, *“If you talk to a counselor, the first thing they bring up is going to a four-year university. They make that important.”*

- **In smaller schools, the close-knit environment fostered strong relationships between staff and students, leading to more personalized and proactive advising.** This setting also promoted a sense of collective responsibility among staff for advising and supporting students. While some larger schools also implemented strategies to build relationships, the smaller schools naturally facilitated better communication and a unified approach to advising, making it easier to address students' needs.

## Does advising differ based on student background?

- **Staff and students generally reported that advising practices did not differ based on student background.** However, advisors aimed to personalize advising based on students' interests, goals, and needs, often giving more attention to those who struggled academically, had special needs, or were more proactive in reaching out to advisors. Some students and staff expressed concern that students who were less comfortable reaching out to advisors, or were not perceived as needing academic support may be overlooked by advisors as an advisor at a comprehensive school shared, *We want to do better serving all of our students and not just the ones that feel comfortable enough to ask us, I guess. Because not every student is comfortable coming up to the front office and asking. And so we tried to, or we're going to try to do better about that.*
- **In comprehensive high schools, advising was similar between CTE and non-CTE students.** This was partly because most students took at least one CTE course so advising for CTE tended to be part of the same advising that all students received. However, students more intensively involved in CTE typically had more exposure to CTE teachers and career-focused advisors as they took more advanced CTE courses.

## How does advising change over time?

- **Generally, college and career advising progressed from broad exposure and awareness in the early grades to more focused planning in the later grades.** Early on, students explored interests and goals while staff raised general awareness about course and pathway opportunities. In later grades, advising emphasized course selection to meet graduation and pathway requirements, college selection and applications, and career

preparation. Some students, particularly at comprehensive schools, suggested increasing the focus in the earlier grades on helping them make connections between high school courses and pathway opportunities and future plans.

- **Over time, students were generally encouraged to take more ownership of their learning and postsecondary planning.**

As a result, however, some students were less engaged with advisors outside of mandatory meetings or registering for classes.

---

*“I wish that some of these things that we’ve talked about [during the focus group] would’ve been things that we talked about freshman and sophomore year, because I feel like if I would’ve known all of the options that I have now as far as degrees and classes that I can take outside of high school my freshman year, I would’ve been like, ‘Oh, I should take these CTE courses because I’m interested in this, and I could fall into this, which will later go into that.’ I think that we just don’t talk about career stuff and future stuff enough, us being young. That’s so important.”*

-Senior at a comprehensive high school

---

## What do students say about the influence of advising on their high school activities and postsecondary plans?

- **Advisors were often described as facilitators who helped students connect their interests with available courses, programs, and other opportunities rather than as direct influencers of their plans.** However, some students did credit their participation in certain courses and pathways to encouragement from advisors.
- **Advising often influenced coursework selection, but it was the coursework itself that students reported as influencing their plans.** Students typically said coursework such as CTE, dual enrollment, and participation in WBL was important in influencing their post-high school plans as a student at a comprehensive school shared, *“I feel like I know more of what I want to do. And the classes I’m taking are progressing my knowledge of like what I want to take when I get to college.”* Coursework and related opportunities could also help students decide what they did not want to do as a student at a non-CTE focused CIHS said, *“I was job shadowing at a vet’s office, and I decided that I didn’t like it but that was good information.”*



- **Advising is most influential when personalized, and provided by those who know students well and understand their individual needs.** Students reported that informal interactions, such as one-on-one conversations with teachers and advisors, were often more helpful than group presentations or other generic advising strategies. They also valued advisors who respected their personal goals and appreciated guidance from staff with direct personal experiences related to their interests, such as CTE teachers.

---

*“...when you come down to deciding what you’re going to do with your life, that’s just going to come from personal feelings about subjects and personal interests but the advising that we’re getting definitely lets us know, at least me, a lot more opportunities and a lot more things that are out there that I can kind of expand what I’m interested in, kind of grow and branch out, and see more of the things that I’m interested in, and help me decide what I want to do.”*

-Student at a comprehensive high school

---

## Policy Implications

These findings have policy implications for postsecondary advising, including:

- **Need for integration and coordination of career advising.** The study highlights the need for a more integrated approach to career advising in schools, ensuring that career guidance is not secondary to academic or college advising. While CTE-focused schools generally maintained a dual focus on college and career advising, some CTE-focused schools and many comprehensive schools offered more structured advising for college exploration and planning than for career advising. It may be beneficial for schools to review current advising practices to identify ways to better coordinate staff and resources to more fully integrate career advising into all aspects of student support, ensuring that career guidance is as robust and comprehensive as academic and college advising.
- **Balancing exploration and commitment in student pathways.** Schools face the challenge of balancing the need for students to explore various career and academic pathways with encouraging them to commit to and progress within a structured pathway. Some schools in our study emphasized commitment to structured pathways, while others prioritized exploration and exposure without requiring strong commitments. Schools may want to develop strategies that allow students to benefit from structured pathways while maintaining the flexibility to adapt their plans as their

interests and goals evolve. Our findings align with prior research, highlighting the importance of early advising—starting in middle or even elementary school—to help students explore their interests before feeling pressured to commit to programs and pathways in high school.

- **Ensuring equitable access to comprehensive advising resources.** The study highlights the important role of advisors in connecting students to courses, pathways, and other opportunities that support students' postsecondary trajectories. Across schools, both staff and students reported that advising practices were generally consistent across student groups, with differences shaped primarily by students' academic performance, career focus, or other needs. Staff emphasized the importance of personalized advising tailored to individual needs—an approach highly valued by students. However, findings suggest that advising could be reactive, focusing on addressing immediate academic or other challenges or responding to the needs of more proactive students who sought out support. As a result, a significant portion of students, particularly those who did not actively seek out advising, may have missed out on opportunities to connect their interests with available school-based opportunities. To address this gap, schools should review and potentially revise their advising strategies to ensure more inclusive and proactive outreach, particularly for students who are less likely to actively seek out support.

---

*This research brief summarizes key findings from the working paper “The Role of High School Career-Focused Advising in Students’ Postsecondary Planning: A Qualitative Study” by Bryan C. Hutchins (UNC-Greensboro), Emma Alterman (MDRC), Cassie Wuest (MDRC), John Sludden (Research Alliance for New York City Schools, New York University), and Julie Edmunds (UNC-Greensboro). The working paper was published in October 2024 at <https://earlycollegeresearch.uncg.edu/>.*

---

**Acknowledgments:** This paper is supported by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education through Grant R305H190036 to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, MDRC, New York University, or the New York City Public Schools.