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



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**Abstract:** The goal of this study was to provide insights on the extent to which high school students receive support for college and career planning, the mechanisms through which they receive this information, and how this varies across students and settings using data from a multi-state, multi-study project focused on advising for postsecondary transitions. Conducted by a collaborative team from three organizations—MDRC, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, and University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s Early College Research Center—this study examines advising structures and practices across 17 high schools in North Carolina and New York City, representing diverse school types, including career and technical education (CTE)-focused schools as well as comprehensive schools offering CTE for elective credit. Findings indicate that advising practices were largely shaped by each school’s academic focus and staff expectations. CTE-focused schools, for example, typically were dually focused on preparing students for postsecondary education and careers through CTE programs that included structured partnerships with colleges and employers. In contrast, comprehensive schools varied in their emphasis on college and career advising and the degree to which students were expected to participate in career exploration and preparation activities. Some comprehensive schools expected or encouraged higher levels of CTE participation, whereas others offered CTE without requiring students to participate or commit to a pathway. These schools also differed in how career advising was integrated into the overall approach to postsecondary planning, with some focusing primarily on college preparation and others helping students develop career knowledge and skills as part of a broader college and workforce readiness strategy. Additionally, the study highlights the important role that advisors and other school personnel, particularly CTE teachers, play in helping students link their interests with available school-supported preparation activities and underscores the benefits of personalized, proactive advising tailored to individual student needs.

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## Introduction

Preparing students for both college and careers has been a longstanding objective for K-12 education. In recent years, the discourse on career preparation in particular has been reinforced by federal efforts to publish more data on career and technical education (CTE) students, allow for more integration of career and academic coursework, and offer additional resources for this training (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Perkins V, 2018).

Many state and local governments have followed with their own policies and programs. North Carolina, for example, has established a career coaching program to place community college staff in local high schools to help guide the development of students' career goals and pathways to achieve them (Mulhern et al., forthcoming; North Carolina General Statute § 115D-21.5). At the local level, New York City (NYC) created the nation's first P-TECH 9-14 schools designed to bridge the often-troubled transition from high school to college, creating partnerships among high schools, community colleges, and employers to prepare youth for the next step in life, whether in college or a career (Rosen et al., 2023). Within the last year, NYC Public Schools (NYCPS) has centered preparation for a career as a fundamental goal of the system, increasing attention on college and career guidance, as well as access to work-related experiences in high school (Kemple et al., 2024; Sludden et al., forthcoming).

The policy attention has been accompanied by an increasing body of research that finds students in various settings often benefit, or do not lose ground, from career-focused training in high school (e.g., Brunner et al., 2023; Dougherty, 2018; Kemple et al., 2023a; Kemple et al., 2023b). But questions remain around how schools provide specific support for college and career planning. Research into this area is relevant, as students' decisions around what path to take after high school has a significant impact on their trajectories (Kim et al., 2019), and high schools have been shown to positively influence students' decisions. Students who meet more often with high school counselors are more likely to apply to, and attend, college (Belasco, 2013). Research also indicates that students who receive career guidance as part of a career pathways program report boosts in postsecondary decision-making and preparedness, and reduced uncertainty about their occupational plans (Ahearn, 2021; Stipanovic et al., 2017; Welch et al., 2018).

Research into school advising and planning support holds particular relevance for vulnerable student populations. Research suggests that schools with more economically disadvantaged students and students from minoritized backgrounds have less access to counselors (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016), and quality advising matters more for these students (Mulhern, 2023). While all students can receive information about their future plans both in and out of school, disadvantaged students are typically more reliant on school staff than their affluent peers. They also tend to have less access to non-school networks connecting them to opportunities and information to plan for high school, postsecondary, and career choices (Ahearn, 2021; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Lareau, 2011; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018).

The extent to which students receive support for college and career planning, the mechanisms through which they receive this information, and how it varies across school and student settings and contexts, remain underexplored. To address this gap, a collaborative team from three organizations—MDRC, the Research Alliance for NYC Schools, and University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s Early College Research Center—have undertaken a multi-state, multi-study project focused on advising for postsecondary transitions. This was done under the auspices of the CTE Research Network, a federally-supported community of practice that brought together teams working on IES-funded studies of the impact of CTE.

Each of the initiatives mentioned above—North Carolina’s career coaching program, NYCPS’s P-TECH 9-14 schools and the district’s broader CTE programming—have been the focus of multi-year research studies conducted by these organizations. In this paper, we present results from a cross-study collaboration that qualitatively examined college and career advising practices in these contexts. Collectively, the findings from these settings add to our understanding of the extent to which schools offer postsecondary guidance and how preparation varies. Specifically, we address five research questions:

**RQ1: How is school-based postsecondary transition advising structured and to what extent are students getting information about connecting high school courses to higher education and careers?**

**RQ2: How does the content and structure of advising change over time?**

**RQ3: Does advising differ based on student background (e.g., academic history, gender, race/ethnicity, CTE participation)?**

**RQ4: How does school structure and culture appear to influence advising?**

**RQ5: To what extent do students report that advising influences their decision to participate in certain career-related activities?**

## Methodology

**About the Schools.** Results for this study come from qualitative site visits at 17 high schools across the three participating CTE Research Network projects. Schools were purposefully selected to represent diverse CTE programs, including those with an explicit CTE focus and those that offer CTE programming as electives within a broader academic context.

Schools with an explicit CTE focus include seven P-TECH 9-14 high schools<sup>1</sup> in NYC, two CTE-focused high schools in NYC, and one Cooperative Innovative High School (CIHS) in North Carolina. The P-TECH 9-14 schools each have a three-way partnership among a high school, community college, and employer(s). Despite slight variation, each school maintains core elements of the model: (1) partnerships with one or more employer partners and (2) offering, at the affiliated community college, one or more associate degrees in a STEM field that are tailored to the industry partner’s field and that create a pipeline of talent into specific, high-demand industries. Over a six-year scope and sequence in which students can earn both a high school diploma and applied associate degree simultaneously, students participate in CTE, work-based learning (WBL), and college classes (including college classes taken while students are in high school, or dual-enrollment courses). The two CTE-focused high schools in NYC are designed to provide all students with a CTE program of study. One school offers numerous CTE programs, largely in manufacturing and information technology, while the other offers programs of study in the health fields. The CIHS in North Carolina is an early college-like school with wall-to-wall CTE dual enrollment offerings in numerous pathways. Like the P-TECH 9-14 model, students at this CIHS participate in a CTE-focused curriculum, WBL, and college classes.

The study also includes seven schools without an explicit CTE emphasis. Six are comprehensive high schools in North Carolina offering varying levels of CTE programming. In four schools, students can choose high school and dual enrollment CTE courses and pathways as electives, subject to each school’s offering. In two schools, students can apply to career academies<sup>2</sup> within the school that offer multiple CTE pathways. In both schools, students are encouraged, but not required to, complete a pathway. Finally, this study includes one CIHS located on a community college campus where students can earn both a high school diploma and two years of college credit within four or five years. Here the emphasis is on earning an associate degree or general education credits that transfer to a four-year program. While this CIHS does not offer CTE, students can take dual enrollment CTE courses at the community college. See Table 1 for characteristics of participating schools.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Site Visit Schools**

School Type	N	Location	Locale	Mean Enrollment (Range)	Mean % FRL Eligible (Range)	Mean % Underrepresented (Range)
Comprehensive HS with CTE programming	6	NC	City (1) Rural (3) Suburban (2)	1,010 (500-1,780)	50 (30-100)	40 (20-75)

<sup>1</sup> See Rosen et al. (2023) for a more detailed description of the P-TECH 9-14 model.

<sup>2</sup> One school is organized around a single career academy offering 10 CTE pathways and the other considers each of its nine CTE pathways a separate academy.



School Type	N	Location	Locale	Mean Enrollment (Range)	Mean % FRL Eligible (Range)	Mean % Underrepresented (Range)
CTE-Focused Comprehensive HS	2	NYC	City (2)	975 (550-1,400)	80 (70-90)	65 (40-90)
P-TECH 9-14 HS	7	NYC	City (7)	520 (400-680)	80 (70-90)	95 (90-100)
Cooperative Innovative HS (1 CTE-focused; 1 non-CTE focused)	2	NC	Rural (1) City (1)	220 (170 – 270)	45 (30-60)	35 (20-50)

*Note. Demographic variables include means and ranges in parentheses. Values have been rounded to protect the confidentiality of participating schools.*

**How We Collected and Analyzed Site Visit Data.** Investigators recruited schools and conducted site visits within their existing projects. Schools in the North Carolina sample were selected from a larger study of the implementation and impact of dual enrollment across the state. This study also included a sub-study of a statewide career coaching program. Schools for the implementation study were selected to maximize variation in terms of school type (e.g., comprehensive high school, early college), location, characteristics of the student population, and dual enrollment participation. The CTE-focused high schools in NYC were selected to examine advising in contexts that differed based on school size, total student enrollment, and number and focus of CTE programming. P-TECH 9-14 schools in the sample included the first seven P-TECH schools that opened in New York City.

At each school, each team worked with a school administrator to identify key staff involved in postsecondary and career advising to take part in semi-structured interviews designed to address the five research questions. Interviewees included principals, school counselors, career advisors, career coaches, and CTE teachers, with at least one staff member interviewed per school. We intended to conduct two student focus groups at each of the 17 schools—one with students beginning their high school experience (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade) and another with students in their final two years—to gauge perceptions of advising. However, recruitment challenges limited us to conducting focus groups at only 10 schools (2 P-TECH 9-14 schools in NYC, 6 comprehensive high schools and 2 CIHSs in North Carolina). The aim was to include a diverse mix of students varying in backgrounds and postsecondary plans in each focus group, with at least half of the participants in groups nearing graduation being CTE concentrators. Table 2 provides a summary of participants by role type. To protect the anonymity of participants, we do not report participation by school type or location.

**Table 2. Interviews by Role**

	Principals	General School Counselors or Advisors	College Advisor or Liaison	Career Advisor or Liaison	Student Focus Groups
Total	7	14	9	15	18

All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Qualitative researchers from each project analyzed the data as separate teams as data sharing agreements did not permit sharing transcript data across teams. As such, the teams held meetings to discuss site visits and share summaries of findings to build a shared understanding of how each team would approach the coding and analysis of data. Each team used a shared case study tracking document, structured around each research question, to record key themes observed at each school. Using this tracking document, the teams conducted a cross-case analysis to identify overarching themes that cut across schools.

## Study Findings

### RQ1: How is school-based postsecondary transition advising structured and to what extent are students getting information about connecting high school courses to higher education and careers?

The provision of college- and career-specific guidance is resource intensive. At all schools, advising and guidance responsibilities were distributed to multiple staff. Students received information related to postsecondary opportunities and connecting high school courses to higher education and careers through various means including individual and group advising provided by counselors and other school staff members, advising through advisory and academic courses, online tools, school outreach to parents, and WBL opportunities.

**Individual Advising was Provided by Counselors at All Sites, but the Frequency and Content Varied by State, and Other Staff Often Played a Supporting Role.** School counselors played a primary role at all sites with students typically engaging in advising sessions with their counselor at least once or twice a year. State and local policies shaped the frequency and content of these sessions. In New York, for grades 6 through 12, state regulations required certified school counselors to submit an annual individual progress review (IPR) plan that reflected each student's educational progress and career plans. Informed by American School Counselor Association guidelines (ASCA), counselors were expected to discuss and track students' development, college and career aspirations and plans (NYSED, 2019). At the time of the site visits, students in North Carolina schools were not required by the state to have formal career plans in place, leaving career planning requirements up to local control. However, starting in the 2024-25 school year, all middle and high school students across the state will be required to complete and maintain a comprehensive career development plan.



As a result, schools varied in their approach to student career planning and monitoring. Some schools required students to complete career interest inventories or engage in career exploration, documenting these activities through formal and structured career plans that were monitored by advisors. In contrast, other schools encouraged similar career exploration and planning but adopted a more informal approach, incorporating these activities into advising sessions without the same level of documentation or structure. In these schools, students discussed career options informally and at a high level with teachers and advisors, particularly during course enrollment periods, but there were few expectations for students or counselors to systematically capture or document career plans and exploration activities.

All study schools used, to varying degrees, third-party online tools to facilitate and personalize the vast amount of information and applications related to college and careers. Naviance was a popular tool among our sample schools. The platform included information about colleges, a portal to contact counselors, and another through which counselors could submit students' college applications and recommendations (Mulhern, 2021). A counselor at a CTE-focused school in NYC described its use saying,

*That career plan, it's two-fold. [Students] complete their career interest and what they want to do in Naviance...They're answering that question as to where they would like to go, or what interest they have...And they can do research of schools in Naviance, too.*

This research done in Naviance could tell students, for example, about the rates of college acceptance at schools of interest for students with similar profiles. In some schools, technology was integrated into counselors-student meetings (or advisory periods which is discussed next), with staff expected to use the available tools and features. In other schools, the technology was provided as a resource, but its use was neither required nor monitored by advising staff.

During advising sessions, students also discussed course selection in relation to their future career and educational goals. Counselors encouraged students to consider the pathway options provided by their school, and accommodated students who changed their minds, but often the focus was on making sure graduation requirements were met. Moreover, interviewees noted that, despite efforts to provide guidance, some course selection was driven by student choice, which did not always align with structured career pathways or counselor advice. One counselor at a comprehensive high school shared,

*We do sit down while they're choosing their classes, we sit down one on one, so that's a time we're meeting with every single student. And then to have that one-on-one conversation of really trying to figure out, okay, so what is your plan? And then how can we get you in the classes that align with it? But they do have the ultimate choice, I guess, at the end of the day of what they want to take.*

The time required to help students schedule their courses meant that counselors often had less time to support longer-term future planning. Also, in most schools, counselors reported how

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other forms of advising such as academic or social and emotional advising left less time for college and career advising support as one NYC counselor, who also filled the role of the high school's college advisor, described,

*...as a guidance counselor, I need to see my mandated students. You know the students that have mandated counseling in their IEPs [individualized education plan] ...I have transcript reviews to do. I'm part of the attendance team, so I need to contact students and parents. I have planning interviews to do for students who are dropping out of high school. I have crisis students. I have kids who are going through things, who need me just as a shoulder. It's never ending.*

To address the demands on school counselors' time, some schools assigned academic or course-related advising to some counselors while other advisors focused on college and career planning. Some schools further supplemented these efforts with summer "bridge" counselors to provide students with college-related support outside of school time. Several schools had dedicated staff who focused more on career advising and program support including career counselors, career development coordinators, career coaches, and WBL coordinators.

Many NYC P-TECH 9-14 schools took this specialization even further by creating multiple staff roles responsible for constituent parts of the planning process, with some establishing dedicated college and career offices. Across P-TECH 9-14 schools, guidance roles were separated into specialized foci, from academic counselors responsible for assigning courses and monitoring attendance and progress to college- or postsecondary-specific counselors who assist students with enrolling in early college courses and postsecondary planning to social workers and parent coordinators.

**Students Typically Received Planning Advice in Advisory and Academic Courses, with CTE Providing a Pathway to Career Advice.** In most schools, students received information about connecting high school courses to postsecondary opportunities, but the structure and timing of college and career planning opportunities differed by site. Many schools in both states provided dedicated class time to future planning either through homeroom or "advisory" periods—a full, regularly-occurring class period led by a teacher—on topics related to socio-emotional skills, postsecondary planning, and employability skills development. For example, in one CTE-focused school in NYC, postsecondary planning was provided for all students in grades 9-11 for one period per day, and every other day for students in grade 12. Several schools used homeroom or advisory periods for structured career and college advising with counselors providing postsecondary planning materials to advisory teachers, while in others, postsecondary advising was less structured or more focused on general academic guidance, tutoring or study time, or assisting students with registration or other logistical issues.

Students may have also received information about connecting high school courses to postsecondary planning as part of their regular academic coursework, though this varied depending on the high school model. In CTE schools in both North Carolina and NYC, CTE

subject instructors often provided formal and informal career-related advice to students about specific fields. In fact, in high schools that offered both CTE and non-CTE pathways, being enrolled in a CTE pathway may have provided more opportunities for students to receive focused advising on connecting their courses and careers; for example, New York regulations required formalized career plans as part of completion of CTE pathways.

In North Carolina, staff and students often reported exposure to CTE and dual enrollment courses as a tool to see connections between coursework and future career paths and noted that students in CTE pathways often received more targeted advice on course selection aligned with specific careers. Two schools operated career academies where students could focus their course selection based on their career interests, often leading to industry credentials or associate degrees. One school (the career-focused CIHS in North Carolina) required students to take a career management course designed to promote career awareness and exploration.

Students described how the quality and depth of advising on course-career connections varied, sometimes depending on the initiative of the student or the advisor's familiarity with a specific career field. For example, one student who was not interested in pursuing their school's CTE pathway described the advising they received saying,

*Some of the counselors and teachers don't really have certain hands-on experience. They have the knowledge, but they don't have the hands-on experience in the certain career fields and some of my certain interests. To me, I prioritize [school advising] but I prioritize more the more hands-on experience [outside of school] than just the knowledge factor.*

Some students also received support focused specifically on expectations for college courses. For example, NYC P-TECH 9-14 students reported that their teachers intentionally incorporated preparation for their dual enrollment courses into their high school classes (e.g., giving examples of what college coursework would look like, types of assignments to expect). One student described this preparation as, “[My teachers] know what professors will be like, what the work is, how hard it will be. In English, [my teacher] gives a lot of examples about colleges. For example, he says that essays in college will be harder and longer.”

**School Staff Reported Challenges with Parent Outreach.** A consistent challenge across sites related to outreach to parents. One P-TECH 9-14 counselor described the role of families as, “Parents are viewed as partners in the work with their child, getting everybody onboard...knowing that...they're going to be starting college classes, this is what it's going to look like...The partnership there is usually the key.” At the same time, though, counselors often had to balance students' interest and personal goals with parental expectations for their child's postsecondary plans. To help bridge these gaps, schools in our sample provided frequent communication on postsecondary planning. These included events like college and career fairs, workshops for parents to learn more about the college processes and expectations, and schoolwide communication through daily announcements, newsletters, and emails.

**Work-Based Learning (WBL) Opportunities Offer Another Outlet for Information, but Opportunities Varied.** Staff often mentioned WBL as an important opportunity for students to connect their coursework with careers. All schools in this study offered some form of WBL, such as job shadowing, internships, or apprenticeships, both within and outside of CTE, but schools differed in their offerings and expectations for student participation. For example, CTE-focused schools placed greater emphasis on WBL through advising and coursework (e.g., in at least one P-TECH 9-14 school, students were required to take a WBL class), but in comprehensive schools WBL was one among many elective options and there were fewer expectations that students participate. Also, in some comprehensive schools, staff and students described their WBL as less structured or integrated into a dual enrollment or high school CTE pathway. For example, while some schools had established internship opportunities through existing local partnerships that tied to CTE pathways, students and staff at other schools described how students who were interested in internships often had to make their own connections with local employers to set up an internship that did not always connect directly with a CTE pathway. However, staff at several schools across both states reported that COVID-19 negatively impacted WBL programs and that efforts were underway to rebuild relationships with local WBL partners.

## RQ2: How does the content and structure of advising change over time?

**College and Career Advising Progressed from Broad Exposure in Earlier Grades to More Narrow Planning in Later Grades.** Regardless of the medium through which students received postsecondary information and guidance, college and career advising typically progressed from broad exposure and exploration in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade to more focused planning in later grades. In comprehensive high schools, early advising focused on introducing students to the high school environment, meeting graduation requirements, overviewing elective options, and exploring goals and interests, with less explicit focus on college and career advising. In CTE-focused schools, more emphasis was placed on introducing students to specialized courses and other opportunities earlier. For example, in NYC schools, some students were provided opportunities to engage in introductory early college courses or WBL (e.g., job site visits or career fairs). One student described their introduction to early college courses as building college readiness saying, “Each grade, they give you more and more steps in the water. Each year they show you more and more how it will be like college.” Typically, counselors would take subject-specific class time in the early grades to provide orientation about postsecondary planning and expectations. Some students, particularly at comprehensive high schools expressed a desire for greater focus in the earlier grades on post-high school plans to inform their academic decisions as a senior at one school discussed,

*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,*

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*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.*

Beginning in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, advising shifted focus to more intensive postsecondary planning, with increased support for students navigating the logistics of the postsecondary transition. One P-TECH 9-14 student described this transition as,

*The importance of making sure that we're doing our best to get everything together and to really get used to our college life or our professional life is more emphasized now because we're closer to graduation, closer to being out in the real world on our own.*

At the same time, students were encouraged to take more initiative in these efforts as they approached 12<sup>th</sup> grade, reflecting the need for independence as they transitioned to postsecondary environments. For example, a student at a P-TECH 9-14 school reflected, "Once you get to college, the professors aren't going to help you." In the North Carolina schools, there was more focus in later grades on advising around specialized course selection (e.g., CTE, dual enrollment) to meet pathway requirements, as well as on students developing postsecondary goals, college applications, financial aid, and career planning. In NYC, students across P-TECH 9-14 and CTE high schools began to narrow in on their options to discuss specific college plans and logistics. For P-TECH 9-14 students specifically, juniors and seniors began to decide whether to continue with the P-TECH program in years 13 and 14 to earn the associate degree associated with their pathway, transfer to a two- or four-year college, or enter the workforce.

### **RQ3: Does advising differ based on student background (e.g., academic history, gender, race/ethnicity, CTE participation)?**

Across schools, staff and students reported that advising practices were generally consistent across groups of students, but that when advising did differ it was primarily shaped by students' academic performance, career focus, and special education needs.

**Individual Advising was Based on Students' Interests, Goals, and Plans.** A typical theme among staff was the goal of individualizing advising based students' interests, goals, and postsecondary plans, while also considering personal challenges and hardship. Although each school's academic focus varied, advisors commonly described their approach as focused on meeting students' needs and interests. Students often picked up on these efforts, as a student at a comprehensive high school said,

*Since my dad doesn't really make much, I come from a poor family, a lot of times when I get college suggestions, or stuff like that, they [advisors] really focus on more affordable colleges or scholarships. And, of course, what ones can I get? Which ones would I be able to qualify for?*

Staff and students described how advisors tried to meet students where they were and students generally felt that their plans, aspirations, and needs were valued. For example, a

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student at a comprehensive high school observed, “It's not like they [advisors] go to each student, and they say the same thing over and over again. They definitely look at who you are and everything and advise you [in] different ways.” Staff and students typically reported that counselors were always willing to meet with students, but it was usually more proactive students who were more comfortable seeking out counselors or students with more visible needs who received additional one-on-one support outside of regular advising meetings as a counselor at a comprehensive high school reflected,

*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.*

**How Students' Academic History, Special Needs, and Background Factored into Advising.** Students who struggled academically or had special needs often received more attention from advising staff who focused more on addressing their academic challenges than on college or career advising. For example, low-performing students at the career-focused CIHS received extra counseling sessions to ensure that they met the CTE dual enrollment pathway GPA requirements as students could not participate in a pathway without meeting minimum requirements. Staff also frequently reported differentiating advising for students with disabilities and English Learners (ELs) to meet their specific needs. For example, advisors collaborated with case managers for students with disabilities to ensure that they received appropriate academic advising for specialized courses of study or with English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and support staff to ensure that ELs had needed supports in place.

A counselor at a comprehensive high school reported, “I think I spend more time during the school year with our at-risk students...and [I] meet with them more regularly once or twice a month, pull them in [and ask], ‘How is your class going?’” Some students discussed how students who may not need academic support sometimes feel overlooked as one student at a comprehensive high school expressed,

*I feel like if you came up being a well-behaved, no behavioral issues, no grade issue, I do feel like they're [advisors] less worried about us, because they kind of know that we can do it on our own, when sometimes, we still need just as much help. But I think they definitely do kind of judge if you're more capable, you should have less help, maybe.*

Generally, staff and students reported that advising was not explicitly differentiated by gender, race, or ethnicity. For example, principals at two P-TECH 9-14 schools described their schools as majority Black male schools, which limited the scope for variation in advising based on race and gender. However, in some schools, staff noted the availability of additional programs designed to meet the needs of underrepresented groups. For example, a comprehensive high school with a large Latinx population partnered with a local university to support Latinx students through college nights, scholarship preparation, and mock interviews. At a NYC CTE high school with



large population of students from non-English speaking families, the school counseling staff organizes community events to provide these families with information about college applications and financial aid. In addition, a counselor at the career-focused CIHS described how the school had an explicit focus on encouraging female students to take part in guest speaker or other events that promoted non-traditional careers in areas such as construction and architecture.

### **How Participation in CTE Did and Did Not Affect College and Career Planning.**

Differences in advising based on CTE participation varied by school model and focus. For example, in the P-TECH 9-14 schools all students were expected to participate in CTE (though not all did), and in two of the three CTE-focused schools (one in NYC and one CIHS in North Carolina) not all students participated in CTE, but most did and were advised accordingly. Much of the reporting on CTE advising differentiation came from the comprehensive schools in North Carolina where CTE was an elective, resulting in greater variation in participation compared to the CTE-focused schools. According to staff and students, advising structures were generally similar regardless of CTE participation. Students who were interested in CTE typically met with the same school counselors responsible for general course planning and enrollment. One reason for this is that many students in the comprehensive schools end up taking at least one CTE course which did not require specialized advising, at least initially. As a counselor at a comprehensive high school said,

*So, we try to put all of our students in CTE classes and let them be concentrators. That's our goal. Not every student does, but CTE classes are really elective options. So, almost all of our students will take a CTE pathway. I don't feel it [advising] differs a whole lot.*

However, for students who ended up participating more intensively in CTE, staff and students at some schools described additional advising opportunities through CTE including contact with CTE teachers and career-focused advisors, who were available at most schools. CTE teachers were frequently mentioned as important sources of information and guidance based on their personal career experiences and insights and their ability to help connect students to local workforce opportunities. As a career advisor at one comprehensive high school shared,

*I think that as far as our CTE classes go, a lot of those teachers have a pretty big influence on the students, because a lot of the kids that are taking those classes want a trade. And so, as they're working with them, those teachers are sharing. Because most of those teachers have experience in the world with that area. So, they share those experiences, how they work in that field or have worked in that field.*

Students taking CTE classes noted the credibility of CTE teachers, attributing it to their industry connections and ability to share their real-world experiences. CTE teachers were also seen as ambassadors for their programs, playing a role outside of teaching CTE courses, as explained by a student at a comprehensive high school,

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*I would say that we get the most advising for CTE from the CTE teachers themselves. Because at the end of the year, teachers will come talk to the whole grade level, maybe, about registration. And so CTE classes, the teachers for those typically need to tell you about the course itself because it's really specific.*

Most schools in the North Carolina sample had a career advisor who met with students primarily through general school-wide CTE recruitment activities or small group information sessions. Students who went on to participate in CTE typically had more regular contact with these advisors either through one-on-one advising or by participating in WBL as these advisors typically coordinated WBL or other career-focused events. However, most students, including those taking CTE courses, reported that they were primarily advised by a general or grade-level advisor.

Although advising structures were generally similar across schools, the content of advising tended to differ for CTE students, particularly CTE concentrators who were more work-oriented, as advising focused on helping these students acquire skills and credentials or making connections with local job opportunities, while non-CTE students received guidance aimed at preparing for college, with an advising focus on advanced course taking.

Finally, student focus groups revealed that CTE advising, particularly around coursework, emphasized aligning courses with students' interests, in contrast to general curriculum advising, which tended to focus on meeting graduation requirements. A student from a comprehensive high school explained the difference saying, "I would say CTE courses are like, 'do what interests you.' But other courses like our core classes are like, 'you have to have this to graduate.'"

#### **RQ4: How does school structure and culture appear to influence advising?**

In general, study schools broadly used similar advising structures, activities, and mechanisms (e.g., multiple advising staff, advising through advisory periods or other courses, use of online tools, etc.). However, the school's focus—whether a CTE-focused or comprehensive high school—along with factors like school size and staff expectations for students, led to differences in how these advising structures were used. For instance, CTE-focused schools explicitly connected career planning to college planning, emphasized career readiness, and promoted employability skills development more heavily, integrating hands-on learning opportunities throughout the curriculum and advising practices. Conversely, comprehensive high schools tended to prioritize academic achievement and college preparation, focusing advising efforts on helping students meet graduation requirements or plan for college rather than making connections between careers and college. In the remainder of this section, we highlight themes on how school structures and culture impacted advising practices.

**The Type of CTE High School Influenced Advising.** In general, CTE-focused schools had a dual focus on career and college advising and heavily invested in specialized staff for both

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college and career supports (e.g., academic counselors, college and career counselors, WBL coordinators). These schools typically used advisory periods for career and college exploration and used online tools to guide career and course planning. They also offered events like summer bridge programs, college fairs, career days, and WBL that provided hands-on experiences and real world-exposure. By design, these career-oriented opportunities were typically aligned with available CTE pathways at each school. In contrast, while the comprehensive high schools did employ various advisors, advising roles tended to be less specialized, often blending general academic advising with college and career advising. Also, while students were encouraged to participate in various pathway offerings (e.g., CTE, dual enrollment) the advising focus in many of the comprehensive schools was to ensure that students met minimum high school graduation requirements and as a result there was less emphasis on students participating in or committing to any elective pathways, including CTE. For example, in the two comprehensive high schools that offered career academies, staff reported a desire for students to complete a CTE pathway, but students could easily switch pathways or withdraw from the academies.

Additionally, while comprehensive high schools also offered advisory or homeroom periods, these periods were inconsistently used for college or career advising. The integration of online tools to support postsecondary advising varied, with some schools actively integrating these tools into advising more so than others. Activities such as college and career fairs were also offered in comprehensive schools, but these activities were often standalone in that they were not always integrated into the curriculum or aligned to specific pathway opportunities. Furthermore, while all comprehensive schools offered WBL, the quality and structure differed widely between schools.

A key distinction in advising practices between the two types of schools was the role of CTE as an organizing force. Generally, the CTE-focused schools offered a more focused curriculum and structured external partnerships to support pathways. This focus led to greater alignment of advising structures, helping students progress through their pathways. Comprehensive high schools on the other hand, are designed to provide a wider range of opportunities to students both within and outside of CTE. As such, advising at comprehensive high schools tended to be more generalized, with a broader emphasis on exploring various academic and career options, rather than guiding students along a specific pathway.

**The Impact of Postsecondary Expectations on Advising.** Regardless of model or focus, most schools had a culture that emphasized the need for students to have a plan for their futures. This perspective was captured by an advisor at a comprehensive high school who said,

*We just expect every student to have a plan for after high school, and that plan varies whether it's going into the workforce, going into the military, going into postsecondary education. Ultimately the plan is a career, so we try to do a career development plan and*

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*work backwards from that. They [students] set the plan for the career and then we try to help them make a goal to reach that dream of the career.*

Although staff typically emphasized the importance of every student having a plan, the postsecondary expectations that staff held shaped how schools advised students in several ways. For example, some schools had a strong college-for-all ethos, with expectations for students to continue their education after high school. In some schools, the emphasis was on four-year college. The most direct example was the non-career focused CIHS, where students were expected to earn college credit through dual enrollment, either to complete an associate degree during or after high school or to earn general education credits toward a bachelor's degree. While students appreciated the quality of college and career advising, including the level of personalization, some students felt that the prescribed curriculum limited opportunities to explore different classes, including CTE, as one student shared,

*My conception going into [non-career CIHS] was like, 'Oh, all of us are going to have different courses because we're going to all go into different career fields.' But now that I realize, in my fourth year, all of us mostly had the same classes. We all have the general ed and that also with most of us for our college credits, took the same college classes even though we had kind of a say in it, but we also didn't.*

Similarly, students and staff at several comprehensive schools in North Carolina reported that the school culture emphasized college, which was reflected in student comments such as, "If you talk to a counselor, the first thing they bring up is going to a four-year university. They make that important" or "I think it's a very high expectation that you go to a four-year university." This emphasis was also found in some CTE-focused high schools. For example, two CTE-dedicated high schools in NYC expected students to apply to at least one four-year college, regardless of their plans to attend. A counselor at one school noted that the expectation orients outreach for students during their senior year. Counselors monitored Naviance and received reports from the local community college system to see which students had not yet applied to college. For students who had not applied by the mid-year, the counselors nudge students and organize afterschool events where they could complete their application.

Finally, while not an emphasis on four-year college, administrators at some P-TECH 9-14 schools had an expectation that students would stick with the program for the full six years, graduate with a high school diploma and associate degree in the related CTE field, and participate in WBL, making postsecondary education achievement an explicit expectation and an important part of the advising process. However, some schools placed greater emphasis on career preparation, viewing college as a pathway if it aligned with students' career goals. For example, at some P-TECH 9-14 schools, school leaders recognized that some students may not have a strong interest in the available pathways, resulting in less emphasis being placed on students completing the six-year program. However, staff at these schools expected students to do

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“something” after high school, focusing advising not on specific pathways but on ensuring that students graduated with strong employability skills and a dedicated plan for their future.

In at least two of the P-TECH 9-14 schools, students themselves reported that the school’s expectations for their postsecondary plans were highly individualized and may not have aligned with the school’s CTE pathway. In these schools, there was more emphasis on students pursuing their own interests, which could result in some teachers or other staff not having the specific knowledge or experience to provide more hands-on support or give specific advice to these students. Similarly, at the career-focused CIHS, while students chose a CTE dual enrollment pathway in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and were only allowed one opportunity to change pathways, it was not expected that all or most students would complete the associate degree by staying a 5<sup>th</sup> year. However, students were expected to take part in career-focused curriculum and advising that gave them the employability skills to prepare for both postsecondary work and educational opportunities as described by an advisor,

*It's 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.*

Finally, at some schools, particularly comprehensive schools, staff were more focused on helping students explore various opportunities rather than steering them toward specific postsecondary paths as an advisor at one comprehensive school shared, “I don't think there's one expectation that we would have for students, other than for them to feel prepared for what they choose to do.” A student at this same school echoed this sentiment, saying,

*I just wanted to say that my favorite part about the advisors is I've never felt pushed towards a certain thing as far as trade school, college or just working after school. They've all laid out their points and been like, 'This could all be good for you if this is what you want to do.'*

In summary, while some schools promoted a culture of exploration and flexibility, allowing students to explore interests and pathways without strong commitment, other schools placed greater emphasis on advising that guided students toward commitment to available pathways. Some of this push was guided by the school model, with staff at schools with more prescriptive models (i.e., CTE-focused schools, non-career focused CIHS) expecting students to complete available pathways and related activities, with advisors focused on ensuring that students’ plans aligned with the school’s structured programs. However, some of the push came from the postsecondary expectations of staff, which did not always align to the school model. While examples of advising that promoted exploration and commitment could be found within and across schools, a key takeaway from our interviews and focus groups was that in general the comprehensive high schools had to cater to a range of student interests and plans, and while

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advisors could encourage participation in certain courses and activities, students ultimately decided which paths to pursue and their level of commitment to those paths.

### **How School Size Affected Relationship Building and Shared Responsibility for Advising.**

Smaller schools generally made it easier for staff and students to form relationships that created robust networks of support, as shared by a student at the career-focused CIHS with fewer than 200 students,

*Everyone knows everyone basically. I really enjoy the staff here because you feel like you're cared for. They notice if something's wrong, if you're happy about something, they always ask you how's your morning, if you have a game...I have a friend that wrestles and they constantly ask him how he did. So we're like a family almost. They make sure you're okay.*

We also saw examples of staff at larger schools trying to foster closer connections with students. For example, one larger comprehensive school kept students with the same homeroom teacher for all four years to help build relationships. However, staff and students at smaller schools often acknowledged how such environments provided a natural advantage that supported more personalized advising as an advisor at a smaller comprehensive school discussed,

*I think the benefit of the small school is we can have those one-on-one conversations with our students, and we can meet with them multiple times a year if we need to. Once we build that relationship, they feel comfortable coming to us about anything. If it's a change of thought of career or if they may be struggling in a class. So, I do think it's a great benefit that we are at a small school that we're able to get to know each and every student on a personal level. And we'll be able to meet with them about their postsecondary options and so forth.*

These more frequent and personalized interactions allowed advisors to proactively identify and address student needs rather than react to problems. Additionally, building these stronger and more trusting relationships often led to more holistic advising, focused on overall student well-being rather than just transactional tasks like completing paperwork.

School size could also play a role in how staff collaborated with one another to support students, with staff at smaller schools emphasizing a sense of collective responsibility among administrators, teachers, and advisors, but even in larger schools staff discussed building a staff-wide commitment to a college and career advising culture. For example, a counselor at a large, CTE-focused school in NYC shared,

*[Advising] is not just held in guidance...Many school cultures are that it only comes from guidance. That's not the culture we try to put forth here. We try to say it's really a multi-tier approach like the staff, the teachers - not just the shop teachers, but all the other teachers - are very much in that culture.*



Although staff at both large and small schools reported that various staff within and outside of the advising department played a role in advising, the smaller schools tended to foster a sense of collective responsibility and provided several advantages to advising efforts. One advantage was that the close-knit environment meant that students were less likely to slip through the cracks and go unnoticed in terms of advising needs and overall well-being. A second advantage was that smaller schools often facilitated better staff communication, ensuring more coordinated advising as illustrated by an advisor at the non-career focused CIHS who said, “It is a consistent message they [students] get from the whole school. It's not just that counselor lady. She's trying to make me do this. It's like it's from everyone.” The need for coherence in advising was particularly important given that most schools had several adults with potentially overlapping advising responsibilities. A third advantage was that advisors in small schools could rely on informal networks and structures to support students, whereas larger schools had to rely on more formal structures to address staffing limitations to maximize advising opportunities for students. For example, in the largest comprehensive high school, advisors who were overextended shared advising materials with teachers who took on a more formal role of advising students during an advisory period. As a result, students in this school reported a greater reliance on their advisory teachers for postsecondary advising and planning and limited interactions with counselors.

### **RQ5: To what extent do students report that advising influences their decision to participate in certain career-related activities?**

Students reported varying beliefs<sup>3</sup> about the extent to which school-based advising influenced their participation in career-related activities and their plans for the future. Advisors raised awareness about opportunities, provided information, and helped address logistical issues. However, students commonly reported that advising helped them implement their already existing plans through course selection and scheduling, rather than shape their decisions. Advising was more impactful when personalized, aligned with students’ interests and goals, and came from relationship-driven interactions rather than impersonal methods like presentations or announcements. Advising was viewed as less effective when advisors lacked specific knowledge or personal experience in careers students were interested in. Below, we expand on some of the themes that emerged from student focus groups.

**Advisors as Information Facilitators.** Advisors were often described as facilitators who helped students make connections between their interests and available courses, programs, and postsecondary opportunities more so than as direct influencers as a student at a comprehensive high school explained,

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<sup>3</sup> Due to school recruitment challenges noted earlier, our reporting here is based only on student focus groups conducted at the eight North Carolina schools and two of the seven P-TECH 9-14 schools in NYC but does not include students attending the two CTE-focused comprehensive schools in NYC.

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*I think first and foremost, really 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.*

Students, particularly younger students, mentioned how advising expanded their awareness of opportunities such as CTE, dual enrollment, and WBL. This awareness building was especially important in comprehensive high schools where students might not be aware of the range of available elective opportunities without advising. Older students, on the other hand, often credited advisors with helping them translate their interests and ambitions into actionable plans, primarily through course selection, scheduling, and ensuring that program requirements were met. As a student at a comprehensive high school said, "We can tell them [counselors] what we want to do for our career, and they can help persuade on which classes to take to provide us the best benefits from those classes to use in the long run." Older students also described how advisors helped students identify postsecondary opportunities that aligned with their needs as a student at the career-focused CIHS discussed,

*The college advising helped me find colleges that have a specific thing that I do want to do. And it's hard because there's only two colleges in the state that offer what I want to do. And there's one out of state that I'm willing to go to. But other than that, it's really helped me find what school I want to go to after high school.*

Some students discussed how advisors were helpful when students were unsure of what they wanted to do as a student at a comprehensive high school reported,

*When I first started coming to high school, she's [counselor] like, 'Hey, what would you like to do?' And I had literally no idea. And now, when she put me in my hypothetical freshman course years, it led me into a pathway. Now I'm in my 10th grade year. So now thanks to her, she and her eagerness, help push through and get us into the classes that we want to be in. She gives us these open options of the mixture of things. And she's like, 'Hey, here's this.' And when I came to my, [dual enrollment] courses, she's like, 'How about you take this course instead of this, they can go to your four-year college.' And all in all, it works out.*

However, other students said that advising was most helpful when students knew what they wanted to do and proactively sought support, as a student at a comprehensive high school shared,

*I feel like, if you know what you want to do, it's easier to have a good advisor, but when you don't, [I'm] not necessarily saying they don't help you figure it out. It's more so like you have to know what you want to do and come to them for them to help you.*

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**Advising Influences Coursework Selection, Coursework Influences Plans.** Many students reported that the coursework itself influenced their plans more so than advisors, but some acknowledged the role of advisors in connecting them with specific opportunities such as CTE or dual enrollment as a student at a comprehensive high school noted, “I came into high school not knowing what I was doing after high school. Then [counselor] mentioned the welding classes to me so I ended up getting into that and now that's what I want to do.” Several students described how their participation in various CTE pathways such as welding, agriculture, and health sciences as well as dual enrollment courses was the direct result of advising from counselors and teachers as a student at a comprehensive high school emphasized, “If I didn't have a guidance counselor, I probably wouldn't be in as many college classes or try to take as many.”

Regardless of how students entered courses and pathways, the coursework itself was often cited as an important influence in shaping their interests and future plans. For some, coursework solidified academic and career goals, as expressed by two students at different comprehensive high schools. One student said the courses were helping them shape their postsecondary plans saying, “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.” A student in a different school highlighted how the CTE courses were helping them move toward their desired career explaining,

*I don't know about y'all, but our CTE courses, especially mine, I took interior design and that was really what made me love it as well as we have carpentry here and stuff like that, which is a really good start for the profession that I'll be going into. So those really help me.*

For others, coursework or other activities promoted exploration and in some cases redirection away from initial interests, as a student at a non-CTE focused CIHS shared, “I was job shadowing at a vet's office, and I decided that I didn't like it but that was good information.” In general, students most valued courses that were hands-on or had real-world applications to careers of interest, as well as dual enrollment courses that provided exposure to postsecondary education opportunities. Thus, while advising helped direct students to specific courses or other opportunities, students often reflected on the content and experiences within these courses or programs as affirming, redirecting, or otherwise pushing students to clarify their goals and interests.

**Importance of Personalized Advising for Students.** Students reported that advising was most helpful and influential when it was personalized and came from advisors who knew them and understood their needs. This advising often came through informal interactions as a student at a comprehensive high school shared, “I'd say that the more you're getting informal advising, just talking to your teachers one-on-one rather than the guidance counselors making a

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presentation, I feel like the more informal is more helpful for me [than] the broad school-wide stuff.”

Students also valued not being pressured in any direction as a student at a comprehensive high school explained, “I find it most helpful usually when I'm just presented the base facts and I'm able to come to my own conclusion.” While most students reported that advisors valued their aspirations and plans, some felt that certain advisors’ expectation for college were off-putting for students who were less interested in attending. As a result, these students were less inclined to seek out advisors for support. Relatedly, some students discussed how advising was more influential when students had personal relationships with advisors as one student at a comprehensive high school shared,

*I think it can really all just depend on the relationships you have, because not that the counselors need to make a relationship with every single student at the school... It's going to be impossible to do that, but it's just easier [seeking advice] when you have a stronger relationship with people, you're more acquainted with, like your family and friends.*

One aspect of personalization highlighted by some students was the importance of talking to someone who had relevant personal experiences. Students reported seeking out counselors or teachers who went to the same college of interest, majored in their area of interest, or had a background in a similar career or industry that they were considering. One student at a comprehensive school expressed,

*Advising is really important, or it's really helpful especially if you can find someone that has done what you want to do with your future as far as like if a certain teacher went to the college you want to go to or have that degree or went to that trade school, it's just nice to be able to talk to that person and have that available.*

**Students Found Advising Was Typically More Effective for College Over Career Decisions.** Students across schools often talked about the structured supports that they received related to college advising, such as help with identifying college programs, understanding applications, financial aid, and making course selections to meet college requirements. This indicated a strong institutional focus on preparing students for college. On the career advising side, when students discussed career advising that was most helpful it often came from informal sources within the school, or through independent research as a student at the non-CTE focused CIHS shared,

*I've kind of felt a little bit on my own about this because my career is kind of... I don't know. I have an alternative career path from everyone that I've talked to about this and I don't know. Any time I've told our advisors or said things, they're like, 'Oh, that's interesting.' I've kind of just had to go out on my own and find people that are interested in the same things as me. But the teachers still are supportive.*

Some students reported that many advisors were more knowledgeable about college than careers or advisors lacked the depth of career knowledge that students were seeking. As such, some students reported turning to other staff, particularly CTE teachers, who were influential not only in sharing feedback about their fields but also in helping students connect with local job or WBL opportunities as a student at a comprehensive high school said,

*The counselors help with deciding which classes you should take based on what you're interested in. But when it comes to finding careers in the field, or getting internships, or finding possibilities to go and talk to someone and just job shadow or anything like that, the teachers really help more in that.*

Several students reported turning to sources outside of school for career advising, such as parents, older siblings, friends, or community members, particularly when they felt that school advisors lacked first-hand knowledge of the experiences of those in certain industries as a student at the non-career focused CIHS said, “I think the most helpful is talking to people who have done what I want to do and asking them for their advice.” Additionally, some students reported that external sources, particularly family members, were more influential because they were more “trustworthy” and “honest” and could provide more than informational support by helping student explore whether a career or other opportunity was a good fit. This sentiment was highlighted by a student at a comprehensive high school who noted,

*I feel like if you go to a counselor, they don't know you as personal, so they can't really stand there and say, 'Hey, you shouldn't do that.' And they're not going to do that, because they're supposed to be supportive, but your family and your friends can kind of help tell you what you need to do and what you're capable of.*

## Discussion

Our findings indicate that advising structures were largely shaped by the academic focus and expectations of staff at each school. P-TECH 9-14 schools, for example, were dually focused on preparing students for postsecondary education and careers through CTE programming, providing students with robust career pathways through structured partnerships with colleges and employers. In contrast, the comprehensive high schools varied in the degree to which they emphasized college and careers in advising as well as their expectations for students to participate in career exploration and preparation activities. While all comprehensive high schools in this study offered CTE, emphasis and expectations around participation and pathway completion varied. These schools also differed in how career advising was integrated into their overall approach to postsecondary planning, with some focusing primarily on college preparation. In the remainder of this discussion, we highlight key findings and discuss their implications for future researchers and practitioners.

**Advisors More Focused on Academic or College Advising over Career Advising.** Our interviews highlight a known issue in the counseling community—that school counselors wear

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many hats and have competing responsibilities that can distract from advising on postsecondary transitions. Across schools, but particularly in the comprehensive high schools, general school counselors tended to focus more on academic or college advising than career advising. For example, advisors in several comprehensive high schools reported a greater concern in ensuring that students graduated from high school and that postsecondary advising was an important but secondary goal. Our interviews and focus groups suggest that when postsecondary advising did occur, the focus tended toward college over career advising and that college advising tended to be more structured and comprehensive than career advising. In fact, some students at comprehensive high schools reported that sources of information outside of school were more helpful and informative when the needed information was career related. Our findings highlight a continued need to make career advising an integral part of academic and college advising.

**Expansion of Advising Teams and Importance of Coordination.** Study schools typically had in place layers of staff (e.g., college/career advisors, WBL coordinators, bridge coaches, etc.) and structures to support college and career advising (e.g., college and career advising offices separate from general advising offices). These additional supports provided students with more tailored and comprehensive guidance, helping them navigate their postsecondary options. School counselors, in turn, benefitted from the ability to share responsibilities and focus more deeply on specific areas of advising, in an effort to enhance the overall quality of support provided to students. More research is needed to explore how schools with multiple staff members serving in advising roles coordinate their efforts to identify best practices and potential gaps, ensuring that students receive comprehensive guidance throughout their high school experience. One concern is that some students may not engage with certain advisors unless they are involved in specific programs (e.g., CTE, WBL, or dual enrollment) or initiate contact with advisors. It is important that schools are proactive in outreach efforts to ensure that all students have equitable access to the full spectrum of advising resources, regardless of their pathway participation or individual initiative. While students participating in specific programs may receive more targeted advising, it is still important that all students have some level of contact with these specialized advisors to ensure that they are informed about available opportunities, resources, and supports.

**CTE Instructors Play an Important Role in Career Advising.** CTE teachers play an important role, both formally and informally, in advising and connecting students to workforce opportunities. An important factor in their effectiveness is their perceived credibility. Unlike counselors, CTE teachers could speak to certain careers and industries from personal experience. Some students had more direct and sustained contact with CTE teachers by taking their courses, while others had more limited interactions through information sessions or awareness activities about CTE opportunities. Given the role that CTE teachers play as advisors, schools should consider ways to expand professional development opportunities to these teachers, particularly those that enhance their advising skills. Also, schools should identify



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strategies to increase students' exposure to CTE teachers through career awareness and exploration activities such as workshops, career fairs, and informational sessions, ensuring more students benefit from their expertise and industry connections. Finally, schools should strengthen collaborations between CTE teachers and other advisors to create a more cohesive and comprehensive career advising structure for students.

**Exploration Versus Commitment: Finding the Right Balance.** One theme to emerge from this study was how advisors find a balance between providing students with the resources, supports, and space to explore various pathway opportunities while also encouraging them to complete (or make meaningful progress in) a pathway provided by the school. For example, in some P-TECH 9-14 schools, staff expected students to complete an available six-year pathway culminating in an earned associate degree. In other P-TECH 9-14 schools as well as the CTE-focused CIHS, staff recognized that available pathways did not always align with students' interests and instead prioritized helping them develop postsecondary plans and flexible employability skills suited for a variety of environments. Similarly, because CTE pathways in the comprehensive high schools were electives, students were encouraged to complete pathways, but most schools prioritized exploration over pathway completion.

On the one hand, allowing students to explore their options and change course can lead to greater self-awareness and satisfaction. On the other hand, without clear commitment to specific programs or pathways, students may struggle with indecision, leave school feeling less prepared for their futures, or experience challenges making successful transitions to postsecondary education and work opportunities. For future researchers and practitioners, it is important to explore strategies that balance these conflicting demands so that students can experience the potential benefits that structured pathways afford, while at the same time giving them opportunities to adapt and make changes as needed. One area for exploration is the timing of advising and the role that advising can play in earlier grades, such as middle school and even late elementary school to identify ways to foster college and career exploration before students feel pressure to commit to programs and pathways in high school.

**Advisors as Gateways to Career-Oriented Experiences.** Our study reveals that advisors play an important role as gateways to experiences and opportunities that help students learn about colleges and careers. While students often view the experiences as more influential than the advising in shaping their interests and plans, many recognize advisors' roles in raising awareness, facilitating participation, and, in some cases, encouraging activities they otherwise would not have pursued. From this perspective, advisors play an important but sometime subtle role in helping students make connections between their interests and available opportunities.

While some students actively and regularly engaged with advisors to explore opportunities aligned with their interests, others interacted with advisors primarily to complete transactional tasks like registering for classes only during mandatory meetings. One concern that emerged

from our work was that across schools, students were encouraged to take more initiative in planning for their futures over time. However, in relying on students to take initiative some staff and students expressed concern that certain students fell through the advising cracks and that these students tended to be those who were neither high risk nor high achieving and included those who were less willing to seek support. Although helping students become more independent is an important goal, schools run the risk of allowing these students to blend into the background, and potentially miss out on opportunities for building relationships with advisors. As a result, students who fly under the radar might miss out on enriching experiences such as internships, specialized coursework, or other extracurricular opportunities. This gap underscores the need for schools to ensure that all students, not just students with visible needs or high achievers, have equitable access to supports and resources that promote a more systematic approach to exploring interests, participating in pathways, and planning for their futures.

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