

Creating a Pathway for Career Exploration in Elementary Schools: Westbury School District



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Comprehensive Career & Character Learning at a NY State Elementary School

Westbury Union Free School District is located just 30 minutes east of New York City. It is home to around 5,400 students across its six schools. Percy Holmes is a school counselor at Drexel Avenue Elementary—one of the district’s four elementary schools—that serves just over 500 students in first through fifth grade. He is a veteran educator, having been with the district for 27 years.

In talking about his work with students, Holmes described the expansive and wide-reaching role school counselors now play in contemporary elementary schools: They must support students in building critical character education and life readiness skills; utilize Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports with students; and help them begin their college and career readiness journey as they discover their unique interests and align those with potential future careers. And counselors must

“find a way to bring all of that together under one umbrella.” This is no simple task.

Key Takeaways

- SchoolLinks provides a comprehensive suite of tools and resources to support the expansive and multifaceted roles elementary school counselors play.
- The access to high-quality CASEL-aligned lessons across a wide variety of topics along with the supplementary resources that pair with the lessons—means that counselors can focus their time on high-impact, direct interactions with students rather than time-intensive lesson planning.
- SchoolLinks provides elementary counselors with critical data and insights that allow them to tailor their efforts and initiatives to the specific needs and interests of their students.
- Having a CCR platform that extends across grade levels—from elementary to secondary school—provides cohesion in student planning and engagement and allows counselors to provide deeper and more personalized support.

SchoolLinks: A Resource that is “Second to None”

With this backdrop, Holmes shared that finding a resource that covers all of these needs and areas of focus cohesively, in a way that is engaging for students, easy for counselors to use, and includes data to measure student growth and progress has been a significant challenge. Until this point, the district has pieced together several different tools to try to meet this range of needs. Holmes was thrilled when the district began using SchoolLinks across all of the districts’ elementary schools because it seamlessly integrates all of these vital functions and goals for student learning and growth.

In his experience utilizing SchoolLinks with his students, Holmes described it as a —

“resource that is second to none.”

He explained that SchoolLinks **“does an amazing job”** supporting counselors in the many different roles, responsibilities, and tasks they have throughout their day, and helps to make their work overall more effective.

Within Westbury, counselors have been impressed with the high-quality lessons, organized around the widely used Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. The expansive library of topics means that counselors have lessons available to them as they determine what their students need. Holmes shared, —

“It really is right there for you. You consider what topic you want to discuss– whether you want to do friendship...relationship skills... growth mindset, responsible decision making, or perspective taking. You will find any of these topics inside of SchoolLinks.”

Holmes described that these lessons are paired with easy-to-use, engaging resources and materials that counselors and educators can use to deepen the lesson or conversation.

Holmes noted that prior to the SchoolLinks deployment, counselors were developing these lessons on their own, curating resources and creating materials as needed. This has greatly reduced the burden on counselors to develop lessons on their own, and they can now reallocate that time to direct interactions with students like **“doing group work, having lunch bunch, or one-on-one meetings.”**



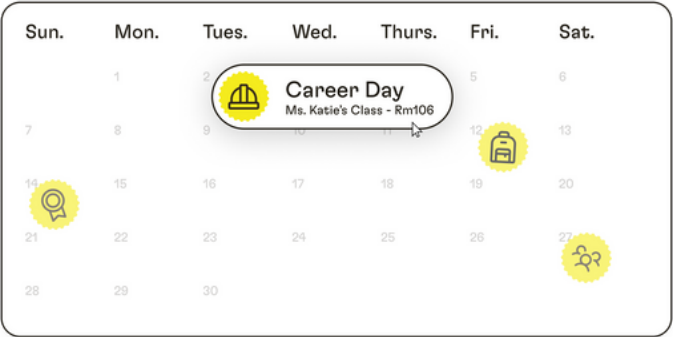
Deeper and More Personalized Student Engagement


SchoolLinks has also allowed counselors to have a better understanding of where their students are, if they are receiving the support they need, and whether they are reaching proficiency with these critical lessons and topics—providing ongoing data and feedback. Because SchoolLinks is utilized at all of the elementary schools within the district, Holmes shared that counselors can facilitate the same lesson and then come together as a professional learning community (PLC) to discuss student progress. Together, counselors can determine what is working and collaboratively think through how to use this data to inform planning and supports at the individual, group, and school level.

Holmes spotlighted a special feature within SchoolLinks **–the Check-in tool** –that he finds particularly helpful in connecting with students. When he enters classrooms to work with students, he begins by asking them to use the digital check-in tool to communicate how they are feeling. He noted that students really look forward to this quick moment of being able to pause and share how they are doing on that day.

This also allows Holmes to quickly assess how students are doing and how ready they are to engage in learning. For students in second and third grade, Holmes asks students to enter a short message about their feelings. This provides practice for students learning how to express their feelings through writing.

Within this tool, Holmes described that if a student writes something concerning, SchoolLinks immediately sends an alert to him, and others on the school support team, so he knows to take a closer look or check in with the student. This means that that student is able to get the right support or intervention as needed in a situation that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.






SchoolLinks

20m ago


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SchoolLinks

4m ago

Reminder that your FAFSA application is due



SchoolLinks

20m ago

Career Survey: 56% complete. Due by 11/15/2023

Transforming and Personalizing Career-Centered Learning

Like many states around the country, New York has recognized the importance of beginning college and career readiness (CCR) efforts early and put a big emphasis on beginning school-to-work readiness efforts in elementary school. Prior to his time working in elementary schools, Holmes spent 17 years at the high school level. This experience reinforced the value of starting early in order to set students up for long-term CCR planning and success.

Holmes explained that SchoolLinks has transformed the ability for their school to embed career-centered thinking, learning, and planning in ways that are meaningful and engaging to students, and developmentally appropriate for the elementary grades. Their school uses SchoolLinks to guide students on identifying their strengths, interests, and hobbies and to learn how these map on to different careers. He shared that students enjoy completing career matching inventories and learning about different fields of work—in ways that authentically help them develop an understanding of what careers exist and what is exciting to them.

Holmes described the ways students get excited about making these connections or thinking about future possibilities: —

“When I’m in the class and they’re doing this, you should see them light up because they’re like, you know, I do want to be a teacher... I want to be a firefighter. I want to be an engineer. I want to be a lawyer.”

And the work students do within SchoolLinks becomes part of their profile that allows counselors and educators to have information and data on what interests them, their goals, and what potential pathways may be a good fit. This information has allowed Holmes and his colleagues to tailor career-centered events and activities specifically to the interests of his students. For instance, during a recent career day, he was able to match student career interests with career day guests, amplifying the interest, excitement, and motivation students had to hear from career guests.



Resources that Grow With Students to Strengthen CCR

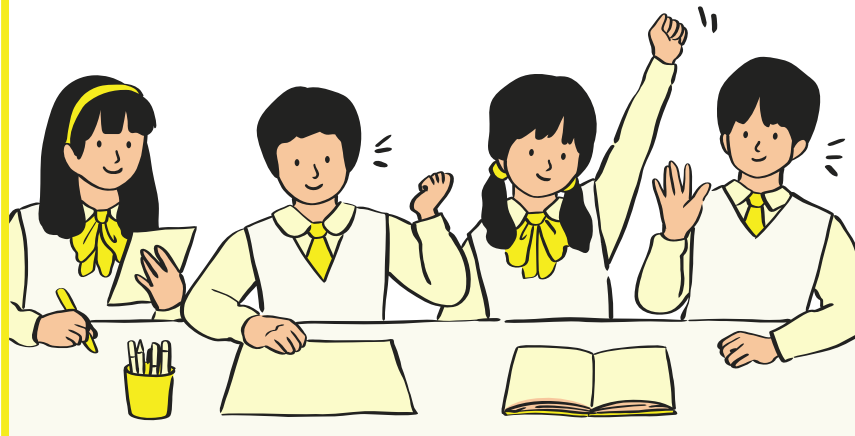
Because of the success of SchoolLinks across the elementary schools, the district is expanding their program to include middle school students. Holmes shared he is excited about how this cohesion across elementary and middle school will amplify CCR efforts for students and counselors. Holmes explained that the SchoolLinks student profile—and all of the valuable information it includes—is able to travel with students to middle school. This can help tremendously to smooth this critical transition point, ensuring that the new set of counselors has information about students' interests, passions, and goals from the start. Holmes explained, —

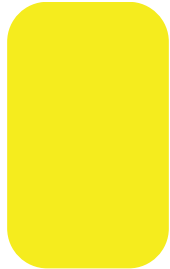
“That gives the middle school counselors some time back because now they don't have to sit down and do all of this work.

All of the information is already carried up with them... starting from first grade all the way up to fifth grade and then onto middle school.”

Middle school counselors can then design their plans and supports for students based on this personalized information.

Oftentimes, district administrators assume that College and Career Readiness (CCR) platforms are only relevant for secondary students, as the idea of planning beyond high school may seem outside the scope of elementary education. However, Westbury serves as a powerful example of how a robust and comprehensive CCR platform can provide age-appropriate resources that support the academic, life readiness, and career exploration needs of young students.





When integrated thoughtfully and strategically and aligned with broader CCR initiatives, these early efforts can foster a sense of purpose and curiosity for students that they will carry with them through high school and beyond.

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