

INTRODUCTION

Connecting the Dots Between Education, Interests, and Careers, Grades 7–10: A Guide for School Practitioners expands student knowledge about college and careers, excites students about college and careers, and informs student and family decision making.

Connecting the Dots has been created at a point in our history when education and skills training beyond high school are increasingly necessary to meet the educational and skill requirements of many current and emerging careers. By 2018, 63 percent of job openings will require workers to have at least some college education.¹ Despite the fact that the labor market demands more educational attainment than ever before, public high school graduation rates are consistently low—the national graduation rate stands at 69 percent.² For African American and Hispanic public school students, about 45 percent fail to graduate on time.³ *Connecting the Dots* has been designed to help students in grades 7–10 understand why education is necessary for their future success by connecting the dots among school, interests, abilities, training, college and careers—all through a fun fact-finding mission that challenges students with interesting questions linking education to future career success. It is a discussion tool that provides adults—teachers, educators, parents—with engaging questions to stimulate dialogue with students about staying in school and is delivered through an easy-to-use question/answer format and includes visual aids for visual learners.

Every school day in America, public high schools lose more than 7,200 students or one student every 25 seconds.⁴ Many of those who drop out before high school graduation are caught up in an inescapable world of poverty. High school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, earn lower wages, be involved in criminal activity, need public assistance, and be single parents.⁵ The employment outlook for a high school dropout is employment that pays less than a living wage, and employment prospects do not improve with time. In fact, over the course of his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate.⁶ *Connecting the Dots* addresses these facts and incorporates information on training and educational requirements that match interests, abilities, and career aspirations, recognizing that college isn't the only avenue that individuals can take to become highly employable. It highlights why education is necessary and emphasizes the positive impact education has on students' lives if grades K–12 are used to prepare for college or a career.

Today's careers demand training beyond high school via technical schools, community or four-year colleges, or beyond. For many youth, the transition between school and work is difficult. The educational and workforce systems are not well aligned—making it hard for individuals to match career options with educational decisions. *Connecting the Dots* matches education, training, and careers to provide students with a tool kit that will help them navigate the world of work, which is a key to being successful in the labor market.

Connecting the Dots is designed to be an easy-to-use tool for adults that is also engaging and interesting for students; it includes 45 main talking points in a question/answer format; extension activities and supplemental discussion questions to encourage interaction and learning; and illustrations (e.g., tables, charts, and graphics) for visual learners. Many of the extension activities, supplemental discussions, and graphics can be downloaded and printed at  www.corwin.com/connectingthedots. The icon to the left will identify materials throughout *Connecting the Dots* that can be downloaded and printed for students.

The more students hear and read facts about the advantage gained by attending college and preparing for a career, the more they will be prepared to pursue a career. The consistency of information will reinforce other positive peer/family/school information that students receive about going to college. With *Connecting the Dots*, we can help students realize that they are not simply scrambling to get their work in on time; together we are preparing students for their future.

Connecting the Dots is adaptable and can be used in a classroom, after-school program, and club or camp setting. It is intended to be a discussion stimulator for teachers, mentors, and families to incorporate into their existing schedules. Its question/answer format requires minimal planning or preparation on their part. The different topics were developed in collaboration with teachers and experts in workforce development to focus learning on critical subjects. The questions highlight the importance of education and its relationship to careers, and they generate inquiry, discussion, and constructive conversation. *Connecting the Dots* includes nine topics that begin with “Education: The Key to Your Future,” progress through “Ready or Not: High School, Here We Come,” and end with “College Life: Much More Than Studying and Classes, It’s Fun!”

SUGGESTED USE

Connecting the Dots Between Education, Interests, and Careers, Grades 7–10 has been developed to fit into any classroom schedule, mentorship or after-school program. Each of the nine topics includes five main talking points (questions/answers) that will generate excitement and engage students in a fun way to help them focus on their future and embrace the connections among school, careers, and rewarding lives. The answers are provided in a summary format to help the facilitator quickly prepare for the conversation.

In schools, *Connecting the Dots* can be used for one week in each of the nine months of the academic year. Another strategy for using *Connecting the Dots* in schools is to present segments at the same time every week so that it becomes a part of the weekly agenda over the course of the year. *Connecting the Dots* is designed to easily meet your classroom schedule.

For mentors, *Connecting the Dots* can be used to start or end sessions with mentees. The questions are so easy to use that it will start or end your time together on a positive note and keep students thinking about their current and future success.

For families, *Connecting the Dots* can be used during any free moments. It can be used in the kitchen and around the breakfast table to remind students why they are going to school. It can be used on the bus or in the car while traveling. It can provide stimulating discussions at any “check-in” points throughout the day such as at the dinner table or while on the phone.

Connecting the Dots includes extension activities, supplemental discussion questions, career definitions, illustrations, and resources (published here and also downloadable at www.corwin.com/connectingthedots) to assist in deepening conversations and opportunities for learning. The order of topics (listed in the Table of Contents on page v) is suggested, but each school, mentorship, or after-school program has different needs, and in some cases, it may make sense to change the order depending on those needs.