

## CASE STUDY



# The Impact of Defined Careers on Engaging Middle School Students in Career Readiness

Broken Arrow Public Schools,  
Oklahoma

Report Authors

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## Introduction

As part of a three-year research project following the implementation of Defined Careers in Broken Arrow Public Schools in Oklahoma, MIDA Learning Technologies conducted an end-of-year survey across 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade students in spring 2023. The purpose of the survey was to examine student perceptions about the Defined Careers platform, a middle-level career exploration program implemented as part of the district's Portrait of a Graduate.

This report summarizes the findings from both the global survey conducted by MIDA Learning Technologies and a localized survey conducted by school counselors in one middle school. The data from the localized survey are based on open-ended responses and were analyzed to develop a deeper understanding of the global survey results.

## District Demographics:

**Location:**

Broken Arrow Public Schools, Oklahoma

**Number of K–12 Students:** 18,530

**Number of Schools:** 30

**Suburban setting**

**Race/Ethnicity:**

- 54% White
- 6% Black/African American
- 16% Hispanic
- 7% American Indian or Alaskan Native
- 4% Asian
- 12% Two or More Races

**Free and Reduced Lunch:** 36%

## Study Design

This report presents an analysis of data from two separate surveys. A global survey was conducted with all 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade students at Broken Arrow Public Schools (BAPS) in May of 2023 by MIDA Learning Technologies. A localized survey was also conducted specifically at Oliver Middle School by the school's counseling office.

The global survey was designed to capture students' insights about Defined Career's effectiveness in shaping their future career pathways. In the second, school-specific survey, students provided open-ended comments about their experiences in career exploration specifically using Defined Careers.

Students were asked to share their insights after a complete year of Defined Careers engagement. It is important to note that students were initially using

the program as a pilot. That is, students did not have individual choices in the careers or projects they selected within the program until the latter part of the school year. Limitation of choice, which is a critical element in the overall career exploration process, may be responsible in part for responses given by students.

Overall, the data analysis revealed that, to this point in the implementation of Defined Careers, the program contributed significantly to career decision-making confidence among middle school students, improved student understanding of various career paths, and demonstrated value as a useful tool for assisting students in their journey of self-discovery related to future career aspirations.





## Global Survey — All 6th, 7th and 8th-Grade Students

### Survey Sample Population

Five questions comprised the global survey that was sent to 6th, 7th, and 8th grades in BAPS in May of 2023. Each question aimed to assess student perceptions about the impact of Defined Careers on their knowledge and understanding developed from career exploration.

### Global Survey Questions

1. Has the Defined Careers program inspired you to explore different career paths?
2. Has the Defined Careers program helped you understand the skills and abilities needed for different careers?
3. Participating in Defined Careers has boosted your confidence in making decisions about careers.
4. Do you think the Defined Careers program has helped you discover your own strengths and interests for future career choices?
5. Do you think participating in the Defined Careers program has increased your knowledge about different career options?

All 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade students were sent a survey link to their individual contact email

addresses. The analysis was performed on a total of 1,250 validated student responses after the initial data set was cleaned to remove invalid responses (e.g. results in which students had simply clicked through the questions without reading them as well as those that were tagged by Qualtrics as invalid.) There were a total of 434 6th-grade, 401 7th-grade, and 415 8th-grade validated student responses.

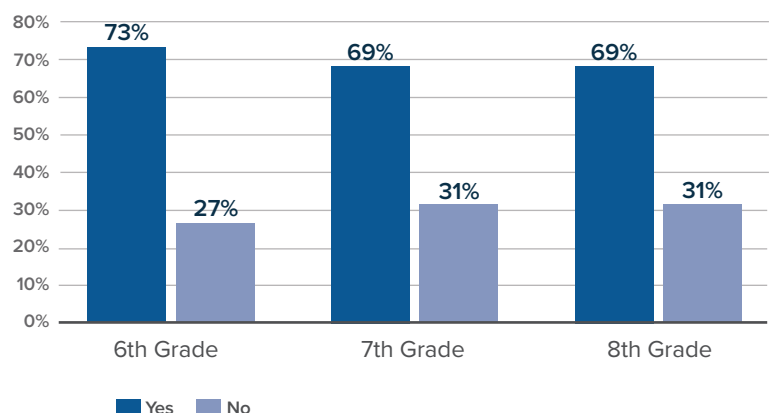
### Global Survey Analysis and Results

For all questions in the global survey, students were asked to quantify their responses on a Likert-type scale from “a lot” to “not at all.” For this report, the analysis creates a binary structure in which students with all levels of positive responses are combined under “Yes,” and students who did not feel that Defined Careers had any impact were categorized as “No.”

#### Question 1:

#### Has the Defined Careers program inspired you to explore different career paths?

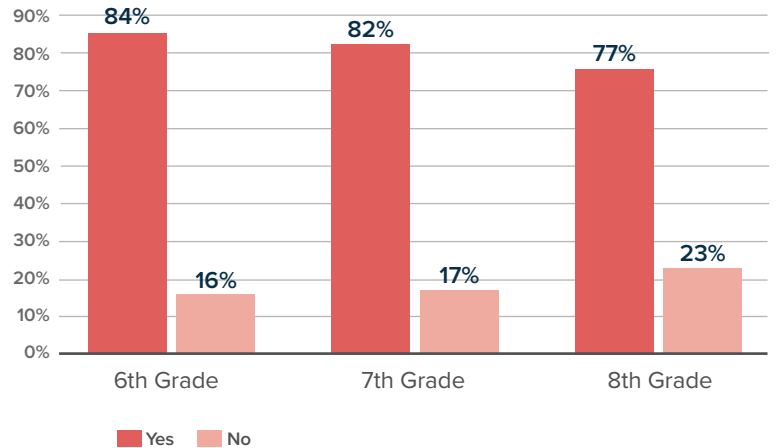
When asked if the program has inspired them to explore different career paths, 73% of 6th graders and 69% of both 7th and 8th graders indicated that Defined Careers had positively impacted their outlook on potential careers to some degree. These findings suggest that the program has been effective in sparking curiosity and broadening the horizons of many students regarding their future career possibilities. Despite the varied age groups and different developmental stages, this high level of engagement is maintained consistently across grade levels, underscoring the broad appeal and effectiveness of the Defined Careers program.



### Question 2:

#### Has the Defined Careers program helped you understand the skills and abilities needed for different careers?

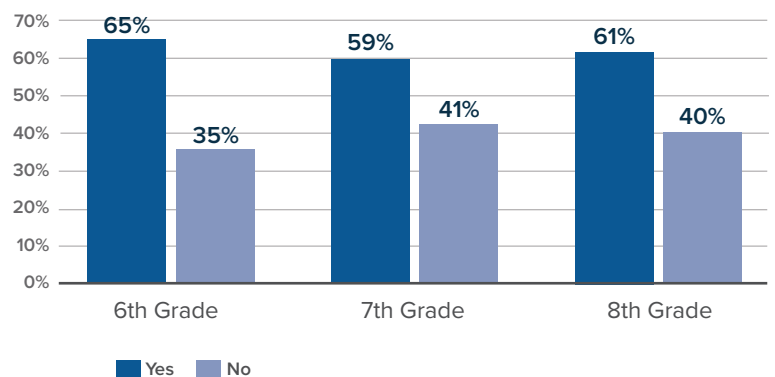
When asked about the effectiveness of the Defined Careers program in terms of aiding students' understanding of the skills and abilities required for various career paths, 84% of 6th graders, 82% of 7th graders, and 77% of 8th graders reported that the program had, to some extent, positively influenced their comprehension of different careers' demands. These responses highlight the capacity of the Defined Careers program to facilitate an insightful learning experience and equip students with a better grasp of the skills and abilities needed to cultivate their future careers, adding value to students' career exploration efforts.



### Question 3:

#### Participating in Defined Careers has boosted your confidence in making decisions about careers.

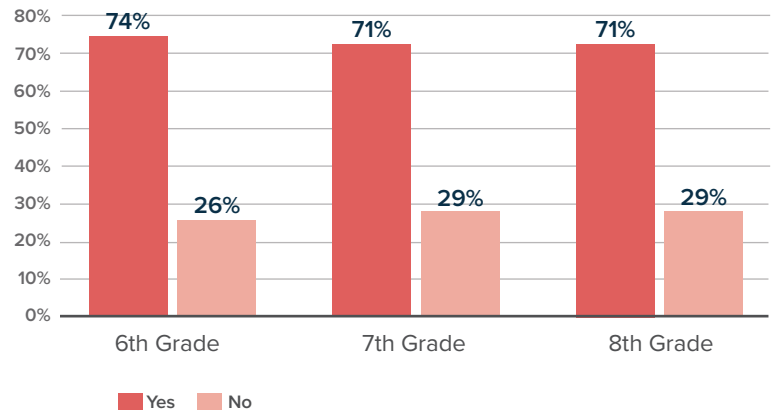
69% of 6th graders, 59% of 7th graders, and 61% of 8th graders expressed that the Defined Careers program positively influenced their confidence in making decisions about their future career paths, at least to a certain extent. These data indicate the program's effectiveness in instilling self-assuredness among students when contemplating their future careers. As students progress from 6th to 8th grade, there is a generally high level of confidence retention, suggesting that the program's influence endures as students advance through their middle school years.



#### Question 4:

**Do you think the Defined Careers program has helped you discover your own strengths and interests for future career choices?**

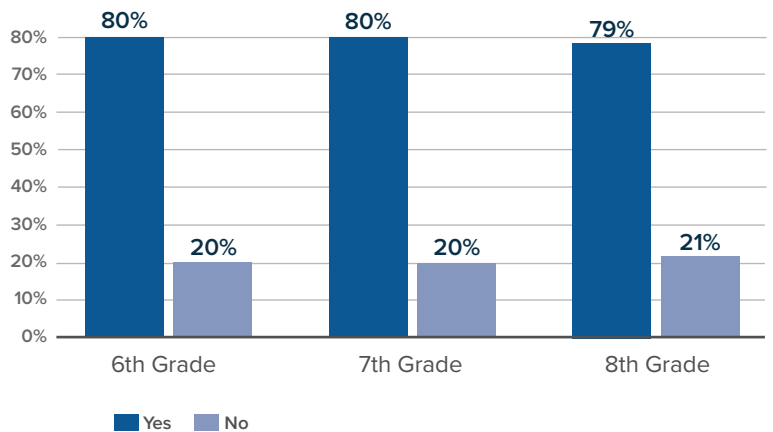
When asked about the program's influence on their self-discovery process for future career decisions, 74% of 6th graders, 71% of 7th graders, and 71% of 8th graders felt the Defined Careers program helped them identify their personal strengths and interests relative to future career paths. These findings support that the Defined Careers platform has been successful in fostering an environment for students to explore and understand their unique capabilities and interests. As students transition from 6th to 8th grade, the consistent percentages reflect that the program continues to be effective in sustaining students' engagement and interest in self-exploration.



#### Question 5:

**Do you think participating in the Defined Careers program has increased your knowledge about different career options?**

80% of 6th graders, 80% of 7th graders, and 79% of 8th graders expressed that their participation in the Defined Careers program increased their awareness about different careers. These data underscore the significant role of the Defined Careers program in broadening students' perspectives about potential careers. With a notable consistency in positive responses across the grades, it is evident that the program effectively caters to students' intellectual curiosity regarding career options, regardless of their grade level.





## Localized Student Survey — BAPS Oliver Middle School

Open-ended survey data was collected by school counselors at BAPS Oliver Middle School in March 2023. 439 students responded to various open-ended prompts designed to provide information to school counselors on the details of implementation, such as what pathways students had selected, who their teacher advisors were, what course they had selected, etc. For the purpose of this study, two specific prompts were analyzed.

### PROMPT 1: List positives about the Defined Careers program and/or what you learned

Overall, the Defined Careers program appeared to serve as a valuable educational tool for students at Oliver Middle School, providing insights into a wide range of career paths and jobs. Some students expressed a newfound appreciation for jobs they hadn't previously considered, while others affirmed their interest in certain career paths. By introducing the varied dimensions of different professions, from nursing to sports coaching, the program offered wide industry exposure that helped broaden students' horizons.

A key aspect of the program that emerged from student responses was its effectiveness in teaching important life skills, especially financial management. Several students praised the program's ability to explain the intricacies of budgeting, both in personal and professional contexts. Positive feedback mentioned the development of other competencies as a result of participation in the Defined Careers program, including increased patience, better writing skills, and enhanced productivity. The program's capacity to facilitate these additional skills further solidified its value in students' eyes.

The ease of use and accessibility of Defined Careers was another point of praise. Several students deemed the program's user-friendly interface, detailed directions, and step-by-step processes helpful. This ease of use likely contributed to the overall positive learning experience. Lastly, many students also felt that the Defined Careers program helped them plan for the future and aided them in making more informed decisions about their potential career choices.

## Localized Survey Prompts

1. List positives about the Defined Careers program and/or what you learned; and
2. Provide suggestions for what counselors could share with Defined Careers to improve the website, course choices, projects, etc

### PROMPT 2: Provide suggestions for what counselors could share with Defined Careers to improve the website, course choices, projects, etc.

After analyzing all student feedback related to this open-ended question, the following themes emerged as areas for potential consideration and future program improvement:

1. **Simplicity and Clarity:** Students desired a simpler and more understandable platform with clearer instructions and less confusion.
2. **Diversity of Career Options:** Respondents asked for more diverse and specific job options, including the arts, sports, fashion, unique jobs, and specific roles like veterinarian and marine biologist.
3. **Engagement and Fun:** Students wanted more engaging, fun, and hands-on activities. They were interested in game-like features to make the learning experience more enjoyable.
4. **Project Complexity:** Some feedback suggested that the projects might be too complex or time-consuming, requiring an undue amount of reading and special resources. In particular, student comments repeatedly expressed difficulty in working with the monthly budgeting component of each project.
6. **Guidance and Support:** Students would like more help and resources in understanding and completing tasks, as well as more basic information about courses and a more effective career test.







## Opportunities for Future Refinement and Investigation

Despite the generally positive feedback about Defined Careers from both surveys, it's also important to acknowledge that several students did not find the program as beneficial as others. Some students expressed that they didn't learn anything new or that the program was a waste of time. Others felt their interests were not well represented, suggesting room for improvement in the program's inclusivity and comprehensiveness.

This observation in student feedback about Defined Careers might mirror a broader challenge present in our education systems. According to a report from the Pew Research Center, approximately 30% of high school students in the United States are not fully engaged or feel disconnected from their school environment (Pew Research Center, 2019). Such sentiments could naturally extend to any new educational initiative, leading to some level of student disapproval irrespective of the initiative's actual content or intent. This means that the observed criticism might be part of an overarching negativity towards school-related projects and not specifically tied to Defined Careers.

Still, this input serves as an important reminder that student satisfaction, overall perception, and feedback are key areas to consider for future refinements made to the Defined Careers program. This observation also points toward the need to dive more deeply into student perceptions in the coming year.

Looking ahead, researchers are seeking to develop a framework to collect a wide variety of student responses from additional surveys, focus groups, observations, and student work artifacts. In addition, in 2023–24, researchers will seek input from a broader audience, including teachers, administrators, school counselors, and related community members. Lastly, researchers will seek to collect and analyze metrics related to student academic performance related to career exploration.

## Summary

The analysis of the Defined Careers program, based on middle school student survey data from BAPS in Oklahoma, highlights its impactful role in guiding students toward understanding and choosing future career paths. From the global survey responses, a majority of students felt that their participation in the program positively impacted their career outlook, helped them understand the skills and abilities needed for various career paths, and positively influenced their confidence in career decision-making. Further, the Defined Careers program proved successful in assisting students with identifying their personal strengths and interests, as well as expanding students' understanding of various career options.

Open-ended survey data collected at BAPS Oliver Middle School further reinforces the effectiveness of the Defined Careers program and highlights suggestions for improvements in the future. Students at Oliver Middle School lauded the program's broad exposure to a variety of professions; its life skill teaching, especially in financial management; its helpfulness in planning for future careers; and the development of competencies like increased patience, better writing skills, and enhanced productivity; and appreciated the program's user-friendly interface and step-by-step processes. Suggestions for improving the program included creating a simpler, more understandable platform with clear instructions. Student feedback also highlighted the desire for a wider range of career options, more engaging and enjoyable activities, adjustments to project complexity, and more guidance and support in understanding and completing tasks, particularly in developing a budget for projects.

Though a notable percentage of students' responses were negative, this observation could potentially mirror a broader challenge in education systems where some students feel disconnected from their school environment. This underlines the importance of continual assessment and improvement to cater to diverse user needs.

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The feedback overwhelmingly validated the effectiveness of the Defined Careers program in providing insight into career paths, teaching life skills, and aiding future career decisions, both at BAPS Oliver Middle School and across the entire school district. The overall survey data reaffirms the effectiveness of the Defined Careers program in various aspects of career education. The program has demonstrated its value in inspiring students to explore different careers, equipping them with an understanding of required skills, instilling decision-making confidence, fostering self-discovery, and expanding knowledge of potential careers.



## About Defined Careers

Defined Careers is the only online K-12 college and career readiness platform that helps schools and districts provide students with the opportunity to explore and experience careers through hands-on Project-Based Learning (PBL). Defined Careers allows students to explore and experience hundreds of careers across 79 career pathways through engaging, hands-on projects.

Defined Careers takes a holistic approach to help students discover their interests through a multi-dimensional assessment that assesses each students' values, interests, and skills. The assessment results in a personalized list of recommended career pathways projects to help students explore and experience careers.



To learn more, visit [www.definedlearning.com/what-we-offer/defined-careers](http://www.definedlearning.com/what-we-offer/defined-careers).

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