

RETHINKING THE PATH TO SUCCESS

UNDERSTANDING HOW STUDENTS AND FAMILIES SEE
THE TRADES AS A PATHWAY TO A SUCCESSFUL FUTURE



OVERVIEW

While much of recent economic growth is concentrated in digital and professional services, the industries that keep the physical economy running—from construction and manufacturing to transportation, utilities, and maintenance—face a very different set of pressures. These sectors and the skilled workers who power them, also known as skilled trades, employ millions of people and underpin businesses and communities worldwide, but their productivity and growth have often lagged behind the rapid advances made in newer, technology-driven sectors.

As demand for skilled workers continues to grow, there's an opportunity to rethink how we talk about trades and highlight them as valuable career paths. **To better understand how to reach today's students and those who influence them about the possibility of a future in trades, Ford partnered with the Ad Council Research Institute (ACRI) to conduct a mixed-methods research study.** The goal of the study was to understand what drives and what hinders consideration of the trades, and to translate that into actionable guidance for a potential national public education perception effort reaching students, parents, counselors, and other trusted adults.

In addition to qualitative interviews with n=51 participants (28 students, 23 parents), the study included a 20-minute online survey fielded in June and July 2026 to n=5,712 participants (3,009 high school students, 2,501 parents of high school students, 202 school counselors). Key findings from the survey include the following.

1. THE REAL CHOICE ISN'T COLLEGE VS. TRADES—IT'S WHAT COMES AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

The central opportunity is to move the conversation beyond a binary choice between college and trades. Students and parents are primarily motivated by the outcomes they associate with a good life: financial security (59%), personal fulfillment (44%), earning potential (42%), and stability (39%). These aspirations create a strong foundation for positioning the trades as a pathway to the same broader definition of success that families already value.

At the same time, college remains the default post-high school pathway. It is the most familiar path (56%) and the one most expected by families (42%), while relatively few teens are actively considering the trades (9%). The challenge, therefore, is not necessarily to persuade students to reject college, but to expand their understanding of what a successful long-term future can look like and establish trades as a credible, familiar opportunity.

OTHER KEY DATA POINTS

Trades receive some consideration as a post-high school option (38% students, 48% parents), but **only about 1 in 9 teens are planning to go into the trades after high school** (11% students, 12% parents).

Notably, **male students are twice as likely as females to say they're planning to go into the trades (14% boys, 7% girls)**; parents of boys vs. girls are similarly split (16% parents of boys, 9% parents of girls).



2. TRADES DON'T HAVE A VALUE PROBLEM; THEY HAVE A KNOWLEDGE PROBLEM.

When students and parents understand what the trades offer, the proposition is compelling. Hands-on learning, practical skills, earning potential, financial independence, job stability, and real-world career readiness align closely with the attributes they associate with a good job and a successful future.

The primary barrier is therefore less about negative perceptions of the trades than about limited knowledge. Compared with college, students and families have less understanding of what trade careers exist, how to enter them, what the training process looks like, and what opportunities can follow. This knowledge gap makes the trades harder to imagine as a concrete next step. Effective efforts must move beyond inspiration to provide a clear, tangible roadmap from high school to training, employment, and long-term career growth.

OTHER KEY DATA POINTS

The majority of teens and parents associate a trades program with a positive outlook: careers can start sooner, the industry is in demand, workers are professionals, and **trades deserve the same level of respect as other pathways.**

Some responses point to uncertainty and negative perceptions, however: **Nearly two-thirds of both students and parents say trade school options aren't explained well in school** (59% students, 61% parents), **nearly half think career growth opportunities in the trades are limited** (46% students, 45% parents), and **some say pay in trade jobs is lower than jobs requiring a college degree** (44% students, 40% parents).



3. STIGMA AND STEREOTYPES LINGER, AND TRADES AREN'T AS RESPECTED AS OTHER PATHS.

Trades are generally viewed positively and command a meaningful degree of respect, but they haven't yet achieved the same status or prestige as careers in fields like health care or technology, where 50% and 46% of students respectively say they'd feel respected by others if they pursued a career in that field (compared to 33% of students for trades). This gap is particularly pronounced among higher-income families, suggesting that social expectations and traditional definitions of career success continue to influence how pathways are evaluated.

Lingering stereotypes and concerns about judgment can create an additional layer of friction. As a result, communications must do more than explain the practical benefits of trades. They should help normalize trades as an intentional choice and broaden the definition of what a prestigious or successful career can be. The most resonant messages are those that connect trades to outcomes families already value: long-term financial independence, meaningful work, hands-on experience, and career readiness.

OTHER KEY DATA POINTS

61% of teens acknowledged there are stereotypes about the kind of people who work in the trades, and 59% said people are sometimes judged negatively for working in the trades.

Two in five students (40%) said women are not encouraged to pursue trade careers.

Data from parents were similar: 63% agreed there are stereotypes about the kind of people who work in the trades, 60% said people are sometimes judged negatively for working in the trades, and 42% believe women are not encouraged to pursue trade careers.

“ Prestige is not my main priority. I care more about finding a path that he loves, feels comfortable with, and where he can realistically grow. With that being said, I understand that there are certain universities that are driven by status and that it can open doors.

– Male parent, qualitative participant

“ Prestige or social perception should not matter at all, but we all know that it does on some level.

– Male parent, qualitative participant

4. STUDENT DECISION MAKING IS INFLUENCED BY FAMILY, SCHOOL COUNSELORS, TEACHERS, AND MENTORS.

Although teens see themselves as the primary decision-makers about their futures, they do not make these choices in isolation. Parents are the most influential members of their decision-making network (76%), followed by other family members (50%), counselors (39%), and teachers (38%). Any effort focused exclusively on students is therefore unlikely to shift consideration at scale.

Awareness efforts are already reaching students through school events and resources, but exposure to trades is less consistent and prominent than college-focused pathway options. There is also a disconnect between the resources counselors believe are available and what students report seeing or knowing about. For example, a much higher percentage of school counselors say schools provide resources to help prepare students for life after college—including counselor meetings (87%), college fairs (75%), career days (72%), trade school fairs (32%)—than what students report (48% counselor meetings, 45% college fairs, 40% career day, 22% trade school fairs). This suggests that simply increasing the volume of information may not be enough.

School counselors represent an especially important opportunity. While 79% say they discuss trades with students, only 54% recommend them, compared with 88% who recommend universities and 69% who recommend colleges. Counselors cite limited familiarity, confidence, time, and resources as constraints on their ability to advise students about trades. In addition, 73% believe they influence less than half of the students they advise. This points to a broader ecosystem challenge: students need awareness, parents need confidence to support the option, and counselors need the knowledge and tools to make trades a viable recommendation.

OTHER KEY DATA POINTS

Notably, **trade school representatives rank fairly low as a career influencer among all three groups** (students, parents, counselors).

Beyond family, counselors, teachers, and mentors, students turn to other trusted adults about a third of the time: college admissions reps (40%), employers (30%), coaches/club advisors (30%), and alumni/solder students (28%). Friends/peers/classmates are also somewhat of an influence among students (37%).



This should be available at the school's guidance counselor's office, but I feel that they universally push higher education over the trades. The trades get a small corner of the office without much celebration or information.

– Male parent, qualitative participant

5. COMMUNICATIONS SHOULD SPEAK TO THE BENEFITS OF TRADES, PLUS TELL THEM EXACTLY HOW TO PURSUE THEM.

The strongest opportunity is to pair inspiration with action. Communications should challenge the assumption that college is the only default route to success while making the trades feel concrete and attainable. Messages should foreground the benefits that matter most (hands-on experience, earning while learning, financial independence, stability, and real-world career readiness) and then show students and families exactly what comes next. A successful national effort should therefore build awareness among students, equip parents to advocate for the option, and give counselors the confidence and resources to recommend it.

OTHER KEY DATA POINTS

Students were more likely to **choose messaging that provided more concrete details about the trades process and career path** (69% vs. 31%).





CONCLUSION

The research generated from this study points to an opportunity that goes beyond simply increasing awareness of the trades. Students and families aren't necessarily looking for an alternative to college; they're looking for a pathway to financial security, stability, fulfillment, and a good life. The trades can offer those outcomes, but people need to recognize their value, understand how to pursue them, and feel confident that choosing a trade is a smart and intentional decision. What's needed, then, are more opportunities to educate students and their influential adults—through real stories and experiences—about skilled trades, what they can provide to students as a long-term career, and how to get started in that pathway.

The research also makes clear that students do not navigate these decisions alone. Parents, family members, counselors, teachers, and other trusted adults all help shape what students see as possible. Reaching students therefore requires engaging the broader network around them, and giving that network the knowledge, language, and confidence to support the trades as a legitimate pathway.

Ultimately, the opportunity is not simply to change minds about the trades. It is to expand the set of futures that students can see for themselves and ensure that the trades are recognized as a credible, compelling, and achievable pathway to a successful life—while strengthening the skilled workforce that the future of the U.S. depends on.



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