

# AMERICAN DREAM VS. AMERICAN REALITY: How Parents Navigate and Influence their Kids' Post-High School Education



## SURVEY SNAPSHOT

Is the dream of a bachelor's degree for every child still the ideal for parents? Are parents starting to shift their mindset because of the ever-increasing cost of college and the changing needs of the job market? How do parents today perceive higher education and the college planning process? Those are some of the key questions American Student Assistance® (ASA) sought to answer through a series of focus groups, small discussions and survey research with parents nationwide.

For many parents today, the American Dream of sending their children to a four-year college is at odds with the harsh reality of college affordability. Employability is also a concern; hiring managers argue that the current higher education system is not adequately preparing students with the skills needed to enter the job market and fill open positions.

ASA's "[American Dream](#)" research reveals that for parents, the dream of their children earning a bachelor's degree is just that – a dream or goal to aspire to – but when the reality of paying for college hits and their child's academic and career expectations are better understood, parents may be open to other forms of higher education. However, while they want to embrace new ways of thinking about post-secondary options for their kids, they don't feel they have the resources to guide them through the process of choosing the best path. As a result, parents may talk about the merits of a wide array of higher education options, but they are still generally defaulting to the best known or most accepted path—a four-year degree. Lack of support and knowledge about the range of available options is preventing families from exploring other higher education paths.

**61% of parents...would consider themselves parental failures if their children didn't complete any post-high school education/degree.**

To empower all students to achieve their goals for education beyond high school, we must start to change the minds of their most important influencers—their parents.

### Key Findings of ASA's American Dream Research:

- For most parents, the American Dream of a higher education is still a goal they want their child to achieve, but they don't always feel they have the support to help their kids navigate the process.
- Parents view college primarily as a means of gaining skills for future employment, and are far less concerned about college as a way for their kids to have a once-in-a-lifetime experience.
- For 72 percent of parents, the definition of "college" is a four-year or bachelor's degree program.
- At least eight in 10 parents expressed a desire for their middle or high school children to enroll in a four-year college.
- 82 percent of parents agree with the statement that achieving the dream of higher education is worth any financial cost.
- 83 percent think that community college is a cheaper and high-quality education alternative, but only fourteen percent think a community college is likely to be the path their child will pursue.
- 82 percent said they were comfortable with the idea of their children pursuing a vocational or technical program, but only 7 percent of parents even classified this type of education as "college," and only 14 percent think that this form of higher education is a likely path for their child.
- Children's college decisions are deeply personal to parents and reflect their opinion of themselves as a parent. In fact, six in 10 parents (61%) whose children are on the path to some form of higher education would consider themselves parental failures if their children didn't complete any post-high school education/degree.

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- Parents' dream for their children to pursue a four-year college education is strongest when the child is in middle school, but a small percentage start to consider other education options as the child progresses through high school.
- Despite parents' overriding *wish* for their children to pursue traditional college, *only half* of surveyed parents with children both under the age of 18 and older said their older children had actually attended a four-year college. One quarter attended another type of program, but the remaining quarter skipped higher education altogether.

Our research suggests that there are opportunities to assist parents to better understand the alternatives to four-year colleges, and to mitigate any concerns about pursuing these different options. There is also a strong need to increase support systems to parents as they guide their children through the complicated process of planning for and choosing a higher education path.

### **ASA Recommendations:**

- Broaden the definition of “college.” We must recognize that there are many viable options for kids after high school, and destigmatize the stereotypes that surround a non-four-year degree. Students who seek a path other than a Bachelor’s degree—one better suited to their interests, strengths and finances—can obtain a meaningful career, earn a living wage and achieve the American Dream. Parents’ acceptance of this reality can put their children on a faster track to long-term success.
- Increase the availability and quality of online tools for planning and paying for college. Parents in our survey indicated a need for more post-high school planning information, and many are turning to the Internet to help fill their knowledge gaps. Increased access to free, credible, comprehensive online tools will help students and parents navigate the complicated college planning landscape.
- Increase the number of school counselors in high schools. Parents highlighted a need for additional counseling support to ensure that kids at all academic abilities—not just the highest performer, and not just those most in need of help—receive attention from a school counselor. There must be an increased commitment of resources to allow for more counselors in our schools, and to ensure that they receive training and tools to help students explore all higher education paths.
- Expand partnerships between school counselors and college planning resources in the community. Community-based college access programs, often administered by nonprofits and higher education institutions, should work with local school districts to provide additional personalized support for students. Expanded services could include more intensive career support for students, like aptitude and interest assessments, mentoring, and internship advice, or planning courses for parents.
- Work to improve public perception of CTE. While the perception of “vocational school” is changing, more work is needed to convey the true value that career and technical education (CTE) provides to students. CTE enables kids to explore possible careers, identify interests and strengths, and build specific skills for real-world jobs. These programs should be praised for providing skills that every child needs.
- Increase funding for the federal Perkins Basic State Grant to expand career exploration in middle school. Increased funding for the Perkins Basic State Grant, under the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, could introduce CTE support and counseling into more middle schools so that students can start exploring college and career options at an earlier age.

To read the full American Dream research report from American Student Assistance, visit: [asa.org/plan](https://asa.org/plan)

