A Developmental Perspective on
Workplace Readiness:
Preparing High School Students for Success

Child TRENDS.

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Attention has been focused for decades on the need to improve high school students' preparation for the workplace.[43] Employers report that nearly half of their entry-level employees are inadequately prepared and lack basic communication and critical thinking skills as well as a work ethic.[41] Although a postsecondary credential is considered necessary for today's workforce, there is also much that high schools can do to prepare students. How can high schools help students develop the skills needed to succeed in the workplace? Current criteria developed by business and government leaders tend to emphasize *general* behaviors, skills, and competencies necessary for success in the workplace. This brief will highlight specific competencies that research has identified as necessary for a person to become a valued and skilled employee in the areas of social, cognitive, and psychological development. It also identifies strategies that high schools can use to help young adults develop these competencies.

Social Development

Social competence is the set of skills necessary to interact successfully with other people, to be generous and thoughtful, and to use accepted social techniques.[5] Specific social competencies highlighted in the workplace readiness research include the ability to communicate well, work with diverse groups, and resolve conflicts. The American Diploma project[2] specifically emphasizes that oral as well as written communication skills are required for workplace success.[2,3,7,28,39-42,44] The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)[47] identifies social and cross-cultural competencies as necessary for successful interactions with clients, customers, and coworkers, especially in light of increased globalization and the diversification of society.

Specific social competence skills include:

- The ability to interact with other people[11,34,35] such as:
  - resolving conflicts;
  - cooperating;
  - working together on a team;
  - understanding and being tolerant of other people and cultures; and
  - working with diverse populations. [12,25,28,44,47]
- Choosing words precisely, being persuasive, and listening. [2]
- Crafting effective written communications such as emails, memos, and reports.
- The ability to speak a second language (for instance, Spanish for native English speakers, and English for non-native English speakers). [1,20]

Cognitive Development

While good grades in rigorous academic subjects and a high school diploma are considered necessary for college readiness, the workplace readiness literature places less emphasis on them.[16,27] In fact, basic academic skills are only one benchmark for determining workplace readiness, and some employers administer their own hiring tests to determine whether a student is ready for a job, rather than relying on high school transcripts.[2, 29]

Employers often look for job-specific skills and competencies that suggest a person would be a dependable worker.[16,24,27] These skills and competencies include:

- Obtaining a workforce readiness credential, such as a certificate in a specific trade;
- Having previous internship or work experience;
- The quality of the internship or work experience;[3,8,15,16,18,19,24,39,44,46,49]
- The ability to use technology;[40,41,43-45,47] and
- Critical thinking/problem solving skills.[41]

Psychological Development

Mental health is a key asset in the workplace.[7,39,43,44,47] Reports of high levels of depression and anxiety found in the workplace[17] indicate that good psychological development can help young adults succeed at work. Personal qualities identified in the workplace readiness literature related to psychological development include:

- Positive self-esteem;[7]
- Optimism and planfulness;
- Coping skills, resilience and flexibility;
- Good judgment;[8,9,13,33,34,39,40,43,44,47,49]
- Self-management, such as motivation, autonomy, initiative, responsibility, time management;[39,47] and
- Moral development, such as a strong work ethic, reliability, honesty, integrity, and professionalism.[3,6,16,32,40,41,43,44,47]

What can schools and communities do to help youth develop the skills needed for the workplace?

Research suggests that if schools tailor curricula to workplace needs, increase support to students and offer activities relevant to the workplace, students will be better prepared to enter the workforce.

Improve school curriculum

- Teach students social skills such as cooperation, working in teams, negotiating, and resolving conflicts.
- Provide better access to technology, and hire appropriately trained faculty to teach technology-relatedcourses.[44]
- Foster communication skills as students prepare assignments, reports, and presentations. Specifically:
    - Assist students in developing written communication skills by assigning work that allows them to practice drafting business correspondence such as emails, memos, and reports.[2]
    - Assign oral presentations to students so that they can learn to summarize information and develop persuasive arguments and reasoning skills.[2]
- Add coursework in career and technical training that is relevant to the world of work so that students who are not on the academic track to college can receive training that will benefit them beyond high school.[33]
- Offer work experience through multiple options, including programs that provide technical curricula in addition to academic curricula; partnerships with area businesses that offer workplace experience and even summer or permanent employment to students upon completion of the curriculum.[23]
- Connect standard high school curricula more directly with workforce needs, and provide students with an understanding of how specific topics and skills are used in the world of work.[31]
- Organize classes around themes that are relevant to life beyond high school.[30] (Internships could be organized around such themes as well).

Increase support to students

- Broaden the role of guidance counselors to provide information and guidance on career planning in addition to preparation for college.
    - Provide students interested in career and technical training with information on community college training programs or certificate programs in a specific trade.
- Pair students with mentors to help develop interpersonal skills and identify career interests and opportunities.[10,22,26,33,37] Mentors can help foster leadership, communication, and social skills.[50]

- Encourage at-risk students to participate in transition or transfer programs that lead to the completion of a regular high school diploma rather than a GED. Research demonstrates that those with a high school diploma have long-term advantages, including social skills, that employers value over those with a GED.[21]
- Implement positive mental health training and self-assessment tools so that students can learn how be resilient in a changing job market.
- Help foster a sense of positive self-esteem by providing opportunities to explore interests, develop leadership, meet one's goals, and obtain skills training.[4,36]

Offer a variety of activities

- Organize civic engagement opportunities that can help students develop leadership skills, communication skills, and interpersonal skills, such as tolerance and the ability to work with diverse populations.[51]
- Provide opportunities for career exploration by offering apprenticeships, internships, and job shadowing partnerships.[49]
- Coordinate job fairs so students can learn what types of jobs are available in the community and can develop their interviewing skills.

When students are able to learn about topics and acquire skills that are relevant to work, when they have supportive adults guiding them, and when they are given opportunities to explore different careers, they are more likely to succeed in the workplace.[14,29,33,48]

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Chart of Key Competencies Across Three Fields:
Healthy Youth Development, College Readiness, and Workforce Readiness

This chart shows each competency mentioned in the report and whether research identifies the competency as critical to healthy youth development, college readiness, or workforce readiness. The order is the same as is mentioned in the report, and it does not imply level of importance. A scale of High, Medium, and Low has been used to identify the extent and strength of research for each competency. Blank spaces in this chart show that no research mentioning that competency was found, not that the competency is unnecessary. Page numbers indicate where the competency is discussed in the report.

Legend: Number of icons indicates the prominence of the competency in the research.

🍎 Low (1 or 2 references)   🍎🍎 Medium (1 or 2 high-level reports + references)   🍎🍎🍎 High (several high-level reports + references)

🍎 = Healthy Youth Development   🎓 = College Readiness   💼 = Workforce Readiness

HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT	COLLEGE READINESS	WORKFORCE READINESS
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT	**PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT**	**PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT**
COMPETENCY — PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH	COMPETENCY — PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH	COMPETENCY — PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Healthy Habits 🍎🍎🍎		**Managing One's Health** 💼
Avoiding Risk Behavior 🍎🍎🍎		**Avoiding Risk Behavior** 💼
Physical Safety 🍎🍎		**Workplace Safety** 💼
Kinesthetic Ability 🍎		
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT	**PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT**	**PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT**
Positive Mental Health 🍎🍎🍎		
Self-Esteem 🍎🍎	**Self-Esteem** 🎓	**Self-Esteem** 💼💼
Positive Identity 🍎🍎🍎		
High Expectations Optimism, Planfulness 🍎🍎🍎	**High Expectations** High Achievement Motivation 🎓🎓🎓	**High Expectations** Optimism, Planfulness 💼💼💼
Resilience, Flexibility 🍎🍎🍎		**Resilience, Flexibility** 💼💼
Self-management Motivation, Autonomy Initiative 🍎🍎🍎	**Self-management** Motivation, Persistence, Initiative, Time management 🎓🎓🎓	**Self-management** Motivation, Autonomy, Initiative, Responsibility, Time Management 💼💼💼
Decision Making, Good Judgments 🍎		**Decision Making, Good Work Ethic** 💼💼💼
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT	**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**	**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**
Character 🍎🍎🍎		**Integrity** 💼💼
Communication Skills 🍎	**Communication Skills** 🎓🎓	**Communication Skills** 💼💼💼
Oral Communication Skills 🍎	**Oral Communication Skills** 🎓	**Oral Communication Skills** 💼💼💼

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HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Using Communication Tools Effectively	🍎🍎
Social Competence	🍎🍎🍎
Conflict Resolution	🍎🍎
Cross-Cultural Competency	🍎🍎
Ability to Adapt to Different Situations	🍎🍎
Acting Appropriately in Larger Context	🍎🍎
Social Support	🍎🍎🍎
Prosocial Behaviors	🍎🍎🍎

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Academic Achievement	🍎🍎

COLLEGE READINESS

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Effective Written Communication	🎓🎓🎓
Using Communication Tools Effectively	🎓
Social Competence	🎓
Conflict Resolution	🎓
Cross-Cultural Competency	🎓🎓
Acting Appropriately in Larger Context	🎓🎓
Social Support	🎓🎓🎓
Engagement in School	🎓🎓🎓

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Academic Achievement	🎓🎓🎓
Rigorous Coursework	🎓🎓🎓
High-level Math Courses including Algebra II and especially Calculus	🎓🎓🎓
Advanced Science Courses	🎓🎓
4 Years of High School English	🎓🎓

WORKFORCE READINESS

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Quantitative Communication Skills	💼💼
Persuasiveness, Appropriately Contributing to Group	💼
Ability to Assist, Teach Others	💼💼
Listening Skills	💼💼💼
Effective Written Communication	💼💼💼
Using Communication Tools Effectively	💼💼
Social Competence	💼💼💼
Conflict Resolution, Cooperation	💼💼💼
Cross-Cultural Competency	💼💼💼
Understand US Norms, Democracy, and Race Discrimination	💼💼
Ability to Adapt to Different Situations	💼💼
Acting Appropriately in Larger Context	💼💼💼
Engagement in Work	💼
Prosocial Behaviors	💼

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Achievement on Employer Exams	💼💼
Rigorous Coursework	💼
4 Years High School Math including Algebra II, Geometry, Statistics	💼💼💼
Advanced Science Courses	💼
4 Years of High School English	💼💼

HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Educational Attainment	🍎
Lifelong Learning Skills	🍎🍎
Use Knowledge, Information and Technology Interactively	🍎🍎
Creativity	🍎
Critical Thinking	🍎🍎
Problem-solving Skills	🍎🍎

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Spirituality	🍎🍎
Sense of Purpose	🍎🍎
Religiosity	🍎🍎🍎

COLLEGE READINESS

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Understand Research	🎓🎓
Language, Grammar Skills	🎓🎓
Attaining a High School Diploma	🎓🎓🎓
Lifelong Learning Skills, Inquisitiveness	🎓
Use Knowledge, Information and Technology Interactively	🎓🎓
Analysis, Evaluative and Critical Thinking	🎓🎓🎓
Problem-solving Skills	🎓🎓
Reasoning, Argumentation	🎓🎓
Foreign Language Skills	🎓

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Spiritual Development	🎓

WORKFORCE READINESS

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Understand Research and Technical Material	💼💼💼
Language, Grammar Skills	💼
Attaining a High School Diploma or Other Credential	💼💼
Previous Work Experience, Tenure in Workforce	💼💼💼
Quality of Past Employment	💼
Career Planning and Job Search Skills	💼💼💼
Lifelong Learning Skills	💼💼
Use Knowledge, Information and Technology Interactively	💼💼💼
Creativity, Entrepreneurship	💼💼💼
Analysis, Evaluative and Critical Thinking	💼💼💼
Problem-solving Skills	💼💼💼
Reasoning, Argumentation	💼💼💼
Foreign Language Skills	💼

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

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