

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


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Attention has been focused for decades on the need to improve high school students' preparation for the workplace.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> specifically emphasizes that oral as well as written communication skills are required for workplace success.<sup>2,3,7,28,39-42,44</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>47</sup> 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<sup>11,34,35</sup> such as:
  - resolving conflicts;
  - cooperating;
  - working together on a team;
  - understanding and being tolerant of other people and cultures; and
  - working with diverse populations.<sup>12,25,28,44,47</sup>
- Choosing words precisely, being persuasive, and listening.<sup>2</sup>
- 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).<sup>1,20</sup>

This brief draws from the report, *A Developmental Perspective on College and Workplace Readiness*, ([http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends-2008\\_09\\_15\\_FR\\_ReadinessReport.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2008_09_15_FR_ReadinessReport.pdf)) by Laura Lippman, Astrid Atienza, Andrew Rivers, and Julie Keith of Child Trends, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The report summarizes and compares competencies that researchers across three fields have found are necessary to be ready for college, the workplace, and a successful transition to adulthood. It applies a developmental framework to recommendations from each field that reveals where those recommendations fall short, from a developmental perspective, and how they could be strengthened. It also highlights competencies that are particularly salient for students with specific challenges, and effective ways that schools could support their development. A chart of key competencies across fields is included (the citations for each of these competencies are found in the full report).

## 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.<sup>16,27</sup> 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.<sup>2, 29</sup>

Employers often look for job-specific skills and competencies that suggest a person would be a dependable worker.<sup>16,24,27</sup> 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;<sup>3,8,15,16,18,19,24,39,44,46,49</sup>
- The ability to use technology;<sup>40,41,43-45,47</sup> and
- Critical thinking/problem solving skills.<sup>41</sup>

## Psychological Development

Mental health is a key asset in the workplace.<sup>7,39,43,44,47</sup> Reports of high levels of depression and anxiety found in the workplace<sup>17</sup> 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;<sup>7</sup>
- Optimism and planfulness;
- Coping skills, resilience and flexibility;
- Good judgment;<sup>8,9,13,33,34,39,40,43,44,47,49</sup>
- Self-management, such as motivation, autonomy, initiative, responsibility, time management;<sup>39,47</sup> and
- Moral development, such as a strong work ethic, reliability, honesty, integrity, and professionalism.<sup>3,6,16,32,40,41,43,44,47</sup>

## 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-related courses.<sup>44</sup>
- 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.<sup>2</sup>
  - Assign oral presentations to students so that they can learn to summarize information and develop persuasive arguments and reasoning skills.<sup>2</sup>
- 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.<sup>33</sup>
- 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.<sup>23</sup>
- 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.<sup>31</sup>
- Organize classes around themes that are relevant to life beyond high school.<sup>30</sup> (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.<sup>10,22,26,33,37</sup> Mentors can help foster leadership, communication, and social skills.<sup>50</sup>

- 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.<sup>21</sup>
- Implement positive mental health training and self-assessment tools so that students can learn how to 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.<sup>4,36</sup>

### 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.<sup>51</sup>
- Provide opportunities for career exploration by offering apprenticeships, internships, and job shadowing partnerships.<sup>49</sup>
- 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.<sup>14,29,33,48</sup>

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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	
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT	
COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Healthy Habits	
Avoiding Risk Behavior	
Physical Safety	
Kinesthetic Ability	
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT	
Positive Mental Health	
Self-Esteem	
Positive Identity	
High Expectations Optimism, Planfulness	
Resilience, Flexibility	
Self-management Motivation, Autonomy Initiative	
Decision Making, Good Judgments	
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT	
Character	
Communication Skills	
Oral Communication Skills	










COLLEGE READINESS	
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT	
COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT	
Self-Esteem	
High Expectations High Achievement Motivation	
Self-management Motivation, Persistence, Initiative, Time management	
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT	
Communication Skills	
Oral Communication Skills	











WORKFORCE READINESS	
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT	
COMPETENCY	PROMINENCE IN RESEARCH
Managing One's Health	
Avoiding Risk Behavior	
Workplace Safety	
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT	
Self-Esteem	
High Expectations Optimism, Planfulness	
Resilience, Flexibility	
Self-management Motivation, Autonomy, Initiative, Responsibility, Time Management	
Decision Making, Good Work Ethic	
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT	
Integrity	
Communication Skills	
Oral Communication Skills	

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	
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	
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	
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	