

A Developmental Perspective for High School Practitioners On College and Workplace Readiness



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What skills and competencies do high school students need to master for future success? And what can high schools do to develop these skills? Research on skills has tended to focus either on college readiness or on workplace readiness, often in isolation and frequently without reference to what the broader field of youth development tells us every young person needs to make a successful transition to adulthood. Additionally, the emphasis has been on cognitive skills, and on how students, particularly those with challenges, leave high school intellectually unprepared for college or work. There has been less focus on the specific competencies, including non-cognitive skills, which are necessary to foster that preparation. This brief draws on research across the three fields of college readiness, workplace readiness, and youth development, to identify strategies high schools can employ to foster both cognitive and non-cognitive competencies in their students, and highlights practices that are particularly effective for students facing specific challenges.

Gaps in Current High School Curricula

Many skills and competencies needed for success in college, the workplace and adult life are

not commonly addressed in current school curricula. Students often do not receive sufficient instruction to help them develop the following skills and competencies:

- problem-solving/ critical thinking and reasoning;
- healthy habits and avoiding risky behaviors;
- self-management and other learning and motivational strategies;
- a strong work ethic;
- social competencies such as communication, conflict resolution, and understanding other cultures;
- a strong moral character (for example, being an ethical person or having integrity).

In this era of high-stakes testing, expanding curricula is difficult, especially when the additional areas do not focus directly on academic subjects. Yet the research base is quite clear and strong: **When these competencies are developed, students do better on the cognitive tasks of high school, as well as on long-term outcomes of college and the workplace.**

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) 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).

What High Schools Can Do

High schools do not need to create additional curricula, but rather, they can modify curricula to help students attain these skills. Here are some examples:

- Design courses so that students learn to reason and solve problems at the same time that they learn the basics.¹⁴
- Teach self-management and learning strategies at the beginning of the school year and review each semester.
- Make character education and multi-cultural education an integrated part of class work.
- Offer opportunities to develop communication and leadership skills, and opportunities to work in diverse groups during classes.
- Integrate civic engagement experiences, such as community service projects, into the curriculum.
- Teach students safe and healthy behaviors through positive programs in which they are engaged in building relationships and in activities that foster skill attainment. Programs that teach positive skills are also effective in reducing risky behavior such as teen pregnancy and drug and alcohol use, while didactic programs that provide information, or programs that employ scare tactics about negative behaviors, are not effective.³⁵

Programs and Practices for Special Populations

Some programs and practices are particularly effective in helping special populations of students overcome readiness challenges.

Low-income and minority youth

- Placing and supporting low-income and minority students in rigorous classes such as Advanced Placement,³⁰ cited in 28 as well as avoiding special education classes,¹⁰ as cited in 4 will help to prepare them for postsecondary education.

- High-quality college counseling (including sharing information on college costs and strategies for managing them), as well as career and vocational planning can help at-risk students set high expectations for themselves, develop the skills to plan and keep themselves accountable to reach those goals.²¹ Gender- and culturally-specific counseling and teaching is particularly helpful.
- Mentoring programs may increase academic motivation and school attendance and reduce problem behavior among low-income and minority youth,^{5,18,34} as well as encourage students to consider postsecondary educational opportunities.¹³ Same-sex mentors may serve as positive male role models for young men.^{22,26}
- School-to-work programs such as internships and career counseling can help students become oriented to the adult world, and may facilitate a smooth transition to the workforce.^{3,15,21}
- Students can benefit from greater access and training to bridge technological gaps that exist in some schools in low-income communities.²⁹

English language learners

- Classes that are tailored to specific levels of skill in speaking English and in academic subjects can help ELL students progress faster. Simultaneous teaching in English and a native language is beneficial when English language learners are just beginning to learn English.^{1,2,6,9,24,27,32}
- For workplace readiness, English language learners tend to benefit from learning about American culture, including workplace norms and expectations.³¹

Disconnected youth, disabled youth, foster youth and sexual minority youth

- Job training and vocational education can help prevent students from dropping out of school⁸ and help improve adult outcomes for foster youth¹⁹ and students with disabilities.^{17,32}

- Students with disabilities do better over time when, if possible, they earn a high school diploma,^{16,33} and when they are provided help with planning their transition to college or the workforce.^{16,17,23} They can also benefit from special coursework that helps them develop basic and social skills.¹²
- Disconnected youth need alternative diploma-based or GED programs with a social skills component. Many students who earn a GED lack the social skills that employers seek.¹¹ Building and assessing these non-cognitive skills in addition to, or as part of, a GED course can help dropouts succeed in the job market.⁷
- Some factors that help foster youth become more successful adults include: participating in clubs while in foster care, earning a high school diploma or GED before leaving care, receiving a scholarship for college or job training, and receiving life skills training.²⁰
- Sexual minority youth who attend schools with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender support groups are more involved in their schools²⁵ and report lower rates of victimization and suicide attempts than those in other schools.⁷

Conclusion

In addition to academic skills, a variety of psychological and social skills are vital to success in college, the workplace, and a healthy transition to adulthood. Schools can help their students by incorporating many of these skills into their curricula, through lessons, for example, in self-management and learning and motivational strategies. Special populations of youth can benefit from programs like mentoring and school-to-work training that are targeted to the academic, psychological and social skills they need in order to overcome readiness challenges. There are many competencies that youth need to succeed in college, the workforce, and the transition to adulthood. Existing high school

programs and practices can play an important role in developing these competencies in their students.

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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	