

Soft Skills Development in K-12 Education

Research Brief

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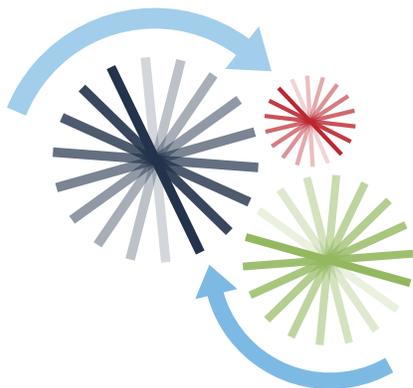
As the national conversation on education turns more and more toward college and career readiness, there is increasing attention to the role of soft skills in preparing students for postsecondary success. While cognitive measures such as high school GPA and standardized test scores are strong predictors of future success, an academic focus alone cannot fully prepare students for the demands of postsecondary education and the workforce.ⁱ So what is the current thinking about the role of the public education system in developing students' soft skills? This brief considers how mastery of soft skills is related to students' college and career readiness and explores examples of how school leaders have taken steps to integrate instruction and practice of soft skills into the curriculum in elementary and high school.

What are soft skills and why are they important?

In an increasingly diverse and globalized job market, college and career readiness has become a buzzword in education conversations at the national, state, and local levels. Low high school graduation rates, along with high rates of postsecondary remediation and attrition, have contributed to educators, policymakers, and citizens expressing concern about the quality of students' preparation for postsecondary success. Conventional views on the mission of public education in the U.S. have defined the task of preparing students for college and the workforce as primarily an academic one. However, the pace at which the economic and career landscapes are shifting suggests a more thoughtful and balanced approach to education is required to ensure that all students graduate from high school with both rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge successfully.

Studies show that equipping young people with skills *beyond* academic mastery opens the door to increased postsecondary opportunities and, by extension, expands their ability to participate long-term in the national, state, and local economy.ⁱⁱ Given the growing demand for a more prepared and skilled workforce, it comes as no surprise that the business community has devoted attention to assessing the range of skills students need to succeed in the modern workplace.ⁱⁱⁱ In *Are They Really Ready for Work?* (2006), over 400 employers from across the U.S. were surveyed to gauge their perspectives on which skill sets new entrants – regardless of educational attainment levels – need to succeed. The report revealed that soft skills are of increasing importance in terms of success in the 21st century workplace. In fact, findings indicated that respondents ranked the relative importance of skills such as *professionalism* and *collaboration* higher than those more academic in nature such as *reading comprehension* and *mathematics*.^{iv}

But what exactly are soft skills? Also referred to as “non-cognitive,” “employability,” and “dispositional” skills, these “softer” skills generally range from the ability to function interpersonally and communicatively to the capacity to lead effectively and make ethical and moral decisions.^v Broad skills areas typically include:



- Attitude
- Coachability
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Initiative
- Persistence
- Problem Solving
- Professionalism
- Self-discipline
- Teamwork
- Time Management
- Work Ethic^{vi}

While this list is not exhaustive, it does provide a glimpse into the types of skills young people need to be better prepared for postsecondary success. Yet, experts report that far too many students are leaving high school and entering college and the workforce lacking these essential skills.^{vii} So what efforts are being made to bring preparation in K-12 into closer alignment with postsecondary expectations?

How are some states advancing soft skills development as part of college and career readiness?

More and more states have begun advocating the integration of soft skills into the K-12 curriculum.^{viii} Virginia, for instance, adopted Workplace Readiness Skills (WRS), drawing on research conducted at the Weldon Cooper Center at the University of Virginia. These 21 essential workplace readiness skills are required by the Virginia Department of Education to be taught as a part of all Career and Technical Education courses across the state.^{ix} Within the context of these state-identified skills for students' postsecondary success, Virginia's schools and teachers retain creative license in determining how to incorporate the skills into the curriculum.^x

In Georgia, soft skills became a prominent topic of discussion after the passage of HB 186 during the 2011-2012 legislative session. The bill targeted high school graduates' college and career readiness, and included a provision that would allow high school students to earn a certificate in soft skills. As outlined in the bill, the certification process would promote, "but not be limited to, skills relating to punctuality, ability to learn, and ability to work in a team, as a discrete and complementary component to the current assessment system utilized in Georgia."^{xi} This policy was welcomed by educators, business leaders, civic leaders, and government officials across the state who had voiced concerns about deficiencies among younger job seekers, including punctuality and poor communications skills.^{xii} Additionally, due to Georgia's recent ESEA flexibility waiver and the trajectory of its newly adopted College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), soft skills could become a growing part of the public school curriculum. The challenge, of course, is identifying the most efficient and effective strategies for incorporating soft skills into students' learning experiences.

What are some ways to embed soft skills into the K-12 curriculum?

Until recently, the trend among college and career readiness advocates had been to focus exclusively on preparation at the high school level. But the P-20 agenda reframes all schooling, from pre-school to primary to middle grades as establishing key foundations that prepare students for postsecondary success. Hence, the development of soft skills, like academic skills, requires a life-long approach to maximize opportunities for these skills to be practiced, refined, and refreshed over time. Finding examples of well-established K-12 programs that explicitly incorporate soft skills is not easy. The examples on the next page offer insights into how one elementary school and one high school are exploring this new frontier.

· Elementary School Focus ·

Who: Spring Hill Elementary School in Fayetteville, GA adopted Franklin Covey's *The Leader in Me* program in August of 2011 with the assistance of school leadership, staff, and parents. The impetus for this program stemmed from teachers' and parents' frustration with the one-dimensional nature of students' in-school experiences, as they mostly revolved around assessments and test scores. The plan was to identify a soft skills program that would round out the students' learning.

How: After consulting with parents and staff about their desire to broaden students' educational experiences to include learning that shaped the "whole child," school leadership set out to find a soft skills program that not only aligned with the school's core values, but also met the developmental needs of its elementary students. The school adopted *The Leader In Me* program, which is based on Stephen Covey's bestselling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The entire teaching staff attended a four-day training workshop facilitated by Franklin Covey to help teachers learn about the seven habits and generate ideas about incorporating them into their instructional strategies. School leaders and teachers constantly model the seven habits and embed the habits into student learning experiences. For example, an art instructor who wants her students to demonstrate their understanding of what it means to synergize (one of the seven habits) may ask her students to illustrate the difference in outcomes when people work together rather than alone. While the school is working on more sophisticated tools to measure students' growth in soft skills, it currently relies on an annual student survey and anecdotal feedback from parents, teachers, and students as indicators of progress.

Lessons Learned: Spring Hill has learned several powerful lessons in the two years since employing *The Leader in Me* program. One of the most important lessons was that taking a ground-up approach and including parents and staff during the process of identifying and implementing the soft skills program helped ensure its successful adoption. An equally powerful lesson, said Spring Hill's principal Randy Hudson, was learning to trust the kids, abandoning our preconceived notions of children's limitations and realizing "that kids can achieve almost anything if we give them the tools and opportunities to demonstrate their abilities."^{xiii}

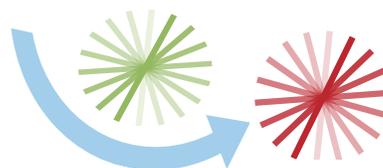
· High School Focus ·

Who: Plymouth High School in Plymouth, Wisconsin launched a soft skills program two years ago as a way to enhance its academic instruction and the integrity of its grading practices. School leaders initiated an assessment system that provided students feedback on academic performance and separately, student conduct. Academically, students would be assessed according to the state standards. Their conduct would be assessed according to a 4-point soft skills rubric divided into four assessment areas: collaboration, respect, initiative, and work habits

How: To determine the parameters of the soft skills grading rubric, school leaders established a working group of community stakeholders, particularly businesses like Sargento and Johnsonville, to identify gaps in employees' skills and to solicit their feedback on the school's decision to separate academic and soft skills assessments. Working with business partners, Plymouth identified four areas to include in the rubric, developing each assessment area around the in-house language of the contributing businesses. Rather than adopt a separate curriculum, the principal and teachers decided to embed the soft skills instruction into the day-to-day activities and assignments of each course with the understanding that the expectations for teaching and learning soft skills were the same across the school, even if instructional methods from one class to the next were different. Practically, this meant that a math instructor teaching students the importance of initiative may assess her students' willingness to assist fellow classmates who may be struggling with a concept, whereas the shop instructor may assess his students' grasp of initiative according to their willingness to participate. Even when the language or the practical aspects of teaching a soft skill differ, the expectation that students will learn each skill is consistent. At the culmination of the semester, students receive a numerical soft skills grade on their report card for each class, ranging from one to four. To add even more practical value to students' soft skills grade, Plymouth High School forged agreements with local businesses that require the review of Plymouth High School students' report cards as a part of the hiring protocol.

Lessons Learned: Plymouth High School has been successful in its implementation of its soft skills curriculum and the principal reports two valuable lessons learned. The first is that partnering with the business community is an ongoing challenge. The personnel turnover at many local businesses makes it difficult to sustain any progress the school and businesses make together. The second is that helping students connect their in-school soft skills training to the realities of the workplace is difficult. Whereas Plymouth students understand soft skills on a basic level, they are sometimes unable to connect the value of those skills to their college and career goals. Consequently, many students do not perceive soft skills training as being equally valuable as their academic training.^{xiv}

The above examples showcase two experiments with implementing soft skills across grade levels and in a variety of contexts. It is too early to determine the outcomes of these programs, but their experiences offer other school leaders ideas for reaching students in a unique way to develop those soft skills deemed most vital to students' college and career readiness.



Tips to Consider

- Frame soft skills as complementing rather than competing with academic skills (often referred to as “technical” or “hard” skills).
- Expect teachers and school leaders to model the soft skills that students will be taught to demonstrate as a key step toward a successful soft skills initiative.
- Define shared expectations among teachers for how soft skills are defined and what to look for in student performance, giving teachers autonomy to create classroom experiences and assignments.
- Create opportunities for teachers to share classroom innovations and best practices in integrating soft skills into the curriculum, particularly when it comes to strategies that help students connect the dots between soft skills and future opportunities.
- Enlist external stakeholder groups in expecting and reinforcing soft skills/behaviors when students are away from the school setting.

Key Questions for District Office Leaders

- Can we identify champions in the local business community that will collaborate with us on providing real world examples of how soft skills link with future career opportunities, especially for high school students?
- How do we model soft skills mastery, as leaders, and do we expect our teachers to model soft skills?
- Do we provide soft skills training for our teachers and parents?
- Do we have a strategic communications plan for raising awareness about the adoption and roll-out of the new initiative?
- Have we developed a process for monitoring and assessing students’ mastery of soft skills?

Soft skills are a valuable component of a well-balanced K-12 experience and, as research suggests, are a distinguishing factor impacting the probability of student success in college and the workforce. Just as college and career readiness initiatives span the K-12 spectrum, soft skills development programs can be integrated successfully into the curriculum of high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to incorporating soft skills into students’ learning experiences, schools seem to find success when they embed the soft skills materials in the curriculum and integrate those skills with academic coursework, and when they are able to secure buy-in from their internal and external stakeholders. This means that soft skills become as central to a students’ school day as math, science, or language arts. This also means that teachers and school leaders will work toward an understanding of soft skills not only as a means of reinforcing the ideas and concepts the students are learning, but also as a means of growing and developing into more effective education leaders.^{xv}

ⁱ Conley, D. (2010). *College and career ready: Helping all students succeed beyond high school*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Sommerfeld, A. (Fall 2011). Recasting non-cognitive factors in college readiness as what they truly are: non-academic factors. *Journal of College Admission*, 213, 18-22.

ⁱⁱ Association for Career and Technical Education. (2010). *What is “career ready”?* Alexandria, VA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.acteonline.org/uploadedFiles/Publications_and_Online_Media/files/Career_Readiness_Paper_COLOR.pdf; See, for example, *Critical skills needs and resources for the changing workforce*. (2008) available at: <http://www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Articles/Documents/Critical%20Skills%20Needs%20and%20Resources%20for%20the%20Changing%20Workforce%20Survey%20Report.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ America’s Promise Alliance. (2006). *Every child, every promise: Turning failure into action*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

^{iv} Casner-Lotto, J. & Barrington, L. (2006). *Are they really ready to work?* The Conference Board: New York.

^v Jain, V. (2009, February). Importance of soft skills development in education. School of Educators. Retrieved from <http://schoolofeducators.com/2009/02/importance-of-soft-skills-development-in-education>

^{vi} Casner-Lotto, J. & Barrington, L. (2006). *Are they really ready to work?* The Conference Board: New York; Southeast Michigan Council of Government. (2012, April). *Lifelong soft skills framework: Creating a workforce that works*. Detroit, MI: Author.

^{vii} America’s Promise Alliance (2006). *Every child, every promise: Turning failure into action*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

^{viii} ConnectEd. (2012, January 7). *College and career readiness: What do we mean? A proposed framework*. Berkeley, CA: The California Center for College and Career.

^{ix} *Workplace Readiness Skills (WRS) for the Commonwealth: The Virginia model, frequently asked questions*. Retrieved from http://www.ctere-source.org/attachments/atb/WRSRepositoryFiles/WRSFAQ_final.pdf

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} House Bill 186 (2011)

^{xii} Tagami, T. (2011, September 2). Georgia high schools to teach work place “soft skills.” *AJC.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/local/georgia-high-schools-to-teach-work-place-soft-skill/nQLPt/>

^{xiii} R. Hudson (personal communication, April 29, 2013; May 1, 2013)

^{xiv} D. Mella (personal communication, March 18, 2013).

^{xv} Drago-Severson, E. (2012). *Helping educators grow: Strategies and practices for leadership development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education

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