

White Paper

Who Will Succeed in Tomorrow's Job Market?

Bridging the Soft Skills Gap for a More Equitable Talent Pipeline

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A decorative graphic on the left side of the page consists of a 10x4 grid of squares. Most squares are in various shades of blue and grey. A few squares are highlighted in other colors: a bright blue square at row 3, column 3; an orange square at row 3, column 4; a yellow square at row 4, column 3; a light green square at row 6, column 2; and a dark blue square at row 7, column 1.

About this Paper

Urban Alliance is a national youth development nonprofit that partners with schools and employers to provide paid internships, professional soft skills training, one-on-one mentoring, and ongoing post-program support to economically-disadvantaged high school students. The goal is to expand young people's idea of what is possible for their futures and prepare them for lives of economic self-sufficiency. Founded in Washington, DC in 1996, Urban Alliance has since expanded to Baltimore, Chicago, Northern Virginia, and most recently, Detroit. To date, Urban Alliance has placed more than 5,000 students in paid internships and served another 20,000-plus through job skills training.

Urban Alliance has a long track record of improving post-high school outcomes for youth from underserved communities. A six-year study conducted by the Urban Institute found that completing Urban Alliance's High School Internship Program had a measurable impact on young men attending college, mid-GPA students enrolling in four-year colleges, and students' development and retention of professional soft skills. 100 percent of Urban Alliance students also graduate from high school, and over 90 percent are accepted to college. A further 80 percent of enrolled alumni continue to a second year in college, and 80 percent of all alumni are connected to a college, career, or career-training pathway one year post-program.

In 2018, Urban Alliance released 'Job Training Starts Now: Why High School Students Need Youth Employment Opportunities,' which highlighted challenges and solutions related to preventing youth disconnection from school and work. That white paper touched on the role of soft skills development as part of a larger set of youth workforce development strategies. This second paper takes a deeper look at this critical set of skills and how schools, businesses, and community organizations can work together to ensure that all young people leave high school equipped with a robust set of soft skills that will meet the needs of 21st century employers.

The world of work is changing rapidly.

Evidence of this change is everywhere. Automation, artificial intelligence, and other new technologies are disrupting industries at a breakneck pace. In the last decade, the ways society watches movies, commutes, shops, and more have shifted radically, leading not only to the decline of some more traditional jobs, but also the creation of new ones. In the next decade, both automation and artificial intelligence (AI) will have a significant impact on the nature of work and the skills required. The World Economic Forum estimates that as soon as 2022, automation will displace 75 million

jobs – but create 133 million jobs, leaving a net 58 million new jobs for workers.¹ Partly as a result of these changes, the number of jobs held in a lifetime has nearly doubled over the last 20 years according to LinkedIn data,² and with as many as 375 million workers projected to change jobs by 2030, that number is likely to increase.³

Preparing young people to succeed in an environment where many of the jobs of the future don't yet exist is a challenge for schools, businesses, and students alike.



Who Will Succeed in Tomorrow's Job Market?

Predictions of the trends in skill demand over the next 10 to 15 years indicate that digital skills and advanced technological skills such as programming will be needed for a far larger percentage of jobs than is true today. Just as important – though perhaps less expected – is the predicted increase in the need for **soft skills** – the uniquely human skills that allow for adaptability and success in any workplace.

To survive and thrive in a rapidly-changing job market, workers will need these transferable soft skills – skills that will enable them to succeed regardless of industry or sector and to effectively move from job to job.

While technical skills continue to change in both predictable and unpredictable ways, the most elemental human-to-human skills (e.g. soft skills) will remain constant.

The ability to work in teams, effectively communicate, and work collaboratively are essential to any successful company with human employees – and they are skills that have not yet been automated, and by most estimates, will not be any time soon. Those who develop them will find success despite the uncertain job market. However, **access and exposure to soft skills training and development is not equitably distributed across all income and demographic groups.**

Without deliberate and specific intervention from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, too many young people will be ill-prepared for employment opportunities, creating not just a loss of individual human capital and an increase in income inequality, but also a surfeit of unfilled jobs impacting businesses' bottom lines.

What are Soft Skills?

Soft skills are the uniquely human set of skills that allow for success in school, the workplace, and beyond. Soft skills facilitate various educational, professional, and personal interactions and environments. Depending on the source, soft skills may be referred to as social and emotional skills, employability skills, 21st century skills, or interpersonal skills, but for the purposes of this paper, "soft skills" refers to all the above.

Though varied and expansive, soft skill competencies remain relatively constant among businesses, human resources professionals, career advisors, educators, and researchers.

While there is some variation, the following commonly appear in lists of core soft skills:^{4 5 6 7}

- Adaptability
- Ability to Accept Constructive Criticism
- Communication (Oral Communication/ Active Listening/Non-verbal Communication)
- Conflict Management
- Critical Thinking
- Interpersonal Skills
- Problem-Solving
- Self-Control/Emotional Self-Management
- Self-Motivation
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Time Management and Organization

The Value of Soft Skills

“We now have very hard evidence that you have to have soft skills in order to succeed.”

– James Heckman, Nobel Prize-winning economist⁸

A preponderance of research shows that soft skills are critical for success.

A 2017 Deloitte report notes that having well-developed soft skills is now a recognized pathway for individuals to improve their chances at getting a job, and that there is increasing recognition that soft skills lead to greater success on the job.⁹ In fact, research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Center concluded that 85 percent of job success comes from having well-developed soft skills and only 15 percent of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge.¹⁰

When more individuals succeed academically and professionally, it results in collective success for both businesses and schools. Strong soft skills development creates this kind of win-win situation.

In the Workplace

In a key 2018 report on automation and the future of the workforce, the McKinsey Global Institute noted that “accompanying the adoption of advanced technologies into the workplace will be an increase in the need for workers with finely-tuned social and emotional skills [soft skills]—skills that machines are a long way from mastering.”¹¹ As businesses drive change toward using all available technologies to improve efficiency and competitiveness, this shift will bring other changes in how work is organized. The McKinsey report predicts a widespread

move toward cross-functional and team-based work structures, which will require workers to have strong soft skills.¹² Further, a 2017 Deloitte Access Economics analysis projected that the number of jobs in soft-skill-intensive occupations will grow at 2.5 times the rate of jobs in other occupations. They forecast that soft-skill-intensive occupations will account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030.¹³ Therefore, those employees equipped with strong soft skills are set up to succeed in this shifting economy.

In fact, companies are already clamoring for employees with strong soft skills. A Wall Street Journal executive survey found that 92% said soft skills were equally important or more important than technical skills.¹⁴ A 2019 CareerBuilder survey similarly found that four out of five hiring and HR managers rate soft skills as being of equal or greater importance than hard skills.¹⁵

When skilled employees are set up to do well, it positively impacts companies' bottom lines. In the Deloitte Access Economics study, a survey of over 1,000 managers and employees found that employees who have and utilize teamwork skills (a commonly-cited soft skill) are 3% more productive, and worth almost \$2,000 more per year to a business than employees without such skills. The report cited additional studies showing that soft skills contribute to higher revenue, productivity, and profitability, across industries and countries.¹⁶ This result is due to reduced costs in recruitment, training time, and employee turnover, and improved employee performance on bottom-line business metrics, such as higher sales and better customer service, a finding replicated by a Youth Employment Funders Group report.¹⁷

Soft Skills Can Be Taught

While it was once assumed that soft skills were innate traits that an individual either possessed or did not, it is now understood that these are indeed skills that can be learned by anyone, provided they are taught and developed effectively and intentionally, most often through a process known as social and emotional learning (SEL). Much research has been done to understand how this learning takes place, and how it can be enhanced for maximum effectiveness.

Soft skills development takes place through both formal and informal processes. In both cases, the core elements of the learning process are the same: Observation; Practice; Feedback/ Coaching; Reflection and Adaptation; and Spaced Repetition.

SEL describes an educational approach that informs how learning best happens in young people. SEL is not a stand-alone curriculum. Instead, it is a holistic approach to learning that takes into account a young person's emotions,

environment, and relationships. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, defines SEL as “a process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”¹⁸

By leveraging neuroscience, psychology, and social science, we are now understanding that students learn best when they develop a set of foundational competencies. These competencies are social, emotional, and cognitive skills – or soft skills. They can be both explicitly taught and developed through a learning environment that is rooted in relationships, settings, and contexts.¹⁹

With SEL, the how of learning and development matters just as much as the what. The research on the benefits of SEL is well-established and is shown to develop soft skills and career readiness outcomes.

The unpredictability of future hard skills versus the certainty that soft skills will be needed even more than today may signal that soft skills training is the lower risk/higher reward strategy for business investment in workforce capacity.

In Schools

Students with strong soft skills not only further their own future success in the workplace, but their overall academic performance improves as well.

The field of K-12 education is currently experiencing a large shift, as schools are under a mandate to prepare students for both college

and careers before high school graduation. The dominant call for students to be both “college and career ready” over the past decade has led state and local school authorities to begin rethinking their understanding of what a high school diploma should mean, spurred on by both the federal government (through initiatives like the Common Core State Standards and the Every Student Succeeds Act) and state education agencies, requiring for the first time that all U.S. schools teach to high academic standards that will prepare students to succeed in college and beyond.²⁰ According to Education Week's Chance-for-Success index measuring how well schools are preparing students for post-secondary success, there is still a long way to go in meeting that goal.²¹

An important development is the consensus that has emerged in recent years among the academic and research communities that in addition to academic skills, schools should also be developing the skills foundational to learning, i.e. students' cognitive, social, and emotional competencies, or soft skills. This shift requires expanding our understanding of learning beyond *what* is learned to also include *how* it is learned.

The Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD) released a landmark report in 2019 utilizing research from psychology, brain science, and social science to explain how learning happens for all students. Academic learning, their research says, depends on developing the competencies foundational to learning, or soft skills. In other words, developing these skills helps the academic growth of students. Students who have developed soft skills perform better in school and are more likely to enroll in and graduate from college.

The Youth Employment Funders Group calls for expansion of soft skills development across

the curriculum and school culture so that it is integrated with academic learning rather than neglected or treated as stand-alone. As stated above, adopting this social and emotional learning (SEL) approach can help schools meet academic performance benchmarks as well as the college- and career-ready mandate.

By integrating knowledge-building with soft skill-building, schools can prepare more well-rounded, agile students who can better cope with the challenges and unknowns of the future workplace.

Soft skills development can impact both young people's odds of success academically and economically, as well as businesses' ability to fill hiring gaps. However, schools and businesses are struggling to develop ways to train their graduates and applicants on soft skills. Those training challenges then manifest in a growing skills gap, leaving employers unable to fill millions of open jobs. While some workers are able to bridge this gap, too many are falling through the cracks.



The Problem: The Soft Skills Gap

Businesses are Under-Investing in Soft Skills Training

“Successful businesses understand the importance of working with local schools and organizations to shape the next generation of leaders. Investing in young people is not only a great business practice and a great investment, it’s the right thing to do. At the end of the day, successful organizations and schools have the same goal – development. Companies who develop their team members today are prepared to address tomorrow’s challenges. One challenge we already face is the growing skills gap. If schools and businesses make a conscious effort to build the next generation’s skills now, everybody wins.”

– Dan Ngoyi, Director of Talent Acquisition,
Quicken Loans

Businesses are already encountering difficulties finding workers who possess the strong soft skills and adaptability companies increasingly need. Soft skills dominate the list of most-desired skills by employers in survey after survey – across all industries.^{22 23 24 25 26} With a near record-high number of open jobs in the U.S., the soft skills gap is reason for concern.

A 2015 Wall Street Journal survey of nearly 900 executives found that eight in ten said they have a difficult time finding people with the necessary soft skills, a trend that has not slowed down, with the same share of human resources professionals reporting difficulty in hiring skilled workers in a

2019 Society for Human Resource Management survey.^{27 28} Similarly, in a LinkedIn survey of 291 hiring managers, 58% said the lack of soft skills among job candidates is limiting their company’s productivity.²⁹

Businesses have focused on recruiting for soft skills, but that does not address the larger issue of an overall shortage of workers with these skills. To reduce this shortfall, it will inevitably become necessary for businesses to invest in soft skills training for both current and future workers. The McKinsey report predicts companies will shift toward training, with a mindset that providing continuous learning options for workers is key to their future success.³⁰

To equip more workers with in-demand hard skills, employers are turning to tried-and-true solutions – apprenticeships, training programs, and hands-on technical education – and they’re starting the process early to build a talent pipeline from the ground up. In the last few years, federal funding to expand apprenticeship programs that develop hard skills has been climbing, nearly doubling since 2016. Additionally, employer spending on formal training has similarly increased.³¹ **While businesses have seriously invested in hard skills training, they have not yet made the same commitment to soft skills development.** The large soft skills gap is evidence of both this lack of investment as well as the fact that employers are uncertain of the best strategies for training employees in soft skills.

Unlike hard skills, soft skills are both difficult to screen for and difficult to measure. This one-two punch sets up a larger barrier for entry for employers who recognize the need for soft skills training.

Schools Face Challenges Developing Soft Skills

“The three core categories of skills: social, emotional, and cognitive, can be taught, but schools cannot do this work alone. Young people need opportunities across all the places and spaces they learn from both adults and peers who can teach, model, and create opportunities to practice these critical skills necessary for success in school, the workplace, and our democratic society.”

– Jennifer Brown Lerner, Assistant Director for Policy and Partnerships, The Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

The skills gap is not just a concern for businesses. Young people entering the workforce after high school and college also report feeling unprepared to succeed in employment.

A YouthTruth survey of 165,000 high school students found that less than half felt prepared for college or careers.³² A recent Dell Technologies survey also reported that members of Generation Z – born in the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s – are more confident in their technology skills than their soft skills.³³ Additionally, students who do not develop soft skills in high school are often not catching up in college, only exacerbating the problem. A large majority of college students – two-thirds – report feeling unequipped with both hard and soft skills needed to enter the job market in a recent Gallup/Strada Education Network survey.³⁴

Ensuring that students leave high school with a strong set of soft skills is becoming more important by the day. Yet schools face what can seem like an insurmountable challenge: restructuring learning experiences and the

learning environment to effectively teach and develop soft skills in order to ensure those opportunities are available to all students, regardless of socioeconomic background.

The degree to which young people learn soft skills as part of their K-12 education experience largely depends on the schools' intentionality in instruction. It is well documented that teachers can either explicitly teach or design assignments, projects, and activities that require soft skills such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, or critical thinking to complete. The learning environment is also important. As the Aspen Institute's *A Nation at Hope* reports, soft skills are best developed in environments that feel safe and supportive for the learner. The report argues that schools' ability to create this environment, as well as to offer this kind of intentionally-structured curriculum, can be limited.

There are examples of schools making important progress in adapting their approach to incorporate SEL, helping to prepare young people for an environment in which adaptability and lifelong learning will be critical. However, capacity constraints are still keeping the majority of schools and educators from more fully incorporating SEL approaches in their classrooms. A 2018 report by the Economist Intelligence Unit found that nearly one in eight teachers surveyed believe that schools should be building students' soft skills through SEL, but more than half of those surveyed feel constrained by school budgets from doing so.³⁵

Incorporating SEL in classrooms also requires new types of training and professional development that can be costly and timely to develop. Finally, many schools still see developing soft skills as a stand-alone curriculum or experience that will only come at the expense of teaching core academic subjects, rather than as a framework touching all aspects

of a child's education. While many examples of promising programs exist throughout the country, these barriers will make it difficult for many schools to develop soft skills in their youth over the short term.

Unequal Access to Training Deepens the Soft Skills Gap

“Networking is a soft skill critical to career success—both for finding the next job opportunity and for developing a comprehensive set of interpersonal skills that allow for achievement in any workplace. That’s why at LinkedIn we are focused on closing the network gap—the advantage that some people have over others as a result of their connections.”

– Cammie Erickson, Group Manager, Social Impact at LinkedIn

Developing soft skills has a clear, demonstrated impact on both education and employment outcomes.

Those who develop these skills will have significant advantages in tomorrow's economy. But soft skills are not innate. Soft skills are not inherited. These skills must be developed and taught, even among individuals with a predisposition for them. Since both educators and employers struggle to provide this training, it raises the question of who is receiving such training, and who is not, bringing up serious equity concerns about how soft skills are developed outside traditional training spheres – and who that affects. As with so many opportunities, research points to inequities across different income and racial groups when it comes to soft skills development.

The previously-noted difficulties schools face in implementing the SEL frameworks

designed to best develop students' soft skills can contribute to this inequity. Young people who receive limited exposure to lessons and activities explicitly designed for soft skills development can lag behind. A Brookings and Child Trends analysis of longitudinal survey data on classroom activities found that there are significant gaps in exposure to classroom activities that build soft skills, particularly for low-income students.³⁶ This has serious negative implications for an economically-disadvantaged young person's economic future. Additionally, the Aspen Institute's *A Nation at Hope* reports that schools with larger percentages of low-income students have a limited ability to create the kind of safe and supportive learning environment needed to develop soft skills. Unfortunately, this limitation then further contributes to education inequity and the widening of the achievement gap.

Outside the formal training that schools and employers can provide, young people's soft skills are shaped and molded by the networks and experiences they are exposed to throughout childhood and adolescence. Harvard Business School professor Francesca Gino explains that “networks give people access to information, such as advice and problem-solving assistance, among other benefits. Over time, this information access helps people acquire the knowledge and competencies that are necessary to succeed at work and better handle challenges.”³⁷

Students who grow up around employed adults are more likely to gain access to professional networks and experiences that will facilitate their understanding, development, and practice of soft skills through repeated exposure and modeling. Those who grow up with access to and mentoring from a variety of adults with strong soft skills tend to develop strong soft skills as well. However, too many young people do not grow up with ready access to these types



of networks, and thus they are more likely to lag behind in soft skills development.

In addition to developing soft skills through modeling, strong adult networks can open the door to experiences that allow young people to further develop and practice soft skills. A 2018 Brookings/Child Trends report posits that early work-based learning opportunities such as internships and apprenticeships enable students to develop soft skills such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork by providing students a chance to practice those skills in a real-world setting in a way that is difficult to replicate in a classroom alone.³⁸ However, the same inequities in access to professional networks and mentoring also extend to such early work-based learning opportunities, with students from low-income backgrounds often having less access to such opportunities, particularly when the experience is unpaid.^{39 40}

In the absence of training from schools and employers, a young person's network has an oversized influence on the development of soft skills critical for success. These networks are often closely tied to those of their family and neighborhood, and opportunities to expand those networks, including through jobs and internships, are often a function of

family influence and income. The long-standing systemic inequities in society based on race and class then come into play in the development of soft skills, as those with historically greater access to networks become those who are able to build the skills needed for future success. For example, in a decades-long study of the wide-ranging effects of youth poverty, Johns Hopkins researchers found that white men were much more likely to further their careers through professional networks than their black, low-income counterparts.⁴¹ Many young people – specifically those from low-income or under-resourced neighborhoods where decades of discrimination and systemic racism have limited economic mobility and opportunities for generations of families – have more restricted access to working adults who can model, teach, and specifically discuss soft skills.⁴² This cycle perpetuates and exacerbates the soft skills gap and it is heightened by the critical role that soft skills will play in tomorrow's economy.

Soft skills are key to success in the workplace of today and of the future. Young people who leave high school with that key can open many doors – to promising careers, to further academic achievement, and more. Those who leave without it will find their path to success repeatedly blocked.

Partnership to Build a More Equitable Future Workforce

Given the growing importance of soft skills to future success, and their increasing value to employers' bottom lines, the development of these skills should not be left to chance. Neither businesses nor schools are set up to tackle this soft skills gap unaided. The time, resources, and staff it would take to adequately prepare students with the skill mobility needed for the changing job market of the future make the solution too burdensome for any one sector to implement alone. The good news is that what one sector lacks, the other possesses. Finding a way to work together is the way forward.

With over two decades of experience connecting businesses and schools to prepare youth for post-high school success, Urban Alliance offers the following recommendations to ensure that all students are equipped with the critical soft skills needed to succeed in a rapidly shifting job market.

#1 Recommendation

Schools and Businesses Should Partner to Provide Work-Based Learning Opportunities that Develop Soft Skills

An SEL approach to training provides a proven, evidence-based roadmap to better develop students' soft skills: 1) naming the skills, 2) specifically teaching them, and 3) giving students the chance to practice them. However, with many schools and districts still years away from fully implementing this learning approach, and businesses in need of a quick solution to the growing soft skills gap, action must be taken now.

A well-designed work-based learning experience is a way for schools and businesses to collaborate now to start plugging the skills gap. To address the shortage, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation strongly recommends that businesses partner with high schools to support and engage in work-based learning.⁴³

Intentionally-structured internships are natural developers of soft skills, evoking many principles of the highly-effective SEL framework by tying in setting, context, and adult relationships. As schools begin the long process of incorporating SEL into their curricula, internship programs provide an efficient, ready-made way to incorporate SEL opportunities into schools with little additional lift.

Well-Designed Internships are Especially Effective at Soft Skill Building

By integrating well-designed internships and work-based learning into high schools, educators can ensure that many of the key soft skill competencies will be developed, providing the internship programs are designed with **built-in training** that focuses on explicitly training soft skills. In addition to the direct training, these competencies are further honed during the internship. Even routine office tasks require elements of problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication. Finally, **feedback and assessment** during internships is often soft skills-focused. It isn't just the final product that matters, but how the product was delivered, including professionalism, timeliness, autonomy, and dependability.

Internships also provide **safe learning environments** that foster feelings of

inclusiveness and acceptance. Workplaces emphasize shared team goals and deliverables. Students are automatically members of the “team,” attending meetings and dividing up tasks with a diverse set of colleagues. In addition, diverse workplaces encourage students to feel that their background and culture is valued. Finally, students who are placed in internships often enjoy a sense of accomplishment and self-value, recognizing an opportunity offered to them that others may not have.

Developing soft skills also relies on **adult expertise and commitment**. Internships offer youth access to adults who model these skills in a setting that is closer to what they will encounter after high school than the traditional classroom setting. **Professional internships during high school offer both the access and exposure to behavior modeling and the opportunity to practice soft skills in a real-world setting under the guidance of adult professionals.**

“Hospitality is one of the remaining industries with a large concentration of entry-level jobs that often lead to fulfilling, life-long careers, and finding candidates with the right professional skillset is increasingly important. However, the soft skills gap is preventing many young people from connecting to open jobs. That is why nearly half of Hyatt hotels around the world collaborate with community organizations to prepare young people for success in the jobs of today and tomorrow. This kind of multi-stakeholder partnership connecting businesses, schools, and intermediaries like Urban Alliance to provide youth with effective soft skills training is a powerful approach to bridging the existing gap.”

– Malaika Myers, Chief Human Resources Officer, Hyatt





#2 Recommendation

Seek Out Existing Experts Within the Community

Building the relationships needed for effective partnership can be overwhelming for resource-strapped schools, and businesses are also finding that the time, resources, and effort needed to develop in-house work-based learning opportunities can often be prohibitive. Fortunately, neither need not take on these tasks alone. Turning to intermediaries – such as Urban Alliance, YouthForce NOLA, and others – that are already set up to manage all the moving parts of successful work-based learning is an effective and efficient solution.

Urban Alliance takes a two-step approach to developing critical soft skills: 1) teaching the principles in a classroom setting; and 2) giving students the opportunity to practice and apply their new skills in a real-world setting through paid, nine-month internships. This work-based learning approach allows students to master a skill both conceptually and in practice.

Research by the American Institutes for Research suggests such afterschool and expanded learning programs can be ideal settings for the development of the kinds of soft skills that enhance employability.⁴⁴

Intermediaries can be the key to helping schools and businesses take the hard work out of investing in soft skills development.

Schools and businesses do not have to chart a new course. They can look first within their community for local experts and lean on such intermediaries to kick-start a more collaborative system of preparing students for future success.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation notes that “when it comes to moving the needle on college and career readiness, especially among students underrepresented in higher education, employers should attempt to partner with established nonprofits that have a clear record of success.”⁴⁵

#3 Recommendation

Add Employability as a Measure of Success in High School

Though a high school diploma is still typically seen as the first step toward post-secondary success, too many young people are failing to connect to meaningful work or further education after graduating. Today, 4.5 million young people ages 16 – 24 (one in nine teens and adults nationally) are not connected to school or work.⁴⁶ Of those, 75 percent have completed high school.⁴⁷ The data is clear: a high school diploma is far from a guarantee of future success.

Many high school graduates lack the soft skills needed to excel in college or a career, and once students graduate, it becomes exponentially more difficult for them to gain these critical skills. A high school diploma should mean that a student is ready for not only further education and the challenges and uncertainties of adulthood, but for the world of work. Focusing on both academic and social and emotional growth in school is the key to achieving this result.

However, current incentives for educators are misaligned with this goal. Established measures of success for schools and districts such as high school graduation and college enrollment numbers largely do not include soft skills development or employability. This absence makes it difficult for school leaders to integrate programming, instruction, and training toward that goal. **Only by establishing employability as a marker of success can school leaders coordinate and prioritize the development of the skills that would support it.**

Unfortunately, there is currently no established consensus on how to measure employability or career readiness. The 2016 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required states to adopt their own standards for college- and career-readiness. However, there is an opportunity for states, school districts, and local governments to work together to define employability within a local context that connects employment needs and trends with training offered through schools. Local policymakers can help create benchmarks for post-secondary success that include not only college enrollment, but also connection to career training and workforce opportunities that match the employer demand. These benchmarks can be tracked and publicly reported, similar to high school graduation rates, encouraging school and district leaders to align curricula, partnerships, and experiences to maximize their employability goal.

#4

Recommendation

Reinforce Soft Skills Development in High School

Soft skills development should be embedded throughout the K-12 continuum, as focusing SEL through employability and work-based learning in high school provides an age-appropriate and relatable construct for developing these aptitudes. Soft skills are often linked to real-world, workforce experiences and thus immediately relevant to high school students on the cusp of entering adulthood and focusing on preparation for life beyond the K-12 sphere.

Brookings Institution/Child Trends research found that, for economically-disadvantaged young people, participating in a cooperative education, internship, apprenticeship, or mentorship program in high school is related to higher job quality at least a decade later. They emphasize that this is true only if these work-based learning experiences are specifically designed to enable adults to provide students with developmentally appropriate and incremental guidance that helps them develop the skills that employers seek in new hires.⁴⁸

As the last convener of young people before adulthood, **high school is the last best chance to equip students with the skills needed for college or career success.** Soft skills development should occur while students are still a captive audience in school – before they have the chance to disconnect from future work or school. Businesses and schools can ensure a stronger future workforce pipeline by investing in early soft skills development.

#5

Recommendation

Businesses Should Utilize Best Practices from K-12 to Develop Soft Skills

When it comes to soft skills, employers should look at what works – and luckily, there is consensus in the evidence around soft skills development: **soft skills can be taught**.

To maximize soft skills training efforts, employers can borrow a page from the education sector's established research and recognize that the *how* of learning and development matters just as much as the *what*. The research on the benefits of SEL contexts is well-established and is shown to develop soft skills and career readiness outcomes. Relying solely on content-focused training will fall short in developing soft skills because it lacks the more surround-sound approach recommended by SEL practitioners.

Instead, employers should bolster their soft skills training by:

- **Utilizing relationships.** Positive adult relationships and social environments help fortify the lessons and skills youth learned during training. Mentoring, job shadowing, and informational interviews are examples of how businesses can add to their soft skills training.
- **Creating a safe environment.** Learning and development is stymied by stress, anxiety, and pressure. Most job seekers experience stress, which is only compounded for applicants from low-income neighborhoods and families who are more likely to experience mitigating risk

factors such as food and housing insecurity. Training that fosters a nurturing, accepting, and diverse environment will yield more lasting impact, particularly for more at-risk young people.

- **Creating space to apply new skills.** Along with a safe environment, students need a practical environment in which to apply and practice newly-developed soft skills – such as an internship. Without this hands-on component, the repetition and models of success needed for skill mastery will lead to imperfectly-developed skills.
- **Fostering skills growth and development.** While soft skills can be explicitly taught and developed, they also grow over time. A one-time training of a specific soft-skill competency will not foster true development. Feedback, behavior observation, and social cues all influence a young person's soft skills development. Employers can build in evaluation of soft skills into their regular performance assessments to encourage reflection and help demonstrate that these skills are necessary for success.

There are soft skills courses offered by many organizations and available online for general consumption. However, these courses as designed may be offered without considering the setting, the context, and the modeling required to fully develop soft skills. These offerings currently fall short of developing true and lasting competence, and may have limited benefit for new hires who have limited experience in professional settings.



#6

Recommendation

Put Soft Skills Front and Center in Hiring

A standard job description details a litany of specialized skills, but what is missing from many postings are the true skills employers are reporting an overwhelming shortage of: soft skills. To facilitate hiring, the business sector largely relies on what it can see and verify in assessing candidates. Certificates, degrees, positions held, and hard skills dominate resumes, and it is easy to understand why. Those elements are simple to authenticate and widely accepted, unlike soft skills, which are much harder to quantify and prove.

By rethinking the language of hiring to emphasize soft skills, however, employers can send an important signal. Clearly indicating

the fundamental skills needed to succeed in the workplace communicates to schools and applicants that soft skills are just as important as hard skills. It sends a message that soft skills development must be a priority.

Employers can also work directly with schools and districts to proactively communicate the skills they need from employees and work together to develop a mutually-beneficial curriculum that includes both classroom training and work-based learning opportunities. Organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce are spearheading such employer-led initiatives to shape education to fit the needs of the future job market. Individual businesses can also follow suit, working directly with their local communities to take an active role in developing the next-generation workforce.

Conclusion:

Shared Investment in Solutions

Building effective, structured soft skills development opportunities requires the involvement of businesses, schools, and community organizations.⁴⁹ Each entity is invested in the ability of all young people in the community to succeed in work and in life because each shares in both the benefits and consequences. The challenge is translating that sense of shared necessity into collective action that yields real results. As the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation declared in a recent report, “Rather than waiting for sweeping reforms, bridging the soft skills gap will require a new wave of local collaboration between stakeholders in the business and education sectors who are best poised to deliver community-based solutions.”⁵⁰

All evidence points to the need for partnership among these key entities. The U.S. Chamber report highlights the shared value that is created when employers make it a business priority to connect directly with schools to develop the right soft skills for the workforce.⁵¹ The Youth Employment Funders Group also points out that successful soft skills development initiatives require active, continuous dialogue and

collaboration across governments, education and training providers, community-based youth programs/nonprofit intermediaries, and employers.⁵²

The education and business communities are united in their recognition of the importance of soft skills to students’ future success in both college and careers. What they are not united in is how to work together to ensure that students are developing these critical skills. Bridging that gap requires both sectors working together to build a stronger and more skilled next generation. An easy way to begin that collaboration is by working with intermediaries with existing relationships in each sector and expertise in designing effective work-based learning opportunities for students. By taking shared responsibility for student success, schools and businesses can share in the benefits of a better-trained, more self-sufficient generation of workers.

Working together, each of these partners have a vital role to play in ensuring that all young people leave high school having mastered critical soft skills and are truly prepared to succeed in career and life.



Appendix: Skill Development in Practice

Urban Alliance started by connecting six high school students in southeast Washington, DC with professional, paid internships. However, it quickly became evident that bridging the gap between employers and youth from underserved communities required more than a job – it required bridging the soft skills gap as well. Since that first group of students in 1996, soft skills training has been an integral part of the Urban Alliance model. Over the last two decades, Urban Alliance has become a leading voice in using work-based learning and internships as vehicles to deliver soft skills training. Working in collaboration with local high schools and employers, Urban Alliance's multifaceted approach maximizes soft skills development by combining intentional training with an opportunity to practice skills in a real-world, real-stakes context.

Urban Alliance's core intervention, the High School Internship Program, is comprised of five main components: 1) six weeks of pre-employment professional development; 2) a nine-month, paid, professional internship; 3) weekly job and life skills training; 4) mentoring from two caring

adults; and 5) ongoing post-program support. During both pre-employment and ongoing professional development sessions, students learn key professional soft skills including: self-management, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, time management, and interpersonal relationship building and management. Three key pieces of the Urban Alliance model help to foster lasting skill development according to the principles of social and emotional learning: 1) a safe and supportive learning environment, 2) strong adult relationships, and 3) feedback and assessment. Urban Alliance interns are integrated right away into the workplace, working to meet shared goals as part of a team. This process is made possible with the help of two caring adults, an Urban Alliance program coordinator who serves as a case manager and coach for the student throughout the year, and an on-the-job supervisor or "mentor" who provides in-the-moment guidance and feedback, tasks tailored to students' individual learning needs, and skill growth evaluations at set points throughout the year.

In addition to Urban Alliance, several other intermediaries are working to build young people's soft skills:

NAF's educational design aims to ignite high school students' passion for learning through career-relevant curriculum coupled with work-based learning experiences, including internships. Partnerships with business are at the core of the design, providing practical context so students are able to make connections between the classroom and the working world. Students gain professional and technical skills such as

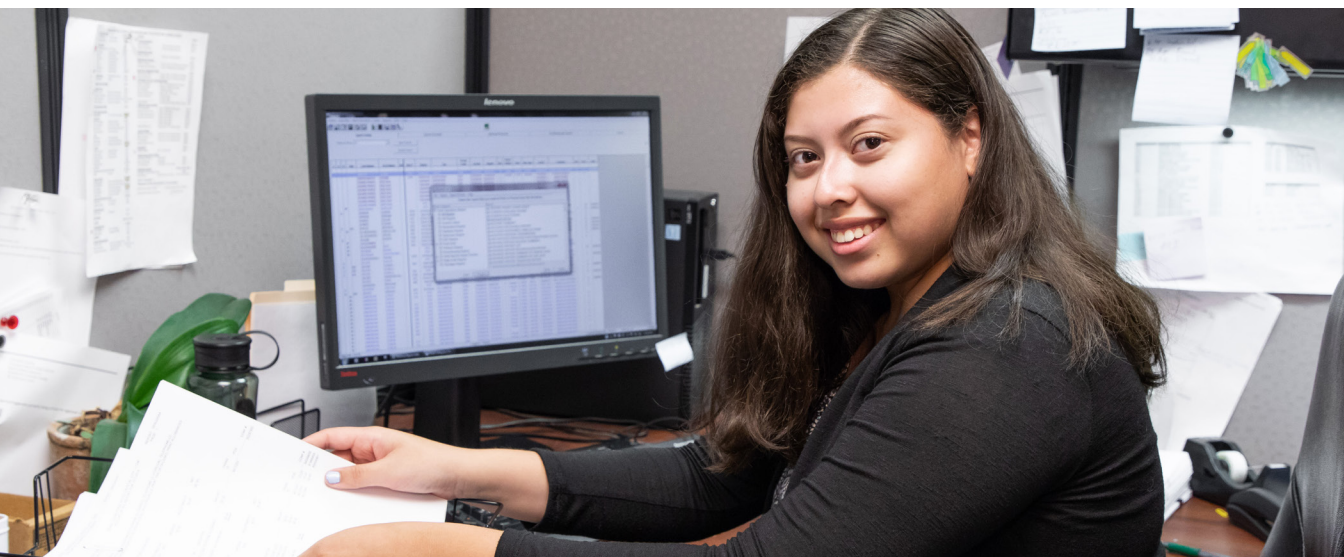
problem-solving, information management, collaboration, and quantitative reasoning through project-based learning and NAF's work-based learning continuum, which builds student knowledge through career awareness, exploration, and preparation activities. NAF students graduate college, career, and future ready with the industry knowledge and soft skills needed to succeed in the working world.

YouthForce NOLA is a collaborative of education, business, and civic leaders working to prepare New Orleans public school students to succeed in high-wage, high-demand careers. Soft skills have been infused into every aspect of the organization's core YouthForce Internship program. Using a skills training framework developed in partnership with MHA Labs, youth are provided with opportunities throughout the program to develop six core skillsets: communication, collaboration, personal mindset, plan for success, social awareness, and problem-solving. Coaches and supervisors are

encouraged to leverage skill-building best practices including feedback, recognition, assessment, meaning making, and engagement. In response to a growing demand for high-quality soft skills development at youth-serving sites across the city, YouthForce also supports other local programs, schools, and employers' soft skill efforts through additional programs such as the Soft Skills Teacher Fellowship, the New Orleans Soft Skill Community of Practice, and a new series of Introductory Workshops co-designed and piloted in 2019 along with MHA Labs.

Year Up is an intensive, year-long program for young adults ages 18-24 who have earned a high school diploma or GED but are otherwise disconnected from the economic mainstream. The program includes six months of classroom training and professional skills development, followed by a six-month internship with industry leaders in 25 cities. The career pathways Year Up offers directly reflect the needs of its corporate partners, so young adults develop valuable, in-demand skills, and corporate partners gain access to a strong pipeline of talent. Students are paid a stipend during both phases of the program and

may earn college credits for coursework in Year Up's standard curriculum, which in addition to standard office hard skills including computer and Excel training, includes soft skills such as oral and written communication (public speaking for delivering informative and persuasive elevator pitches, business proposals, and presentations and business writing for emails, reports, resumes, and cover letters) as well as career development and interpersonal relations for effective job interviews, delivering and receiving feedback well, and managing relationships with supervisors and teams in a professional office environment.



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