



LifeReady
STUDENTS
Building Skills. Advancing Success.

GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND

Achievement of students with
employment experience

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Introduction

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics ([BLS](#)) reported in January 2020 that among the major worker groups, the unemployment rate for teenagers was 12.2 percent, much higher than any subpopulation. Research suggests that the labor market can pose challenges for young people, making it difficult for high school students to gain early work experience. There is consensus, however, on the positive influence of early employment. Research has consistently suggested that early employment experience is critical for high school students to explore their interests, identify a pathway to a career, develop real-world skills, and enhance employability. It is important for students, parents, school leaders, and other stakeholders to understand better how gaining early work experience can benefit students in both the short and long run.

What we studied and why

For decades, research shows that part-time jobs for high school students are beneficial as long as the number of hours worked per week stays appropriate (Keister & Hall, 2010). For instance,

- Steady work during high school may foster the development of time management skills for both career and college ([Motimer, 2010](#));
- High school jobs can help youth to build the basic skills needed to enter the workforce and many other “[LifeReady](#)” skills, particularly for those youth who are less interested in college ([Baum & Ruhm, 2014](#); [Motimer, 2010](#); [NSBA, 2019](#));
- And, for a young adult in high school, 20 hours per week of part-time work in their senior year resulted in annual earnings that were 20 percent higher 6-9 years after graduation, as compared to their fellow students who didn’t work (Ruhm & Baum, 2014).

Although some studies show that students who worked 20 or fewer hours per week during the school year were more likely to attend college (Rothstein, 2001), it is unclear whether high school employment has either short-or long-term effects on grades in academic courses or that the grades obtained in these courses influence employment activities (Warren, LePore, & Mare, 2000). The Center for Public Education (CPE), a research branch of the National School Boards Association (NSBA), explored the data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) and investigated the relationship between students’ employment experiences and their achievements.

Findings

Characteristics of high achieving students

The data we analyzed include 8,404 sampled individuals. Over three-quarters of the surveyed youth had employee-type jobs when they were teenagers (ages 14 to 19), although most students started employment experiences at the age of 16 while attending high school. We looked at the GPA and ACT/SAT scores of these students, and found that high achieving students, regardless of whether they had employment experience or not, shared the following characteristics:

- Spending less time watching TV;
- Spending more time using computers;
- Being organized;
- Rarely being late for school without any excuse;
- Having fewer absent days from school;
- Doing homework on weekdays; and
- Taking extra courses.

Academic performance of students with employment experience

The NLSY97 data show that the more work weeks teenager students accumulated, the better they performed academically and the more workplace skills they developed. Compared with students who had no/little employment experience, students with employment experience were –

- About 2 times **less likely** to spend more than 20 hours per week watching TV;
- About 1-2 times more likely to use computers more than 10 hours per week;
- More likely to be organized in their daily life;
- More likely to do homework on weekdays and to take extra course(s); and
- More likely to have fewer absent days from school.

At the same time, teenage students with employment experience had higher GPA and ACT/SAT scores than their peers without employment experience. For instance, among students with employment experience,

- 42 percent maintained a high GPA (3.0 – 4.0);
- 80 percent had ACT score 19 or above; and
- 60 percent had SAT math/verbal score above 500.

Table 1. Percentage of teenage students, by employment experience, indicator, and academic achievement

	No employment experience	Employment experience
Indicators		
Spending more than 20 hours/week watching TV*	29%	15%
Spending zero hour/week using a computer*	41%	21%
Spending 10 hours or more/week using a computer*	20%	31%
Being organized*	50%	59%
Doing homework on weekdays	88%	90%
Taking extra course(s)*	23%	28%
Absent days from school!	5.2 [4.3-6.0]	4.8 [4.5-5.1]
Academic achievement		
GPA 3.0 or above	39%	42%
ACT score 19 or above*	51%	80%
SAT verbal score above 500*	49%	60%
SAT math score above 500*	57%	60%

Note: *The difference is statistically significant, even after controlling for birth year of students.

! The difference between the two means [95% confidence interval] is not statistically significant.

Source: <https://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy97.htm>

Noncognitive skills of students with employment experience

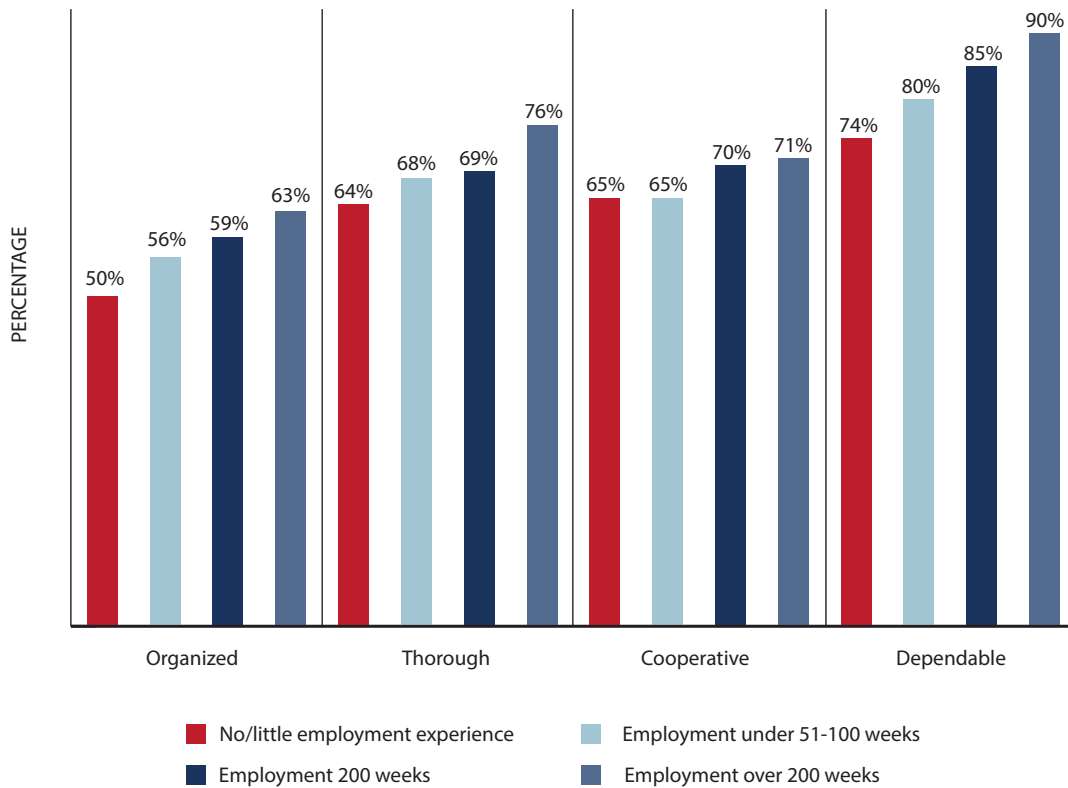
While academic skills – literacy and numeracy – are critically important, some noncognitive skills (e.g. [LifeReady Skills](#)) play a pivotal role in students’ postsecondary life. Increasing time using computers for learning, reducing time on TV, and being organized between school and work are self-regulation, time-management skills. These skills equip students not only to handle the demands of high school academic courses and thrive in extracurricular activities but also to get ready for college and careers.

[Studies](#) show that students who work are more confident and possess better time-management skills than students who are not employed. The interviewed individuals in the NLSY97 reported on some of their

personal traits. We found that the longer students worked on employee-type jobs, the more likely students reported that they were organized, thorough, cooperative, and dependable. As Figure 1 shows, among students who worked on employee-type jobs over 200 weeks between ages 14 and 19,

- 3 out of 5 felt they were organized;
- 3 out of 4 reported being thorough rather than careless;
- 7 out of 10 said that they were cooperative; and
- 9 out of 10 believed that they were dependable.

Figure 1. Percentage of teenage students reporting on a personal trait, by employment experience



Source: <https://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy97.htm>

Another takeaway

Job satisfaction in students' employment experience also had a significantly positive association with student achievement. For instance, the odds of getting higher SAT math scores were 0.75 times greater for students who had high level of job satisfaction than for students who felt that their jobs were just OK. It should be noted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds had more challenges in their job experience. For example,

- **40 percent of Black students** were dissatisfied with their employment experience, compared with their non-Black and non-Hispanic peers (23%); and
- **35 percent of students from disadvantaged families** (i.e., mother had education under high school) had unsatisfactory employment experience, compared with their peers from not disadvantaged families (24%).

Conclusions*

The NLSY97 data show that employment experience is relevant to students' academic achievement as well as the development of workplace skills. Taking employee-type jobs during high school benefits students both short-term and long-term. Our findings suggest that employment experience – appropriate quantity and quality of employee-type jobs – not only has positive effects on students' grades in academic courses, but also helps students to acquire real-world skills.

High academic achievement and [LifeReady skills](#) such as dependability and reliability are real-world skills, and equipped with these skills, students would be better prepared for postsecondary life. Other crucial soft skills for Career, College, and Success in Life were identified in NSBA's Commission to Close the Skills Gap Report in 2018 that included adaptability/trainability; critical thinking; decision-making; customer focus; and teamwork.

A recent survey conducted by the National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC) reveals that most 2020 voters see teaching real-world skills as a priority for public education. For school leaders, an effective strategy to improve student achievement is to foster a positive employment experience for every student, particularly disadvantaged students.

The good news is that some school districts have already started good practices in actively and intentionally enriching students' early employment experience, developing partnerships with business communities, and reforming curriculum to help students prepare for college and career success through real work experiences while they are in high school. The following are some examples:

- [Federal Hocking](#), a rural school district in Ohio, creates many opportunities to help students gain early employment experience. At the "Career Day" in 2019, both middle school and high school students were invited to sample plenty of places they might go after graduation. Forty business and professional people from the local community volunteered their time to come talk with students about careers in architecture to farming, nursing to photography, social work to artificial intelligence and more.

- [Linked Learning](#) is an educational approach to transforming the experience of high school students who are traditionally underserved. The approach encompasses four core components woven together in industry-themed pathways (i.e., rigorous academics, high-quality career-technical education, work-based learning, and comprehensive support services). Since 2009, Linked Learning has expanded statewide in California and now serves more than 65,000 students, as well as thousands of students in Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin.

**Our research has limitations. For instance, the youth in the data we analyzed are millennials now, and their employment experience during high school may not represent every aspect of today's students in school. However, we did find that more students with employment experience had high academic performance, high self-regulation/time-management skills, and reported that they were organized, thorough, cooperative, and dependable. As far as achievement is concerned, these students went above and beyond.*

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