



LifeReady STUDENTS

Building Skills. Advancing Success.

Six LifeReady Skills for Career, College and Success in Life:

A Report of the Commission to Close the Skills Gap

AN **nsba** INITIATIVE

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EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

As leaders in the education community, it is our goal, if not our obligation, to ensure that when students leave their secondary education, they are equipped with the skills they need to lead a successful and fulfilling adult life. Too often though that is not the case, and students graduate high school without the tools to ensure they succeed in whatever path they choose to follow. The National School Boards Association's (NSBA) Commission to Close the Skills Gap has identified these critical "LifeReady Skills", and developed recommendations to help school districts ensure that students have every opportunity to learn these skills.

NSBA encourages all school boards to look closely at what their districts are doing to ensure that students are graduating with skills to be "LifeReady" and consider implementing some or many of the recommendations made here by NSBA's Commission to Close the Skills Gap.

BACKGROUND

For the first time in decades, there are now far more jobs available across the nation than there are interested or qualified workers to fill them. As of January 2019, the number of job openings reached a high of 7.3 million, and that number is expected to double in the next five years.¹ The business community is struggling to fill jobs at every level, but the entry and mid-level positions that need a high school diploma yet may not require a college degree face the largest number of vacancies. Corporate leaders have described this situation as urgent, if not dire, and the situation is growing worse as even more jobs go unfilled each year.

The combination of a growing economy, and a period where more baby boomers are leaving the workforce than new employees are joining it, has created an important new opportunity for America's high school students. That includes the most disadvantaged and at-risk students, those with disabilities and others who often face the most challenges getting the first step up on the career ladder.

Leadership with a variety of business organizations make it clear that many high school graduates do not have the basic skills needed to enter the workforce, thus vastly compounding this workforce crisis. As the leading advocate for public education, this is of serious concern to NSBA.

¹ U.S. Department of Labor. (2019). Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.nr0.htm>

From these concerns, the Commission to Close the Skills Gap was created in 2018. NSBA convened the leadership of major business trade and membership organizations to advise school boards on ways to increase the readiness of young people to meet the needs of employers. Every business group approached by NSBA agreed to be represented on the Commission. All committed to serving for at least half a year to offer suggestions to school districts on how to better prepare more young people for the workplace.

Organizations on the Commission include:

- American Health Information Management Association
- American Hotel & Lodging Association
- American Public Transportation Association
- Center for Energy Workforce Development
- CompTIA
- Manufacturing Institute
- National Restaurant Association
- National Retail Federation
- Society for Human Resource Management
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Over six months, the Commission members listened carefully to the “voices” of businesses and school boards. They recognized that many in the business community are interested in engaging more with school boards, as school boards seek guidance and counsel on the essential skills young people need to be effective in the workplace. Two other important conclusions emerged from those conversations:

1. School boards often encounter challenges in reaching out to and engaging with employers; and,
2. Many interested employers found it challenging to reach out to and engage with school districts.

LIFEREADY SKILLS

The first goal of the Commission was to determine the workplace skills most needed, in addition to critically important academic skills. Many of the Commission members participated in the National Network, comprised of 28 trade and membership organizations under the leadership of the Business Roundtable, which identified 24 of the most critical Common Employability skills . The Commission narrowed down the 24 skills to six that they considered critical for young people to master in preparation for employment, education and that larger goal of “success in life.”

They include the following:

- Dependability and reliability (Personal Skills category)
- Adaptability/trainability (Personal Skills category)
- Critical thinking (Applied Knowledge category)
- Decision-making (Workplace Skills category)
- Customer focus (Workplace Skills category)
- Teamwork (People Skills category)

These skills are essential, not only for the workplace, but for every interaction and relationship. That is why the Commission deems them to be LifeReady skills for all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL BOARDS

The Commission developed recommendations for school districts to consider that would assist high school graduates in developing the skill sets essential for success in most of life's endeavors. If implemented effectively, these recommendations likely would result in real improvement to young people's readiness to meet the needs of employers and take advantage of the opportunities in today's economy for entering good jobs and careers.

These recommendations are grouped into three categories: Industry Engagement, Policy and Programming.

INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT

Overall, building relationships between school districts and the local and/or regional business community will help school boards understand local career opportunities available to students upon graduating, and help determine if students are graduating with the requisite skills to be successful in the workforce.

1. Create a Business Advisory Board position that would regularly meet with the leadership of the school board to review progress of how high school graduates are meeting the needs of the business community. The Advisory Board and school board would work together and ensure the "voice of business" is heard on an ongoing basis in supporting appropriate changes to enhance workforce readiness for young people.
2. Seek recurring opportunities for the participation of school board members in appropriate meetings of local Chambers of Commerce, industry trade associations, small business membership groups and other gatherings of employers. This will (a) ensure that the school board understands local and regional current and potential future economic conditions and job vacancies, (b) present the goals and objectives of the school board for enhancing young people's readiness for work, and (c) allow for guidance from the business community.
3. Conduct an annual survey of local employers to assess the progress of graduates in meeting their workforce needs around the six key LifeReady skills. Each year, using the same metric, measure progress in the readiness of high school graduates to meet the requirements of employers.
4. Identify and designate a leader within the school district, or an individual school board member, as the specific liaison with the business community. This should be someone in the business community who could offer assistance and guidance on how best to engage young people around career and employment opportunities.
5. Consider "open houses" for business leaders to meet regularly with school board members, administrators, parents and teachers to talk through their goals, objectives and ways in which the business community might help support strategies to enhance the work readiness of young people.
6. Attend local Chamber of Commerce K-12 Workforce Committee meetings and events. At such meetings, take the opportunity to ask the group if the entry level workforce has the skills necessary to successfully meet the job requirements. In addition, understand the opportunities and challenges emerging for local employers so the school district can be proactive in adjusting its emphasis on programs and policies.

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7. Tour local or regional businesses to learn about job opportunities available to graduates in the school district and ensure that curriculum and/or career and technical education (CTE) is available in the district that matches the workforce needs in that area.
 8. Hold school board meetings at local business establishments if allowable, to further build the working relationships with the business community, the school board and district staff.

POLICY

As school board members, policy changes can be the greatest way to affect change in your district. Set a strategic imperative to ensure that the students graduating from your district do so with the skills necessary to succeed in work and in life and then set policies in place to make that happen.

1. Put equivalent focus on CTE/Career Readiness as College Readiness.
2. Consider an option for students to secure a “Job Ready” diploma. This diploma would be designed in concert with the business community in each local area that measures the six LifeReady skills.
3. Consider requiring each student have work-based learning as a condition for graduating high school. This could include internships, work study, externships, work-simulated projects, or part-time employment. Specific metrics would be applied, and students would be required to demonstrate mastery of critical LifeReady skills.
4. Create curriculum and school experience focused on the National Network’s Employability Skills.
5. Select entry-level, industry-based and locally relevant credentials to incorporate into the curriculum, either as an academic requirement or elective.

PROGRAMMING

Through programs in a district, ensure that all life-path opportunities are highlighted to students, including the basic skills needed to be successful on any path a student chooses.

1. In regular professional development sessions for teachers, provide information and training on the critical LifeReady skills identified by the Commission on Closing the Skills Gap. These would be provided at least once a year, and as part of the regular training for new and current teachers.
2. Communicate/promote work experience as having similar benefits to a young person’s personal and professional development as sports and extracurricular activities. Encourage these experiences prior to a student’s graduation.
3. Host annual career awareness events for regional industries to talk about local careers and include education sessions where young people can discuss and learn about the basic skills required for success in college and/or careers.
4. Starting in elementary school, institute a campaign to promote middle-class highly-skilled jobs and change the perception that the only good jobs are those that require a college education.
5. Hold events where students tour local/regional businesses to obtain a better understanding of positions and/or work environments available in their area. The Manufacturing Institute’s Annual Manufacturing Day is a great example of a coordinated effort by the manufacturing industry to promote the opportunities that exist in their industry, as well as how the work environment has changed drastically over the last several decades.

SUMMARY

A huge problem faces our country. The high demand for skilled workers is not being met with qualified individuals for the jobs available. NSBA's Commission to Close the Skills Gap was formed with the goal to develop ways to get to the heart of the problem through school districts working with their local industry leaders in creating a workforce that can meet the needs of industry, and more importantly, meet the needs of graduating students.

At the conclusion of the work of the Commission to Close the Skills Gap, reflecting on months of work and candid discussion, it is clear that if school boards and industry could partner on a much deeper level, many young people would benefit. In ensuring that more students are graduating from high school with skills that prepare them for work, our partnerships would be creating opportunities for students to be successful in every aspect of their lives. NSBA and the Commission members believe that every child deserves this opportunity.

As NSBA and our partners in the Commission look ahead, ensuring that students are "LifeReady" will be the goal of our next steps. NSBA and our Commission partners are developing ways to communicate the need for a national K-12 focus on the development of these LifeReady skills for LifeReady students. This will include a national campaign entitled LifeReady Students, Building Skills, Advancing Success. Pilot engagements with states and local districts, and a website to connect local school districts to local and regional industry interested in partnering are also in the planning phase.



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