

Every Child Every Promise

TURNING FAILURE INTO ACTION

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ISSUE BRIEF

W O R K F O R C E R E A D I N E S S

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Every Child, Every Promise

examined how much children and youth experience the Five Promises, or positive features of development, that research shows are connected both to avoiding risky behavior such as alcohol or other drug use and to positive outcomes such as volunteering or doing well at school. For this brief, we draw from *ECEP* data and focus on 15- to 17-year-olds — students who are nearing the end of their high school careers and preparing either to enter the workforce or post-secondary education.

The Five Promises are Caring Adults, Safe Places and Constructive Use of Time, A Healthy Start, Effective Education, and Opportunities to Help Others.

The research behind *ECEP* is a collaboration among the Alliance, Child Trends, Search Institute and the Gallup Organization.

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UNDER-EQUIPPED AND UNPREPARED: America's Emerging Workforce and the Soft Skills Gap

It is no secret that, as a nation, we have inadequately prepared millions of America's young people to participate in the workforce of the 21st century. The scope of this failure is most often measured by increasingly familiar statistics, such as stubbornly stagnant standardized test scores and low high school graduation rates.

These dismal indicators are harbingers of a future workforce whose inability to compete effectively in a global economy has ominous implications, not only for the workers' well-being, but for America's continued economic leadership and prosperity.

The growing attention on test scores and graduation rates, however, often leads policymakers and practitioners to overlook other, equally significant ways in which we are short-changing America's young people. Specifically, a large percentage of the children and youth who will enter the workforce over the next two decades are lacking enough of the "soft" or applied skills — such as teamwork, decision-making, and communication — that will help them become effective employees and managers.

As economists Drs. James Heckman, a Nobel laureate, and Flavio Cunha, explained in the America's Promise Alliance's 2006 *Every Child, Every Promise (ECEP)* report¹, these "soft" skills are just as essential to a young person's success as the more frequently cited academic indicators. In fact, both federal and international commissions have concluded that these skills are essential prerequisites for high school graduates to enter the workforce successfully.² These commissions emphasize the need for young people to acquire knowledge that is applicable to work as well.

In fact, a recent Wall Street Journal/Harris Interactive poll found that employers are seeking these skills among managers and believe that MBA programs should devote even more attention to them. Prestigious business schools, such as Yale, MIT, Vanderbilt and Carnegie Mellon are following suit.

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Unfortunately, there exists today a significant gap between the level of soft skills that future workers need and the level of these skills that they now possess. According to *Are They Ready to Work?*, a report commissioned by leading organizations and associations representing the business sector, three-quarters of surveyed employers said that incoming high school graduates were deficient in these “applied skills.”

Additionally, 40% of employers said that the high school graduates they hire lack enough of the “soft” skills they need even for entry-level jobs.⁴

Through recent analysis of the *ECEP* data, we find that young people lack not only the skills themselves but important opportunities to develop them. Most students, we find, say they are not being sufficiently challenged in high school, their work is not considered relevant to potential future careers, and they experience too few significant career-building opportunities such as internships.

As with graduation rates and many of the other traditional indicators of a child's overall well-being, the deficit in soft-skills is more prominent in some areas among young people of color, those from low-income families and with parents who themselves did not graduate from high school. However, these deficits also are apparent across all lines of race and ethnicity, education levels and family income. Almost all young Americans today are at risk of entering the workforce without enough of the skills that make for success.

Meanwhile, more American employers are looking to the future with the dispiriting realization that they will need to make significant financial investments to provide remedial training for young people who enter the workforce without enough of the skills companies need.

WORKFORCE SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Decision-making. To acquire this skill, young people need opportunities to participate in the making of decisions not just at home but in other environments as well. However, 35% of young people surveyed for *ECEP* responded that they never or only sometimes were allowed to help make decisions when spending time in after-school programs. (By contrast, 22% indicated that they were “very often” empowered to help make decisions.) Those least likely to be involved in making decisions were from low income families.

Teamwork and leadership. Opportunities in and outside of school to work in teams, take on leadership roles, and resolve conflicts are indispensable preparation for the workforce. While 61% of the 15- to 17-year-olds surveyed reported that they often or very often practiced these skills in class, and 62% learned them in after-school community programs, more than one-third lack these opportunities.

Communication. *ECEP* research found that fewer than half (46%) of the youth surveyed believe that they communicate well with others. African American youth were nearly twice as likely to report poor communication skills as white youth.

Working with diverse groups. Like American society as a whole, the U.S. workforce is becoming more diverse. In 1980, three-fourths of America's children were non-Hispanic whites. Today, this group represents just over half of the child population.⁵ This trend has created one of the few bright spots in the workforce preparation picture: Only 7% of youth reported that they either somewhat or do not get along well with diverse groups of people.

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Computer skills. Today, computer skills are a necessity for students who pursue higher education. In most jobs, similarly, they're not just a plus but increasingly a prerequisite. While the great majority of 15- to 17-year-olds indicated they were confident in their computer skills, 13% reported they did not know or only "somewhat" knew how to use a computer for the basic tasks of word processing or preparing a presentation.

Money management. Understanding how to manage money — including making a budget, saving, and investing — is important not only to personal economic success but relevant to the workplace of the 21st century. Just 60% of 15- to 17-year-olds reported that they are confident in these skills; and only 23% described themselves as "completely" confident.

WORKFORCE SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

	Never or Sometimes	Often	Very Often
How often are you allowed to help make decisions when spending time in after-school or community programs?	35.1	42.9	22.0
Over the last 12 months, how often have you learned skills in class like teamwork, leadership, or how to resolve conflicts without violence?	38.9	41.9	19.3
When spending time in after-school or community programs, how often are you learning skills like teamwork, leadership or how to resolve conflicts without violence?	37.7	36.9	25.4
	Not at all or somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Completely like me
How much is this like you?			
I communicate well with others.	16.3	37.4	46.4
I get along well with people of different races, cultures, or religions.	6.8	22.8	70.5
I know how to use a computer to do word-processing or make a presentation.	12.6	21.8	65.7
I know how to manage money, such as making a budget and saving or investing.	39.9	36.7	23.4

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OPPORTUNITIES IN SCHOOL FOR OBTAINING APPLIED SKILLS

The problem is not simply that young people are failing to develop the “soft,” less easily measured competencies they will need for the workforce. The problem also reflects a gap in opportunities for students to practice and master these skills through academic engagement and participation in real-world working situations. Schools can either engage students and guide them toward future careers, or they can turn

them off. Students who are engaged with their schoolwork are more likely to achieve academically and to be engaged in the workplace as well.⁶

For students to build the skills they will need, schoolwork must be relevant to real-world situations, with curriculum aligned with the workplace. However, we found that 43% of students said that they “never” or only “sometimes” believed that their homework was meaningful and important.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR OBTAINING SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

IN SCHOOL

In the last 4 weeks, how many days of school have you missed because you skipped school?	None 85.1	1 or more 14.9		
How often do you feel that the schoolwork you are assigned is meaningful and important?	Never or Sometimes 43.1	Often 38.8	Very Often 18.1	
Over the last 12 months, how many of your teachers gave you challenging schoolwork?	None or Some 38.5	Most 38.6	All 22.9	
Thinking of your teachers or other adults in your school, how many know you well and care about you?	None or 1 23.2	2 46.3	3 or more 30.6	
Over the last 12 months, how many of your teachers have treated you fairly?	None or some 17.5	Most 39.8	All 42.7	

OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

In an average week, including weekends, how many hours do you spend doing family chores like helping around the house or taking care of brothers and sisters?	1 hour or less 37.3	2-5 hours 39.1	More than 5 hours 23.6	
How often do you volunteer without getting paid to help others or make your community better?	Never or a few times a year 41.9	Once or twice a month 40.7	Every week 17.5	
During an average week, how many hours do you work at a paid job?	None 68.8	1-10 hours 14.6	More than 10 hours 16.6	

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OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE SCHOOL FOR OBTAINING SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Young people learn workforce skills in multiple contexts outside of school. Working at a paid job, interning, volunteering, or even helping with chores and other household duties all provide valuable learning opportunities. Unfortunately, *ECEP* research indicates that young people are not experiencing these opportunities on a regular basis.⁷ In fact, *ECEP* found that 64% of students have never had an internship arranged by their school or after-school program and of the remaining 36%, less than half have had two or more internships.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our young people will soon be part of the global economy and therefore the global workforce.

Considering that only approximately 30% of American fourth and eighth graders are proficient in math and reading⁷, it should come as no surprise that so few also are ill equipped with the “soft” skills they will need to compete effectively.

Schools, communities and corporations can no longer afford to focus on academic outcomes alone. Applied skills are essential to personal economic success and to the success of corporate America. By extension, they are essential to the future well-being of all Americans. Increasing youth involvement in real-world experiences, whether through internships, paid employment or community service is an important first step. Similarly, schools need to engage their students in active learning and connect curricula to the modern workplace.

¹ America's Promise Alliance (2006). *Every Child, Every Promise: Turning Failure into Action*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

² The Federal commission reports: U.S. Department of Labor. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. (1991). *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000*. Washington, DC: Author. (EDRS No. ED 332054); Merrifield, J. (2000). *Equipped for the Future Research Report: Building the Framework, 1993-1997*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. The primary international commission was the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's project, *Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo)*; DeSeCo. (2005). *Definition and Selection of Key Competencies: Executive Summary (30-Jun-2005)*. Retrieved August 9, 2007 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/61/35070367.pdf>

³ Asop, R. (2006, January 11). M.B.A. Recruiters' No. 1 Pet Peeve: Poor Writing and Speaking Skills. *Wall Street Journal Onlin*. Retrieved from: <http://www.careerjournal.com/myc/school/20060117-alsop.html>.

⁴ Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Conference Board, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, & the Society for Human Resources Management (2006). *Are They Ready to Work?* Washington, DC: Author.

⁵ Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2007). *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2007*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

⁶ Finn, J., & Rock, D. (1997). Academic success among students at risk for school failure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82 (2), 221-234.

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). The nation's report card: *Mathematics 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education; National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). The nation's report card: *Reading 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.