

Building Workforce Skills in Afterschool

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Today, the private sector spends more than \$164 billion every year on employee education and training to close workforce skill gaps.¹ Currently, more than 1 in 3 workers agree that they do not have the education and training they need to get ahead.² These issues beg the question about one of the major challenges facing the country: how do we sufficiently prepare youth to enter the future labor market as adults? Afterschool and summer learning programs are helping to close the gaps that exist between the skills and competencies students possess and the needs of employers—which range from communication and problem-solving skills to proficient technical skills. Afterschool programs are also connecting students to the workforce in other ways, such as helping them discover new interests and professions they may never have considered entering into and providing real-world work opportunities to help them to reach their career aspirations.

The skills and experiences most expected to build a strong and vibrant workforce are largely missing

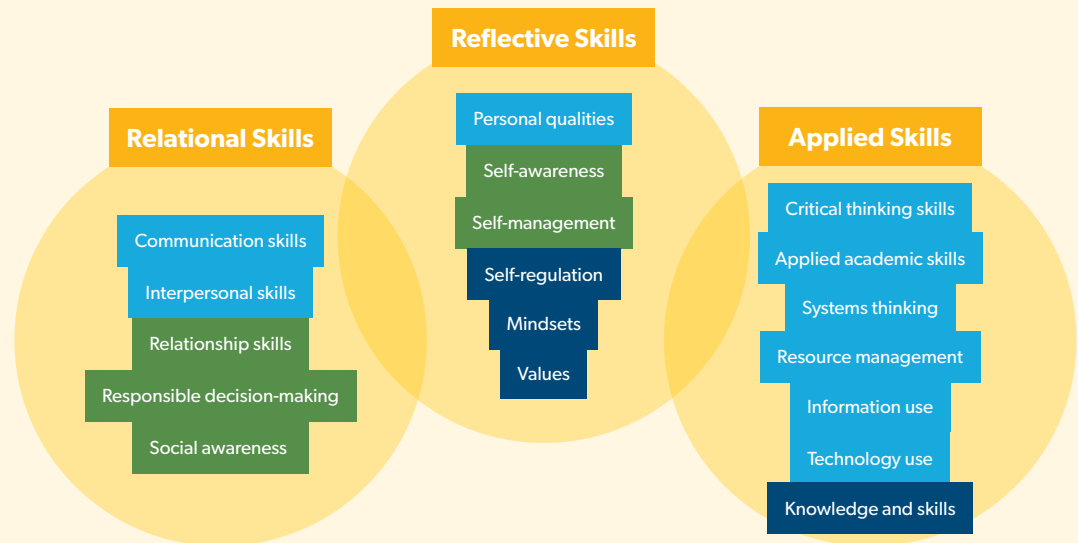
Data spanning more than a decade indicate that there are sets of foundational skills and competencies that are strongly desired among employers, but challenging to find among potential employees.

The ability to work in teams, solve problems, and communicate effectively are among the principal skills—included under various terminologies, such as “social and emotional learning,”³ “employability skills,”⁴ and “foundations for young adult success,”⁵—that employers consistently report desiring in their future hires. (See *Figure 1*.) In fact, in a 2017 National Association of Colleges and Employers *Job Outlook* survey, more than 7 in 10 employers report that they look for employees who demonstrate strong teamwork, problem solving, and communication skills.⁶ This is not a new trend: a 2006 workforce readiness survey of more than 400 U.S. employers found that communication, teamwork and collaboration, and critical thinking and problem solving were among the most important skills reported.⁷

Figure 1:
You say tomàto,
I say tomäto.

When debating the skills and competencies students need to land their first job and do well in the workplace, one is likely to hear one or all of these terms: “social and emotional learning,” “employability skills,” and “foundations for young adult success.” While each framework has its own emphasis, a comparison of all three clearly illustrates their cohesive thread.

- Employability Skills
- Social Emotional Skills
- Foundations for Young Adult Success



Yet, despite the high priority regularly placed on these skills, employers have long reported that these are skills difficult to find in potential and current employees. A 2017 Business Roundtable survey of its member companies found that although critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills were highly relevant to positions within their company, these were also the skills that were challenging to find in qualified job candidates.⁸ Similarly, employers in the 2006 workforce readiness survey largely did not rate new entrants’ communications, teamwork and collaboration, and critical thinking and problem solving skills as strong, reporting that, “many of the new entrants lack skills essential to job success.”⁹

Hiring a workforce that possess the technical skills needed for open positions is another challenge for employers.

In addition to the foundational skills integral to success in the workplace, there are technical skills that are increasingly necessary in today’s rapidly evolving economy. For example, the U.S.’s STEM jobs will grow 13 percent between 2017 and 2027, compared to 9 percent of other jobs overall.¹⁰ However, employers report difficulties recruiting qualified applicants. Almost all 113 CEOs surveyed for a Business Roundtable and Change the Equation report said that skills shortages was a problem for their companies and close to 4 in 10 companies said that at least half of their entry-level applicants lacked basic STEM skills.¹¹

It is also important to note that the technical skills gap extends further than STEM-specific skills. Demand is high for middle-skill jobs,* yet there is not an adequately trained workforce to fill job openings.¹² Although more than half of the current U.S. labor market is comprised of middle-skills jobs, only 43 percent of workers are trained for these jobs.¹³

Job experience is another facet of the hiring challenge employers face when looking to fill open positions.

A third important category that factors into the hiring equation is one’s experience and familiarity with a position’s responsibilities. Despite the weight placed on job experience, a candidate’s lack of experience was one of the top reasons employers reported when asked why it was hard to fill positions, with approximately 1 in 5 employers reporting this to be the case.¹⁴ Among unemployed adults looking for work, a lack of job experience was the number one obstacle to finding a job.¹⁵

Percent of Employers Who Look For the Following Attributes in a Candidate

| | |
|------------------------------|------------|
| Ability to work in a team | 78% |
| Problem solving skills | 77% |
| Written communication skills | 75% |
| Verbal communication skills | 71% |

Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017

*Middle-skills jobs are those that require more than a high school degree, but not a four-year degree, such as health technicians, construction workers, and sales managers.

Afterschool programs offer students a step up for future success

Afterschool programs provide a ladder of supports that help students reach their career aspirations.

Building students' workforce competencies is typically associated with programming for older youth, especially by connecting them to internships and apprenticeships, but preparing students for the workforce begins much earlier. While workforce experience is at the top of the ladder of supports afterschool and summer learning programs provide as students get older, there are intermediary rungs that students as early as elementary school can reach and programs without a workforce development focus can offer. For instance, afterschool programs serving younger students often work with students on their communication and teamwork skills, the foundational skills employers desire in their future hires. The flexible nature of afterschool programs also lend themselves to expose students to the wide spectrum of career fields, from introducing students to a potential new interest to taking students on field trips to local businesses to learn more about that field.

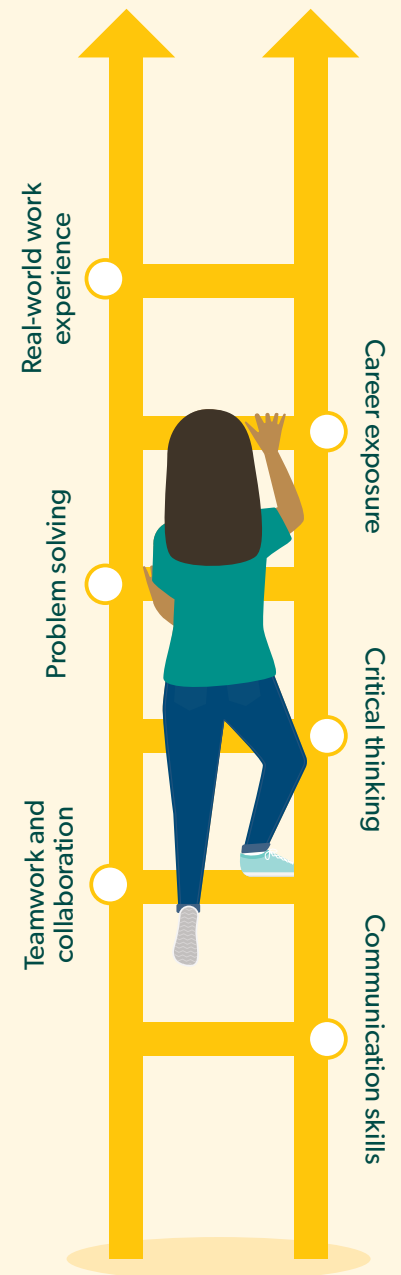
Research has found that younger students participating in quality afterschool and summer learning programs get along better with their peers and see gains in their pro-social behavior, as well as reductions in aggressive behaviors.¹⁶ Among afterschool programs for older youth that focus on workforce readiness and building students' workforce skills, participation in programs has a positive impact on students' school day attendance and graduation rates.¹⁷

Building students' foundational skills and competencies that will help them in the workforce and in life.

Close to 4,000 students in grades K-12 participate in *Minneapolis Beacons* (Beacons), which provides scaffolded leadership development opportunities to build students' foundational skills. Kindergarten through 5th grade Beacons students build teamwork and communication skills, work in groups, listen to and learn about different perspectives, and learn to reach consensus in a group setting. Middle schoolers work on goal-setting, explore their personal identities, and have the chance to become program assistants and youth advisory members, where they lead groups or clubs and weigh in on the activities offered at their center. In high school, Beacons students can also become program assistants and participate in the youth advisory council, continuing their foundational skills development as they plan, manage, and lead activities. In addition to the most recent Beacons Network Evaluation finding that the program spent more than 21,000 hours building students' communication, problem solving, and leadership skills, a 2016 longitudinal evaluation found that Beacons participants were 1.2 times more likely to attend school at least 95 percent of the time and 2.2 times more likely to graduate in four years relative to their peers.

Introducing students to new interests, opening their eyes to potential career pathways.

A CareerBuilder survey found that approximately 1 in 4 high school students reported that career choice was based on something they saw on television or in a movie and 33 percent of full-time workers regretted their choice of college major.¹⁸ Additionally, companies have reported their struggles finding qualified candidates with diverse backgrounds when looking at gender, race, and ethnicity.¹⁹ Afterschool and summer learning programs—in which children from low-income households, African-American children, and Latino children are more likely to participate²⁰—offer activities in various interest areas, introducing students to a diverse range of fields and occupations, including STEM fields.²¹



Afterschool and summer learning programs provide scaled opportunities for students to gain foundational skills that employers desire in their future hires.

Statewide afterschool networks supporting workforce readiness

Large-scale systems—such as the 50 state afterschool networks—are also at work in the afterschool field, helping coordinate, grow, and strengthen afterschool programs' connections to college and career readiness. For instance, Kansas' afterschool network, the Kansas Enrichment Network, joined forces with the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce to develop the Education Practice & Immersion for Credit (EPIC) project, connecting afterschool youth in rural Salina to potential career pathways in the community. In South Carolina, the South Carolina Afterschool Alliance brought together a group of stakeholders, including a school district and the South Carolina Department of Education's Office of Career and Technology Education, and was able to facilitate the creation of digital badges that validated the skills and competencies high school afterschool program participants gained learning about careers in the health sciences. An upcoming white paper in late 2017 by the American Youth Policy Forum will further explore the systems-level work taking place across the country, including the ways in which state and local afterschool systems come together with workforce systems to prepare students for their futures, as well as their future careers.

For example, a survey of close to 1,600 students in 160 different afterschool programs found that 4 out of 5 students reported that their STEM career knowledge increased because of their afterschool experience.²² What's more, 73 percent of students reported that they had a positive change in their attitudes toward STEM interest after participating in their afterschool program,²³ which is relevant as high STEM interest is positively associated with STEM course enrollment and selecting a STEM career pathway.²⁴ Students in the *YWCA Greater Miami-Dade Clubhouse* experiment with and build skills to use technology as an avenue to explore and develop their interests. As one of 100 Clubhouses across 19 countries, the Greater Miami-Dade Clubhouse empowers its student population (95 percent of whom are African-American) to become more capable, creative, and confident learners through hands-on experiences. An online survey of more than 1,300 youth involved in Clubhouses worldwide found that students are learning content in science and technology; building skills that contribute to designing, making, and problem-solving; and gaining professional, collaboration, and social skills.²⁵

Two examples of afterschool programs connecting students to new career paths are *The City*, a program serving middle schoolers in Salina, Kan., and *MEDTwo*, a program that works with high schoolers in Columbia, S.C. The City students have the opportunity to take part in the EPIC (Education Practice & Immersion for Credit) project, headed by the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce. The project's goal is to create a "cradle-to-career continuum" in Salina. For instance, when learning about audiovisual jobs and digital production, students visited the local access television station where they were shown how to produce a show and put together their own video clips. MEDTwo's students gain a closer look at the health sciences field through a lecture series that brings in guest speakers representing an array of health science professions, including pathologists, pharmacists, and a trauma team from the local hospital. Speakers share with students what it takes to become a health science professional, discussing what a typical day looks like for them and the steps they took to get to where they are. There is also a lab component of the program, where students get hands-on experience in a health science profession. Students in both programs are able to earn digital badges to capture their new knowledge and skills.



Providing real-world work experiences that help build students' familiarity with and capabilities in the workforce.

Connecting students to work experiences through activities such as internships, and preparing students for the work through developing job-seeking skills, are valuable opportunities afterschool and summer learning programs can provide to help students succeed in the workforce. Research has found that the benefits associated with early work experience include less time unemployed and higher hourly wages and annual earnings.²⁶ *Sunrise of Philadelphia* in Pa., provides scaffolded workforce development programming to their K-12 grade students. While elementary and middle schoolers build their foundational skills and explore career options, the program's high school students participate in career-themed clubs and take part in paid internships, gaining hands-on work experience in fields from social media marketing to the restaurant industry. Sunrise also helps set students up to land their first job through mock interview practice, resume support, and tips on dressing professionally. A program alumnus and current Sunrise group leader shared, “[Sunrise is] a very welcoming and loving environment . . . I learned a lot of teamwork skills and different ways to handle situations depending on who I may come across. These skills helped me land a job with Sunrise as a Group Leader.”

High school students enrolled in the *EVOLUTIONS After School Program (Evoking Learning and Understanding Through Investigations in the Natural Sciences)* in New Haven, Conn., a majority of whom are from low-income families and are first generation college aspirants, have the opportunity for paid museum and lab internships. After one year, high schoolers who participate in the program—which explores STEM careers—are eligible to work in the museum or intern in Yale science faculty's laboratories. The program also introduces students to a range of career fields available within the museum, from graphic designers to exhibit technicians. Through a collaboration with local schools, students earn school credits for successful participation in the program. A survey of EVOLUTIONS students found that more than 5 in 6 reported an increased understanding of the connection between high school academics, college academics, and careers; an increased ability to work in teams; and an increased knowledge of science related careers.

Conclusion

A strong and vibrant economy is reliant on a strong and vibrant workforce equipped with the necessary skills, competencies, and knowledge. Afterschool and summer learning programs play an integral role readying students for their career pathways; not only helping them develop the foundational skills that are critical across the different contexts of their lives from an early age—including in school, in work, and in their everyday interactions—but providing them with opportunities that stretch their ideas of what is possible and of what they are capable. Programs introduce students to diverse career fields, teaching them about the array of jobs within each field and connecting them to internships and apprenticeships. Afterschool and summer learning programs are making sure that all students, regardless of their zip code, receive the supports that will follow them from school to the workforce, as they make the transition into successful adults.

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– Sunrise of Philadelphia Alumnus



Endnotes

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