



BRIDGING THE SOFT SKILLS GAP

■ How the Business and
■ Education Sectors Are
■ Partnering to Prepare Students
■ for the 21st Century Workforce

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OVERVIEW

Despite U.S. high school graduation rates reaching all-time highs, many employers are finding that recent graduates are unprepared to succeed in the workforce because they lack foundational “soft skills.” While technical skills are often industry-specific, soft skills such as professional communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and time management are valued by employers across sectors. The importance of these skills is widely acknowledged; yet, they are not taught with consistency or given prioritization. Closing the gap between the soft skills employers require in their workforce and those that students leave school with is essential. This can and should be achieved through collaboration between business and education at the local level. Bridging the Soft Skills Gap makes the case for partnerships between the business and education sectors and outlines strategies already being used successfully across the country. It offers practical recommendations for businesses seeking to make an impact and profiles five successful partnerships established by Nike, EY, Wegmans, Wynn Las Vegas and the Northern Kentucky Education Council.



1 The Soft Skills Gap

Despite U.S. high school graduation rates reaching all-time highs⁽¹⁾, a growing number of employers across industries are reporting that job applicants lack the basic skills needed to succeed in the workforce.⁽²⁾

Even when applicants make it past the interview process, employers are coping with new hires who are unsure of how to write a professional email, who struggle to organize and prioritize tasks, or who have a difficult time collaborating with coworkers. As Time magazine notes, “the entry-level candidates who are on tap to join the ranks of full-time work are clueless about the fundamentals of office life.”⁽³⁾ Somewhere along the road from education to employment, the system is not routinely equipping all students with all the skills they need to succeed.

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While there are dozens of terms for this widely coveted category of skills, employers, educators, organizations, and policy-makers are increasingly coalescing around “soft skills,”⁽⁴⁾ which commonly refer to the following:

- *Teamwork & collaboration*
- *Problem solving & critical thinking*
- *Organizational skills*
- *Interpersonal communication*
- *Leadership*
- *Work ethic & persistence*
- *Creativity*
- *Relationship skills (e.g. conflict resolution)*

In contrast to hard skills or technical skills required for employment in specific sectors, such as technology or manufacturing, soft skills are valued by employers across sectors. An analysis by the career networking site LinkedIn found that the ability to communicate is most predictive of LinkedIn members getting hired, followed by “organization, capacity for teamwork, punctuality, critical thinking, social savvy, creativity, and adaptability.”⁽⁵⁾ In short, soft skills pay off.



“We now have very hard evidence,” says James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, “that you have to have soft skills in order to succeed.”⁽⁶⁾ For example, noncognitive skills such as “conscientiousness” (the tendency to be hardworking, organized, and responsible) predict educational attainment and labor market outcomes as strongly as measures of cognitive ability.⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, Heckman cites evidence that soft skills can be learned and mastered by all students, regardless of personal attributes (eg. individual motivations, goals, or preferences). As such, “programs that enhance soft skills have an important place.”⁽⁸⁾

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- James Heckman, Economist and Nobel Laureate

While employers value these skills and increasingly look for them in new hires, evidence demonstrates that they are finding this challenging. For example, the Wall Street Journal found that 92% of nearly 900 surveyed executives said soft skills were equally important or more important than technical skills, yet 89% said they have a very or somewhat difficult time finding employees with those soft skills.⁽⁹⁾ A survey by the recruitment firm CareerBuilder similarly found that 77% of surveyed employers rate soft skills as being of equal importance to cognitive skills (eg. reading, mathematics, science).⁽¹⁰⁾ PayScale and Future Workplace found that only half of managers surveyed believe that recent graduates are adequately prepared for the workforce.⁽¹¹⁾

Educators and parents also grasp the importance of soft skills for students entering the workforce. A full 96% of educators rank problem-solving as a “very important or important” skill for career success, according to a survey by Wainhouse, followed by collaboration (95%) and persistence (90%).⁽¹²⁾ Gallup found that over 3 in 4 parents strongly agree that their children should learn soft skills, such as critical thinking and communication, in school.⁽¹³⁾

Why, then, are so many high school and college graduates entering the workforce unprepared? According to a Brookings report, there is a lack of specificity in terms of what and how soft skills should be taught in the first place, which makes it incredibly difficult for teachers to incorporate

them into curricula built to transfer hard skills. On top of this, no matter how much employers lament the soft skills gap, the system-wide incentives (e.g. embedded in targets mandated at the local, state, and federal levels) for educators to teach soft skills are not universally aligned.⁽¹⁴⁾

Employers are scrambling to fill positions now and graduates are failing to qualify for them. 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.

“Businesses large and small constantly tell us how hard it is to find qualified workers who can not only do the job, but who can also show up to work on time, dress appropriately, and work well with a team. With almost 6 million unfilled jobs in America, this lack of soft skills hurts workers, businesses, and the economy. Businesses recognize the critical need for soft skills and are working hard in their communities to help students obtain the skills they need to succeed in the jobs of tomorrow.”

- Cheryl Oldham, Senior Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Center for Education & Workforce

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The Case for Collaboration Between the Business & Education Sectors

There's a strong case for collaboration between business and education. On the one hand, when teachers know which soft skills they should be emphasizing, they are able to make simple, effective changes. Yet many K-12 educators lack the flexibility, resources, and support to bridge the soft skills gap on their own and require help from credible partners. On the other hand, nobody knows better which skills employers are looking for than businesses themselves. Unfortunately, the current approach of waiting to bridge an employee's skills gap "on the job" is too expensive and comes too late. To create a reliable talent pipeline, businesses have to work hand-in-hand with schools.

Collaboration is smart for another reason. So far, with the exception of a few bright spots, efforts to address the soft skills gap have been siloed. For example, there are over 80 different pedagogical frameworks associated with soft skills. This proliferation undermines efficient collaboration, according to Rebecca Winthrop from The Brookings Institution. There is an "urgent need for clarity" along with "coherent, clear messaging" about which specific skills a given program is meant to strengthen.⁽¹⁵⁾ Breaking out of existing silos will ensure that students reap the benefits of a sharpened education much sooner.

"Building a stronger America will require building a more skilled America where businesses, educators, and workers are working together with shared purpose. There are 6 million open jobs in the U.S. – 3.3 million of them being STEM-related. A good step to solving this problem are employee-school partnerships focused on "soft" and "hard" skills."

- Dean Garfield, President and CEO, ITI

Finally, the benefits of solving the soft skills gap through collaboration between the business and education sectors exemplify the concept of creating shared value. As described in the Harvard Business Review, "Shared value is created when companies recognize that there are tremendous opportunities for innovation and growth in treating social problems as business objectives."⁽¹⁶⁾ Schools struggle to prepare students with the right soft skills for the workforce. Employers struggle to fill positions. Shared value is created when employers make it a business priority to connect directly with schools, developing skills and career pathways for students.



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Across the country, a growing number of companies are focusing on student education as a part of their business strategy. They see the value in equipping students with the skills for workplace success and, in so doing, strengthening their talent pipeline.⁽¹⁷⁾ For example, EY's city-based mentoring programs are tied to a larger corporate responsibility strategy that specifically names the priority of "developing future generations of talent."⁽¹⁸⁾ Meanwhile, the Nike School Innovation Fund is specifically focused on partnerships with public schools in Oregon, where over 12,000 of Nike's employees reside.

Although bridging the soft skills gap and preparing students for the jobs of today, and tomorrow, is no simple task, there are bright spots that demonstrate how powerful collaboration between business and education partners can be.



3 Profiles of Successful Partnerships

WHO: Nike, Oregon Schools, AVID

WHAT: Classroom Solutions

WHERE: Portland, Beaverton, and Hillsboro Schools Districts, Oregon



HOW IT BEGAN: With more than 12,000 Oregon-based employees, many of whom have children in public schools, Nike makes it a priority to invest in education. Nike CEO Mark Parker committed \$9 million in 2007 to establish the Nike School Innovation Fund (NSIF) in partnership with the Portland, Beaverton, and Hillsboro public schools.⁽¹⁹⁾ NSIF initially spanned K-12 and in 2015 focused its attention on high schools.

HOW IT WORKS: NSIF pairs Nike leaders with 10 high school-based teams, sharing Nike innovation and inspiration as well as business expertise with school leaders while helping classroom teachers establish stronger connections to the 21st century workplace. The core of NSIF is a granting and innovative mentorship program, implemented in partnership with the nonprofit AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), that spans 100 individual high schools and 30 middle schools in the state. AVID was chosen because the grants directly impact the classroom, and students, especially when it comes to preparing students with the soft skills needed to be successful in college and their career. Rather than developing new curriculum, altering the current school model or asking students to participate in a program outside of school time, AVID “trains educators to use proven practices to prepare students for success in high school, college, and a career” alongside subject mastery and coursework.⁽²⁰⁾ Specifically, teachers, counselors, and principals at each school receive professional development training at an AVID Summer Institute. AVID is nationally recognized for strategies that focus on students who are typically underrepresented in higher education and support them to succeed.

OUTCOMES: As a result of the scale Nike was able to provide, 99% of AVID students in Oregon public schools graduate on time and are ready for college.⁽²¹⁾

“Public schools impact everyone in our community and our state. We are proud to build on our rich history with Portland, Beaverton and Hillsboro schools by bringing a proven college and career readiness program to students across the state.”

- Caitlin Morris, General Manager, Nike Global Community Impact

“Nike’s commitment to impact students’ education, both in academics and the soft skills necessary to succeed in college and in their selected careers is remarkable. We are proud that we are the provider of AVID strategies to best support these dedicated educators.”

- Dr. Sandy Husk, CEO of AVID



WHO: EY, College For Every Student

WHAT: Mentoring for College & Career Readiness

WHERE: 34 cities across the United States

HOW IT BEGAN: Across EY's United States workforce, about one-third of their employees were first-generation college students.⁽²²⁾ These students often don't have the role models or real world training to understand what it means to work in a corporate environment, including the types of soft skills needed in a first job. To address this, EY created a mentoring program tied to one of EY's strategic focus areas for corporate responsibility, "developing future generations of talent."⁽²³⁾

HOW IT WORKS: Partnering with the nonprofit College for Every Student, EY created College MAP (Mentoring for Access and Persistence), which mobilizes 1,000+ employees every year to mentor 1,500+ underserved youth. Each EY mentor commits two years to the program and joins a mentor group that works intensively with College MAP Scholars at a local high school. The mentors use a curriculum that focuses on the development of life skills via goal setting, work ethic and persistence, and managing personal finances. As one EY executive put it, "Our mentors are working with students to create an aptitude and understanding of what is required of a young person to be able to navigate through a college exploration and access process." EY mentors also help College MAP Scholars transition into post-secondary education by assisting with college and financial aid applications, discussing majors, and helping to organizing campus visits.⁽²⁴⁾

OUTCOMES: Since 2009, EY professionals have spent an estimated 125,000 hours mentoring underserved youth through College MAP which has resulted in 97% of College MAP Scholars graduating high school. Additionally, 90% of College MAP Scholars who graduate high school enroll in college, compared to 52% in their relevant peer group.

"College MAP makes a huge difference to the College MAP Scholars we mentor. It literally changes the trajectory of their entire lives and often of their younger siblings' lives as well. The unexpected benefit of the program has been the impact on our own people... connecting them far more strongly and personally to one another and to the firm."

- Deborah K. Holmes, EY Americas Director of Corporate Responsibility





WHO: Wynn Resorts, Dean Petersen Elementary School

WHAT: Adopt-a-School

WHERE: Dean Petersen Elementary, Clark County School District, Las Vegas

HOW IT BEGAN: Krista Yarberry, became Principal of Dean Petersen Elementary to help turnaround a low performing school and provide opportunities for students to succeed. After assessing what she and her staff could implement on their own to drive real change, she realized that she was going to need resources and support beyond what even the District could provide. In partnership with the Superintendent of Clark County School District, Pat Skorowsky and Principal Yarberry reached out to Maurice Wooden, the President of Wynn and Encore Las Vegas to ask them to adopt the school.

HOW IT WORKS: The team from Wynn met with Principal Yarberry to really understand the school's challenges and started by supporting Dean Petersen Elementary in small ways, such as helping to meet basic necessities. But in 2016, Wynn hosted the Petersen Collaboration Summit to identify needs in a more comprehensive manner. The Summit resulted in a larger partnership with the School District, opening up possibilities for multifaceted programming. Wynn tasked its design team with refurbishing the school's facilities. New chairs, tables, carpeting, appliances and paint created an inviting environment for students. Employees collect and distribute school supplies; host appreciation days for teachers; offer tutoring services; and organize a career day to expose students to different professional opportunities. Each Petersen classroom has been "adopted" by a different Wynn department.⁽²⁵⁾ A core part of the programming is the "Be Kind" effort that Wynn supports to help students understand the value of kindness, respect and sharing. These soft skills were critical for students at Dean Petersen Elementary to change the school from a place they have to go everyday, to a place they want to go everyday. Wynn provided Be Kind t-shirts to every student and staff member; and participates in Be Kind appreciation events every week to acknowledge those students who go above and beyond.

OUTCOMES: The Wynn partnership contributed to a change in school and teacher culture significantly. When Principal Yarberry took over, there were 39 teacher openings with high turnover. As teachers felt more appreciated, through Wynn support, Principal Yarberry was able to fully close the gap and retain high-quality teachers.

"It's easy to write a check, but we wanted to roll up our sleeves and become a true partner, to dig in and provide genuine support."

- Maurice Wooden, President of Wynn

"If we start with teaching our children not only how to be good scholars...but how to be good citizens so they can get the jobs and be a part of the workforce – we've won, we've changed what's happening in these children's lives."

- Krista Yarberry, Principal of Petersen Elementary



WHO: Wegmans Food Markets, Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection

WHAT: Work-Based Learning

WHERE: New York and Maryland school districts

HOW IT BEGAN: Often being many kids first job, Wegmans realized that they had a responsibility to ensure kids were both prepared for this first job and got the most out of that experience. In 1987, Wegmans' employees began running a program to help at-risk youth finish high school through mentoring and work-based learning. By 1991, President George H.W. Bush recognized the program with the "Points of Light" award, and it was considered a national model. In order to grow the program, Wegmans issued an RFP to identify a non profit partner.

HOW IT WORKS: To achieve scale and help as many students as possible, Wegmans made a conscious decision not to try and build this alone. Instead they searched for a best in class nonprofit partner who already had reach and buy in from a wide base of schools. By choosing the Hillside Family of Agencies, Wegmans was able to support a community nonprofit that operates a \$15 million program serving 4000 at-risk high school students across New York school districts as well as Prince George's County in Maryland.

In addition to funding their work, Wegmans is the largest employer partner of the Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, with nearly 600 students employed. As an employer, Wegmans has real world opportunity to mentor students, helping them to learn the soft skills they need at Wegmans and for their future jobs. Between Wegmans and the HW-SC program, they also provide college and career readiness training, tutoring, and mentoring. One Wegmans executive noted that the company's "best decision was to outsource the program to our not-for-profit community partner who works in partnership with us to ensure student success."⁽²⁶⁾

OUTCOMES: "On average, 96 percent of youth who stay with the program throughout high school, receive job training, maintain part-time employment with an HW-SC employment partner and earn their diploma on time."⁽²⁷⁾ The reduction in turnover is another benefit of the program for employers, considering that for these employees the turnover rate is only about 15%, compared to close to 30 percent for similar positions across the company, and down from 100 percent when the program began back in 1987.

"By visualizing the potential of a true community partnership to benefit at-risk students – and then working to make that vision a reality – Wegmans and Hillside Family of Agencies have created an innovative solution to a pervasive problem."

- Duane Hutt (Wegmans) & Meghan Wagner (Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection)



WHO: Northern Kentucky Education Council

WHAT: Business-Education Coalitions

WHERE: Northern Kentucky

HOW IT BEGAN: In the early 1990s, Northern Kentucky recognized that their area, made up of 18 school districts and 6 counties all within a short drive of each other, functioned much like a big city without the benefit of a shared vision and resource pool. Consequently, a dialogue began between business, education and community leaders led, in 2007, to a community-wide business and education Summit; Champions for Education. It became clear that many entities were trying to accomplish the same goals and, at the same time, there was too much fragmentation in the solutions leaving Northern Kentucky without an aligned school to workforce development plan. To address this, Northern Kentucky formally named the Northern Kentucky Education Council in 2008, a diverse coalition of educators, businesses, and community leaders from the Northern Kentucky region, whose "heartbeat" was six action teams encompassing nearly 100 partners. The Northern Kentucky Education Council now serves as the catalyst for the regional education goals.

HOW IT WORKS: The overarching work of the NKYEC is to ensure that through collaboration, the region as a whole can effectively educate, prepare and grow talent, ensuring businesses can be competitive, now and into the future. The six action teams started with an explicit goal of mapping backward from job and soft skills in demand in their area to elementary school curricula. Each action team addresses one of the six regional education goals, and as a result of the Council, students have significantly greater opportunities for academic and lifelong success, and Northern Kentucky has become a more prosperous place to live.

OUTCOMES: As a result of NKYEC partnerships like these, Northern Kentucky is recognized nationally for its record of success. Since inception, they have achieved a 93% on-time graduation rate for the region - higher than the national average - and have been able to increase the college and career ready rate from 51% to nearly 70% in just a few years.

"We believe it is critical to Northern Kentucky's success to take a holistic approach to preparing students of today for the jobs of tomorrow. Education and business can no longer afford to 'go it alone', we must work together as a community to achieve real outcomes."

- Polly Page, Executive Director at Northern Kentucky Education Council

"We need to make sure we have a pipeline for talent,"So we need to invest in the educational institutions that we have in the community and in the region.

- Vera Hall, St. SVP, Chief Nurse Executive at Elizabeth Healthcare

4 Pathways to Impact

Since student, school, and employer needs vary so much from community to community, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to bridging the soft skills gap. Nevertheless, there are a host of proven approaches and strategies which can guide local collaboration.

Five common approaches to collaboration between the business and employment sectors are summarized on the following page. Selecting the right approach or combination of approaches depends on several factors:

- An assessment of local needs
- The degree of mutual commitment from company and school leadership
- Extent to which employees will be engaged
- Opportunities to partner with an established nonprofit

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.

The good news is that these approaches are complementary, and there are now many examples of them in action, including the five case studies above.

5 Approaches To Business-Education Collaboration

1 Classroom Solutions

Investing in classroom solutions empowers teachers to better help young people develop the skills they need in school, work, and life. Since promoting soft skills is less about what is taught than how they are taught, access to hands-on, methodology training for educators is vital. Employers can help by ensuring that teachers and administrators across local schools have access to proven professional development programs from established education nonprofits.

2 Mentoring for College & Career Readiness

Businesses can mobilize employees to mentor students based upon a college and career readiness curriculum. Proponents of these mentoring programs say that they enhance employee satisfaction and retention; strengthen the talent pipeline; and contribute to thriving communities.⁽²⁸⁾

3 Adopt-a-School

In adopting a specific school or school district, businesses typically identify and commit to meeting a holistic set of needs through multifaceted programming, ranging from tutoring and mentoring to specific grants for programming and facilities.

4 Work-Based Learning

Instead of solely offering traditional internships for college students, businesses can partner with high schools to establish pre-employment apprenticeship programs designed to introduce students to workplace demands. The Department of Labor supports employers that establish Registered Apprenticeships to build a robust talent pipeline.⁽²⁹⁾

5 Coalition Building

Building a coalition of representatives from industry, the education system, and the community creates the space for meaningful dialogue about common priorities and unique local challenges. It also facilitates collective action around solutions.

5 More Information

Although the challenge presented by the soft skills gap is significant, there are also many ways to begin solving it. Businesses have a critical role to play in this regard. Fortunately, there are several simple starting points for those businesses looking to take the first step to consider:

- Attend a local school board meeting and voice the needs of businesses in your area.
- Work collaboratively with local schools to create a common lexicon, identify skills and job needs transparently.
- Set up career exploration days for students to visit local businesses.
- Explore internship matching for open positions.
- Reach out to education nonprofits and learn about how they can directly help schools in your area.
- Identify a local school (or district) that you could uniquely support and begin a dialogue.



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