



American Institutes for Research (AIR)

is pleased to release the second brief in our series *Beyond the Bell: Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field*. Practitioners do amazing work to help young people grow and learn every day. Researchers study this work and learn about how it helps youth, families, and communities. These briefs are designed to connect the dots so that we can learn from one another.

Ready for Work?

How Afterschool Programs Can Support Employability Through Social and Emotional Learning

Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field

What will today's young people and adults need to know and be able to do in order to thrive in our fast-changing, complex, and interconnected world? For educators and employers, understanding the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that ultimately contribute to success in school, work, and life is a priority.¹ Throughout the past decade, afterschool programs have helped prepare young people for the world of work in a variety of ways. Programs serving middle and high school youth often use strategies such as internships, work-study programs, job shadowing, and career development to help youth understand and begin to develop a work-oriented mind-set. Likewise, programs focus on developing work habits (e.g., punctuality) and a strong work ethic to help prepare youth for what will be expected of them when they begin working. These important and valuable attitudes and skills are crucial for job readiness and success.

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But another aspect to *employability* has gained more attention in recent years—the need for workers to have strong social and emotional skills in order to be successful in the workplace. This concept isn't new. In fact, as long ago as 1995, Dan Goleman reported that aspects of social and emotional intelligence (e.g., optimism, self-control) were more important than IQ for having success in the workplace.² Since then, the afterschool field has started to recognize that these skillsets, alternatively termed *noncognitive skills*, *soft skills*, or *21st century skills*, help set one individual apart from another and allow a young person to successfully navigate the relationships with colleagues, employees, and superiors that are an essential part of success at any job. Afterschool programs have a role to play in supporting the development of these skills for *all* youth. A widening skills gap is plaguing the workforce—meaning that today's workforce is not prepared for today's jobs—and an even more alarming problem is that youth from low-income communities do not have access to the same opportunities to build desired employability skills as their more affluent peers. Afterschool is helping to close this skills and opportunity gap.

In this second brief in our *Beyond the Bell: Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field* series, we define employability skills overall with a focus on social and emotional competencies and present research on why they are important. Then we share how social and emotional learning programs and practices can support the development of these skills and how afterschool and expanded learning settings are an ideal place for this to happen.

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What Are Employability Skills?

Research has shown that a variety of *skills*—problem solving, communication, self-discipline, and collaboration, to name a few—are critical to college, career, and life success.³ But what specifically are these skills, and what do we mean by success? One often-cited definition comes out of the [Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education \(OCTAE\)](#) in the U.S. Department of Education. They define employability skills as “general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors.”⁴ They have developed a framework (see Figure 1) for these skills that breaks them down into three main categories:

- **Applied knowledge**, including applied academic knowledge (transfer of academic knowledge to work) and critical thinking (analyze, reason, solve problems)
- **Effective relationships**, including interpersonal skills (collaboration, communication, positive attitude, teamwork) and personal qualities (responsibility, self-discipline, flexibility, integrity, initiative, professionalism, self-concept, sense of responsibility for self)
- **Workplace skills**, including successfully using various communication strategies, managing time and resources, using information well, and using technology

OCTAE’s framework is just one of many,⁵ but it captures the wide range of skills that youth need in order to be successful in the workforce. Afterschool leaders may recognize many of these skills as key targeted outcomes for their programs.

Why Do Employability Skills Matter?

A growing body of research during the past decade has shown that these skills—those not directly linked to content knowledge and application—are important. Employers want to see these skills in their applicants and are concerned about what they see as a skills gap among potential employees. The Manufacturing Institute Skills Gap study, for example, found that a lack of problem-solving skills was the number one skills deficiency among current employees. Likewise, in a survey of members of the American Society for Training & Development, leadership and managerial skills were ranked as the biggest skills gap.⁶ Studies have shown that employability skills are useful not only for performing job duties but also for obtaining and keeping jobs and advancing in one's career. One study found that employability skills are at least as important as cognitive abilities in workplace success,⁷ while others have found that the skills are even better predictors of economic success and can be connected to wages, work experience, ongoing employment into adulthood, and even closing the gender wage gap.⁸ In addition, employability skills can be developed and improved and may even be more malleable than cognitive skills.⁹

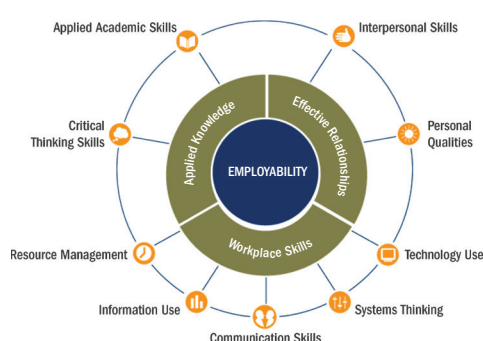
What Is the Connection Between Social and Emotional Learning and Employability?

Although some researchers argue that schools are not doing enough to support the development of the necessary skills for workforce readiness,¹⁰ evidence suggests that we already know a lot about how to develop some of the employability skills outlined in the OCTAE framework—we may just be calling them something else. School-day and afterschool programs across the country have been implementing what are called social and emotional learning (SEL) programs for years. These programs support the development of social and emotional competencies such as problem solving, critical thinking, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and social awareness through both explicit SEL instruction (this is more common in school-day settings) and broader SEL strategies and practices (this is more common in afterschool settings). Although not termed as such, the social and emotional skills that these programs target are

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also key employability skills. In fact, the framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) bears a strong resemblance to OCTAE's Employability Skills Framework.

Figure 1. Side-by-Side Comparison of OCTAE's Employability Skills Framework and CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning Framework



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (n.d.). *Employability skills network*. Washington, DC: Author.



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2015). *Social and emotional learning core competencies*. Chicago, IL: Author. Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.

As these two frameworks illustrate, there is a great deal of connection between social and emotional competencies and employability skills. Although not identical, when you dig deeper into the two frameworks (click on each one to learn more), the alignment is clear. For example:

- **Interpersonal skills** (OCTAE) and **social awareness** (CASEL) both require the ability to understand social norms and work with others from diverse backgrounds.
- **Personal qualities** (OCTAE) and **self-awareness** (CASEL) both require the ability to recognize one's emotions and have a sense of confidence.
- **Communication skills** (OCTAE) and **relationship skills** (CASEL) both require the ability to communicate clearly, listen well, and resolve conflicts.

Given these similarities, it makes sense that SEL programs that explicitly target the development of social and emotional competencies could also be considered workforce readiness programs or programs targeting the development of employability skills. We explore this assertion a little further in the next section.

How Do Afterschool Programs Support the Development of Employability Skills?

Research has shown that SEL programs in school-day settings can contribute to the development of social and emotional competencies, many of which overlap with or contribute to employability skills.¹¹ Likewise, a growing body of research is starting to show that afterschool programs are also prime settings in which to implement social and emotional learning programs and practices, which, in turn, contribute to the development of employability skills. Youth development programs have been promoting these skills for many years with great success. As we note in our [first brief](#) in this series, several studies have shown that high-quality afterschool programs with intentional and targeted social and emotional learning programming contribute to improved self-concept, improved social behaviors, and reduced problem behaviors.¹²

Afterschool programs also target explicit activities that help young people develop employability skills and leadership through activities such as apprenticeships, public speaking, leadership development, team-building activities, résumé workshops, and mock interviews.

What does this look like in action?

[After School Matters](#) in Chicago invites high school youth to participate in apprenticeships at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels where they can explore their interests and learn skills related to a specific job or career. They also have an internship program to place high school youth in workplace settings to develop workplace readiness skills and to get on-the-job experience. Through participating in all of their programs, youth develop both content knowledge and employability skills such as problem solving, communication skills, and a personal workplace mind-set.

The School's Out New York City (SONYC) initiative is a club-based model for middle school youth in programs funded by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development. Although each club is unique, all are expected to build leadership skills into their model and have explicit leadership development activities in addition to a content area focus (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM]; sports; arts). Leadership activities include role modeling, opportunities to be counselors in training, public speaking, service learning and civic engagement activities, and opportunities to provide leadership within program activities. Through explicitly focusing on leadership, SONYC programs aim to develop key skills that young people will need as they move into high school and eventually the workplace.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Recommendations for Practitioners

The research is clear—employers are looking for employees who possess a broad set of skills that go beyond content knowledge. Afterschool and expanded learning programs already target many of the skills that employers want and can play an important role in helping close the skills gap between youth from lower income backgrounds and their more affluent peers so that all young people are prepared for the workforce. Unfortunately, in order to keep up with funder interest in improved academic achievement and the development of content knowledge, afterschool programs have too often downplayed their role in developing employability skills. As evidence grows about the importance of developing social and emotional competencies, afterschool practitioners should consider the following recommendations:

- **Listen to youth**—Talk to youth about their interests and career goals. Expose them to different kinds of careers and workplace environments (e.g., corporate, technology, community, sales, service, manufacturing). Talk to them about the diverse skills they will need to gain and sustain employment. Be explicit about how your program can help them develop these skills.
- **Listen to employers**—Talk to employers and recruiters in your community. Find out what kinds of skills they expect employees to have. Share your program strategies and results with them. Set up internships and job-shadowing programs. More than ever, companies want to prepare the next generation of the workforce, so include them in your programming!
- **Be explicit**—Define the skills your program aims to develop, and specifically name and intentionally target social and emotional competencies and employability skills that are important for the workplace.
- **Be comprehensive**—Consider all of the different ways your program can support employability skills, through both explicit programming designed to prepare youth for the workforce (e.g., internships, résumé workshops) and social and emotional learning (e.g., practices that support leadership development, critical thinking, self- and social awareness, communication skills).
- **Be open and creative**—Tomorrow's workplace is going to be different in both roles and culture than our own, so be sure to stay up-to-date with workforce trends, and innovate with youth and families in your program on ways that your program can create tomorrow's job leaders.

Recommendations for Researchers

Although the research on how afterschool programs can support employability skills is promising, there is not enough information about how targeted social and emotional learning practices explicitly contribute to the development of employability skills. Afterschool practitioners know anecdotally that they are supporting these skills. They conduct surveys with alumni that indicate the program influenced career choices and know that their programs are supporting the development of key social and emotional competencies, but they do not have enough rigorous evidence to prove those connections. More longitudinal and rigorous research is needed to answer questions such as the following:

- What are effective staff practices that explicitly support the development of employability skills?
- How do participants in afterschool programs fare in the workplace and why?
- What afterschool program practices and models are connected with the development of employability skills?
- How does afterschool participation close the skills gap between youth from lower income backgrounds and their more affluent peers to ensure that more young people are prepared for the workforce?
- What are the connections among improved social and emotional competencies, school success, and workplace readiness?

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Notes

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10 South Riverside Plaza, Suite 600
Chicago, IL 60606-5500
312.288.7600

www.air.org

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About Beyond the Bell

Today's afterschool and expanded learning programs provide enriching activities that support academic, social, emotional, artistic, and physical growth. Research shows that these programs work best when they are high quality and evidence based. *Beyond the Bell: A Toolkit for Creating Effective Afterschool and Expanded Learning Programs* (4th Edition) takes the guesswork out of designing, implementing, and evaluating your program by translating the latest research into accessible information and tools. Whether you are a program leader or staff member, whether you are new to the field of afterschool and expanded learning or a seasoned veteran, whether you want to fine-tune a successful program or design a new one from the ground up—*Beyond the Bell* can help you provide enriching programming that supports youth development.