

# Ready for Work



All youth ready for college, work & life.

## Advocates' Series

## Action Brief #2

Ready by 21™ is the bold new national initiative started by the Forum for Youth Investment in 2005 to challenge states and localities to better harness their collective horsepower to ensure that all youth are Ready by 21: Ready for college, work and life.™ Advocates' work is critical.

The Forum has compiled this brief as a part of our work with KIDS COUNT grantees focused on older youth. The working group and this series have been generously supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The Forum is pleased to present this action brief series in conjunction with two national dissemination partners:

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*To succeed in today's economy, all young people have to be ready for college, work and life — those in school and those not in school. Reports from higher education, business and youth development leaders suggest that while the pathways to college, work and adult responsibilities are different, the skills needed are largely the same.<sup>1</sup> Research studies and population surveys, however, suggest that too few young people have the skills needed to succeed.<sup>2</sup>*

*Nationally, 3.8 million 18–24 year olds are neither in school nor in the workforce — almost one in six.<sup>3</sup> Several research studies suggest that a small number of these young adults have opted out of school and work in order to start families or see the world. Most, however, are on the sidelines because they are ill-prepared for college or work or life.<sup>4</sup>*

*Who are these young people? Why are they getting lost in the systems? How can we get them back? What can be done to not lose them?*

### Forty percent of public high school graduates say they are unprepared for college or work.<sup>5</sup>

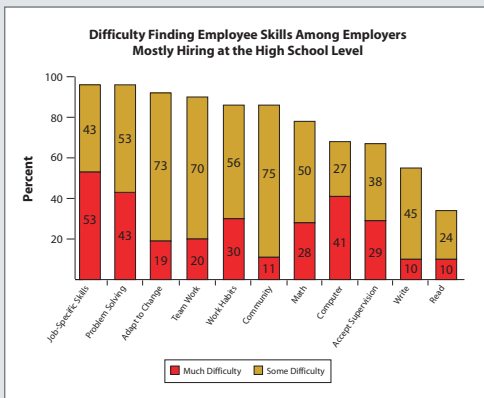
Business people, community leaders, educators, parents and young people themselves are becoming increasingly concerned that young people don't have the 21st century skills they need to succeed in the workforce. Leadership is needed. Schools can do more to align curricula and learning experiences with the demands of the 21st century workplace. Businesses and community organizations are places where young people can apply classroom skills, build new skills and earn credit for work experience.

To ensure that every student has the opportunity to learn and develop 21st century skills, educators, business and community leaders need to work together — to acknowledge that youth need a broader skill set to be prepared for work, to develop opportunities for young people to learn the skills employers value in school and on the job, and to develop common assessments and credentials that measure and document those skills.

- **There is a disconnect between youth skills and employer needs.** More than a third of high school graduates say there are gaps in their preparation for the expectations in their current jobs — gaps in academic skills like writing, research, math, and science. Employers expressed similar dissatisfaction in high school preparation.<sup>6</sup> A recent poll of National Association of Manufacturers reports that 84 percent of its members believe that K–12 schools are not doing an adequate job preparing students for the workplace and nearly half reported that their current employees lacked basic employability skills such as attendance, timeliness, and work ethic.<sup>7</sup>
- **Youth, especially low-income minorities, are having a hard time finding quality jobs.** Teen employment is now the lowest it has been in 57 years and unemployment rates are particularly high for low-income African American and Hispanic high school graduates.<sup>8</sup> Low-income minority youth actually remain the least likely to be employed while still in high school, creating additional school-to-work transition barriers.<sup>9</sup> Those jobs that are available are typically in lower level service industries, often lacking benefits, training, and opportunities for advancement.<sup>10</sup>

## Employers Want Skills

According to a 2003 survey conducted by the Washington State Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, employers who hire high school graduates report not only that their recruits lack job-specific skills, but also basic cognitive, personal and social skills needed: Problem solving skills top the list.<sup>14</sup>



A new 2006 survey fielded by Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the Society for Human Resource Managers and The Conference Board will be available fall 2006. This survey asks business leaders to rate the work readiness of entry level workers with high school diplomas, associate degrees and four year degrees. All are found lacking.

Many studies have found a positive relationship between paid employment and educational and occupational success after high school.<sup>11</sup> Today’s teens, however, especially those with fewer skills and fewer quality work opportunities, are becoming increasingly concentrated in retail trade, hospitality, leisure (fast food restaurants), and lower level service industries where the probability of receiving on-site training — computer training, formal training or apprenticeship training — is unlikely.<sup>12</sup>

While much attention has been given to the number of students disengaging and/or dropping out of school, few have noted the reduced opportunities along the developmental “work experience pipeline” from middle school through early adulthood. While some studies have shown that too much work (more than 20 hours per week) can interfere with learning and skill development, part-time and summer work experience can provide the kinds of experiences young people need to gain a broader skill set, assessments, certificates and the work exposure that enables them to apply learning to a real-world context. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, “Enhancing employment experiences during the teen years may play an important role in the long-term reduction of welfare rolls by providing at-risk youth with skills and experience that can be translated into later labor force successes.”<sup>13</sup>

## Supports Youth Need to Enter and Succeed in the Workforce

It is important that assessment tools measure the full range of work-related skills young people need, and highlight career possibilities for them. Young people also need businesses to collaborate with their schools to offer skill-based certificates and credits that showcase their skills, and quality job opportunities that complement and expand on the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom.

**Support for building a broader skill set.** Education and business leaders need to work together to align academic requirements with the key skills expected in the workplace. In the 21st century global economy, employers are seeking skills beyond core competencies in science, math, and reading comprehension. Educators need to partner with the business and higher education communities to develop a broad consensus on the 21st century skills employers value in potential employees and integrate those skills into the curriculum. Education and business leaders need to acknowledge and support the role that community-based organizations can play in providing opportunities for skill- and experience building for both teens and older disconnected youth.<sup>15</sup> To learn more about the key skill set as defined by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, see the sidebar on page 3.

**Opportunities to assess youth skills.** Once stakeholders have acknowledged that today’s youth need a broader set of skills to prepare them for work, businesses and communities can partner to measure young people’s 21st century skills, serving as indicators for high school reform initiatives that align the curriculum with workplace needs. Youth can also benefit from a variety of assessments that highlight both their aptitudes and appropriate career options.

In Washington state, the Franklin-Pierce school district offers Navigation 101 classes that meet twice a month during the school year to assess students’ personal interests and aptitudes.<sup>16</sup> To learn more about this assessment, see the sidebar on page 5.

**Skill-based certificates and credits that demonstrate work readiness.**

Efforts to define and assess 21st century skills help students take charge of their preparation for college and work. But increasingly, employers are looking for evidence that young people have the cognitive, personal and social skills they need to succeed. Certificate programs and alternative credit offerings supported by schools, businesses and community organizations can help young people get credit for the skills they have learned in school, on the job, or in community programs that provide opportunities for applied training, work and service. These credentials ensure that young people applying for jobs have tangible evidence that they're prepared for work whether they have a GED, a high school diploma or an Associates Degree.

In September, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, five states, Washington, D.C. and Junior Achievement Worldwide will unveil the Work-Readiness Credential, a voluntary national assessment, to a limited number of states and communities.<sup>17</sup> See the Resources sidebar on page 4 to find out how you can learn more. In Sonoma County, California, New Ways to Work is partnering with the Sonoma County Office of Education and Sonoma County's Youth Council to design the county-wide, industry-driven Work Readiness Certificate program to ensure that students have the skills they need to enter the workforce. Student skills will be evaluated by employer groups and certificates will be awarded to those who prove they are ready for work.<sup>18</sup> To learn more about New Ways to Work, see the Profile on page 5.

**Appropriate early work exposure.** The differences between school and workplace cultures and expectations are considerable, especially for teens whose families have marginal labor force attachments or negative attitudes towards work. Business and community organizations are places where young people can apply classroom skills, build new skills and earn credit for work experience. The development value of these experiences can be enhanced if young people receive intentional training and ongoing career development support. School to career programs, internships, and supported work experiences sponsored by schools, businesses or intermediaries can not only increase the likelihood that all youth have work experiences, but increase the chances that these work experiences are developmental because the tasks and the staff are supportive. To learn more about New Ways to Work, an organization in California striving to provide young people with quality work exposure, see the Profile on page 5.

**Ready for Work: State of the States**

Across the country, policy makers are looking for new and innovative ways to prepare the nation's young workforce. Below is a compilation of information on policies aimed at increasing the number of prepared, competent and competitive workers in the United States.

**Providing youth with 21st century skills.** Five states (California, Indiana, Nebraska, New York and Wyoming) have gone through an alignment process that includes collaboration with the business and higher education communities to ensure that high school standards reflect workforce skill demands. Indiana was the first state to take this approach by allowing the business, industry, labor, post-secondary and K-12 communities to complete a thorough review and revision of its high school standards. The new standards were then used to create more rigorous high school academic programs.<sup>20</sup> Through the American Diploma Project Network, 22 states are collaborating with Achieve, Inc. to align what employers and colleges expect of students with the knowledge and skills they need to graduate from high school.<sup>21</sup>

**Partnership for 21st Century Skills Challenges Schools to Create 21st Century Learning Settings**

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills is one of several business collaboratives that have defined the skills young people need if they want to be successful in the workforce.<sup>19</sup>

- **Core Subjects.** English, reading or language arts, math, science, foreign languages, civics, government, economics, arts, history and geography (As identified by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).
- **21st Century Content.** Global awareness, financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, civic literacy and wellness awareness.
- **Learning and Thinking Skills.** Critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, communication skills, creativity and innovation skills, collaboration skills, contextual learning skills and information and media literacy skills.
- **Information and Communications Literacy.** Use technology to learn, think critically, solve problems, use information, communicate, innovate and collaborate.
- **Life Skills.** Leadership, ethics, accountability, adaptability, personal productivity, personal responsibility, people skills, self-direction, and social responsibility.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills isn't the only organization highlighting the need to expand the skill set youth need to be prepared for work.

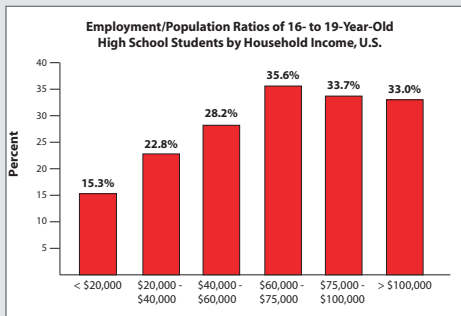
[Click here](#) to see what skills the Chamber of Commerce believes young people need to be prepared for the workforce.

[Click here](#) to see what employer's in Kentucky view as the skills needed for work.

## Teens Need Jobs

Between 2000 & 2004, the Employment/Population ratio of the nation's teens has declined nine percentage points to 36.4 percent. Andrew Sum and the Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies revealed information on teen employment in 2005, and while their analysis found small differences in teen employment based on gender and age, the more significant disparities were seen in family income, race and educational attainment.

**Family Income Matters:** In each race-ethnic group (African Americans, Hispanics, Whites), youth from the lowest income households and those living in high poverty neighborhoods were the least likely to be employed.



**Race Matters:** Even when you control for family income, racial disparities still matter, seeing as fewer than seven percent of African American male high school students in low-income households were employed in 2004 versus 12 percent of low-income Hispanic males and 23 percent of low-income White males. Between 2000 and 2004, teens in each of the three major race-ethnic groups (African Americans, Hispanics, Whites) encountered sharp drops in their employment rates, ranging from eight to nine percentage points. On an average month in 2004, four out of ten white teens were employed, compared to three out of ten Hispanics and only two of ten African Americans.

**Education Matters:** Only 50 percent of those without a high school diploma (GED) were employed while 76 percent of those who completed at least one year of post-secondary education were employed.<sup>22</sup>

The value of the (E/P) ratio is obtained by dividing the estimated number of employed teens (E) by the number of teens in the civilian non-institutional population (P).<sup>23</sup>

**Assessing work readiness skills.** States rely on assessments and data systems to hold high schools accountable for improving student transitions to college and work. Indiana, New York, North Carolina and Oklahoma hold high schools accountable for improving the college and work readiness of their students while nine more plan to do so. Businesses also play a role in assessing youth skills.<sup>24</sup> In April, New York City-based Conference Board and partner organizations sent out a survey to about 10,000 human-resource and training executives to get a better sense of what knowledge and skills their companies are looking for in job applicants so that educators can then take that information and integrate it into school curriculums.<sup>25</sup>

**Expanding pathways to work.** Portland, Oregon has co-located and integrated the resources of youth services and alternative schools to allow for youth's easier access to career development and career ladder programming. Portland benefits from Oregon state policy which allows for significant autonomy in alternative learning programs.<sup>26</sup> In 2007, the California Department of Education will establish three to five new schools through the Diploma Plus program. Created by the Commonwealth Corporation and New Ways to Work, this innovative small-school program allows students to enroll in college courses and work on internships and community service projects in order to strengthen what they learn in the classroom. Graduates earn a high school diploma as well as valuable real world experience.<sup>27</sup>

**Increasing work opportunities.** Young people aren't the only ones who benefit from career exposure and job training in the workplace. The Youth Registered Apprenticeship Tax Credit is a state-based tax credit program that provides incentives to more than 70 certified Michigan employer sites to sponsor federally approved registered apprenticeships. Students between the ages of 16 and 19 who are enrolled in high school or a GED preparation program are employed part time, and their on-the-job training is combined with classroom work. Employers receive a tax credit of up to \$2,000 annually per apprenticeship.<sup>28</sup>

## Policy Data Resources

*Look here to find resources where you can track federal policies related to work readiness*

**National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC).** In their legislative updates section, you can find information about WIA reauthorization and other important federal legislation. The best information can be obtained by becoming a member and accessing their Members Only database. [www.nyec.org](http://www.nyec.org)

**National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD-Y).** Visit the policy maker section of the homepage to find information about federal policies relevant to helping youth with disabilities enter the workforce. [www.ncwd-youth.info](http://www.ncwd-youth.info)

*Look here to find resources where you can track state data and policies related to work readiness*

**National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).** Access information about Vocational/Technical Education by looking under Postsecondary in the Education Bill Tracking Database.

[www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/educ\\_leg.cfm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/educ_leg.cfm)

**Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF).** Access data on youth, including idleness and employment. You can also find data on some cities and counties.

[www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/profile.jsp](http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/profile.jsp)

## Profile: Advocates Improving the Odds

New Ways to Work (NWW) is a California-based organization working on the local, state and national level to build community connections that ensure young people's access to quality educational and career opportunities. Their team of experienced practitioners is particularly interested in supporting the development of sustainable systems that leverage local resources and create powerful partnerships among schools, the community and the workplace.

In 2003, participants in the federally funded School-to-Work Intermediary Project called upon NWW to serve as a facilitating partner who could help them create a self-funded network to sustain their work. Together, they created the Intermediary Network (INet). NWW assisted INet member organizations in exploring connections to the after-school and small schools movements and worked to support college access and success for under-represented populations. Since then, the network has expanded to engage new local and affiliate members. INet members leveraged over 18 million dollars in public and private investments and provided services to 89,000 students, 13, 473 teachers, 2,000 schools and 6,422 employers.

Steve Trippe, president and executive director of NWW, recognizes that the competencies needed for work and college are similar, but he explains that NWW encourages the development of common-sense work readiness skills in young people. "In addition to the skills needed for college, young people need programs that more closely emulate workplace practices such as teamwork expectations. Often, in school, teamwork is parallel to cheating whereas in the workplace, it is encouraged. Of course, simple things like dress, absenteeism and tardiness become more critical in the workplace as well."

Trippe warns advocates that our systems are targeted toward either children or adults, not for adolescents/young adults' social or cognitive developmental needs. Therefore, he identifies a need for a coherent youth policy for the 14–24 age groups. "The programs to support 18- to 24-year-olds are buried in adult systems, and the data is not disaggregated," he says. "It is important to keep searching for new ways to connect youth and adult policy across funding streams."

For more information on New Ways to Work, visit their Web site, [www.nww.org](http://www.nww.org).

### Where to Learn More

#### Broader Skills

Read Tom Bailey, Katherine Hughes and David Moore's 2004 study, *Working Knowledge: Work-Based Learning and Education Reform*, to learn more about including work-based learning as part of a broad education reform strategy to prepare young people for the workforce.

#### Better Assessments

[Click here](#) to read the *21st Century Skills Assessment Paper*, a state-of-the-art summary of individual skill assessment tools that can be used in schools.

For more about the *Navigation 101* assessment program in Washington state, [click here](#).

#### Options for Certification

*Jobs for the Future* publishes research and analysis on ways to provide youth with the learning and credentials they need to make the transition to productive adulthood. For more, [click here](#).

The *Work Readiness Credential* was designed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its partners to improve the quality of job applicants entering the workforce, and to help employers in the hiring process. To read more, [click here](#).

For more on the *Work Readiness Certificate* program, [click here](#).

#### Early Work Exposure

*Promising and Effective Practices Network* run by the National Youth Employment Coalition, provides a wealth of knowledge on effective practices (both policy and programmatic) in the professional development of youth. To read more, [click here](#).

*Workforce Alliance* provides background information and analysis on existing federal policies that could expand education and workforce training. In addition, the Workforce Alliance provides key research on the effectiveness of investment in workforce skill development. For more, [click here](#).

Read Andrew Sum, Neeta Gogg and Garth Magnum's book *Confronting the Youth Demographic Challenge: The Labor Market Prospects of Out-of-School Youth* to learn about the wide array of private and social economic and educational benefits that can be generated by expanding substantive employment opportunities for the nation's teen's and young adults.

## Endnotes

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4. *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men*. (P. Edelman, H. Holzer, P. Offner); *America's Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventive Strategy*. (D. Besharov).
5. *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies conducted for Achieve, Inc. February 2005.
6. Ibid.
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23. Ibid., p.4
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