

Personal Skill Development in Grades 6-12

Enhancing Learning for 21st Century Success



International Center

for Leadership in Education

Acknowledgment

The International Center for Leadership in Education wishes to thank
Christine LaRocco for authoring this resource kit.

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Overview

The Need for Change

Educators are saddled with ever-increasing and escalating demands to expand the secondary curriculum. Since the mid-1980s, the necessary skills for success in the world outside the classroom have included far more than strong academic achievement. Business and industry leaders throughout the country and the world now expect and demand effective personal skills in addition to technical skills and overall competence in a particular line of work. The workforce skills gap has become a national and global crisis that will impact the economy of the country, and schools have an obligation to emphasize behavioral skills as well as academic skills. This is a call to action that no school can afford to ignore.

These personal skills include communication and problem solving skills, taking initiative, self-direction, and the ability to work with others. Employers are looking for college and high school graduates with demonstrated abilities in these skills. They expect schools to design an instructional plan for all students — not merely for career and technology students — that blends lesson plans in academics with the practice of workplace and interpersonal skills. This balance is critical for long-term employment and advancement.

Wilhelm, W. J., Logan, J.,
Smith, S., and Szul, L.
*Meeting the Demand:
Teaching “Soft” Skills*

In its 1997 survey of 4,500 manufacturers, the National Association of Manufacturers found that 88% of employers report a shortage of qualified workers. The report showed deficiencies not only in basic math, writing, and comprehension skills, but also in personal skills such as problem solving and basic conduct — like showing up for work on time and staying on the job all day.

Judy, Richard and D’Amico,
Carol, *Workforce 2020: Work
and Workers in the 21st
Century*

The Hudson Institute’s report, *Workforce 2020*, indicates that the average manufacturer finds five out of six job applicants lacking in basic writing or verbal skills. While these workers may have graduated from high school or even college, their education in writing and speaking may have been limited solely to academic applications while the workplace applications of these

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skills were neglected. Beyond academics, education in the necessary personal skills for success on the job often is overlooked. Employers report that a greater gap exists in the desired behavioral skills than in academic skills. Only 50% of high school graduates are prepared for entry-level positions, with most being deficient in behavioral skills.

Wilhelm, W.J., J.
Logan, S. Smith,
and Szul, L.
“Meeting the
Demand: Teaching
‘Soft’ Skills”

These findings are significant. The workplace has evolved into a high-tech and high-performance environment in which employees are expected to be independent thinkers and problem solvers. To keep up with the changes in the nature of work, secondary schools must integrate personal skill development into the existing curriculum in all classrooms.

Educators need not panic when considering this change. With a few adjustments, these behavioral, or “soft,” skills can be incorporated into teachers’ lesson plans and methods.

Personal Skill Development in Grades 6-12: Enhancing Learning for 21st Century Success is a teacher training kit that identifies ways to integrate personal skills into the overall school curriculum. The activities, strategies, processes, and lessons described in this resource kit will help schools develop a “culture of success” for every student — not only in school, but also in the world outside the classroom.

How to Use the Resource Kit

Good teachers meet the challenge of creating this culture of success by continually adjusting their instructional approaches and methods to meet students’ needs. To prepare students for the workplace, educators should focus on the whole student and design classroom and community activities that require students to interact with others. The activities and strategies included in this kit will help schools identify those “portable, generic” personal skills, habits, and character traits that educators, employers, and stakeholders have identified as critical to lifelong learning and success in adult roles.

Chapter 1: Personal Skills for a Changing World

Chapter 1 provides background information, definitions, and the necessity of incorporating personal skills into the education system. What do schools look like when personal skill development programs are incorporated into lesson planning? What changes need to be made in the daily routine to allow students to practice and hone their personal skills?

Schools with personal skill development programs offer students opportunities to:

- demonstrate positive social behaviors
- practice critical communication skills
- learn and practice leadership skills
- participate in the community for the greater good
- expand civic, consumer, and financial forms of literacy

As teachers develop lesson plans, they should include activities that allow students to participate as leaders, practice interpersonal skills, think critically, resolve conflicts, solve problems, and practice decision making. This involves setting up in-class situations that simulate workplace performance and actions, as well as developing community-based activities that allow students to interact in adult roles.

The chapter also connects personal skill development to the International Center for Leadership in Education's Rigor/Relevance Framework[®] and the Learning Criteria.

Chapter 2: Character Education and Lifelong Skills

Chapter 2 describes character education initiatives, which are finding such success that a wide assortment of different applications and lessons are available, and many are discussed on the Internet. Character education is

the foundation for the development of good citizenship and commitment to behavior that is respectful of others. In establishing a character education initiative, schools choose a set of core guiding principles, or character traits, that are universal in society and promote positive interpersonal relationships. In schools where students, teachers, and administrators demonstrate and practice these principles, the school environment is more conducive to learning and high academic achievement.

Chapter 3: Soft Skills for Success at School and Work

Chapter 3 details the “soft skills,” or the personal attributes that define one’s approach toward work, problem solving, and leadership. Several forms of literacy encompass these soft skills: personal, social, business, and cultural. Soft skills include carefulness, taking initiative, cooperation, creativity, goodwill, optimism, and sociability. Those successful in the 21st century workplace are skilled at working in teams, are creative thinkers, and easily adapt to the changing work environment. They are good listeners, critical thinkers, collaborators, and self-motivated. Chapter 3 offers a number of strategies to incorporate soft skills into the core curriculum.

Chapter 4: Communicating in Groups

Chapter 4 discusses the importance of communicating in groups and offers strategies for team-based instruction. Teamwork in today’s world includes communicating with people from a variety of cultures, experiences, and backgrounds. Students need an awareness of traditions and customs different from their own, as the ever-changing nature of society brings together people from many different backgrounds. Students must learn to be flexible, tolerant, respectful, accepting, and appreciative of others, whether they are working on project in a classroom or out in the community. Across the curriculum, teachers are adapting their course content to include practice in team communication skills and communicating with co-workers,

customers, and employers. Moreover, while schools traditionally teach writing, students also need the important ability to communicate in workplace situations that require speaking and listening skills.

Chapter 5: Communicating with Supervisors and Customers

Chapter 5 focuses on practical applications throughout core content areas for communicating with supervisors, customers, and clients. Employers expect entry-level workers to have skills in listening and speaking, as the bottom line depends on positive interaction with customers. The same active listening, body language, and problem-solving techniques apply when working together in groups and communicating with supervisors and other workplace leadership.

Chapter 6: Self-Management Skills

Chapter 6 is about self-management. Self-managing people are those with a vision who know how to plan their time, tackle the hurdles, and move toward completing a task. The key to self-management is motivation. While individuals may be well educated and have years of experience, if they are not motivated to work, they will not be an asset in the workplace. One has to be motivated to take initiative, be optimistic, be adaptable to change, and to incorporate all the other attitudes and behaviors that make up the self-management skills that are so critical in today's world. The chapter also focuses on time management and study skills that provide the fodder students need to be competent in self-managing their academic goals and needs.

Chapter 7: Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Skills

Problem solving and decision making involve critical thinking skills that students must develop if they are to succeed academically and in their personal lives. Problem solving fundamentally is tied to decision making,

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for individuals must be skilled in making well-informed decisions to reach a solution. An important role for schools is helping students learn the skills needed to make insightful, perceptive, and educated decisions in solving problems. These thinking skills are the tools students will use to manage their academic and career choices and realize their potential throughout their lives.

Chapter 7 offers a step-by-step process that helps students focus on a problem, brainstorm alternative solutions, decide on and implement the most effective solution, and evaluate their final decision. The chapter also offers classroom activities and lessons that give students the opportunities to solve real-world problems.

Chapter 8: Leadership Skills

Chapter 8 is about how students can obtain the necessary leadership skills, which hold a central place in the growth of young people as they mature and take their places in communities as citizens, parents, and neighbors. A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to promoting leadership skills through service learning. Projects in service learning provide hands-on experiences that teach students to practice respect, responsibility, compassion, taking initiative, and trustworthiness through meaningful community service. Schools combine learning objectives with service objectives, placing students into structured situations that provide a community service. Through their experiences, students apply core academic content knowledge and grow through self-discovery, reflection, and action.

Chapter 9: Civic and Financial Literacy Skills

Chapter 9 focuses on civic and financial forms of literacy as part of personal skill development. Preparing students to become participants in a civil society is an important responsibility for both families and schools. Lessons focusing

on citizenship and community help students learn the role of informed and engaged citizens.

The chapter discusses a need for a renewed emphasis on social studies in developing a comprehensive schoolwide civic literacy program. A strong education system must enable students to understand their roles in a democratic society. However, the assessment-driven attention to math and literacy skills has taken the focus away from social studies, which traditionally has been the primary content area in which to teach civics.

Learning to handle finances also is an important part of student skill development. Responsible citizenship includes making informed and intelligent decisions on saving, spending, credit, and other issues involving personal financial assets. We all need to take individual responsibility for setting financial goals, using financial services wisely, and meeting our financial obligations. Personal finance education is a building block for a strong economy.

Appendices

The kit also has four appendices. **Appendix A** has short descriptions of school programs related to personal skills development. **Appendix B** has the various surveys, worksheets, etc. from the chapters in a form suitable for photocopying. All of these items are also on the accompanying CD. **Appendix C** has information and examples of some national financial literacy classroom materials that are available at no charge. Finally, **Appendix D** contains the references used in the preparation of the kit.

Empowering Students Through Personal Skill Development

When students learn to communicate effectively, respect others, accept responsibility, resolve problems, analyze, evaluate, and work on teams, their academic achievement improves. Learning to take personal responsibility in the classroom leads to being accountable for completing assignments,

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Employers find that many entry-level applicants for jobs lack personal skills, which are even more important than “job-specific technical skills.”

Hiring practices in industry often include written tests that measure the academic background of applicants. For instance, the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB) measures verbal and mathematical aptitude as well as manual dexterity. Those applicants with high scores move on in the process to interviews, and some are selected.

However, companies are finding that many times the applicants with high scores on academic tests are not those who are the best job candidates. IQ does not seem to be the main factor for success on the job. Supervisor ratings find that scores on soft-skill assessments, such as teamwork and interpersonal communication, are a better determiner of high performance in the workplace.

The same results occur in many studies of workforce preparation. Interviews with managers in 56 firms in Los Angeles and Detroit indicated that the requirements for jobs include basic literacy or math. However, 80% of the managers surveyed responded that “soft skills are the most important hiring criteria.”

Interviews with 550 employers in Virginia also confirmed the findings that personal skills are just as important as the academic “hard” skills expected in entry-level workers. Respondents indicated that math, reading, writing, and speaking should be paired with decision making and problem solving. Also important is the worker’s attitude toward the job. He or she should take the job seriously, have a positive attitude, and demonstrate responsibility, reliability, and flexibility.

The Importance of Soft Skills

Murnane, R. and
Levy, F. *Teaching
the New Basic
Skills*

Tyack, D. and
Cuban, L.
*Tinkering Toward
Utopia*

Martin, J.
“Virginia’s
Changing Work-
place in the 21st
Century”

Educating students for success not only on the basic and higher-order thinking skills, but also in personal skill development is not a new area for educators; it always has been the goal of education to instill strong personal qualities in students. However, with the changing world of the 21st century come new demands on the education system to be accountable for personal skill development and to determine ways to assess and measure student growth.

The Role of Schools

Still, the question remains: Who is responsible for instilling strong attitudes toward work and other soft skills in students? Historically, families have taught their children these standards of behavior, but schools always have been expected to play a part to support, reinforce, and sustain these behaviors. The focus of any discussion on workplace readiness centers on how secondary education, in particular, can meet the needs of their graduates.

Casner-Lotto, J. and Barrington, L. “Are They Really Ready to Work?”

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills advocates that high schools revise their curricula by including a broader base of skills than are required by federal *No Child Left Behind Act*. To be successful, students need 21st century content, learning and thinking skills, information and communications technology literacy, life skills, and authentic assessment.

Raising the Bar

Researchers offer guidance to government policymakers, administrators, and teachers on ways to raise the bar to higher levels of personal skill development in schools. These recommendations include:

Cotton, K.
“Developing Employability Skills”

- a national goal to provide students with employability skills and that includes programs designed to link employers and schools
- a national certification system to show evidence of students’ employability competencies

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- early career awareness in the lower grades
- programs structured to meet local employment needs
- teacher support and professional training in designing effective workplace readiness programs, as well as summer internships for teachers in local businesses
- assessments of student performance and development of employability profiles for each student's use in securing a job
- support for teachers to design classroom settings and projects to replicate workplace activities
- high expectations for student performance on workplace tasks that include classroom behaviors and positive attitudes that replicate those demanded by employers
- individualizing instruction and adapting content and instructional strategies to include workplace activities, such as role-playing, problem solving, and group participation
- cooperating with local employers to support and encourage the efforts of schools in preparing students for success in the workplace
- developing a positive classroom atmosphere in which students are regarded as capable, intelligent, and effective.

Important to all citizens in today's world are global awareness, financial literacy, and civic literacy. The rapidly changing world economy impacts those in the workplace across the country, forcing them to quickly learn new skills and transition to different divisions. To become financially literate citizens, students need education in personal finance, savings, investing,

21st Century Content

**Soft Skills
Personal
Survey**

worksheet, students can take a personal survey to assess their proficiency in applying the skills.

Taking a personal skills survey is a good idea for anyone seeking employment. Teachers can use the following survey early in the school year and again later in the year to help students assess their skills levels and personal growth.

A personal skills survey helps students rate themselves and set goals. Because such a survey requires students to reflect honestly on their personal behaviors, they gain a better understanding of themselves, and they consider how others might perceive them in the classroom, workplace, and community.

Soft Skills Personal Survey

| | |
|---|--|
| Think of situations in which you practice the following soft skills. How do you behave? Rate yourself on each item using the following scale: 4 = Excellent 3 = Good 2 = Average 1 = Poor 0 = Nonexistent | |
| ___ | 1. Teamwork: I participate well in groups, contributing and working toward accomplishing group goals. |
| ___ | 2. Initiative: I am resourceful and can take the first steps to accomplish a goal on my own. I can work without constant supervision and direction. |
| ___ | 3. Critical thinking: I am comfortable analyzing a situation. I think logically and clearly, reflecting and evaluating a situation before acting. |
| ___ | 4. Adaptability: I am a flexible worker. I can alter my direction and adjust my action when conditions change. |
| ___ | 5. Leadership: I am willing to take responsibility and lead the way, guiding others. |
| ___ | 6. Cooperation: I work easily with others, assisting and supporting them. |

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| | | |
|---|-----|--|
| ___ | 7. | Listening: I focus my attention on the subject, stay involved, and avoid distractions when listening to others. |
| ___ | 8. | Creativity: I am inventive and skilled at finding original ways of doing a job. |
| ___ | 9. | Resourcefulness: I am practical and can quickly figure out a situation, looking for the best ways to handle the job. |
| ___ | 10. | Organization: I am efficient and methodical. I like a job to be orderly and well thought out. |
| ___ | 11. | Problem solving: I use a systematic plan to identify problems and analyze solutions. |
| ___ | 12. | Learning to learn: I seek knowledge and work at continuous learning in both my professional and personal life. |
| ___ | 13. | Time management: I use my time wisely and do not waste effort. I focus on what is most important. |
| ___ | 14. | Diversity: I am comfortable working with people from many different backgrounds and cultures. I work hard to understand their views and opinions. |
| ___ | 15. | Attention to detail: I am concerned that my work should meet the highest standards. I am careful not to skip any steps, and I review what I have done before completing it. |
| <p>Scoring: Add all the numbers.</p> <p>If you scored:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 54-60—Your soft skills are well honed, and you should enjoy success in the workplace. ▪ 48-53—You should do a good job at work, especially if you are conscious about continuing to sharpen your soft skills. ▪ 42-47—You have average soft skills. You should work hard to improve and practice your workplace attitude and skills. ▪ 41 or less—Below-average soft skills mean that you should make a conscious effort every day to change workplace behaviors and attitudes. You need training and practice in soft skills. | | |

Adapted from Vogt, P. "Measure Your Soft Skills Smarts"

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Leadership Self-Assessment Worksheet

Name _____ Date _____
 Course _____ Teacher _____

Rank yourself as an effective leader and determine the areas that need improvement. Use the following scale:

5 = strong skills **3** = average skills: needs practice
1 = skills lacking — needs practice and improvement

| | 5 | 3 | 1 |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. I am a good listener. | | | |
| 2. I am organized and resourceful. | | | |
| 3. I am self-confident and comfortable in whatever tasks I undertake. | | | |
| 4. I treat others with respect and dignity. | | | |
| 5. I am concerned for others and go out of my way to help them achieve. | | | |
| 6. I work well on teams and am comfortable leading groups. | | | |
| 7. I work hard to communicate with others. | | | |
| 8. I am fair and objective. | | | |
| 9. I accept responsibility for my actions. | | | |
| 10. I am reliable and honest. | | | |
| 11. I am creative and work to discover new solutions to problems. | | | |
| 12. I can make decisions and carry them out. | | | |
| 13. I work to bring out the best in others. | | | |
| 14. I accept the opinions of others and consider the opinions carefully. | | | |
| 15. I set an example for others and try to be a role model. | | | |
| 16. I am loyal to those I work with and to superiors. | | | |
| 17. I am comfortable training others and mentoring them. | | | |
| 18. I constantly seek self-improvement. | | | |
| 19. I have a clear sense of direction and share it with team members. | | | |
| 20. I seek ways to help others try out new methods or ideas. | | | |
| 21. I am comfortable working with people from diverse backgrounds. | | | |
| 22. I express appreciation and celebrate others' successes. | | | |
| 23. I follow through on my commitments. | | | |
| 24. I support others' decisions. | | | |
| 25. I am positive and upbeat when I describe the organization. | | | |
| 26. I help others find situations in which to lead. | | | |
| 27. I can handle controversy calmly and creatively. | | | |
| 28. I work hard to foster collaboration and cooperation. | | | |
| 29. I work hard to gain the trust of others. | | | |
| 30. I have a vision of the future of the organization. | | | |

Adapted from Heller, R. *Learning to Lead*