BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CHANGE:

What it Means to be Career Ready

The ever-changing demands of the global economy and the desire to remain competitive, coupled with mounting frustration over decades of lackluster academic performance, are converging to create an opportunity for change.

Once a powerhouse, the United States now trails many nations in achievement and attainment in secondary and postsecondary learning. And, increasingly, there is evidence of a mismatch between employer needs and the knowledge and skills of the current and future workforce, on display in employment figures and reports from business and industry leaders.

Policymakers and the public alike are embracing "college and career readiness" as the solution, but what does it mean? Much of the policy debate focuses on college entrance and completion, without remediation, as a solution. However, college readiness is only part of the answer. What is needed is a more comprehensive strategy that bridges the gap between education and workforce preparation.

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To find that solution, the Career Readiness Partner Council was formed in 2012. The Council unites leaders from national education and workforce organizations with the goal of bringing clarity and focus to what it means to be career ready. This document highlights the outcome of the collaborative efforts of the Council to help inform policy and practice in states and communities.

Career Readiness Partner Council

- Achieve
- Alliance for Excellent Education
- American Association of Community Colleges
- American School Counselor Association
- America's Promise Alliance
- ASCD
- Asia Society
- Association for Career and Technical Education
- Business-Higher Education Forum
- ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career
- Corporate Voices for Working Families
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation
- Ford Motor Company Fund
- Gallup
- James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy
- The Manufacturing Institute
- National Academy Foundation
- National Association of State Boards of Education
- National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium
- National Council of La Raza
- National Education Association
- National Governors Association
- National League of Cities
- National Youth Employment Coalition
- Skills for America's Future, The Aspen Institute
- Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium

Defining What it Means to be Career Ready

There is an often-confusing mix of definitions, frameworks, policies and implementation strategies for career readiness. Some viewpoints center around learning skills for a specific entry-level job, while others define career readiness as a broader understanding of workplace skills. Still other definitions focus on knowledge and skills for a particular industry sector such as health sciences or marketing. Career readiness is a convergence of all of these definitions.

A career-ready person effectively navigates pathways that connect education and employment to achieve a fulfilling, financially-secure and successful career. A career is more than just a job. Career readiness has no defined endpoint. To be career ready in our ever-changing global economy requires adaptability and a commitment to lifelong learning, along with mastery of key knowledge, skills and dispositions that vary from one career to another and change over time as a person progresses along a developmental continuum. Knowledge, skills and dispositions that are inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing. These include:

Academic and Technical Knowledge and Skills

A career-ready person is proficient in the core academic subjects, as well as in technical topics. This foundational knowledge base includes competence in a broad range of academic subjects grounded in rigorous internationally-benchmarked state standards—such as the Common Core State Standards for English language arts and mathematics. It also includes a level of technical-skill proficiency aligned to a chosen career field and pathway, and the ability to apply both academic and technical learning in the context of a career. Many careers also require deeper learning and mastery in specific academic or technical subjects.

Employability Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions

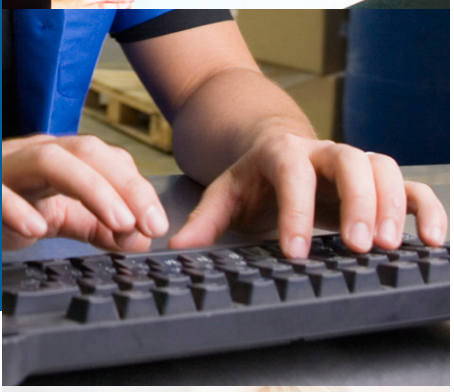
A career-ready person has a good understanding of their interests, talents and weaknesses and a solid grasp of the skills and dispositions necessary for engaging in today's fast-paced, global economy. These include, but are not limited to:

- Goal setting and planning;
- Managing transitions from school to work and back again, and from one occupation along a career pathway to another;
- Clear and effective communication skills;
- Critical thinking and problem solving;
- Working productively in teams and independently;
- Effective use of technology; and
- Ethical decision-making and social responsibility.

These academic and employability knowledge, skills and dispositions are acquired in a range of secondary, postsecondary and workplace settings, and help to address an increasing reality: Today, most career pathways require some form of postsecondary education, whether it's an entry-level job, a management position for a mid-career professional or perhaps even a shift from practicing a profession to teaching others. A particular job might require a certificate, a two-year degree, a four-year degree, a doctorate or even a handful of courses to hone in on a particular piece of knowledge or a skill. Indeed, the "college and career" tagline that has become part of the education reform rhetoric encompasses all of these postsecondary options. Career readiness also incorporates engaging workplace experiences that allow a person to apply academic and technical learning to real-world projects and problems alongside professionals. This starts with career awareness and exploration and includes job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships and service learning.

Building a Comprehensive System That Supports Career Readiness

Career readiness also requires a comprehensive system of supports that deliver learning when it is needed, where it is needed, how it is needed and by a cadre of experts that includes teachers and career professionals. It includes both classroom and workplace experiences, high-quality standards and instructional materials to support learning, a portfolio of assessments that gauge progress using multiple measures along a continuum from being not at all career ready to fully career ready, and finally a policy and funding structure that is aligned across K-12, higher education and business and industry sectors.



No one group or individual can realize change of this magnitude; however, uniting around a common goal is a powerful catalyst for change. Working together there are strategies to ensure our nation's prosperity and the success of future generations:

Policymakers. Align policy and funding infrastructures that break down long-standing silos between secondary, postsecondary and workforce systems and provide the full spectrum of supports needed to ensure seamless transitions from high school to college and beyond. One step to accomplish this is to clearly define what it means to be career ready in policy and to adopt a set of metrics to measure career readiness that will help to strategically align funding and programs.

High school teachers, leaders and counselors. Engage with business and industry and higher education leaders and faculty to better understand what is expected of high school students and to develop joint goals for college and career readiness. Also, actively engage parents and students in developing long-term goals and strategies around college and career aspirations.

Business and industry. Actively partner with secondary and postsecondary stakeholders to develop shared goals. Also, share expertise and provide engaging opportunities for students and educators to experience hands-on, work-based learning.

Higher education. Engage with secondary educators and business and industry to develop common goals that seek to align systems. Ensure career-readiness knowledge, skills and dispositions are fully integrated into curriculum and instruction, and help students chart a course for career success beyond college.

Parents and students. Expand the goal of "college bound" to include career goals. For students in particular, take responsibility for charting a course that aligns with personal interests and talents. For parents, strive to provide support and guidance in helping students meet education and career goals.

Community. For social service professionals, after school providers, healthcare practitioners, religious leaders and other community leaders, engage with K-12, higher education and business and industry to create common goals that align with the values, beliefs and economic needs of the community. Support the shared goals by aligning community resources and programming.

A Call to Action

For too many years, high school graduates throughout the United States faced a fork in the road. One path led to a four-year college, the other to an entry-level job. Some students chose for themselves, while others were tracked based on aptitude and, all too often, on race and income. In today's 21st century global economy, the choices are much more complex and interconnected, and the fork in the road has been replaced by numerous paths, all of which require a rigorous and rich high school experience that prepares all students—not just some—for college and a career.

The attempt of the Career Readiness Partner Council to bridge diverse viewpoints and develop a joint statement about what it means to be career ready is an important step in leveraging current efforts to transform education and workforce development. But much more is needed.

We hope this definition spurs conversation and action in communities across the nation. The inextricable link between education and the economy has never been more apparent; the urgency for change unparalleled. We have a window of opportunity for bold change, and the future of our nation, and each and every citizen depends on it.

Please visit us at CareerReadyNow.org to learn more about the Career Readiness Partner Council.

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