

REIMAGINING WORK-BASED LEARNING



To Equip Youth with Durable
Social-Emotional Skills

Introduction

The way we must prepare young people for future careers has changed. Not only is the world of work changing rapidly, but ensuring young people are prepared for what comes next is increasingly the purview of employers and community partners who work in tandem with schools to ensure young people have the skills they will need for education and career. However, not all who aim to support students are equally prepared to ensure youth are developing the durable skills they will need for long-term success. At the forefront of this skill development are the social emotional skills we know are a crucial component of both education and career success. As we increasingly turn to employers to engage students in work-based learning to develop workplace skills, we must strive to ensure employers have the support and resources to help learners build—and articulate—the durable social emotional skills that are a critical benefit of completing a work-based learning program.

We know the development of these skills is more important than ever as shifts in the economy and technology make it necessary to prioritize essential durable human skills that cannot be replicated by AI and machines.¹ Success in the modern workplace will require more than just technical prowess; tomorrow's workers will also need to cultivate interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and resilience. In fact, research shows that over [70 percent of executives](#) think durable skills, like critical thinking, collaboration, and communication, are more important to their organizations than highly technical AI skills and 78 percent of the 10 top-employing occupations classify uniquely human skills and tasks as “important” or “very important.”²

Simultaneously, there is a growing effort to extend career-connected learning and career preparation earlier along a student's educational journey in order to ensure young people are developing these skills at a younger age. Amid rising college costs and shifting preferences for postsecondary education and training among today's youth, many students, parents, educators and other stakeholders in education and workforce development agree that workforce preparedness, including the acquisition of durable and social-emotional skills, should begin long before age 18.³ Part-time job opportunities for high school students have historically been considered a vital avenue for youth to gain hands-on experience and refine these skills that they will use throughout their adult careers. Yet exposure to the workplace has drastically declined for today's young people: In 1979, nearly 60% of teenagers were employed, while in 2019, only 35% were⁴. Without the traditional “first job” experiences during the teen years, many youth struggle to acquire the needed foundational skills through academics and education alone. In fact, employers today report a “skills gap” among young workers, with nearly three out of four reporting they have a hard time finding new college graduates with the durable skills their companies need.⁵

WHAT ARE DURABLE SKILLS VIS-A-VIS SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Social-emotional learning, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, encompasses the process through which individuals **acquire and apply knowledge**, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals.

Similarly, America Succeeds defines durable skills as the **competencies used to share knowledge**, including critical thinking and collaboration, as well as character traits like fortitude and leadership. Acknowledging the significant overlap between these skill sets, we will consider them interchangeable for the purpose of this discussion.



Formal work-based learning (WBL) experiences for youth younger than 18, such as internships and pre-apprenticeships, are an effective strategy to help students gain the requisite skills for 21st-century careers. Although too many students nationwide still lack access to these experiences -- research suggests just 2% of students have completed one form of work-based learning, an internship, during high school⁶ -- there are signs of growing interest in WBL, from students, educators, and employers alike. Generation Z craves hands-on learning experiences that connect classroom education to real-world jobs⁷, while more educators and state leaders across the country are incorporating work-based learning into in-school and out-of-school experiences.⁸ Employer participation in youth work-based learning is on the rise, too; an Britebound study found that the percentage of businesses offering high school internships rose from 30% in 2018 to 38% in 2023.⁹

But while the trend toward more work-based learning in general is a positive development, expanding access to these opportunities alone won't ensure that students acquire the foundational skills they need to navigate the multifaceted demands of the contemporary workplace. Employers are no doubt cognizant of the importance of durable skills, both for student growth and their own organization's needs, but may still prioritize technical skill development due to resource constraints and operational demands. Further, many businesses may feel ill-equipped to mentor and teach youth and believe that responsibility better lies with parents, schools, educators, community-based organizations or intermediaries. In reality, numerous employers likely already unconsciously integrate elements of SEL and durable skills into their youth work-based learning experiences, but it is often not intentional or systematic. To ensure more students have equitable access to skills development in the workplace, we must look to intentionally design and implement strategies that prioritize the integration of SEL and durable skills within work-based learning initiatives. Ideally, multiple stakeholders, including educators, career development professionals, out-of-school-time program providers and employers, should collaborate to combine career-connected curricula with hands-on career experimentation experiences that mutually reinforce each other and seamlessly integrate the acquisition of both hard and soft skills.

Britebound (Britebound), a national nonprofit dedicated to changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures through equitable access to career readiness information and experiences, developed this report to highlight several outstanding organizations that have successfully incorporated these principles into their programming. With insight from several Britebound grantees, as well as our own organizational reflections on employing apprentices and interns ranging in age from 13 to 18, this report aims to serve as a resource of practical and tangible recommendations for employers who are looking to expand or pilot work-based learning experiences at their organizations. We believe that when more employers consciously integrate SEL and durable skills into their youth-based programs, we all win -- with an educated, skilled, crisis-proof workforce ready to thrive in an ever-evolving and dynamic economy.

Britebound as WBL Provider: Lessons Learned

Britebound recognizes the importance of actively engaging and providing work-based learning opportunities to youth. As part of this commitment, we provide meaningful work-based learning experiences to middle and high school youth. This work provides us valuable insight into the challenges employers face to establish meaningful youth work-based learning that provides the skill development and access to social capital that youth need, and the pipeline development and youth perspective that can benefit an employer.



Britebound partners with the nonprofit Apprentice Learning to provide real-world apprenticeship experiences to 8th graders from across Boston. To be sure, the experience has been highly rewarding, but we acknowledge that middle school students in a workplace can present significant challenges. As we struggled early on to meaningfully engage the apprentices and hold their attention, we learned to shift our goals and strategies and recognized it was more important for students to master durable skills than understand a particular job function.

At the outset of each apprenticeship cycle, students and Britebound staff engage in relationship-building exercises, so that we can facilitate a conducive work environment and ensure apprentices feel supported in the workplace. It is crucial to emphasize that while the primary goal is to enable students to explore different facets of our organization, the expectation is for them to emerge from the experience with a greater comfort with the world of work— not to be trained for a specific industry.

“We structured our apprenticeship program to involve rotations through various departments,” explained Jing Cox-Orrell, Philanthropy Program Manager at Britebound. “Our aim was to grant students comprehensive exposure to the diverse experiences and expertise our employees offer, thereby maximizing their learning opportunities. But what we learned over time was that we were making it about us, when it should be more about them. Success doesn’t mean the apprentices have to walk away as experts in a specific area, like Marketing or IT; success can be something small, like the apprentices observing appropriate office behavior and work attire.”

To expand our youth work-based learning opportunities, we introduced an 8-week paid internship program for local rising high school juniors and seniors through a strategic collaboration with the [Boston Public Industry Council \(PIC\)](#). Leveraging the substantial youth population in close proximity to our offices, this initiative aimed to create meaningful opportunities for young individuals while simultaneously enriching our organization with fresh perspectives and talent.



Apprentices at our downtown Boston offices, working with Britebound’s IT department to build their own websites.

Comprehensive training is at the core of our program, focusing not only on role-specific skills within our nonprofit but also on the development of durable skills essential for youths irrespective of their career paths. Collaborating with community-based organizations, we conducted workshops covering various topics such as communication skills, resume building, professional networking, and LinkedIn optimization, complemented by formal headshot sessions. Volunteer opportunities were integrated to expand students' social capital, facilitating connections with peers, supervisors, and potential employers in a relaxed environment. Students were involved in both individual and collective projects, culminating in presentations to senior staff at the program's conclusion.

The program also recognized the importance of flexibility, establishing a hybrid working model that allowed students to experience both in-office and virtual working environments. Subsidies for public transportation were offered as well, if students needed it. Midway through the program, we received feedback from students expressing a desire to utilize the designated work space in the office instead of working from home, which prompted us to increase the in-office time.

Recognizing the diverse backgrounds of our student cohort, we made deliberate efforts to foster interaction among peers. Activities such as a welcoming lunch, icebreaker games, and visits to events hosted by our grantee partners provided valuable insights into Britebound's involvement in the nonprofit sector.

Engaging with Britebound from varied perspectives not only provided students with insights into our organization but also broadened their awareness of the nonprofit sector's intricate network. In addition to immersing themselves in our organization's operations, students actively participated in service learning initiatives, volunteering with organizations like [Community Servings](#) and [The Greater Boston Food Bank](#). Each activity was designed to impart a balance of durable skills and executive function skills, such as timely navigating public transit, adapting to new environments, and properly presenting yourself in a professional environment. Volunteer opportunities also allowed students to expand their social capital, facilitating connections with peers, supervisors, and potential employers in a relaxed environment.



Britebound's High School Summer Interns at The Greater Boston Food Bank during a volunteer event along with two of their direct supervisors.

Considerations to Keep in Mind

Empower student choice. When possible, provide students with the opportunity to choose their preferred department and shape the outcome of their final project. This approach aligns the internship experience with individual interests and career aspirations, fostering a sense of ownership and investment. Additionally, it cultivates essential and transferable skills crucial for their future endeavors, such as decision-making, communication, collaboration, project planning, public speaking and presenting ideas to senior staff.

Provide both long and short term projects. This ensures interns can tackle tasks of varying complexity, while building confidence and subject knowledge along the way. This approach prepares them to confidently take on more daunting challenges in the future.

Examples of long-term projects:

- Develop a comprehensive social media campaign focusing on sharing best practices for employers on creating internship programs for high school students.
- Evaluate social media channels to ensure messaging is tailored to Gen Z audiences

Examples of short-term projects:

- Read and evaluate three grant proposals, provide detailed notes and comments on each proposal and be prepared to discuss thoughts on what you like and don't like, or whether you would use the services outlined in the proposal.
- Review the organization's existing blog and then craft new content..
- Read a provided article and generate several concise LinkedIn posts based on its content. Each post should effectively capture key points or insights from the article to engage our audience on LinkedIn.
- Write a script for a TikTok ad.
- Review ad concepts and provide feedback.

Be intentional about working environments. To optimize productivity, establish clear schedules so students know when they are expected to be in the office or work from home. If there is flexibility in dates, ASK the students what would work best for them.

- Encourage clear communication and effective use of digital tools with check-ins throughout the day, especially if the working environment is hybrid or virtual.
- Allocate specific times during in-office days for group work, mentorship sessions and direct interaction with managers, to take advantage of face-to-face time.

Provide opportunities for community building and networking. Exposing interns to outside community organizations (via service learning, for example) not only enriches their understanding of the nonprofit sector but also fosters connections and a sense of belonging.

Meet kids where they are in their development. No two apprentices – or groups of apprentices - are alike. Britebound has hosted several cohorts of apprentices, all of the same age and grade and many from the same school. However, we have learned that each cohort – and each student – can vary greatly in engagement and interest level. Employers may need to adapt their presentations and activities to each group's learning style.



Set rules and expectations at the outset. For many business employees, especially those in Generation X and older, it's been a minute since they were last in a classroom. Technology has changed everything. Phones, tablets, and laptops can be excellent educational resources, but they can also be major distractions. Employers should clearly spell out at the beginning of an apprentice or intern engagement what's acceptable use of technology and what isn't. Similarly, set ground rules about acceptable behavior in meetings and during presentations. You can always consult the intern's teacher or school to understand their school technology policy and mirror it in your workplace.

Leverage current teachers, former teachers, and mentors. As an education nonprofit, we've always had a healthy respect for teachers, but maybe never more so than after our apprentice experience. If your company or organization is lucky enough to have former teachers on staff, or other staffers who are involved in youth mentoring activities like coaches or scout leaders, involve them in your work-based learning efforts. Their expertise in student engagement and general student management is invaluable.

Think outside of the box for scheduling. This one may be logistically difficult, as most students are physically in school during most of the standard Monday-Friday, 9-5 office hours. Late afternoons would seem to be the only time available, but after school can be a really tough time. Students are often mentally or emotionally drained after a full day of school and commuting. "Leaving to Learn" arrangements, like those employed by [Big Picture Learning](#), where part of the students' school day can be spent outside the building at a workplace, can be an innovative solution.

Success may seem small, but the benefit can be larger than you think. Success doesn't have to be only defined as students finding a profession they love. A win, especially among younger students, can be as small as exposing them to new environments and experiences. For example, for some of our apprentices, visiting our office was the first time they rode in an elevator, or the first time they used public transportation by themselves. Helping students progress toward independence can mean mission accomplished, as it provides learners with increased confidence to take the next step in their career journey.

Practical Tips for Implementation

There are a number of practical considerations for employers embarking on work-based learning:

- Be sure to dedicate enough time and resources to the set-up and planning of your program, and be sure to include representatives from throughout the organization. For example, your Legal team should be consulted from the beginning to advise on any liability issues or concerns, such as state laws and regulations around safety, liability, child labor, or workers' compensation for youth below a specific age.
- Think through the hiring process: How will you advertise your opportunities to students? Do you have established relationships with local schools or youth groups? Is there an intermediary that can connect you with applicants? For example, Britebound coordinates intern recruitment with the Boston Private Industry Council, the city's workforce development board and its school-to-career intermediary organization.



- Carefully consider your organization's financial commitment. Paid work-based learning opportunities are more equitable because they don't force low-income students to choose between a needed paycheck and a valuable career exploration experience. Research also shows that paid work-based learning opportunities set students up for better earnings down the road. If paid opportunities are not financially feasible for your organization, look into possible grants, wage subsidies or tax incentives offered by your city or state to help offset costs. Delaware, Indiana, New Jersey and Vermont are a few examples of states that provide funding assistance. Also make sure that your Finance team(s) are prepared and equipped to add student learners onto your payroll, or coordinate with an intermediary to handle payment for you.
 - Be aware of the state and federal tax exemption forms available to student workers who earn under a certain amount in a calendar year and therefore are not required to file a tax return.
 - Federal tax exemption [forms](#)



Britebound's High School Summer Interns along with their direct supervisors.

Boston Public Industry Council has some great resources for employers looking to start internship programs, their resource pages can be found [here](#). The Key Resources and Toolkit at the end of this report also has additional information to help organizations get started!

Ultimately, Britebound's internship program is not just about equipping students with job-related skills but also about nurturing their personal growth, fostering a sense of community, and inspiring them to become active contributors to society. Through this immersive experience, students emerge not only as more capable professionals but also as empowered individuals ready to make a meaningful difference in their communities and beyond.

Insight from Our Grantees

THE CAPS NETWORK

The Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) Network, a national non-profit organization with over 100 sites throughout the country, is committed to bridging the gap between education and employment through immersive, professional-based learning experiences. Their innovative programming empowers students to tackle real-world challenges alongside industry professionals and community leaders, providing invaluable insights into the expectations and needs of employers.

Corey Mohn, President & Executive Director of the CAPS Network, believes that in order to effectively engage with students, there must be a mutual understanding of their needs and the value proposition provided by work-based learning sites. Mohn highlights the necessity for employers to prioritize skill development through direct interaction and workshops with youth, or by leveraging partnerships with organizations like CAPS to enhance social-emotional learning skills further. For example, CAPS serves as an intermediary and works with employers to offer a two-week boot camp orientation that immerses students in the cultivation of durable skills such as communication, resilience, and collaboration before they enter any professional setting. Customizing these boot camps to specific industry sectors while emphasizing universally essential durable skills ensures their relevance and practicality.

Additional CAPS recommendations:

- Employers can engage youth through smaller events like speed networking and mentor sessions, which foster meaningful connections and provide opportunities for youth to gain immediate feedback on skill-building from employers in real time.
- Employers should use resources such as the CAPS Professional Skills Profile and [Durable Skills Wheel](#) to assess and prioritize durable skills in candidates.
- Employees looking to start an internship program but receiving pushback from colleagues and/or managers should emphasize the practical benefits of durable skills and offer tangible examples of integration into existing training programs to help alleviate concerns.
- Professionals can look to alternatives like client-connected projects, where students serve as consultants to the business and have students dedicate time to work the 10th thing on the company to-do list.
- Inviting business professionals into schools and learning spaces can bring real-world experience to schools, helping students develop essential skills for the workforce. Clear communication and coordination are key for success, aligning education with industry needs.
- Remember that learning is lifelong and shouldn't be limited to just the youth; WBL administrators should be provided with support and resources to enhance their own social-emotional learning.

CHICA PROJECT

[Chica Project](#) is an organization that supports over 3,000 young female-identifying women of color, ages 11-18, in their journey of community, connection, and collective power. Chica Project aims to expand learning opportunities for young people through internships and fellowships, developing a peer leader pipeline and delivering a career readiness curriculum, both in and out of school settings.

Integrating 21st-century skills into their youth development programs and work-based learning experiences is a key priority for Chica's leaders. This organization places significant emphasis on the cultivation of self-awareness and the promotion of self-care, recognizing these as fundamental components for fostering resilience and overall well-being among program participants. Chica Project underscores the importance of trauma-informed approaches in establishing supportive workplace environments where individuals feel valued and understood. Despite challenges such as resource constraints and time limitations, the program remains steadfast in its commitment to empowering youth, advocating for equitable treatment and fair compensation for interns and fellows involved in the program.

Central to this initiative are the ways in which Chica Project creates safe spaces for their participants to engage in learning. Firstly, they open every meeting with a "vibe check," not only welcoming folks but making sure they are in the right headspace before diving in and learning because Chica Project understands that youth are struggling with many different things in a given day, and sometimes are not able to fully be present.



Chica Project uses the following best practices to ensure their program participants feel safe and empowered to take on these new experiences in the workplace:

- Stress long-term engagement. Instilling in their participants that this is a lifelong support, past participants remain engaged through an alumni network and take on mentorship roles, providing ongoing opportunities for skill development. Every program has the opportunity to build social capital for young people, and employers should think critically about how they can improve the social capital of young people after the internship is over.
- Chica's Peer Leadership Program incorporates structured activities and training sessions focused specifically on durable skills, such as communication, teamwork, and cultural competence. The peer-to-peer mentorship model offers unique benefits over adult-led mentorship: It allows for a more empowering, youth-led program as peer mentors share relatable experiences, fostering trust and open communication, and serve as relevant role models, offering practical advice. Additionally, both mentors and mentees benefit from mutual learning and skill development. In a traditional work environment, this might look like near peer mentorship. Managing interns can often give younger employees the management skills they need to grow and succeed in the workplace, and give interns a mentor closer to their age and experience level.
- Chica's Interns/Fellows program features a professional development component with monthly workshops covering a range of topics from resume building to trauma-informed work practices. These workshops emphasize the development of employability skills valued by employers, such as authentic self-expression, networking, and effective communication. The program also fosters Intergenerational learning by encouraging collaboration across age groups, facilitating cross-generational dialogue sessions, and collaborative projects.
- To address common pushback from partners and employers, such as lack of funding and time constraints, Chica's leaders provide evidence-based examples of the impact of durable skills training on career development as they advocate for more state and federal funding that supports stipends and equitable paid internships/fellowships for youth.
- Chica establishes mechanisms for gathering feedback from both participants and employers for the ongoing evaluation and enhancement of the program. They conduct straightforward pre- and post-surveys or organize focus group discussions led by a trusted facilitator to allow young individuals to articulate their experiences, take responsibility for their learning, and articulate their personal growth and development. This offers a chance for students to put their SEL skills to the test!

RODEL CHARITABLE FOUNDATION OF DELAWARE

Rodel Charitable Foundation works to “strengthen Delaware’s public education system and workforce by connecting partners to advance and implement sustainable solutions.”¹⁰ They aim to integrate ideas from the community, their local institutions, and key research findings from around the world to inform their decisions and create an effective public education ecosystem for all Delawareans.

Executive Director, Paul Herdman says, employers often have difficulty with the intricacies of integrating high-school aged students into professional environments. “I recall one situation where an employer brought in interns from a local high school. One of the interns, a distraught young woman who had just broken up with her boyfriend, became disengaged during work hours and glued to her phone. The intern’s mentor was ill-equipped to handle the situation and unsure of how to proceed.”

Herdman suggests employers turn to agile nonprofits that specialize in providing support and guidance tailored to the unique needs of younger individuals entering the workforce. For instance, [Code Differently](#) and [Junior Achievement](#) are examples of organizations adept at navigating the dynamics of remote work with young students. These nonprofits function as invaluable outsourced partners for companies, offering assistance with internships and providing ongoing support for troubleshooting and relationship-building with high school students.



Paths to Action

Knowing where to begin to intentionally integrate durable skills into a work-based learning program can be the hardest part. Here are some actionable steps to get started:

Plan workshops and activities. Before your program begins, plan out the activities that will focus on durable skills. If your organization doesn't have the resources or expertise to develop a workshop on its own, think about partnering with a subject matter experts, such as a local youth-supporting organization or afterschool program like the YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Big Brothers Big Sisters, etc.

Stress intentionality with managing staff. Be sure that all staff directly managing student learners are aware of the goal to teach them durable skills as well as technical skills. Equip them with strategies to bring these skills into the day-to-day work, such as assigning projects that require teamwork or taking advantage of an incident of tardiness or a missed deadline to talk about time management.

Focus on equitable opportunities. Advocate for policies at the federal and state level, as well as business practices within the private sector, that provide equitable opportunities for all individuals to access skill-building experiences and career pathways, including fair compensation, extending internship opportunities to a diverse range of individuals, and prioritizing inclusivity and fairness in youth development programs and educational settings.

Collaborate across stakeholders. A workplace experience is of course just one environment where student learners acquire durable social emotional skills. Whenever possible, talk to the other stakeholders who support your student learners, such as educators, after school program coordinators, or college access professionals, about societal expectations for effective skill development and ways your programs can connect with or enhance one another. For example, if your student learners attend a workshop at school on communication, you can reference it in a work assignment that requires communication skills - helping them to make the connection between classroom learning and the real world. Also, allow for students to engage with employees across the department and company to begin building out their professional networks by engaging with multiple team members.

Balance authenticity and adaptability. Recognize the importance of balancing authenticity with adaptability in professional environments, where individuals navigate their authentic selves while understanding and respecting workplace norms and expectations for personal growth and improved workplace interactions.

Ultimately, engaging youth in the workplace is hard work – and equipping them with the durable skills they'll need for future success must be part of an intentional strategy, not left to chance. Educators, employers, policymakers, and all stakeholders invested in workforce development must work together to create an education-to-career ecosystem that prioritizes learners' social-emotional IQ and wellbeing. Together, we can develop the tools needed to educate and engage youth in any work-based learning setting, putting them on the path to a more prosperous future, closing skill gaps, and creating a skilled workforce that will keep our nation competitive for generations to come.



Key Resources + Toolkit

Programming

- [Setting Intern Expectations](#)
- [One Pager for Managers](#)
- [High School Job Description \(Sample\)](#)
- [Internship Calendar \(Sample\)](#)
- [Timesheet \(Sample\)](#)

Activities for Interns/Students:

- [SMART Goals Worksheet](#)
- [Communication Styles & Debrief Worksheet](#)
- [Durable Skills Wheel](#)
- Project plan (Sample)

About Britebound

Britebound® is changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures through equitable access to career readiness information and experiences. We help middle and high school students to know themselves—their strengths and their interests—and understand their education and career options so that they can make informed decisions. Britebound is fostering a generation of confident, crisis-proof young people who are ready for whatever path comes next after high school. Britebound fulfills its mission by providing free digital-first experiences, including Futurescape® and Next Voice™, and EvolveMe™, directly to millions of students, and through impact investing and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others.

To learn more about Britebound, visit Britebound.org/about-us.



Endnotes

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