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October 26, 2023

TO: The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chair
House Education and Workforce
Committee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member
House Education and Workforce
Committee
Washington, DC 20515

Recommendations re: Workforce Opportunity and Innovation Act

Dear Chairwoman Foxx and Ranking Member Scott:

We are writing on behalf of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the Committee for Children, the Coalition for Career Development Center, and the Office of American Possibilities. We are organizations aligned on integrating employability skills in the future of workforce development. Below, we propose several recommendations to enhance the House Education and Workforce Committee's efforts to reauthorize the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

To be future-ready, individuals need academic knowledge, technical competency, and related credentials of value for success in today's economy. Equally important are the employability skills – sometimes described as workforce readiness skills or soft skills, and often considered alongside similarly crucial entrepreneurial skills – necessary for success in work and life. Our organizations believe that integrating evidence-based programs and practices to develop employability skills with career and workforce development efforts is an essential method to help prepare all individuals – and youth in particular – for postsecondary and job success. Research shows that evidence-based programs and practices lead to positive learner outcomes including strong employability skills development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and high academic performance¹—skills and abilities desired by employers.²

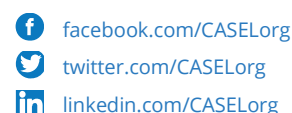
The development of employability skills inherently promotes career and workforce development. Moreover, a recent CASEL study found that the

¹ Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88(4). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28685826/>

² Lieberman, M. (2021, March 2). Top U.S. companies: These are the skills students need in a post-pandemic world. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/technology/top-u-s-companies-these-are-the-skills-students-need-in-a-post-pandemic-world/2021/03>

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development of such skills prepares students with the competencies that directly underpin the skills most needed by employers today and that are the most necessary for adapting to the needs of the workforce of tomorrow.³ Particularly in a time when advancements in technologies such as automation and artificial intelligence are making leaps and bounds, deeper human-centered skills such as employability skills are essential to prepare all individuals for success as effective contributors to our nation’s future prosperity. A McKinsey Global Institute analysis of 2,000 work activities covering 800 occupations in 46 countries projects that in 2030, the top three skills in order of demand will be “technological skills, social and emotional skills, and higher-level cognitive skills.”⁴

The reauthorization of WIOA in 2014 marked an important first step towards this vision for workforce development. However, more must be done to ensure our nation is equipped to prepare individuals for a rapidly changing economy and world of work. A greater emphasis on developing skills with longer-term and cross-cutting value will significantly improve the outcomes of those served by the publicly funded workforce system authorized by WIOA. With this view, we urge the House Education and Workforce Committee to adopt the following recommendations as part of its wider reauthorization effort for this legislation, which include the following:

Update Career Pathway Definition and Include Employability Skills Development as an Activity within Allowable Uses of Funds

Within current statute, various WIOA programs and activities reference “learning skills,” “communication skills,” “workforce preparation skills training” and “development of learning skills, communication skills, interviewing skills, punctuality, personal maintenance skills, and professional conduct.” However, there is a range of varied and broad terminology used, which undermines the ability of programs and activities to address a need for employability skills.

Clearer language is needed to build on these existing references in WIOA and clarify that “job skills needed to obtain opportunities” include not only sector-specific technical skills but also employability skills. Indeed, employability skills not only endure beyond rapidly changing technical skills that can become obsolete as technology and the world of work changes, they also greatly support the ability of learners to cultivate technical skills and other important competencies. Strong employability skills further allow learners to successfully upskill and reskill throughout their lifetimes, enabling them to continue to learn and thrive in the workforce and in society.

³ Yoder, N., Atwell, M.N., Godek, D., Dusenbury, L., Bridgeland, J.M., & Weissberg, R. (2020). Preparing youth for the workforce of tomorrow: Cultivating the social and emotional skills employers demand. CASEL. <https://casel.org/casel-gateway-preparing-workforce-of-tomorrow/?view=true>

⁴ McKinsey Global Institute. (2018) “Skill shift: Automation and the future of the workforce.”



We therefore recommend updating the definition of “career pathway” to make clear that the combination of education, training, and services entailed by the term align with both the technical and employability skill needs of industries:

Sec. 3. Definitions.

- (7) Career Pathway.—The term “career pathway” means a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that—
 - (A) aligns with the **technical and employability** skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved;

Further, we recommend updating the uses of funds for Youth Workforce Investment Activities and Employment and Training Activities respectively to more explicitly allow for employability skills development. Such updates would ensure that 1) both employability and technical skill gaps are identified as part of any initial intake assessment and 2) allow funds to go toward training or other services that support the development of employability and technical skills:

Sec. 129. Use of Funds for Youth Workforce Investment Activities.

(b) (2) Allowable Statewide Youth Activities.

Insert new “(D) supporting the implementation of evidence-based education and training programs, including efforts to support individuals in developing employability skills.”

(c) Local Elements and Requirements

(1) Program Design

(A) provide an objective assessment of the academic levels, skill levels, and service needs of each participant, which assessment shall include a review of basic skills, occupational skills, **employability skills**, prior work experience, **employability**, interests, aptitudes (including interests and aptitudes for nontraditional jobs), supportive service needs, and developmental needs of such participant...

(2) Program Elements

Insert new “(E) employability skill development, which may include bolstering skills such as self-management, responsible decision-making, effective communication, conflict resolution, and relationship skills;”

SEC. 134. Use of Funds for Employment and Training Activities

(a) Statewide Employment and Training Activities.

(3) Allowable Statewide Employment and Training Activities.

(A) Insert new “(xv) implementing evidence-based education and training programs, including efforts to support individuals in developing employability skills.”

(2) Career Services.

(A) Services Provided.

(iii) initial assessment of skill levels (including literacy, numeracy, and English language proficiency), aptitudes, abilities (including **technical and employability** skills gaps), and supportive service needs...

(I) comprehensive and specialized assessments of the **technical and employability** skill levels and service needs of adults and dislocated workers...



(VI) short-term prevocational services, including development of learning skills, **employability skills**, communication skills, interviewing skills, punctuality, personal maintenance skills, and professional conduct, to prepare individuals for unsubsidized employment or training...

(D) Training Services.—Training services may include—

(ix) job readiness training **and employability skill development** provided in combination with services described in any of clauses (i) through (viii);

(B) Training Activities.—The training program for incumbent workers carried out under this paragraph shall be carried out by the local board in conjunction with the employers or groups of employers of such workers (which may include employers in partnership with other entities for the purposes of delivering training) for the purpose of assisting such workers in obtaining the **employability and technical** skills necessary to retain employment or avert layoffs.

(5) Transitional Jobs.

(C) are designed to assist the individuals described in subparagraph (A) to establish a work history, demonstrate success in the workplace, and develop the **employability and technical** skills that lead to entry into and retention in unsubsidized employment.

Define the term “evidence-based” in WIOA

A consistent definition of “evidence-based” in WIOA would give the field crucial guidelines and signal that using evidence-based practices is a priority. Such a definition, drawing from past bipartisan models in the Every Student Succeeds Act and the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program, would also further improve WIOA’s Pay for Performance provisions by allowing contracts under the approach to be more meaningfully anchored to evidence-based practices. In turn, WIOA Pay for Performance Contracts can achieve further improved outcomes and continue to save taxpayer dollars through a clearer focus on evidence-based interventions. Our recommendation is as follows:

(76) Evidence-based.—The term ‘evidence-based’, when used with respect to an activity, strategy, or intervention, means an activity, strategy or intervention that—

(A) demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving participant outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on—

(i) strong evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented experimental study;

(ii) moderate evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study; or

(iii) promising evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias; or

(B) (i) demonstrates a rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes; and

(ii) includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.



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Conclusion

The federal government plays a critical role in ensuring our nation's career and workforce development infrastructure is up to the task of supporting the career pathways and employability skill development of our nation's workforce. We thank the House Education and Workforce Committee for considering our recommendations. We appreciate your leadership and look forward to the opportunity to work with you on this reauthorization.

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