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Empowering Learners for School, Work, and Life: Insights from the Research Practice Collaborative (Phase I)

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Introduction and Background

The education landscape is evolving, with growing recognition that student success depends on developing durable skills — core competencies like critical thinking, communication, and adaptability that support lifelong learning and career engagement. Workforce data underscores their importance: in partnership with Lightcast, America Succeeds' analysis of 82 million job postings found that seven of the ten most in-demand skills are durable skills, highlighting their alignment with workforce needs.

The urgency to prioritize durable skills stems, in part, from rapid technological change, as evolving industries render various technical skills obsolete while durable skills remain consistently valuable. These adaptable, transferable, human competencies enable individuals to navigate shifting workplace demands, tackle new challenges, and sustain long-term professional effectiveness and economic mobility.

Moreover, focusing on durable skills fosters holistic development, equipping students to navigate challenges, collaborate effectively, solve problems creatively, and learn continuously. These skills bridge the gap between traditional education outcomes and employer expectations.

As schools and districts across the country grapple with how to better prepare their students to succeed, there is growing interest in understanding how to effectively develop durable skills within existing educational frameworks. While the importance of these skills is widely acknowledged, there remains widespread uncertainty about the most effective ways to foster their development. Our project aimed to address this gap by examining innovative schools and programs that have made explicit commitments to developing these essential competencies.

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The Research Practice Collaborative (RPC): Phase I

Research Questions

Phase I of this project was designed to provide practical insights for other schools and districts interested in enhancing their support of students' durable skill development. We focused on identifying concrete practices, documenting their implementation, and understanding their impact on student growth.

To drive our investigation, we identified three fundamental research questions:

01 How can schools and programs effectively support the development of their learners' skills — both the skills articulated by the schools/programs and the durable skills identified by America Succeeds?

02 What serves as evidence of students having engaged, acquired, or developed these skills?

03 What school and program structures, practices, resources, etc., contribute to the development of learners' skills?

These questions reflect a growing understanding that although traditional academic measures remain important, they are insufficient indicators of students' readiness for future success.

Partner Schools/Programs

Through our extensive professional networks, we identified four educational institutions that had developed approaches to skill development while maintaining strong academic programs. The three high schools and one innovative profession-based high school program we selected were included because of their deliberate focus on competency development, their embrace of unconventional practices, and their commitment to documenting student growth. By exploring their approaches, we sought to understand not only what practices contribute to skill development, but also how these practices can be effectively implemented in various educational contexts.

Bostonia Global High School, an innovative high school situated in the El Cajon school district just outside of San Diego (CA), was chosen for its distinctive focus on core competencies through competency-based project classes and other learning experiences. The school's use of mentorships and explicit focus on skills through regular coaching sessions with advisors, coupled with their competency dashboard for documenting and reflecting on growth, provides a compelling model for skill development. Their integration of traditional academic requirements with innovative learning approaches demonstrates how schools can meet state standards while fostering essential skills.

Gibson Ek High School, a Big Picture Learning school in a bustling suburb of Seattle (WA), engages students in interest-driven internships two days per week and supports their students' engagement in personal, self-directed learning projects the other three days. Their approach to skill development is particularly noteworthy for its integration of real-world experience with academic learning. The school's use of a virtual dashboard to track and co-assess evidence of targeted skills as well as ongoing support from an advisor throughout their time at Gibson Ek provides valuable insights into how schools can deliberately document and support skill development with students, extending responsibility for students' skill development directly to students.

Building 21 Philadelphia, a competency-driven urban high school in Philadelphia (PA), was selected for its comprehensive set of competencies across multiple domains, including traditional subjects and crucial areas like Habits of Success, Personal Development, NextGen Essential Skills, and Wayfinding. The school has developed detailed skill progressions from novice to mastery and deliberately designed their studios and seminars to support learners' skill development. Their approach ensures comprehensive coverage beyond typical high school curricula while maintaining a clear focus on skill development.

GO CAPS Monett, a profession-based high school program grounded in the CAPS Network learning model, represents an innovative approach to supporting career exploration and professional skills development for high school students. Located in the semi-rural community of Monett (MO), a town of 8,000, this program was selected for its unique practice of supporting learners' exploration of work and professional skills development in partnership with dozens of industry and educational partners in the region. Students engage in multiple forms of professional interaction, including job shadowing, meeting with industry professionals, undertaking client projects, and pursuing personal capstone projects related to their career interests.

These institutions were specifically chosen for their diverse approaches to skill development, representing different contexts and methodologies and exemplifying a variety of approaches that can contribute to students' development of durable skills. Our goal was to gain insights and potential recommendations for how other schools could enhance the development of their learners' durable skills while maintaining academic rigor and meeting traditional educational requirements.

Our Selection Criteria

Our selection criteria emphasized schools that:

Deliberately focus on skill development through learner-centered, situated, and personalized approaches
Represent a variety of implementation methods and contexts (urban, suburban, rural)
Serve diverse student populations across different socioeconomic contexts
Demonstrate commitment to documenting and evidencing skill development
Show innovation in connecting academic learning with real-world application

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Methodology

Our methodology was designed to explore both the breadth and depth of how these innovative programs support students' skill development. Through a multi-faceted approach to data collection and analysis, we sought to understand not only what these schools do but how and why their practices contribute to students' development of durable skills (see Appendix for further detail).

Data Collection

We employed a comprehensive data collection strategy designed to capture multiple perspectives and depths of understanding at each institution. The process started with Zoom interviews with school and program leaders, followed by in-depth leadership team discussions. Each site was then visited for interviews and focus groups with educators, students, and sometimes industry partners, along with observations of learning inside and, occasionally, outside school. These immersive visits allowed us to observe practices in action, document learning environments, and witness first-hand how each school's daily practices contributed to their learners' skill development. We paid particular attention to youth—adult interactions and the practical implementation of digital platforms for tracking skill development, while also experiencing each institution's unique culture and learning environment.

In a few instances, we interviewed program graduates, gaining valuable insights into how they viewed their school's practices as contributors to their skill development and how these skills supported their post-graduation pursuits and opportunities. These conversations proved invaluable in understanding how the skills developed during their time in the programs translated to post-secondary education and career pursuits.

To complement our qualitative data collection, we piloted surveys at both Gibson Ek and GO CAPS Monett to gather data related to both educators' and students' perspectives on how each school was assisting and supporting the development of their durable skills.

Data Analysis

Our analysis strategy combined innovative technological tools with traditional qualitative research methods to ensure both efficiency and depth in examining the extensive data collected. At the core of our approach was the use of three AI platforms—AILYZE, ChatGPT, and Claude—to conduct initial analysis of interview and focus group transcripts. These tools proved invaluable in efficiently processing large volumes of qualitative data, helping us identify recurring themes, core practices, and patterns in skill development across different stakeholder groups. The AI analysis particularly excelled at recognizing connections between specific practices and their outcomes.

This technological approach was complemented by a human validation process, including careful review of all AI-generated insights and cross-referencing with original data sources. To ensure accuracy, we shared draft case studies with school leaders for verification and conducted systematic cross-site analysis to identify both common practices and context-specific innovations. This combination of AI-assisted analysis and thorough validation enabled us to develop rich, detailed case studies while identifying broader patterns and insights applicable across different educational contexts.

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Learnings

Core Practices Supporting Durable Skills Development

The development of durable skills across all four programs was rooted in a shared commitment to creating intentional, meaningful learning experiences that connected academic growth to real-world applications. All of the programs we worked with supported their learners' durable skills development in the following five ways:

- Interest-driven learning
- Project-based learning
- Real-world engagement
- Competency-based learning and assessment
- Intentional advising practices

01

Interest-driven learning.

A foundational element was the integration of student interests and aspirations into all aspects of learning. Each program recognized that connecting their learners' educational experiences to students' passions and goals led to deeper engagement and more meaningful skill development. At Gibson Ek, personal learning projects allowed students to explore interests while developing targeted competencies. Building 21 integrated student interests into problem-based learning experiences, while Bostonia Global aligned core classes and X-factor electives with student aspirations. GO CAPS Monett enabled students to select industry strands matching their career interests. This approach fosters intrinsic motivation and fuels students' meaningful skill development through projects and their interactions in the world.

02

Project-based learning.

A cornerstone of this approach was project-based learning, which each program adapted to fit its unique goals and contexts. At Gibson Ek, personal learning projects allowed students to explore their interests while solving authentic problems and presenting their solutions to real audiences. Building 21 designed problem-based studio guides, where students tackled complex challenges that required them to apply multiple skills simultaneously. Bostonia Global integrated traditional academics with innovative electives, including X-Factor courses that bridged classroom learning with practical applications, while GO CAPS Monett immersed students in industry-specific projects, providing opportunities to deliver real-world outcomes for actual clients.

03

Real-world engagement.

Another foundational practice was the incorporation of real-world engagement, ensuring that skill development extended beyond the classroom. Authentic professional experiences ranged from weekly internships (Gibson Ek, Bostonia Global) to profession-based electives and community interactions (Building 21). GO CAPS Monett fully integrated professional exposure into its curriculum, blending internships, client projects, and job shadowing opportunities to give students direct insights into industry practices and expectations.

04

Competency-based learning and assessment.

Competency-based assessment was another critical element, with each program employing frameworks that clearly defined skills and provided measurable markers of progress. Gibson Ek utilized a system to track evidence of growth across five domains of competencies, while Bostonia Global's Smart Coach platform monitored progress across 24 core competencies. Building 21's LMS offered detailed documentation of skill progressions, enabling precise tracking of student growth and providing actionable insights for educators and students alike.

05

Intentional advising practices.

Finally, intentional advising practices were integral to each program's success, offering students consistent guidance and support. At Gibson Ek, mixed-age advisory groups fostered peer learning and ensured adult mentorship, while Bostonia Global paired bi-weekly advisor check-ins with digital tracking to keep students focused on their growth. Building 21's advisory approach is intended to ensure that every student is well known and supported, and GO CAPS Monett relied on industry mentors to provide professional coaching. These advisory practices created a foundation of trust and accountability, helping students navigate challenges while reflecting on their progress and setting future goals.

What makes these common practices particularly powerful is how they worked together to create comprehensive systems for skill development. The combination of interest-driven learning, project-based learning, real-world experiences, competency-based assessment, and intentional advising practices created multiple, reinforcing options for students to develop and demonstrate their growing capabilities. While each program implemented these elements differently based on their context and goals, the consistency of these core practices across programs suggests their fundamental importance in supporting skill development.

This analysis reveals that while there's no single formula for success, certain key elements consistently support effective skill development. **The challenge for other schools isn't necessarily to replicate any one program exactly, but to understand how these core practices can be adapted and implemented in ways that serve their specific contexts and student needs.**

Key Durable Skills in Practice

Each institution in our project approached skill development with deliberate intentionality, though their methods varied based on their contexts and goals. While their specific competency frameworks differed, all four programs shared a commitment to making skill development explicit, measurable, and meaningfully connected to real-world application.

Our analysis highlighted how several of the practices as pursued across the four learning environments inherently if not explicitly supported the development of their learners' durable skills through both deliberate design and natural consequence of their learning environments. Below we present how the programs' approaches aligned with and supported the development of their learners' durable skills, often in both intentional and organic ways.

COMMUNICATION

Communication skills were developed through a variety of structured and authentic experiences emphasizing both written and verbal expression, with students showing heightened engagement when communicating about topics aligned with their interests and aspirations. Orientation workshops introduced foundational skills like email etiquette, professional presentations, and interpersonal communication strategies, which students then applied in personally meaningful contexts. These skills were reinforced throughout the programs in multiple ways, including advisory sessions, client projects, and professional mentorships. For instance, students at GO CAPS Monett frequently interacted with real clients in their chosen industry strands, honing their ability to communicate effectively in professional settings they were passionate about.

Exhibition systems were particularly powerful tools for fostering communication skills, as students were challenged to articulate their learning and growth about projects they cared deeply about to diverse audiences. This personal investment in the subject matter naturally strengthened their presentation abilities and built confidence in public speaking. Digital platforms further supported skill development by enabling structured reflections, peer discussions, and feedback exchanges, ensuring communication remained a consistent focus across all contexts.

In collaborative environments, students practiced group communication, learning to articulate ideas clearly and respond constructively to feedback, particularly when working on projects aligned with shared interests. Intentionally designed team projects at Building 21 or mentorship discussions at Bostonia Global, demanded nuanced communication to navigate team dynamics effectively. By embedding communication development into both academic and professional contexts that connected to student interests, these programs ensured students were well-prepared for varied real-world scenarios.

CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking was cultivated through activities requiring students to analyze complex challenges, evaluate multiple perspectives, and develop practical solutions, with engagement deepening when students tackled problems connected to their personal interests and aspirations. This skill was embedded into project-based learning structures, such as personal projects at Gibson Ek or studio-based instruction at Building 21. Students were tasked with identifying real-world problems they cared about, researching solutions, and justifying their approaches to peers, educators, and professionals.

Competency-based assessments reinforced analytical abilities across contexts, while design thinking protocols provided structured approaches to problem-solving. Regular reflection, such as through portfolio reviews, helped students evaluate their decision-making processes and refine strategies, particularly when applied to projects they felt personally invested in. Professional partnerships offered authentic opportunities to apply critical thinking to industry-specific challenges in fields aligned with students' career interests, ensuring students developed and practiced these skills in meaningful ways.

CREATIVITY

Creativity was nurtured through innovative projects and problem-solving activities, with students showing greater creative engagement when exploring areas aligned with their passions. Personalized learning projects at Gibson Ek allowed students to explore interests and experiment with new ideas, while problem-based learning experiences at Building 21 encouraged creative approaches to challenges students found personally meaningful. Client-based projects at GO CAPS Monett added real-world feedback to the process, helping students refine their ideas in industry areas they were eager to explore.

Mentorship programs at Bostonia Global exposed students to professionals who modeled innovative thinking in fields matching students' interests, while digital platforms supported documentation of creative processes. Finally, reflection opportunities across all of the schools fostered students' ability to reflect on, assess, and refine their creative approaches, ensuring they developed the ability to generate and pursue novel ideas effectively, particularly in areas they were passionate about exploring.

COLLABORATION

Collaboration skills were developed through team-based experiences that mirrored professional dynamics, with student engagement strengthening when working on projects aligned with shared interests. Students worked in diverse groups, often across age levels or disciplines, to tackle complex challenges they collectively found meaningful. Mixed-age advisories at Gibson Ek fostered peer learning and mentorship, while Building 21 required students to collaborate and provide peer feedback on team-based projects.

Client projects at GO CAPS Monett provided authentic contexts for teamwork, as students worked together to meet real-world deliverables in their chosen industry strands. Professional mentorships at Bostonia Global further supported collaboration by teaching students how to navigate interpersonal dynamics in workplace settings aligned with their career interests. These experiences emphasized the importance of clear communication, conflict resolution, and shared accountability.

Advisory sessions played a key role in teaching collaboration strategies, helping students reflect on their roles within teams and improve group dynamics, particularly when working on projects that captured collective interest. Regular exhibitions required students to coordinate with peers to prepare and deliver presentations about work they were passionate about, reinforcing their ability to work effectively with others. This comprehensive approach ensured students were well-equipped to collaborate in both academic and professional contexts.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership opportunities were embedded across programs, allowing students to take initiative and guide projects in meaningful ways, with students often emerging as natural leaders in areas aligned with their interests and passions. At Gibson Ek, students led advisory activities and managed personal learning projects connected to their aspirations, developing skills in decision-making, delegation, and accountability. Building 21's Community Council provided students with the opportunity to lead their peers in problem solving approaches to address conflicts that arose in the school community.

Client projects at GO CAPS Monett required students to manage professional relationships and deliverables in their chosen industry strands, simulating real-world leadership scenarios. Similarly, mentorship programs at Bostonia Global allowed students to observe and practice leadership in professional settings aligned with their career interests, often taking the lead on collaborative tasks or projects they were passionate about.

Reflection was a crucial component of leadership development. Students regularly analyzed their leadership styles, identified areas for improvement, and set goals for future growth, particularly meaningful when leading projects connected to their personal interests. These experiences, combined with explicit instruction in leadership strategies, ensured students developed the confidence and skills needed to lead effectively in diverse contexts.

METACOGNITION

Metacognition was fostered through structured reflection systems that encouraged students to think critically about their learning processes, with deeper engagement evident when students reflected on projects aligned with their interests. Portfolio development was a key practice, providing students with a space to document their progress, analyze their strategies, and adjust their approaches in personally meaningful contexts. Digital platforms supported this by tracking growth and facilitating regular self-assessments.

Advisory meetings played a central role in helping students develop metacognitive abilities, with advisors guiding discussions on learning strategies, challenges, and successes in areas students were passionate about exploring. Exhibitions provided opportunities for students to reflect on their learning journeys, articulate their growth, and set future goals connected to their aspirations. By integrating metacognitive practices into daily activities that aligned with student interests, these programs helped students become more self-aware and strategic learners.

GROWTH MINDSET

Growth mindset was deeply embedded in the culture of these programs, with a strong emphasis on continuous improvement, particularly powerful when students pursued learning aligned with their interests and goals. Competency-based systems encouraged students to view skill development as a progression, celebrating incremental achievements and learning from setbacks in contexts they found personally meaningful. Regular feedback cycles and advisory discussions reinforced this perspective, helping students understand that effort and persistence lead to growth.

Portfolio systems and digital platforms made progress visible, enabling students to track their development over time in areas they were passionate about exploring. Studio-based learning encouraged iteration and refinement, teaching students to embrace challenges and view failures as opportunities to learn, especially when working on projects that captured their interest. These practices helped students internalize the belief that abilities can be developed through dedication and effort.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness was integrated into program practices through activities that fostered self-awareness, empathy, and thoughtful interaction, with students showing deeper engagement when reflecting on experiences connected to their interests and goals. Advisory sessions at Gibson Ek provided regular opportunities for reflection and relationship-building, while Building 21 integrated reflection as a component of every performance task and through their Restorative Practices approach to school culture. Bostonia Global's bi-weekly check-ins focused on personal growth and interpersonal dynamics in contexts meaningful to students.

Professional mentorships and client projects further supported mindfulness by requiring students to navigate professional relationships with empathy and consideration in their chosen fields. Regular exhibitions and team projects emphasized the importance of understanding audience dynamics and collaborative relationships. These experiences helped students develop mindfulness as a core competency for personal and professional success.

CHARACTER

Character development was emphasized through experiences that required integrity, responsibility, and ethical decision-making, with students showing stronger engagement when facing ethical challenges in areas aligned with their interests and values. Internships, client projects, and mentorship programs demanded professionalism and accountability, giving students opportunities to demonstrate these traits in real-world settings they were passionate about. Advisory sessions reinforced discussions about honesty, time management, and ethical behavior in contexts meaningful to students.

Portfolio systems documented character development, providing students with tangible evidence of their growth in areas they cared about. Exhibitions required students to take ownership of their learning and present their work with integrity, particularly powerful when sharing projects aligned with their aspirations. These practices ensured students developed strong character traits that would serve them well in future academic and professional endeavors.

FORTITUDE

Fortitude was cultivated through challenging experiences that required persistence and resilience, with students showing greater determination when tackling obstacles in areas aligned with their interests and goals. Long-term projects, such as personalized learning plans at Gibson Ek or client engagements at GO CAPS Monett, pushed students to overcome obstacles and work toward solutions in fields they were passionate about. Professional mentorships and industry partnerships exposed students to real-world challenges in their chosen areas, teaching them to navigate setbacks and maintain effort.

Reflection protocols played a key role in helping students internalize the value of perseverance, particularly when reflecting on challenges in projects they found personally meaningful. Through regular advisory discussions and portfolio reviews, students analyzed how they overcame challenges and identified strategies for future success in areas they cared about. These experiences helped students develop the fortitude necessary to thrive in both academic and professional contexts.

Systems and Structures That Support Durable Skills Development

The success of these programs in fostering durable skills was underpinned by a set of systems and structures that ensured consistent, intentional development across all competencies. These elements provided a cohesive foundation for learning environments that connected academic growth with real-world readiness, enabling students to develop and demonstrate durable skills in meaningful ways.

Digital Platforms played a critical role in tracking progress and supporting reflection, which was particularly powerful when documenting growth in areas aligned with student interests. Tools like Gibson Ek's competency tracking system, Building 21's LMS, and Bostonia Global's Smart Coach provided students and educators with detailed insights into skill development. These platforms not only documented evidence of growth but also facilitated regular feedback loops and promoted metacognitive practices. By making learning progress visible and connecting it to personal interests and goals, digital platforms empowered students to take ownership of their skill development and allowed educators to tailor support to individual needs. For instance, students could use these tools to set goals, reflect on their strategies, and monitor incremental improvements over time in areas they were passionate about, reinforcing a growth mindset.

Portfolio Development emerged as a vital tool for integrating learning across multiple contexts and capturing growth in areas meaningful to students. By maintaining portfolios, students could reflect on their achievements, articulate their learning journeys, and demonstrate growth to diverse audiences, including peers, educators, and industry professionals. Exhibitions provided additional opportunities to showcase these portfolios, requiring students to present work they were passionate about in formal settings. This process fostered accountability, highlighted the interconnectedness of skills, and underscored the importance of continuous improvement. Portfolios also served as tangible records of student accomplishments, particularly valuable when documenting projects aligned with their interests and useful for future academic or professional pursuits.

Competency Frameworks provided the structure for skill tracking and assessment, creating clear pathways for student growth while allowing flexibility to pursue individual interests. These frameworks, such as Building 21's detailed progression markers or Bostonia Global's 24 core competencies, clarified expectations for both students and teachers. They ensured skill development was measurable, actionable, and aligned with real-world applications while allowing students to demonstrate competencies through projects connected to their passions. The explicit nature of these frameworks also created a shared language for evaluating and discussing progress, enabling productive conversations between students, educators, and mentors. Competency frameworks were particularly valuable in helping students understand their strengths and areas for improvement, allowing for targeted development and more personalized learning experiences.

Advisory Systems were another critical structure, offering consistent guidance, personalized support, and accountability while helping students explore and pursue their interests. Programs like Gibson Ek's mixed-age advisories and Bostonia Global's bi-weekly advisor check-ins helped students stay focused on their goals and track their progress in areas they found meaningful. Advisors played a pivotal role in facilitating reflective practices, coaching students through challenges, and connecting them with relevant resources, mentors, or professional opportunities aligned with their interests. At GO CAPS Monett, industry mentors extended the advisory function, providing students with insights into professional expectations and real-world problem-solving in their chosen fields. These systems ensured that students received the individualized attention needed to navigate both academic and personal challenges effectively.

In addition to these core elements, regular reflections and structured progressions were embedded into daily practices, ensuring that skill development was both explicit and intentional while remaining connected to student interests. The integration of digital tools, portfolio systems, competency frameworks, and advisory support created a synergistic environment where students could develop durable skills in a manner that was transparent, iterative, and deeply meaningful to their personal goals. By leveraging these interconnected systems, the programs not only prepared students for immediate academic and professional success but also equipped them with the adaptability and resilience required for lifelong learning and growth.

Cross-Program Insights and Recommendations

The analysis of these programs revealed a consistent set of practices and principles that supported the development of durable skills across diverse learning environments. These findings underscore the importance of intentionality, real-world application, robust support systems, and interest-driven learning in fostering skills that prepare students for academic, professional, and personal success. Below are tailored recommendations for district leaders, school leaders, and educators, to guide the implementation of durable skills practices within their unique contexts, and for learners, to navigate their own development and lives.

District Leaders

Establish a Vision for Durable Skills Development:
Develop a district-wide vision that emphasizes the importance of durable skills in preparing students for future success. Use this vision (and related tools, like portraits of a graduate/learner) to align strategic goals, professional development, and curriculum planning across schools.

Invest in Competency Frameworks and Tools:
Provide resources to adopt or create competency frameworks that make skill development explicit, demonstrable, and measurable. Equip schools with digital platforms to track student progress, reflect on growth, and document achievements.

Foster Partnerships with Industry and Community Organizations:
Build relationships with local businesses, nonprofits, and higher education institutions to create authentic learning experiences such as internships, mentorships, and client-based projects. These partnerships should span diverse fields to accommodate varying student interests while providing valuable real-world contexts for skill application.

Support Professional Learning Communities:
Facilitate collaboration among school leaders and educators — both within one's own district, and between one's district and other local and distant districts — to share best practices, develop innovative approaches, and adapt successful strategies.

School Leaders

Embed Durable Skills into School Culture and Practices:
Establish durable skills as a central focus of the school's mission and instructional practices. Ensure these skills are integrated into all aspects of learning, from interest-driven projects to advisory sessions and assessments.

Design Systems for Documenting, Tracking, and Reflecting on Skill Development:
Implement portfolio systems and digital tools that enable students to document their growth, reflect on learning strategies, and showcase their progress. Use exhibitions and presentations to provide students with opportunities to articulate their learning journey.

Create Opportunities for Real-World Learning:
Incorporate internships, community projects, and industry mentorships into the school schedule, enabling students to select experiences aligned with their interests. Leverage local partnerships to ensure students experience the practical application of their skills in authentic contexts they find meaningful.

Provide Ongoing Professional Development:
Train teachers and advisors on effective strategies for fostering durable skills, including project-based learning, competency-based assessment, and reflective practices. Equip staff with tools and resources to integrate these approaches seamlessly into their teaching.

Educators

Focus on Authentic Learning Experiences:
Design lessons and projects that encourage students to solve real-world problems connected to their passions, collaborate with peers, and apply their learning in meaningful ways. Use interdisciplinary approaches to help students see connections across subjects and areas of interest.

Use Competency Frameworks to Guide Instruction:
Align lesson objectives and assessments with clear skill progressions while allowing flexibility for students to demonstrate competencies through personally meaningful work. Provide students with explicit criteria for success and actionable feedback to support their growth.

Facilitate Reflection and Metacognition:
Incorporate regular opportunities for students to analyze their learning processes, set goals, and track progress. Use tools like journals, portfolios, and peer discussions to make reflection a consistent part of the classroom experience.

Build Strong Relationships with Students:
Act as a mentor and coach, helping students identify and explore their interests, guiding them through challenges, and helping them connect their academic work to personal and professional goals. Use advisory or one-on-one sessions to provide individualized support and encouragement.

Learners

Take Ownership of Your Learning Journey:
Use tools like portfolios or digital platforms to track your progress, set goals, and reflect on your growth over time. Be proactive in identifying areas where you want to improve and seek out resources or opportunities to support your development.

Seek and Embrace Real-World Learning Experiences:
Actively participate in internships, client-based projects, and mentorship programs to gain hands-on experience in applying your skills in authentic and personally-relevant contexts. Treat these opportunities as practice for future professional scenarios, focusing on building communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities.

Engage in Ongoing Reflection and Growth:
Regularly reflect on your learning processes, skill development, and outcomes, considering what worked well and what could be improved. Embrace feedback from teachers, peers, and mentors, using it to refine your approach and strategies. Cultivate a growth mindset by viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and progress.

Develop Professional Habits:
Build foundational skills such as email etiquette, time management, and effective communication. Practice presenting your ideas confidently, whether in team discussions, exhibitions, or public presentations. Focus on professionalism in your interactions, demonstrating reliability, integrity, and a strong work ethic.

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Looking Ahead

Building on our insights from Spring 2024, we are embarking on an expanded research agenda to deepen our understanding of how schools can effectively develop students' durable skills. Our 2024-25 RPC Phase II research will engage schools at three distinct levels of participation, allowing us to examine skill development from multiple perspectives and depths.

The first tier will continue our exploration of innovative practices through regular interviews with leadership and educators, focus groups with learners, and analysis of school-curated evidence. Our second tier will take a deeper dive, tracking 8-12 students intensively throughout the year while conducting regular interviews with their matched educators and advisors. This longitudinal approach will provide unprecedented insight into how students develop skills over time. Our third tier will work with "sandbox programs" willing to test new approaches, including structured protocols for advisor-student conversations and innovative documentation methods.

Across all tiers, we'll focus on understanding not just what practices work, but how and why they succeed in different contexts. We're particularly interested in examining how schools document and evidence skill development, recognizing this as a crucial challenge for many institutions. Through expanded use of AI tools for analysis, implementation of standardized protocols, and integration of quantitative and qualitative measures, we aim to develop robust insights that can guide other schools in enhancing their approach to skill development.

This work holds particular urgency as schools increasingly recognize the importance of durable skills for student success. By developing detailed case studies, evidence-based recommendations, and practical implementation guides, we hope to provide educators with concrete tools and strategies for supporting their students' skill development. Our ultimate goal is to help create more learning environments where students can develop the essential skills they need for future success.

Appendix

Methodology: Phase I

Comprehensive Data Collection Strategy

Our investigation into how schools support durable skills development employed a multi-layered approach designed to capture both breadth and depth of understanding. Beginning with preliminary virtual leadership interviews, we established foundational context about each institution's philosophy and approach before conducting extensive on-site visits during Spring 2024. These initial conversations with school leaders provided crucial insights about their vision for student development and their methods for tracking growth, helping us frame our subsequent site visits effectively.

The heart of our data collection occurred during two-day visits to each location, where we immersed ourselves in the daily life of each program. These visits allowed us to observe practices in action, witness student-advisor interactions, and see firsthand how theoretical frameworks translated into daily practice. We conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with educators, students, and where applicable, industry partners, following semi-structured protocols that allowed for both specific insight gathering and organic exploration of emerging themes.

To understand longer-term impact, we interviewed program graduates, speaking with four alumni from the GO CAPS Monett program and one from Gibson Ek High School. These conversations provided valuable insights into how skills developed during the programs translated to post-secondary education and career settings. Additionally, we piloted surveys at Gibson Ek and GO CAPS Monett, including detailed assessment of durable skills, student self-reflection measures, and program-specific items.

This multi-faceted approach allowed us to triangulate findings across different stakeholder perspectives while gathering both qualitative and quantitative data about skill development. The combination of leadership insights, direct observation, stakeholder perspectives, alumni reflections, and survey data provided a rich understanding of how these programs approach skill development and evidence student growth.

Leadership Interviews: Prior to site visits, we conducted two zoom-based interviews with leadership from each school/program. These conversations provided crucial context about each institution's philosophy, approach, and targeted outcomes. Leaders shared their vision for student development, specific practices they believed were most impactful, and their methods for tracking and evidencing student growth. These initial discussions helped frame our subsequent site visits and informed our focus group protocols.

Site Visits: We conducted 2-day on-site visits to each location during Spring 2024. These visits allowed us to:

- Observe practices in action
- Document the learning environment
- Witness student-advisor interactions
- See how digital platforms were used to track skill development
- Experience the school culture firsthand

The extended time at each site enabled us to develop a thorough understanding of how theoretical frameworks translated into daily practice.

Focus Groups and Interviews: During site visits, we conducted several types of focused discussions:

- Educator focus groups exploring teaching practices and skill development strategies
- Student focus groups examining their experiences and perceived growth
- Individual interviews with key staff members
- Where applicable, discussions with industry partners (particularly valuable at GO CAPS Monett)

These conversations followed semi-structured protocols designed to elicit specific insights about skill development while allowing for organic exploration of emerging themes. For educators, we explored:

- Individual roles and experience
- Program purposes and practices
- Targeted skills and competencies
- Evidence collection methods
- Specific approaches to developing durable skills
- Student focus groups investigated:
- Reasons for program enrollment
- Daily experiences and activities
- Perceived learning gains
- Skill development processes
- Value of acquired competencies

Alumni Interviews: We conducted follow-up interviews with program graduates to understand the lasting impact of their experiences:

- Four alumni from GO CAPS Monett program
- One alumnus from Gibson Ek

These conversations provided valuable insights into how skills developed during the program translated to post-secondary education and career settings.

Survey Pilots: To gather quantitative data on skill development, and insights about survey items, we piloted surveys at Gibson Ek High School and GO CAPS Monett. The surveys included:

- 30 Likert scale items assessing durable skills (3 items per skill)
- 10 items asking for student self-assessment
- 2 rank scale items
- 5-7 program-specific practice items
- 2 open-ended response items

Analysis

Our analysis strategy integrated cutting-edge technological tools with traditional qualitative research methods, creating a robust framework for examining the extensive data collected across the four sites. At the heart of our approach was the innovative use of three AI platforms—AILYZE, ChatGPT, and Claude.ai—to conduct initial analysis of all interview and focus group transcripts. These AI tools proved invaluable in efficiently processing large volumes of qualitative data, helping us identify recurring themes, core practices, and patterns in skill development across different stakeholder groups. The AI analysis particularly excelled at recognizing connections between specific practices and their outcomes, offering insights that might have been missed through traditional coding methods alone.

However, recognizing the importance of maintaining research integrity and ensuring accurate representation of stakeholder perspectives, we implemented a human validation process. Every AI-generated analysis underwent careful manual review by our research team, with findings meticulously cross-referenced against original transcripts and video recordings. This validation process was particularly crucial in verifying that AI extrapolations authentically represented stakeholder commentary and captured the nuances of each program's approach. Draft case studies were shared with school and program leaders for accuracy verification, providing an additional layer of validation from those most familiar with each context.

Analysis cont.

Our cross-site analysis took a systematic approach to comparing practices and outcomes across the four institutions. This process revealed not only common effective practices but also highlighted unique innovations and context-specific adaptations. We paid particular attention to how different programs approached similar challenges, identifying both shared solutions and distinctive approaches shaped by local contexts. This comparative analysis proved especially valuable in understanding how different environments influenced the implementation and effectiveness of various practices.

By combining AI-assisted analysis with rigorous human validation and systematic cross-site comparison, we were able to develop rich, detailed case studies while identifying broader patterns and insights applicable across different educational contexts. This comprehensive approach ensured both efficiency and accuracy in our findings while maintaining the deep, nuanced understanding necessary for meaningful qualitative research in educational settings.

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