

# Real World Education in Alabama's Public Schools

Certified Public Manager® Program

Solutions Alabama 2019



**AUM**

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY  
AT MONTGOMERY**

**CONTINUING EDUCATION &  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

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## INTRODUCTION

Education today puts a focus on “standards.” Reading, math, social sciences, science and other key areas have an important place in preparing students for their adult lives. What about the importance of soft skills that assist in the day to day functioning in society? Soft skills are critical for success and equipping students to handle the complex world ahead. While some school programs are working to prepare students for real life situations, there appears to be a need for all school programs to equip students with common life skills. A 2012 survey of 704 employers conducted by The Chronicles of Higher Education and American Public Media’s Marketplace showed that half of those surveyed said they had trouble finding recent graduates to fill vacancies in their companies. Even though applicants had the technical proficiency, they lacked the communication, adaptability, decision-making, and problem-solving skills needed to do the job.<sup>1</sup> The Certified Public Manager (CPM) Solutions “Real World Education” team was tasked with identifying the most vital soft skills and examining the soft skills deficits of high school graduates in Alabama. The “Real World Education” team accomplished this task by researching current classes and programs offered in Alabama’s public schools and workforce development programs. Furthermore, proposed recommendations designed to better prepare these students for real world experiences by ensuring that they have the vital soft skills that the workforce requires.

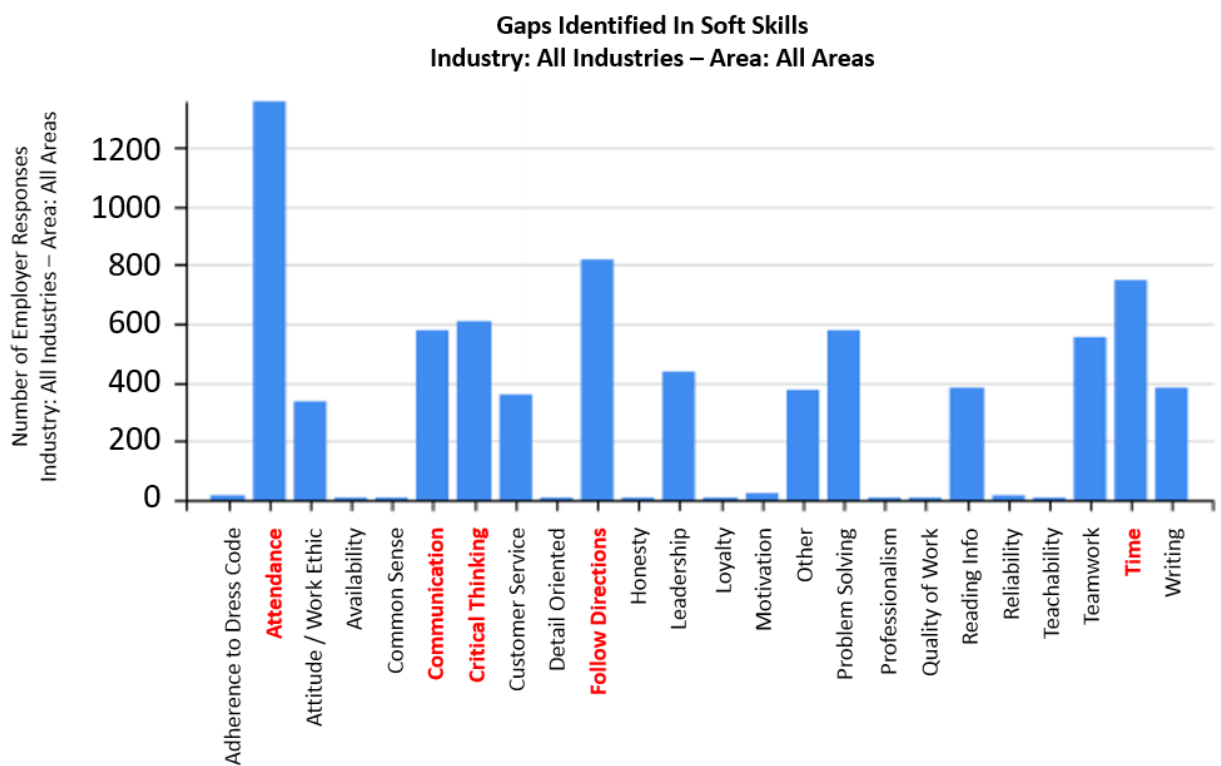
## BACKGROUND

In order to identify recommendations towards soft skills deficits that may be lacking in today’s Alabama graduates, one must first define a soft skill. According to Career Builder, “soft skills are referred to as transferable skills, interpersonal skills, or social skills. Soft skills may include nearly any ability that pertains to the way you approach others or handle your professional life.”<sup>2</sup> Soft skills include a good work ethic, being able to communicate well with others, problem-solving skills, and being punctual. Hard skills, on the other hand, are actual technical work skills, or a skill set required for a job. According to The Balance Careers, hard skills are often “...acquired through formal education and training programs, including college, apprenticeships, short-term training

classes, online courses, and certification programs.”<sup>3</sup> Essentially, hard skills help you to be able to perform the job, while soft skills, which emphasize things affecting work habits in any environment, will help you get and keep the job. Another important term is employability skills. According to the U.S. Department of Education, employability skills are “general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors.”<sup>4</sup> It is important to note the current requirements for Alabama’s public schools when it comes to career preparedness. According to the Alabama High School Graduation Requirements, only 1 credit of career preparedness is required out of the total 24 credits of mandatory coursework to graduate.<sup>5</sup> In this Career Preparedness course, students learn about personal decision making, academic planning, career development, and technology skill applications. Furthermore, students learn about managing finances and budgeting, saving, investing, banking and financial institutions, credit and debt, and risk management and insurance. The course totals 140 hours, but not much time is spent working on soft skills. Only 10 hours (or 7%) of the course is focused on the employment process, which does include interview skills, among other parts of the process. The college and career readiness course only accounts for 10% of the students’ weight towards the letter grade for schools with a grade twelve. This course is currently taught in the ninth grade. The state of Alabama Legislative Support for Character Education started in 1995. Act(s) 1975 Code of Alabama, Section 16-6B-2(h), 1995 Accountability Law, Act 95-313 mandates that the State Board of Education and all local boards shall develop and implement a comprehensive character education program for all grades to consist of not less than ten minutes of instruction per day focusing upon the students’ development of the following character traits: courage, patriotism, citizenship, honesty, fairness, respect for others, kindness, cooperation, self-respect, self-control, courtesy, compassion, tolerance, diligence, generosity, punctuality, cleanliness, cheerfulness, school pride, respect for the environment, patience, creativity, sportsmanship, loyalty, and perseverance.

## FINDINGS

The 2013 Alabama Skills Gap Study results indicated that the top five soft skills gaps were: attendance, following directions, time management, critical thinking, and communication. For the study, researchers polled 6,926 Alabama employers in the utilities, construction, and manufacturing industries. The study’s findings noted that soft skills training would be even more vital than occupational and educational training to improving the workforce.<sup>6</sup>



Source: Alabama Department of Labor – Labor Market Information Division 2013 Skills Gap Survey

In Dothan, Alabama, a survey was conducted among 106 companies with a total of 495 responses. They listed what they considered deficits in employability skills. The top five were attendance, critical thinking, following directions, communication, and being drug free.<sup>7</sup> This study is almost identical to the Alabama Skills Gap Study. Reports from the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), National Association of State Directors of Career Technical



Education (CTE) Consortium, and the Partnership of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (P21) found that employers want to hire workers with the “4 C’s”: critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication, and collaboration. Nationally representative surveys in the United States show that over half of business CEOs and manufacturers have problems finding workers with the skills needed to have success in the workplace. Manufacturers state that the number one insufficiency is problem solving.<sup>8</sup> Since 1980, research shows that “all of the job growth in the United States has been in occupations that require high social skills, while there was an especially strong decline in jobs requiring high math, but low social skills”.<sup>9</sup>

## **PROGRAMS IN ALABAMA**

We did not have any criteria in regard to what type of schools/programs to research in Alabama. We searched for as many programs being offered as possible. We evaluated the programs appearing to be most successful, and incorporated those best practices into our findings and solutions.

### **West Alabama Educator Workforce Academy**

In 2016, via the passage of new legislation, Alabama Works was created. Later, West Alabama Works (WAW) was created under the Alabama Works umbrella. WAW covers all Alabama counties in Region 3, which includes Tuscaloosa, Hale, Green, Bibb, Pickens, Marengo, Sumter and Lamar counties. In 2017, WAW launched a program called “The Educator Workforce Academy.” The program was the result of a partnership between WAW and local school systems with the goal of developing a workforce and leadership academy. The aim of the program is to increase the workforce potential for K-12 students in West Alabama. Specifically, the goal of the program is to provide the skills and resources to participants to fill the thousands of jobs in Alabama that do not require a four year degree. The Academy aims to familiarize educators to the world of business and industry. The Academy is composed of two “Groups”, which help educators learn about Region 3 workforce needs. Each of the Groups meet four times per year and participants involved in the program get an opportunity to visit employers/entities in the state. Some of those employers include Brookwood Workforce Center, industries such as Mercedes-Benz, ZF Chassis Systems, and ARD Logistics. Also, teachers involved in the program receive a Professional Learning Unit (PLU) for being involved in the program. During the program,

teachers learn specific technical and soft skills that employers seek. The skills include following employer directions and consistent job attendance. Teachers then take that knowledge back to their school districts and integrate it into the curriculum in elementary, middle, and high school courses so that the skills can be introduced to students. The program has been deemed a success and has won accolades. On April 24, 2019, the program won the Governor's Award for Overall Best Regional Workforce Council at the Alabama Works statewide conference in Birmingham. Sandra Aldridge, who is a teacher in the Tuscaloosa City School district, stated, "We need this academy to be a partnership of how we can work together collaboratively to prepare our students for careers and the workforce, but when the students can see it in action, it is so much more powerful. Students need to see the workforce come to their school as well as visit the various workforce companies on field trips. Seeing and experiencing is far more powerful than just telling."<sup>10</sup>Alabama High School Graduation requirements include one credit hour of career preparedness. Introducing a program like this during that hour could be very beneficial to students learning vital soft skills. <sup>11-12</sup>

### **Instructor Field Trips – Butler County Schools**

In view of the current burgeoning financial period in Alabama, some areas of the state have a shortage of personnel that employers see as suitable to hire. To combat this trend, in April 2019, some Butler County School instructors took a field trip by bus to visit local employers to see what more could be done in their classrooms to prepare their students for life after high school, and to initiate a culture change in the way students are being prepared. What the teachers learned from local employers was ubiquitous. The companies visited cited things such as maturity issues, arriving to work as scheduled, and time management as common problems for young adults entering the workforce. Because of these shortcomings, one Butler County employer prefers not to hire any person under the age of 25. During this field trip and understanding the fact that parents cannot teach their children everything, one Butler County teacher saw the field trip as a practical reason to expand her lessons in class to include soft skills instruction and plans to do so going forward. According to Butler County School Superintendent Dr. John Strycker, the field trips will be expanded on a voluntary basis to not only include all 187 teachers in the county, but also

to support staff and administration, so all will be involved in knowing what employers are both looking for and see as issues as it relates to potential new hires.<sup>13</sup>

## Ready to Work Program

The Alabama Ready to Work Program (RTW) is a career readiness program that provides its participants with basic training on entry level workplace skills. Administered by Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT), RTW is operated through the Alabama Community College System. The program focuses on teaching students in the areas of career preparedness, work ethic, and soft skills. The 40-60 hour course is taught at local Alabama Community College

System campuses and satellite sites. As of now, there is a total of 75 site locations where services are offered, through 22 institutions. RTW is available to any individual seeking employment who possesses a high school diploma or GED. Job pursuers wishing to enter or re-enter the workforce have the opportunity to gain workforce preparedness and valuable employability skills training through the program. In addition, RTW is provided at no cost to the participant. A survey was taken by Southeast Alabama Works, the regional workforce council in the Dothan area, from students currently enrolled in the RTW program at Wallace Community College, as to how they ranked soft skills as they relate

to employment. The results varied with millennial aged students in the class saying that work ethic, following instructions, and things such as being reliable are the most important soft skills to have. Older participants ranked being drug free and punctuality as being strengths most employers would find necessary for an applicant to have aptitude for prior to employment. The

|                                   |   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Be Drug Free                      | Positive attitude   | <b>Soft Skills Game</b><br>Rank the Soft Skills from<br><b>1 – Most Important</b><br>to<br><b>6 – Least Important</b> |
| Show up to work on time or at all | Follow Instructions, Regulations, and Rules               |   |
| Great work ethic                  | Respectful, Responsible, Reliable, Resource, and Resolute |   |

From left to right: The first two columns are rankings from the older generation. The last two columns are from millenials.

## Results!

|                     |   |   |   |   |
|---------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Great Work Ethic    | 3 | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| 5R's                | 6 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Positive Attitude   | 4 | 6 | 5 | 5 |
| Drug Free           | 1 | 1 | 6 | 6 |
| Follow Instructions | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Work on Time        | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 |

Graph courtesy of Southeast Alabama Works, Dothan, AL

workplace environment of the program allows trainees to learn entry level communication skills, aptitude for problem-solving strategies, structured decision-making ability, teamwork prowess, time management practices, and dexterity in conflict resolution. RTW's curriculum also includes the area of career exploration and proper workplace ethics & behaviors, among other things. Upon graduation, participants will receive credentials of the Alabama Certified Worker Certificate and the National Career Readiness Certificate. Measured by skills employers believe are critical to long term job success, these certifications are issued after the student achieves a 95 percent attendance and punctuality rate, work ethic and organizational skills attainment, and skills achievement in problem-solving and workplace behaviors among other measures the student must attain. Lastly, the participant must earn a score of 3 or above on three Work Keys assessments. These assessments test skills in applied mathematics, reading, and locating information that have been determined to be required for more than 85% of all potential jobs.<sup>14-</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Seeing the possible need to expand the RTW program into Alabama high schools, in the fall of 2017, curriculum was updated to begin implementation of the "High School Direct Ready to Work" pilot program. The target audience of this program is high school students who desire to enter the workforce closely upon graduation. Along with earning the same certifications mentioned for the community college program, the high school students who complete the class will earn a tuition waiver, which can be applied towards one course at an Alabama Community College. To be eligible for the program, the Local Education Agencies (LEA) must agree to certain stipulations, part of which includes a proposal as to how they plan on implementing the RTW program at their respective high schools. The LEA also provides a full-time certified teacher as the RTW trainer.<sup>18</sup> The RTW program has already been implemented at Central High School in Tuscaloosa, has been expanded to more than 15 schools in West Alabama, and has also spread to multiple schools in the Birmingham metro area and further. The first six weeks for enrolled students in the semester long course originates with AIDT's Ready To Work soft skills training, problem-solving, and various work readiness skills training. In totality, the RTW programs have proven to be successful, with a job placement percentage of close to 90%.<sup>19</sup> When contacted, state education personnel stated a definite tracking list is currently being compiled of exactly

how many schools across Alabama are participating in the program. However, they did verify that over 20 additional high schools are being added for the upcoming 2019-2020 school year.<sup>17</sup>

### **Dothan City Schools**

Dothan City Schools offers a job fair for seniors. The job fair gives seniors an opportunity to gain summer jobs and possibly full-time employment after they graduate. Students may also be asked to interview onsite the day after the job fair. Prior to the job fair, students will prepare a resume and practice interviewing. This gives the students the opportunity to become comfortable with the process prior to the job fair.

### **WeeCat Industries**

A skilled workforce is in demand now more than ever and industry leaders are requesting that students be educated on employability skills before entering high school. One such program that teaches students employability skills at an early age is the WeeCat Industries in Enterprise City School System, located in Enterprise, Alabama. The Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (2013) is embedded in the WeeCat Industries program for special education and general education students ages three and four. The Enterprise City Schools Special Projects Center determined that the preschool environment was perfect for teaching employability skills after review of workforce readiness among students. This program offers a simulated workplace with live work for students in the daily curriculum. The program began after Deborah Owens, Special Education Teacher and WeeCat Industries President, began to identify ways to provide an engaging and interactive learning environment for her pre-kindergarten students. Addressing the varying cognitive skills and motor skills for her students in the development and implementation of a simulated workplace is achieved through WeeCat Industries. Roughly fifty percent of the students in the pre-kindergarten class have special educational needs. The Alabama Simulated Workplace Manual (2015) was used as a guide for developing and implementing WeeCat Industries in collaboration with school and district personnel. In addition to this manual, there are nine areas of development Ms. Owens wanted to incorporate for her pre-kindergarten students. As outlined in the Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (2013), the nine areas of development are: Approaches to Learning, Language and Literacy, Mathematics, Science, Creative Arts, Technology, Social and Emotional Development,

Physical Development, and Health and Daily Living. The pre-kindergarten employees of WeeCat Industries are put in positions that challenge them and also help them to experience success in developmental areas. Position titles include: Quality Control Inspector, Assembly Line Operator, Job Foreman, Delivery Team, Clean Up and Set Up Crew, Inventory Procurement Specialist and Store Clerk. WeeCat bucks are earned as payment for jobs well done and completed tasks and can be used to purchase items in the WeeCat Industries Company Store at the end of each work week. When students go above and beyond, they can earn bonuses. Through this, the fundamentals of addition and subtraction are taught to the students. Employees of WeeCat Industries are required to wear identification badges at all times and are to clock in and out using their assigned employee numbers. Through this program, students are exposed to the use of fine motor skills, number recognition and memory recall. Employee numbers are from the pin numbers assigned through the Child Nutrition Program and students use their numbers to purchase breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria. The pin numbers will remain the same as long as the child remains enrolled in the Enterprise City Schools. On the first day of work, procedures and safety policies are addressed with the students. WeeCat Industries emphasizes teamwork and that individual differences makes the team strong. Their success is due to the genuine desire for all students to be successful.<sup>20</sup>

### **Montgomery Job Corps**

Job Corps is an educational and career technical training program that is administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, whose primary goal is to teach young adults employability skills. Part of the curriculum for its students is called Career Success Standards (CSS). The courses offered by Job Corps involve participants learning workplace relationships and ethics, communication and interpersonal skills, personal growth and development, as well as teaching students how to live independently. The students also hold mock interviews, where professional dress and timeliness is calculated as a barometer of success.<sup>21</sup> According to Jerry Morris, Business Community Manager of Montgomery Job Corps, the Montgomery Job Corps program houses up to 258 students. The program also has a dual enrollment agreement with Montgomery Public Schools and Lowndes County Schools, where high school seniors have the opportunity to participate in the program.

## **Clanton Intermediate School**

Clanton Intermediate School's (CIS) Character Education program is implemented by the principal during the daily morning announcements over the intercom. The principal addresses character education to the entire school at the same time; this allows each student the equal opportunity to receive the same level of teaching. Before the school year starts, the school develops a schedule of words or topics to focus on throughout the year. According to CIS's schedule for the 2018-2019 school year, words and topics include: accountability, integrity, conflict resolution, cooperation, attitude, and careers, amongst others. The principal discusses these words and topics in detail and gives a "word for the day" for the students to remember. The teachers are then required to touch on this word of the day throughout the school day. The principal will also quiz students and teachers throughout the day, asking them if they remember the word of the day.

## **Career Coaches**

The Career Coaches Initiative is a program implemented in Alabama in response to the skills gap crisis. At the time this program was implemented, state officials were concerned about the lack of skilled workers for jobs, along with an aging work force at a time when unemployment rates were high. This program was designed to inform youth about different career opportunities, many of which they did not even know existed, and help them attain the skills needed for careers they become passionate about. When the program was first implemented, Career Coaches connected with thousands of students within the first nine months alone. Through this initiative, school counselors match students with careers that fit their interests. Coaches work with the students to expose them to new career options and help them understand sixteen career clusters. Students are then connected with business and industry contacts, which allows students to network. There is a common concern among employers with the lack of soft skills in employee candidates. The millennial generation lacks strong interpersonal and communication skills, but they rely heavily on their technology; however, these soft skills are very important. Career Coaches help students develop the skills employers are looking for, and help students understand the importance of being a reliable worker, and that finishing high school will create more career opportunities for them.<sup>22</sup> In May of 2018, Governor Kay Ivey announced a new state initiative

known as the Success Plus Campaign. The ambitious plan was partly created to address the needs of high school graduates as they enter the workforce. The plan, as written, does not provide new funding, but thoroughly addresses a goal of adding jobs for 500,000 state citizens with at least high school credentials by 2025, while also stressing the need for students to be prepared for the workforce through educational opportunities. Part of the nine-month research in drafting the plan involved stakeholders from various organizations participating in listening sessions and offering feedback. From these listening sessions, it was determined that the lack of soft skills was a barrier to both obtaining post-secondary education and building a strong workforce, particularly as it pertains to young adults. In addition, the stakeholders found that career coaches are strengths in relation to student college and career preparedness, and concluded that awareness of these coaches needs to be amplified and the number of coaches should be increased significantly.<sup>23-24</sup>

### **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act**

Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Rehabilitation Services of Alabama was charged with a focus of providing pre-employment transition services to all high school students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Mary Helen Little was tasked with leading this endeavor. She met with various vocation rehabilitation counselors within the state school system and developed a plan to meet the school's needs and their students' needs. Ms. Little has observed that not all kids are being taught life skills at home. She believes that every child needs a plan, but not every child will go to college, and life skills are necessary for students to be successful in the workplace. "Developing Skills for Success" is the program established to aid disabled students in becoming successful in the workforce. The program emphasizes life skills such as positive first impressions, effective communication, conflict management, resume development, and interviewing skills. The class on effective communication includes verbal, non-verbal and written communication, and the importance of each. The class on conflict management/resolution involves discussing the value of resolving differences with coworkers and employers and reviewing what is the best action to take to resolve issues in the workplace, with the use of role-play to work through workplace scenarios. Diana McCraney from G.W. Long High School states that, as a result of this program, "my students have successfully interviewed



and obtained jobs.” Jennifer Robinson with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services states that students “have reported they have been hired because of what they learned” in this program, and many have asked for individually based help.

## **PROGRAMS OUTSIDE OF ALABAMA**

We wanted to look at other schools/programs outside of Alabama to see if we could take best practices from each successful program, and incorporate them into a plan for Alabama schools. We initially wanted to look at areas of similar demographics and neighboring states, but we expanded our search to be able to evaluate as many options as possible.

### **Fort Wayne, Indiana**

Fort Wayne, Indiana has a broad Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program, which encompasses about 40 different classes; however, they are not all offered at every school. One of the courses offered is “Life 101”, otherwise known as Adult Roles and Responsibilities, as named by the state.<sup>25</sup> This course uses the book “*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*”, by Sean Covey. This class addresses topics such as social skills, time management, and goal setting, among others. Students have had good experiences in the different FCS courses, as some of these topics may not be taught at home. Several students that have taken these courses have had several job offers. As of July 1, 2019, each school in Indiana implemented interdisciplinary employability skills standards. The standards are based on the National Employability Skill Standards from the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), the Indiana Department of Workforce Development’s Employability Skills Benchmarks, the Governor’s Work Ethic Certificate, the Indiana Department of Education’s Social-Emotional Learning Competencies, and approved by the State board in the school’s curriculum.<sup>26</sup> They are to begin introducing basic career awareness in Kindergarten and continue through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Indiana’s Employability Skills Standards are working to prepare students for today’s changing workforce. Students will work within the four different areas: Mindsets, Work Ethic, Learning Strategies, and Social and Emotional Skills. Each of these areas are taught differently, as the curriculum is divided up into “bands”. These bands are grades: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-10, and 11-12. Each band implements the four areas listed above, but in different ways to be able to relate to a child at any age. The Mindsets (M) area establishes a set of attitudes impacting self-growth. The course focuses on lifelong learning and self-

confidence, helping students to demonstrate a willingness to work and learn, apply new knowledge, and be confident enough in their ability to succeed and assert themselves when necessary. The Work Ethic (WE) area focuses on a set of values centered on the importance of doing work and to have a desire to work hard. The course focuses on self-discipline, independence, perseverance, time management and organization, adaptability, integrity, and professionalism. Students will learn to exhibit self-control and be able to follow rules with little direction, be able to fulfill expectations with little supervision, demonstrate endurance, and have the ability to complete tasks. Students will also need to be able to plan and organize long-term and short-term goals, while being able to balance home, school, and extracurricular activities. Students should show that they can adapt to changing situations, act in a responsible and honest manner, and exhibit skills and behaviors appropriate for school and work environments. The Learning Strategies (LS) area teaches students processes and tactics to assist in thinking, remembering, and learning. It teaches effective communication, aptitude awareness, decision-making, initiative, attention to detail, and problem-solving. Students will be able to apply communication skills to persuasively express ideas and messages to others, specific to the environment they are in. Students will be able to identify interests in their coursework to lead them to a potential career path and use critical thinking skills to make informed decisions based on options, rewards, risks, limits, and goals. Students will be self-motivated to learn and complete work, achieve thoroughness and accuracy when completing a task, and apply critical and creative thinking to solve problems. The last area, Social and Emotional Skills (SE), discusses how knowledge, attitudes, and the skills are necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This area teaches regulation, connection, and collaboration through teaching students to recognize and manage their emotions, work well with others when in a team, and being able to show the ability to network with others through social awareness and cultural sensitivity.<sup>27</sup> Due to the fact that these standards are just now being implemented, it will be several years before Indiana will be able to tell if this new program will have good, solid benefits in the lives of their students.

## GeorgiaBEST Program

Georgia developed a program called GeorgiaBEST High School. Administered by the Georgia Department of Labor through a partnership with the University of North Georgia, it is designed to address the lack of employability skills, soft skills, and work ethic in today's workforce. GeorgiaBEST High School was created by Georgia Department of Labor Commissioner, Mark Butler, shortly after he took office in 2011, and is free to individuals in the State of Georgia. Originally named Business Ethics Student Training, the program was created in response to a growing concern of the state's employers regarding its future workforce, which is their students. The small initiative began in just 20 high schools across the state and was designed to teach students some of the top soft skills for success in the workforce. The soft skills of focus included punctuality, teamwork, attitude, and communication to name a few. The program experienced rapid growth and expansion. In the process, it was determined that soft skills development was needed before students reach high school. Thus, in 2013, GeorgiaBEST Middle School was launched. GeorgiaBEST Middle School introduced students to the soft skills needed not only to be successful in the work force but also in high school. This new program focused on the same soft skills as the original GeorgiaBEST, but taught in an age appropriate manner. Additionally, the program focused on sparking ideas and conversation on career exploration. In 2014, the GeorgiaBEST Advisory Council, comprised of teachers and administrators from across the state, was formed. The council volunteers their time to ensure the continued success of this program by providing feedback and guidance on the GeorgiaBEST program. Also in 2014, the Department of Labor added yet another program to its platform called GeorgiaBEST Adult Education. This newly added program mirrored the curriculum in GeorgiaBEST High School, but was offered to out-of-school youth working to obtain their GED diploma. This program was offered through Technical Colleges throughout the State of Georgia. In 2016 and 2017, the Georgia Department of Labor conducted a survey including questions on employee turnover, current challenges with workers, and familiarity with the GeorgiaBEST program. Over 1,100 employer respondents provided feedback. Based on this input, the program experienced significant enhancements with even more content added to meet requests from employers wanting more well-rounded incoming employees, educators wanting curriculum for all grade levels (Pre-K through Post-

Secondary), correctional facilities who desired training for the citizens that were returning to society, faith-based organizations wanting to improve the lives of those in their communities, and unemployed individuals and concerned parents wanting to improve their own skills as well as that of their children. “We learned that 69 percent of all first-time workers lose their jobs for lack of soft skills, so we developed a 10-week soft skills certificate curriculum to teach what we call 'employability skills' ” said Cindy Morley, GeorgiaBEST director.<sup>28</sup> From the survey, a couple of key enhancements were born. First, the name, GeorgiaBEST, now stands for Business Employability Skills Training to reflect terminology currently in use. Next, it was determined the best approach to address the employer-identified lack of employability skills should be three-pronged; GeorgiaBEST@School (for Pre-K through Post-Secondary classrooms), GeorgiaBEST@Work (facilitated training for those who are currently in the workforce), and GeorgiaBEST@Home (for parents who want to work on employability skills with their employment-aged children, for individuals who want to brush up on their own skills, or for faith-based organizations or civic groups who wish to conduct training sessions within their communities.) While students participating in GeorgiaBEST@School and GeorgiaBEST@Work learn by way of activities and discussion in a classroom setting, GeorgiaBEST@Home can be a facilitator-led or self-directed study. But, with each approach, the training includes videos and activities, including ethical choice scenarios, to stimulate group discussion and encourage an examination of their own morals and values with an overall goal to create a changed behavior. For the purpose of this research paper, our focus is primarily on the school aspect of the program. GeorgiaBEST@School is designed to provide training that facilitates discussion in the classroom. The goal of this program is to provide age appropriate activities for ALL grade levels by rewarding appropriate behavior and skills in order to prepare students for the workplace, for higher education, and for life. Lesson plans for this program are grouped as follows: Pre-K through 1st grade, 2nd through 5th grade, 6th through 8th grade, 9th grade, 10th grade, 11th grade, 12th grade, Adult Education/GED, and Post-Secondary. GeorgiaBEST@School utilizes a grading rubric and participant evaluation that more closely resembles how employees are evaluated in the workplace. This is a behavior-based scale where the participants can be evaluated on the frequency of the behaviors being observed. This frequency observation tool can be used by

teachers, employers, correctional facilities, non-profits, etc. Additionally, Career Portfolio and Capstone Project elements were removed from the 2018 College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI.) While these are certainly valuable indicators of workforce preparedness, GeorgiaBEST@School emphasizes other attributes, competencies, and skills that employers have specifically requested. There are three components to the GeorgiaBEST program: Personal Characteristics, Interactions with Others, and Employer Expectations. Each component contains attributes, competencies, and skills based on the input received from the 1,100 employer survey conducted across the state of Georgia. Here is how the program is structured: Personal Characteristics addresses areas such as attitude, initiative, flexibility, organization, discipline, and integrity; Interactions with Others addresses areas such as respect, effective communication, and teamwork; Employer Expectation addresses areas such as attendance and punctuality, customer service, critical thinking and problem-solving, technology usage and social media ethics, professionalism, and adherence to policy. The GeorgiaBEST program has helped many across the State of Georgia in developing and/or honing their soft skills. Kaylynn Samples, a Chestatee High School graduate who participated in GeorgiaBEST during her senior year, had this to say about the program, “I was lucky that my high school offered work-based learning experiences, as well as the GeorgiaBEST program; I took advantage of both. GeorgiaBEST is a great program that teaches personal attributes that enhance an individual’s interactions, job performance and career prospects for the future. It helped prepare me to face tomorrow with a confident and committed attitude that will propel me to excellence.”<sup>28</sup> The highest level of certification a student can earn in the program is called GeorgiaBEST Elite Certification. Students study all 10 standards addressing soft skills needed to succeed in the workforce as included in the GeorgiaBEST Module. Students are assessed on their comprehension and demonstration of the soft skills needed to succeed by teachers. All students create a complete portfolio demonstrating their mastery of key workplace skills through completion of exercises and projects. Students will also complete a senior project, capstone, or a work internship. At Appling County High School (ACHS), GeorgiaBEST training modules are embedded in their 9th Grade guidance program, SOAR, for all ACHS students. In their 11th and 12th grade year, students who participate in the Work-Based Learning (WBL) program create a GeorgiaBEST portfolio and complete their work

internship through the WBL program. Students who earn the required number of points, meet all portfolio standards, and have demonstrated good work ethics in school (attendance, punctuality, discipline) and on the job, will earn their GeorgiaBEST Elite certificate. Today, the program is stronger than ever, having grown from 20 to over 200 high schools across Georgia participating in GeorgiaBEST. This program is most popular among juniors and seniors, but also with some sophomores and freshmen. GeorgiaBEST is embedded in other classes instead of being taught as an individual course. The program is flexible, allowing each high school to decide how best to embed the curriculum into existing classes. Some of the key contributors and stakeholders in the GeorgiaBEST program include: Georgia Department of Labor, Georgia Department of Education, University of North Georgia's BB&T Center for Ethical Leadership (who assisted with the development of the original GeorgiaBEST High School Teacher's Manual and offered supplemental classroom material for the program), Georgia Northwestern Technical College (who assisted in the development and implementation of GeorgiaBEST Adult Education), Technical College System of Georgia (who assisted in embedding GeorgiaBEST Adult Education in Adult Education/GED programs throughout the state), Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice, the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, Great Promise Partnership, and the many business owners who provided input, which was the catalyst for improvements that serve as the foundation of the GeorgiaBEST program across the State of Georgia.<sup>29</sup>

### **Workforce and Employability Skills Program (WESP) – State of Maryland**

The Maryland GEAR UP Workforce and Employability Skills Program (WESP) is a federally funded project which partly focuses on teaching its participants sharpening of their soft skills. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) partnered together to apply for the GEAR UP grant. Through this grant, WESP is provided as a part of GEAR UP. Through a different grant, Maryland has a College Preparation Intervention Program, which is more focused on academics. However, WESP covers topics such as leadership development and workforce opportunities to high school students. Facilitated by MHEC, WESP is initiated through a Request for Proposal (RFP), which is solicited to select two or four year institutions of higher learning by MHEC. The institution then submits a proposal that must be approved by MHEC. The institution works with a district coordinator,

school district administrators, and high school principals to outline which services will be provided to the students. To hold everyone involved accountable, the proposal submitted delivers a synopsis or needs assessment, which has been agreed upon by the school district and high school principals, as to what will be provided to students. The two or four year institutions provide their own staff who go into the schools, providing direct service to the students. Part of the activities the institutions provide the students is a Soft Skills Workshop. This workshop encompasses Communication Workshops, Collaboration and Teamwork Workshops, and Self-Management and Advocacy Workshops. Some of the things the Communication workshop does is instruct students on oral presentations, public speaking, customer service interactions, and professional writing of memos and reports. The Collaboration and Teamwork Workshop, among other things, focuses on the components of understanding different communication preferences, working as an individual and as a team member, and learning how to apply teamwork skills in various situations the student may encounter in a real-world environment. Lastly, there is a self-management and advocacy workshop included in the Soft Skills Workshop. This workshop instructs its participants on the importance of managing time, coordinating tasks, adapting to and generating new solutions, timelines, and showing initiative, to name a few. Aside from these soft skills workshops, WESP offers Job Exploration Counseling and Experiential Learning, which support teaching students independent living skills. Lastly, a component of WESP, which is offered by some of the institutions to participants, is Workplace Readiness Training and Youth Employment. It allows students to work away from their high school campus. Through the grant, transportation is provided for the student to get to and from their worksite location. Maryland currently has approximately 250 high school students participating in WESP. These students are spread out over 3 different school districts, which include Baltimore City, Dorchester, and Wicomico counties. The program is open to every student who is enrolled in a GEAR Up cohort school district; however, the school district and the project coordinator at the institution of higher learning is allowed flexibility as to how to utilize the program. For example, some schools may see the need to only provide the program to a certain age or grade level. Conversely, other districts may feel it is best to offer the program to male students exclusively, providing the opportunity for them to be equipped with the skills taught upon graduation. According to Kendall

Cook, MHEC's GEAR UP/CPIP Coordinator, "While it is the goal of MHEC to have as many high school students as possible enter postsecondary education, the three school districts involved and supported by the U.S. Department of Education's GEAR UP program represent a diverse student body. Each GEAR UP school district defines its own college and career readiness goals. Some may guide students to enter a two-year or four-year institution, while others may emphasize a career, technical, or vocational education. Therefore, the path that each student takes to achieve educational success after graduating high school may include postsecondary training or enrolling in a higher education institution." This diversity also brings varying needs among school districts. With some of the schools requiring a more hands on approach, meaning more workshops and contact hours with students, others may simply need to advise the students on completing the process of applying for college. As previously stated, WESP is funded completely through the GEAR UP federal grant. However, part of the federal grant is matched by a state grant. The institutions of higher learning pay 25% of the state grant to ensure the state meets their match to the federal funds. For the current WESP project period of October 5, 2018 to October 4, 2019, each institution has been awarded up to \$60,000. The amount of funds will vary per project period, as MHEC looks to issue another RFP in August 2019, to provide continuity in services. The success of WESP is determined through a project evaluation, with results submitted by the institutions included in interim and final reports. These reports provide quantitative and qualitative data as to how the program met its objectives as submitted in their original proposal. Interim report data has not yet been published, but according to Mr. Cook, participating students have shown an increase in self-esteem, being more connected to college and career readiness goals, and increased parental engagement. Final reports from the institutions are due January 2020, at which time they can be examined publicly through MHEC. However, the institutions of higher learning presently have specific data as a measure of how successful WESP has been on a weekly or monthly basis.<sup>30</sup>

## **Guide for Life Arkansas**

The G.U.I.D.E. for Life program is a program developed by the Arkansas Department of Education. The program is implemented as part of students daily school activities. The program targets K-12 students and is designed to address five guiding principles that participants develop



proficiency in to utilize in the workforce. The skills that comprise the G.U.I.D.E. acronym are: Growth (manage yourself), Understanding (know yourself), Interaction (build relationships), Decisions (make responsible choices), and Empathy (be aware of others). Each of the principles has subsets that are covered under them. For example, the Understanding (U) principle teaches students how to develop critical thinking skills. Specifically, it aims to do that by encouraging students to be curious and inquisitive. Each grade level teaches the goals in a different way. For example, for K-2 students, critical thinking is taught on a very basic level. Students learn to identify people, places, and other resources to go to for help; for example, parents, relatives, and school personnel. For young students, this critical thinking challenges them to identify proper help for dealing with issues. Conversely, grade 12 students are given “Global Problems” they have to address. Students are given “resources”, amounts of fictional money, administrative personnel, etc., to deal with the problem. The exercise teaches students to analyze and address situations from all angles. The Interaction (I) principle teaches communication skills to students through role playing exercises that cover multiple situations such as job interviews and conflict resolution.<sup>31-32</sup>

## **Leader in Me**

Leader in Me (LiM) was originally developed by a principal and teachers who wanted to teach their students life skills along with academics. They believed leadership, responsibility, accountability, problem-solving, adaptability, and social-emotional skills were just as important as math and reading. The program was initially started by a principal who wanted to turn around her failing elementary school. This principal, Mauriel Summers, at A.B. Combs Leadership Magnet Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina, identified leadership as her theme based on community feedback. She decided to utilize Baldrige quality tools, FranklinCovey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*®, and several other educational best practices in developing and implementing a leadership model for her school. A significant turnaround was seen in a few years, and her school was named the #1 Magnet School in America. The school reported academic achievement, increased enrollment, soaring parent and teacher satisfaction, and a higher level of student self-confidence. Several schools noticed the success and started to implement these practices in their own schools, seeing similar success. Based on demand from

Summers and other principals and teachers who were intrigued by the success of A.B. Combs, Franklin Covey codified Summers' process, creating *Leader in Me* so that other schools could implement the same leadership model and achieve similar results. LiM joins students, staff, and families around a common goal to prepare students with college, career, and life-readiness skills that are essential to flourish in today's world. These skills include, but are not limited to, critical thinking, self-discipline, communication, teamwork, and time management. LiM does not just focus on academics alone, but also includes a rounded approach to education, redefining how schools measure success. This approach gives educators the tools to teach leadership, help them create a culture of student empowerment, and allow them to parallel a successful academic program. LiM is in many schools in over 50 countries around the globe. All of these schools share a vision and purpose to empower students to become leaders that are equipped with the life skills essential to be successful in a global economy. In implementing this program, each grade level addresses the relevant priorities that are exclusive to the respective school environment. In elementary school, LiM establishes a whole-child mindset with a belief that each and every child has genius and the potential to become a leader. In middle school, an environment is created aimed at social-emotional learning to help each student build confidence and discover their true potential. In high school, a culture led by students encouraged to find their voice is created. Here they develop the critical skills needed for college, career, and life. Researchers of the LiM Program recommended that it is a way to "help educators in better preparing students to be responsible individuals who use their Leadership skills to positively impact their own learning and school and community cultures". Educators continue to offer feedback on best practices to allow for continuous improvement and enhancement of the process, ensuring generations of students will experience exceptional results.<sup>33</sup>

### **Ron Clark Academy**

The Ron Clark Academy (RCA) is a highly-acclaimed, nonprofit middle school located in Southeast Atlanta that has received recognition for its success in educating students with academic rigor, passion, and creativity, balanced by a strict code of discipline. Fifth through eighth grade students represent various socio-economic and academic backgrounds and communities from across the metro region. RCA is a demonstration school, where visiting educators engage in a vibrant

professional development experience by observing best practices in action before participating in hands-on workshops. In the past nine years, more than 38,000 superintendents, district level administrators, and teachers from 42 states and 22 countries have participated in the RCA Experience to learn better ways to engage students, promote academic rigor, and create a climate and culture that promotes success. The school is divided into four “Houses” to create unique communities to encourage positive character traits and to promote student engagement. These houses include Altruismo (Givers), Amistad (Friendship), Isibindi (Courage), and Rêveur (Dreamers). Students are chosen to be members of each House at random. Houses earn points for positive behaviors, or through other designated criteria that an educator deems worthy, and each House is a team that works together to collect points. At the end of the week, points are tallied and are revealed at House Meetings. The school also promotes communication skills by hosting the Amazing Shake National Competition. The Amazing Shake is a competition that places an emphasis on teaching student’s manners, discipline, respect, and professional conduct. Prior to the competition, students learn the nuances of professional human interaction as they are taught skills such as how to give a proper handshake, how to “work a room”, how to give a successful interview, and how to remain composed under pressure. The goal is to prepare our students so that they are able to present themselves exceptionally well for opportunities today, as well as those that will come in the future.<sup>34</sup> Clanton Alabama’s Intermediate School has participated in the RCA Experience and have implemented many of their practices in their own school. The House System was seen to be a huge success in encouraging student involvement and positive character traits. The school also held its own handshake competition. Students were taught how to give a proper handshake and how to respectfully communicate with another person. They then held a competition in which the students were put in a room with volunteering adults who judged them on their verbal and non-verbal communication skills. The winner was recognized at the end of the year awards ceremony.

### **Prepare Rhode Island (PrepareRI)**

PrepareRI is an initiative to prepare all Rhode Island youth with the skills they need for jobs that pay. It was developed through a partnership between the Rhode Island government, private industry leaders, the public education system, universities, and non-profit organizations across

the state as a response to the state's anticipated future workforce shortage. The goal of PrepareRI is that, by 2020, "all career pathway programs will be aligned to Rhode Island's high-demand career fields; all high school students will have access to a work-based learning experience, such as an internship in a relevant career field; all students, starting no later than middle school, will have career exploration opportunities and individualized learning plans based on their unique strengths and interests; over half of high school students will participate in career and technical education (CTE)."<sup>35</sup> PrepareRI was first introduced in 2016, when the state was awarded a New Skills for Youth grant from JPMorgan Chase and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The internship program was intended to address apprehensions that students might experience, as well as communication and other workplace etiquette issues that can arise when teenagers and young adults first enter the professional world. There is no data available at this time to evaluate the success of PrepareRI, but a baseline report was established in 2018 using 2017 data.

### **Skills to Pay the Bills**

Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success is a curriculum developed by The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). The program is focused on teaching "soft" or workforce readiness skills to youth, including youth with disabilities. The program was created for youth development acting as an introduction to workplace interpersonal and professional skills. The curriculum is targeted for youth ages 14 to 21 years of age, both in-school and out-of-school environments. The aim of the program was to prepare youth to be ready for the workforce. The program itself is available in PDF, hard-copy, and as a video series. The program features activities such as role playing that focuses on six key skill areas: communication, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem-solving and critical thinking, and professionalism. Regarding communication skills, the program teaches participants how to communicate to others and to interpret information received from others. As mentioned, the program uses various activities and role playing exercises to teach these skills. For example, one role playing exercise is called "What's Your Point?" The exercise is designed to teach students to be specific when giving and receiving information. During the exercise, one participant asks the other a series of questions each more specific than the last. The

other participant answers the questions in a vague manner. Then during the next round, the questions are vague and the answers are specific. After the exercise, the participants utilize journaling activities and group discussions to evaluate the exercise. They also talk about and discover how important it is to communicate with specifics to be understood. Over time, the students become adept at asking and giving specific information. For critical thinking skills, students participate in several exercises designed to help them evaluate information. One such exercise consists of one group of students reading prepared statements. The other group of students must evaluate whether those statements qualify as praise, feedback, or criticism. This exercise challenges students to think critically when evaluating comments and information provided by others. In 2012, when the program was launched, pilot programs were implemented in various parts of the country including Maryland, Florida, Washington D.C., Kentucky, Washington State, Connecticut, and Colorado. Select students were allowed to participate in the curriculum programs each day for five consecutive weeks. The program activities were led by a facilitator chosen from each of the local school districts. A survey was taken prior to the initiation of the pilot program and after to gauge its success. Pre-survey, teachers rated on a scale from 0 to 100 percent whether their students showed skill in or understood the following areas as following:

*Communication: 60%*

*Enthusiasm and Teamwork: 81%*

*Teamwork: 58%*

*Networking: 0%*

*Problem Solving and Critical Thinking: 50%*

At the conclusion of the five-week program, the teachers ranked their students as follows:

*Communication: 100% (40% increase)*

*Enthusiasm and Teamwork: 100% (19% increase)*

*Teamwork: 100% (42% increase)*

*Networking: 100% (100% increase)*

*Problem Solving & Critical Thinking: 100% (50% increase)*

The success of the program shows activities that are focused on soft skills can have a direct impact on increasing those skills.<sup>36-41</sup>

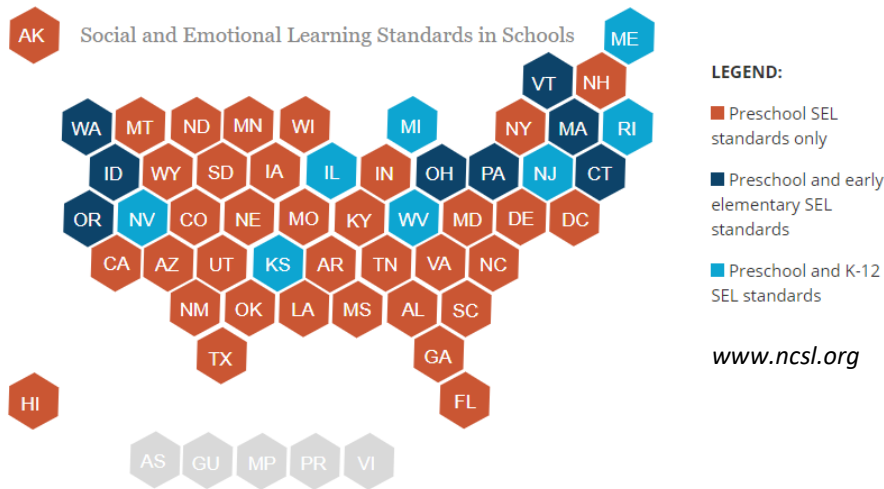
## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, we have several recommendations for implementing soft skills education in Alabama classrooms.

### **Infuse Soft Skills Early**

One recommendation is to infuse soft skills training early on within the curriculum. As Dr. Elisabeth Davis, Assistant State Superintendent of Student Learning with the State Department of Education stated, “There are many “one-shot” experiences that businesses and other organizations provide students, but there needs to be an ongoing learning experience for a lot of our students. When infused within the curriculum, especially using real world examples and hands-on learning, students realize how it affects them and will understand the importance of these soft skills better.” Problem-solving could easily be taught during Physical Education classes at any age through games and activities. One way that soft skills training can be infused is through social and emotional learning (SEL). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>42</sup> SEL teaches self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, self-awareness, and responsible decision making.<sup>43</sup> The topics taught meet many of the employability needs that have been identified by business leaders. The skills taught in SEL curricula have many benefits for children. For example, “kindergarteners with stronger social and emotional skills are more likely to graduate from high school and college and have stable, full-time employment and are less likely to commit crimes, be on public assistance, and have drug, alcohol, and mental problems”.<sup>44</sup> A national survey of teachers showed that 95% believed that social and emotional skills can be taught, 97% believed that SEL curricula will benefit children from any background, and 87% believed that SEL curricula will be a benefit in preparing students for the workforce.<sup>45</sup> It is vital that these soft skills are introduced as early as possible. When children reach age 4, the cortex,

which is responsible for thinking and perceiving, is twice as active as adults. This means that children's capacity to learn is at its greatest. Also, their very brain wiring can be solidified by early learning. Research has shown things that children learn at an early age tend to take root. For example, a study conducted at Brown University concluded that children's habits (routines, chores, etc.) are unlikely to change much after reaching the age of nine years old. This means that by the third grade habits are ingrained in children. Michael Phelps, a biophysicist at UCLA, stated: "If we teach our children early enough, it will affect the organization or 'wiring', of their brains". His comments echo the Brown University research findings that early learning, particularly in children, leads to stronger retention.<sup>46-48</sup> The WeeCat Pre-K program could be a blueprint for how to implement soft skills into classes. Infusing soft skills at an early age could prove to be beneficial to them, if they are not only incorporated early, but continued to be built upon each school year afterwards. SEL pays for itself in the long run. An analysis showed that on average, there was an \$11 return on investment for every dollar spent on the initial cost of the program.<sup>49</sup> "Given the evidence linking children's proficiency in social and emotional skills to their long-term outcomes in education, employment, and crime, and given the expenses involved in handling crime, unemployment, and other social problems, there is potential for quality SEL



programs to provide economic benefits".<sup>50</sup>

Currently, Alabama has SEL standards, but only for preschools. There are other states that continue the SEL standards, which go

beyond preschool. However, Alabama does not have learning goals that show what students should know and be able to do socially and emotionally. They have free-standing standards for character development, but they are not comprehensive and they do not develop SEL

systematically across grade levels.<sup>51</sup> The 1975 Code of Alabama does mandate that schools provide character education to all students for a period of time not less than ten minutes per day; however, in many schools, it is left up to each individual teacher, and the consistency could vary. Having the principle reach out to the school as a whole, will create more consistency in the information reaching the children.

### **Involve Local Businesses**

As the labor market tightens, businesses are on the hunt, looking to fill jobs with young people coming out of schools and colleges. While there has been a lot of talk about the demand for technical capabilities among this burgeoning pool of labor, employers complain that students lack fundamental skills such as being able to collaborate, communicate, think critically and interact effectively with coworkers. In response, some states have added requirements that schools teach these skills. States are adopting online curricula, or in some cases, developing their own programs from the ground up. But some education experts argue that too much of the burden for training people on the professional skills they need is falling on educators. For this training to be truly effective, they say, schools also need help from local industries to provide rigorous real-life workplace learning experiences. Programs like Prepare Rhode Island can offer an ideal way to get kids into the workplace, while sharing the responsibility for their training with employers, experts say.

### **Implement Career Success Standards**

We recommend that the Alabama Department of Education study the Career Success Standards (CSS) programs offered at Montgomery Job Corps. Because these CSS courses involve learning workplace relationships and ethics, communication and interpersonal skills, and personal growth and development, as well as prepare the student to live independently, schools should incorporate this into the curriculum for high school students. Alabama should also implement a policy which makes it mandatory for every public high school to have the Ready To Work program as part of its curriculum as an option for students entering the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Through this career readiness program, students are instructed in the areas of work ethic, career preparedness, and soft skills, and this is what employers are looking for.



## **Incorporate Workforce and Employability Skills Programs**

Alabama currently has 43 schools across 5 regions that participate in a federal GEAR UP program and are in GEAR UP Cohort school districts. Alabama should investigate infusing its own Workforce and Employability Skills Program (WESP) into GEAR UP.

## **Increase Career Coaches**

We recommend adding more career coaches, bringing them in beginning in the ninth grade, and having them work with each student through graduation. Informing high school students of many different career options, exposing them to different career environments to help them to find a career they are passionate about, and then working with a career coach to attain the technical and employability skills needed to be successful would make a positive impact on the student's academics and attendance, as well as on local business and industry. Businesses and local industry would benefit because the pool of applicants for available jobs would have the soft skills employers are looking for.

## **CONCLUSION**

Alabama's current education model is in line with that of the rest of the country, in that there is an emphasis on standardized testing. School districts and public school systems are under immense pressure to meet test standards or risk repercussions, such as state takeover or loss of funding. With such a focus on testing, incorporating soft skills training via additional classes is difficult. However, research indicates that college seniors simply are not prepared for the work force. Soft skills are incredibly important for anyone, but especially for students graduating high school. Incorporating our team recommendations will better prepare these students for the challenges they are certain to face once they finish high school and begin the essence of young adulthood. Whether it be immediate full-time or part-time employment upon graduation, beginning trade or vocational school, or simply applying for college, possessing soft skills will be essential to the student's success in the real world.

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