

# Evidence-based Characteristics of Effective K-12 Career Readiness Initiatives

“Education through occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method.” John Dewey. *Democracy in Education*. 1916

## **Lead Author**

*Steve Regur, EdD*

## **Contributing Writers, Editors, and Reviewers**

*Kathy Boyd*

*Julia Budd-Bredeke*

*Christine Cherry*

*Julie Escala*

*Kim Goodwin*

*Anna MacDonald*

**A**s school districts realign their work to meet expectations for career and

life readiness, a range of products and initiatives are emerging. How do districts make the right choice? What is the criteria for evaluating effective career readiness programs? What research should inform decisions?

There has been little to no formal experience or training for K-12 educators in the areas of career readiness skills, career counseling, and long term development of workforce readiness. Similarly, teacher preparation programs provide little or no formal training in teaching career readiness and promoting workforce skills in their credentialing programs. Many curriculums are disconnected from modern work expectations, rooted in a history of academy and cognitive skill training.

Contemporary supplemental programs and initiatives such as Social Emotional Learning (SEL) attempt to round off the “whole child” approach but tend to overlook the easy connection to discussing employable skills as part of their

implementation. Even “innovative” initiatives that focus on employable skills such as STEAM, coding, or entrepreneurship, still lack an overall approach to helping students

**Effective career readiness initiatives focus on developing personal identity and provide a sense-making process for mapping opportunities in the world of work**

understand their own career readiness in a broader sense. Students often experience a narrow scope of what opportunities exist and lack a sense-making tool to understand and access the diverse and constantly changing market of global opportunities available to them.

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Discussions and explorations of career options often happen as supplemental to the “core” offerings of a K-12 system. Most often, specific seminars, clubs, or smaller initiatives carry the weight of communicating “career readiness” and are typically reserved for secondary students. Such theme-based or work sector

based initiatives will benefit from an overall review of effective career readiness practices. This approach

**Even well designed programs and initiatives tend to lack a global focus**

also provides a narrow understanding of career readiness without a wider framework for students to develop their identity and then map their preferences to career opportunities. Effective initiatives focus on developing personal identity and providing a sense-making process for mapping opportunities in the world of work. Indeed, even well designed programs and initiatives tend to lack a global focus that highlights the increasingly interconnected, international, and expansive nature of modern the modern workplace.

Workforce readiness, career planning, and goal setting are often left to secondary schools as initiatives or other “programs” such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) or Regional Occupational Programs (ROP). Such work can be highly effective when integrated into the fabric of classroom and district culture. In fact,

there is evidence that career readiness can be a catalyst for change within K-12 settings when implemented successfully. Learning can take on a personalized and relevant experience

**Embedded and integrated designs appear to have a greater chance of taking root and outlast turnover in leadership and shifts in funding**

for all students when it focuses on their personal passions and interests. This paper

summarizes the research and provides a checklist to review the effectiveness of a scaleable K-12 career readiness initiative. To be clear, this work assumes a district has the goal of a systemic approach aimed at offering all students the most amount of access to career readiness skills.

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# Understanding the Research

## Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Related Educational Psychology Theories

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was first presented by Albert Bandura in the 1980s and grew to SCT (primarily the relationships between self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations) being one of the most thoroughly investigated constructs in the social sciences. Social Cognitive Career Theory builds from this robust research base and adds components specific to career development. SCCT helps us to learn about and explain **how students develop interests, make choices, and process experiences** (all of which are crucial to an effective career readiness program). Furthermore, because most of career readiness initiatives are largely delivered within educational environments, it is essential to utilize theories with **strong track records of efficacy within educational environments**. Classroom and school settings narrow the options for a full implementation strategy for career readiness such as personalized career counseling, job shadowing, internship experiences, and other work-based experiences. Theories specific to goal setting, motivation, self-regulation, and self-determination are particularly important to effective programs.

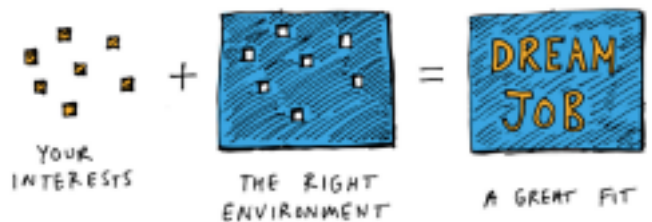
## Person/Environment Fit Theories: Holland and Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA)

Both theories set out to help individuals find the 'right' work environments and address any issues that might affect their performance or satisfaction within those work environments. The most researched and resourced component of the Holland theory is its ability to **organize characteristics of different work environments and match them to different personality types**. These categories (Realistic, Investigative,

Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional) are crucial to making sense of the world of work and are a huge component of the

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effective approaches to career exploration. This theory should be found across resources for students and teachers in effective initiatives, embedded in materials not as stand alone or isolated “career readiness” experiences. Integrations into curriculum and instructional materials is key.

The Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA) categorizes work environments from another angle by **focusing on work ‘values’** (e.g., achievement, comfort, status, altruism, safety, and autonomy) that are either reinforced or lacking within different work environments. TWA was also inspired by research related to rehabilitation and disability job coaching practices. This developed into a very useful model to solve problems or make improvements (to both individuals and environments). TWA is particularly valuable because of its focus on **skill development and coaching** which are both essential to an effective program.



## Developmental Career Theories: Super and Gottfredson

Super and Gottfredson are categorized as developmental career theories. They help to chart **phases of career development over time**. Both theories are very focused on the development of the ‘self.’ Gottfredson views this development through a social/psychological lens. Super views it as **a process that involves actively learning about yourself so that you can ‘construct’ your best identity**. Due to the focus on personal development within both theories, developmental activities and practices tend to be more future oriented, creative, and hands-on. **Effective programs incorporate these principles into activities such as personal narratives, art, and visualization.**

## Evidence-Based Career Readiness Design Elements 1.

### **Develop Identify**

The evidence behind narrative theory supports a wide range of activities that engage students in reflecting, exploring, and imagining possibilities for their future self. Students benefit from repeated exercises of inventories, surveys, journaling, and discussing their aspirations. An effective program systematically helps students develop a sense of identity for their present and future self.

### **2. Expand Experiences**

Social capital and self-efficacy emerge from a wide range of experiences for students. Projects, group work, simulations, embedded work experiences, and interactions with role models help students expand the context and understanding of the world of work. What are the options? Who is “out there” doing “real work”? School can be isolated from what students experience as the “real world”. An effective program expands “real world” experiences for students.

### **3. Map Opportunities**

Making sense of the wide range of opportunities, how to access those options, and how to engage with the hiring process is critical to career readiness. For a student to feel empowered to see options and navigate their path, they must have a way to organize and categorize styles or sectors of work options. An effective program provides a framework or sense-making tool for mapping opportunities.

### **4. Reflect and Dream**

Career development is not a linear experience for most people. It often involves adjusting to new contexts, adapting new strategies, and refining goals. The discipline of honest reflection helps students strengthen their ability to guide their educational and career goals over time. An effective program builds the habit of reflection.

# Examples of Career Readiness Design



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## How to Evaluate Effective K12 Initiatives

The following can be used to review based on evidence

| What Students Should Experience   | Not Present, Present, or Exemplary? |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Students explore family and community messages around jobs, careers, and work ethic |                                     |
| Students inventory and explore personal interests                                   |                                     |
| Students inventory and explore personal talents leading to strengths                |                                     |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Students explore priority sectors, areas of industry growth, and career growth areas   |  |
| Students have opportunities to work in a range of individual, small group, and large group settings to experience a range of working conditions and environments |  |
| Students have work-based learning experiences  |  |
| Students set, refine, and extend both short and long term goals  |  |
| Students create narratives with options for their future and possible self   |  |
| Students have opportunities to map and categorize different jobs and career pathways   |  |
| Students continually reflect on their experiences to identify what they value in a work environment  |  |
| Students meet regularly with mentors to discuss and explore career opportunities   |  |
| Students engage with experts in their work environment   |  |
| Students continually reflect on their journey and share out ideas about their future possibilities   |  |

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| How the Initiative Should be Designed  | Not Present, Present, or Exemplary? |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| The initiative takes teachers through the same journey of career exploration as the students                       |                                     |
| The initiative embeds easily into existing curriculum and instructional frameworks already in place in a district  |                                     |
| The initiative explicitly connects student learning experiences across content areas, classrooms, and grade levels |                                     |

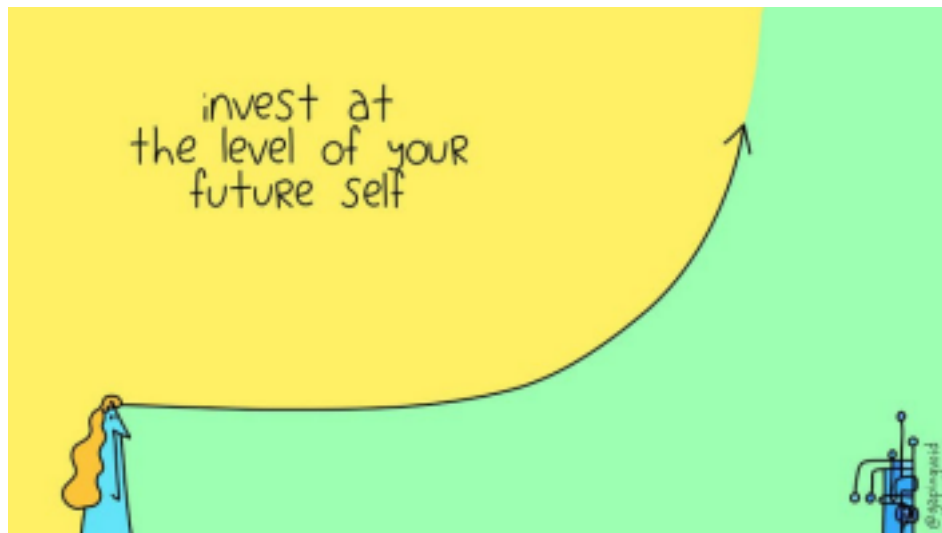


|  |  |
|--|--|
| The initiatives includes a set of surveys, inventories, or other systematic ways for students to reflect on strengths, interests, and values |  |
| The initiative includes a clear scope and sequence of career readiness skills  |  |
| The initiative offers flexibility in language and alignment to district initiatives and other programs                                       |  |
| Professional development and ongoing support is part of the initiative   |  |
| Teachers reflect on their own career experiences to share with students  |  |
| Administrators have clear guidelines on how to support, coach, and engage teachers in the work   |  |

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## Other Considerations

- Is the program sustainable beyond the funding cycle?
- Are there ongoing fees for subscriptions, materials, and software?
- Is the initiative an “add on” or something that is integrated into core practices?
- How is the initiative designed to adjust and adapt over time? • How is the professional development structure over time to provide growth?
- How connected are local leaders in the business community, priority sectors, and education opportunities?
- How does this work connect with and enhance existing curriculum, instructional practices, and local assessments?
- What can the district remove from the plate of teachers so they can focus on the relevant, practical, and employable skills broadly, versus focusing on narrow initiatives in one sector?
- Has the district establish ongoing partnerships with corporate partners?



*K-12 Schools should focus on students developing their personal narratives, connecting with professionals, and mapping their personal interests to education and career opportunities to ensure school is relevant.*

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## **High Quality Elements of Career and Technical Education (CTE)**

California School Dashboard - Action Items to Improve College and Career Readiness Indicators

1. Students participate in a formalized career exploration Program and CTE pathway.
2. Students have an individualized four-year plan on file that includes CTE courses/pathways.
3. Students receive career guidance through programs of study, CTE-specific counseling services, and formalized industry mentoring.
4. Student leadership development is embedded into all career pathway(s)

through one of the six recognized CTSOs.

5. Students have access to WBL activities to ensure quality experiences in CTE pathway
6. Students are aware of clear and specific alignment of all CTE pathways and current/projected labor market needs.
7. Students have the opportunity to achieve at least one capstone, industry recognized certification that qualifies them for entry-level employment.
8. Students explore CTE programs that lead to postsecondary education or training, employment or postsecondary degree.
9. Students are surveyed on their interest and postsecondary choices and success.

*\*Statements above are curated from the CTE Incentive Grant (CTIG) list and 12 Essential Elements of High Quality CTE*

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## Approaches to Career Readiness Aligned to a District's Focus

### **Career and Technical Education (CTE) Pathways**

Using the pathways as a “mapping” strategy helps students makes sense of the wide range of options available to them both in traditional education, internship experiences, and exploring personal interests. Some district may start with this programatic sense, then round off their initiative to center on the individual strengths, interests, and values so students can not only map their options, but develop a great sense of self and possible self for navigating that map os work options.



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## **CASEL**

Connecting career readiness to social-emotional learning (SEL) is an easy and obvious starting point for many districts. Using the four essentials of career readiness, initiatives can connect to SEL through extending activities, modifying prompts for conversations, and exploring scenarios. The “mapping” of these two framework is not one-to-one, but it still offers students a way to apply what they are learning about emotions, self-regulations, and social interactions to the “real world” and see how this may work in their future.

*SAMPLE Alignment Matrix*

| <b>Four Evidence-based Design Principles for Career Readiness Initiatives</b> | <b>CASEL</b>                      |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Develop Identity  | Self-Awareness<br>Self-Management |
| Expand Experiences  | Social Awareness                  |

|                   |                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Map Opportunities | Relationship Skills         |
| Reflect and Dream | Responsible Decision-Making |



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## Essential Skills

Many “workforce readiness” framework exist and directly relate to career readiness. A simple cross-walk of any career readiness initiative can highlight the strengths and gaps in the design.



**Essential Employment Skills are Taught in the Classroom**  
 Educators teach the essential skills in their classroom through many activities and lessons. By relating our classroom experiences to the work world, students will have the opportunity to practice their skills and become college and career ready.

This infographic lists seven essential skills with corresponding icons: Collaboration (hands shaking), Communication (two heads), Creativity (lightbulb), Critical Thinking (head with gear), 21st Century Innovation (circuit board), Initiative & Self-Management (person with gear), and Emotional Intelligence (hand holding heart).

How do we Teach Essential Skills? [Click Here](#)  
 Skills-Based Educational Planning: [Click Here](#)  
 Career Resources for Teachers: [Click Here](#)  
 Essential Skills Flyer: [Click Here](#)

**Start Building Essential Skills Today!**  
 For more information contact:  
 Anna MacDonald, [amacdonald@ocde.us](mailto:amacdonald@ocde.us)  
 Chrissy Cherry, [ccherry@ocde.us](mailto:ccherry@ocde.us)



**Essential Skills**  
 While technical skills are what you do at work, essential skills are how you do it. Employers value these skills in their employees—often as much as technical skills. Developing them and making sure employers understand your expertise will help you to get a job and advance your career.

**Emotional Intelligence**  
 Considering the feelings and perspectives of others to infuse empathy and thoughtfulness into all interactions. Working on your own self-awareness to approach situations with humility, kindness and patience.

**Communication**  
 Exchanging information, feelings and meaning in person or digitally through actions, words, body language, listening and writing to achieve understanding among people.

**Creative & Critical Thinking**  
 Using imagination and problem solving to apply knowledge or address challenges in new exciting and innovative ways. Using reasonable and logical thought to prioritize, make decisions and achieve a desired outcome.

**Collaboration**  
 Building helpful, respectful and productive relationships with others to work toward a common goal. Using strategies that incorporate the ideas of many diverse people and promote agreement or compromise. Listening to critique with openness and approaching conflict with an inclusive mindset.

**Dependability**  
 Building trust with others by keeping your word. Managing your time by planning and controlling how your work time is spent to achieve goals. Meeting deadlines and producing quality work. Taking initiative and working independently to move things forward.

**Resourcefulness**  
 Relentlessly seeking solutions and opportunities. Understanding your own strengths and weaknesses and knowing when to ask for help or lean on another person's expertise. Being a lifelong learner who approaches problems and obstacles with perseverance, adaptability and a make-it-happen mentality.

San Diego Workforce Partnership  
 EDUCATION | [workforce.org/mynextmove](http://workforce.org/mynextmove)

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## Global Context

Often, the global context of the work opportunities of the future is lost if there is an over focus on a specific sector or discipline (eg. STEAM, Coding, etc.) By looking at a global framework, career readiness initiatives can use contexts like the United Nations Sustainability Goals or Global Competency to review the program and connect to a larger vision of the future of work.





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steveregur@educators.coop August 2021

### **STEM, STEAM, and STEM/CS**

STEAM or STEM or STEM/CS initiatives are more common in districts that in the past. Often, students are using a design process such as Design Thinking or Engineering Design Process. This work often involves simulations, projects, and even competitions for solving problems. Often, these are excellent starting points for districts who can build on their successes and connect a broader sense of “career readiness” based on the personal strengths, interests, and values of the students. As with CASEL example above, a simple alignment matrix may help connect the work within a district’s existing initiatives.





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## About the Author

Over the past six years, our work has met at the intersection of instructional improvement in K-12 schools and career education. We have worked with a range of small and large scale implementations, including student-facing software platforms, teacher-facing portals for resources, wrap around print materials, intensive teacher training initiatives with follow-up coaching, repurposed library space as an interactive career center, regional consortiums, and 2 generation (2Gen) community engagement solutions. This wide range of experience has led to our deeper understanding of what the essential elements of career readiness are, how easily those elements can get

lost in the buzz of district initiatives,

and the critical aspect of designing the

work with the concept of sustainability

in the face competing local priorities.

There are many options for districts,

so they must be thoughtful and

purposeful in their implementation

design. Sometimes the highest priced

and shiniest products on the market

do not fit into the culture of the district

and end up causing disruption and disappointment. Embedded and integrated designs appear to have a greater chance of taking root and outlast turnover in





leadership and shifts in funding. In the end, helping students develop a strong sense of who they are, what they want out of life, and where to connect to opportunities requires hands-on, human-centric design. Career readiness is about personal identity, developing relationships, and making connections.

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