

Toward a More Meaningful High School Diploma in Kentucky

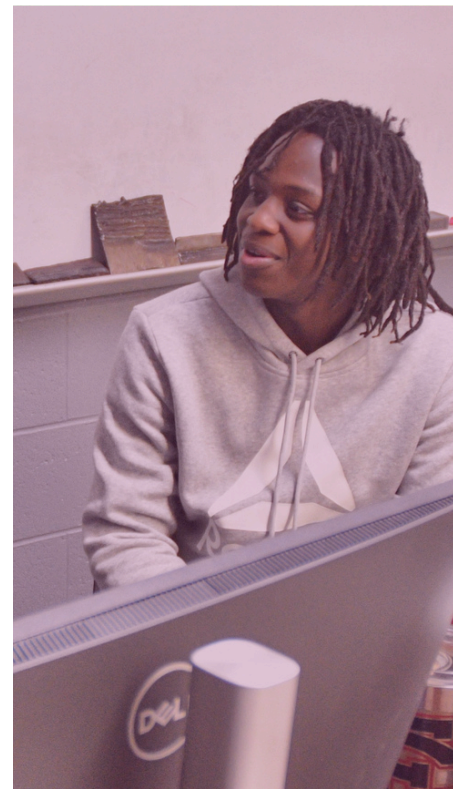


KENTUCKY EMPLOYER AND INDUSTRY SURVEY ANALYSIS AND REPORT

DECEMBER 2024
WORKING PAPER



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The Prichard Committee

Building a Groundswell for a Big Bold Future

Contents

CONTENTS	2
AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT	3
ABOUT US.....	3
AUTHORS.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
LETTER FROM THE CEO.....	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
KEY SIGNALS FROM KENTUCKY’S BUSINESS COMMUNITY	8
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS.....	9
EMPLOYERS’ CONFIDENCE IN RECENT HS GRADUATES	13
EMPLOYMENT READINESS INDICATORS.....	15
WORK-BASED LEARNING AND INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CREDENTIALS	16
DURABLE SKILLS.....	18
ADDITIONAL COMPETENCIES.....	21
SCHOOL-EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS	24
BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKFORCE READINESS PROGRAMS	28
INCENTIVES TO INCREASE SCHOOL-EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS.....	31
POLICY CONSIDERATIONS.....	36

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Kentucky faces a critical moment in aligning high school education with the demands of postsecondary education and the workforce. Despite a high graduation rate of 92.3%, significant gaps persist in academic proficiency, postsecondary education enrollment, and postsecondary attainment. With less than half of 10th graders meeting core subject benchmarks and workforce participation trailing most other states, the value of a high school diploma as a signal of preparedness has never been more important. Addressing these gaps requires a focus on building foundational skills and fostering stronger school-employer partnerships to ensure graduates are equipped for success in college, careers, and beyond.

To address these challenges, the Center for Best Practices and Innovation (CBPI) of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence conducted the Meaningful Diploma Employer Survey in Summer 2024. This research aimed to understand the crucial role Kentucky employers play in shaping future initiatives and policies to ensure high school diplomas meet the needs of Kentucky's business community.

The survey gathered insights from over 600 Kentucky employers across more than 20 industries, examining their confidence in graduate preparedness, success factors, and willingness to partner with schools. Key focus areas included durable skills, work-based learning, and school-business partnerships. The resulting report, *The Meaningful Diploma Employer Survey Report 2024*, provides an in-depth analysis of employers' perceptions regarding recent Kentucky high school graduates' preparedness, along with insights about workforce readiness programs and potential barriers to their implementation. These findings can help education leaders and policymakers strengthen the connection between K-12 education and workforce needs.

ABOUT US

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Center for Best Practices and Innovation (CBPI)

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence is an independent, nonpartisan, citizen-led organization working to improve education in Kentucky – early childhood through postsecondary. Since 1983, the Prichard Committee has worked to study priority issues, inform the public and policy makers about best practices, and engage citizens, business leaders, families, students, and other stakeholders in a shared mission to move Kentucky to the top tier of all states for education excellence and equity for all children, from their earliest years through postsecondary education.

Within the Prichard Committee, the Center for Best Practice and Innovation serves as a hub for identifying and promoting effective educational strategies. The Center seeks to elevate local best practices and bring research and evidence-based approaches to local communities to inform their efforts to improve education outcomes. Through its work, the Center crafts policy recommendations for state system change, tracks local innovations for sharing statewide, and evaluates both local and statewide initiatives to assess their impact on education outcomes and return on investment.

AUTHORS

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Prior to the survey's launch, Prichard Committee staff met with various employers and industry stakeholders from across the Commonwealth. During these meetings, Prichard Committee staff provided an overview of the survey and requested assistance to broadly share the survey within their employer and business community networks. We'd like to thank the following partners for their input: Appalachian Regional Healthcare, Gray Construction, Jobs for America's Graduates Kentucky, Kentucky Agricultural Council, Kentucky Association for Economic Development, Kentucky Association of Manufacturers, Kentucky Bankers Association, Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, Kentucky Hospital Association, Kentucky Small Business Development Center, Kentucky Statewide Attraction and Talent Team, Kentucky Travel Industry Association, Shaping Our Appalachian Region, St. Elizabeth Healthcare, Toyota Manufacturing of Kentucky.

LETTER FROM THE CEO

I am pleased to share with you the results of our survey of more than 600 Kentucky business leaders in more than 20 industries, which provides valuable insights into the skills and competencies high school students need to be successful in today's workplace.

The survey confirms what many of us already know—employers are looking for more than just academic and technical knowledge. They are demanding *durable skills* such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, along with real-world applications of academic learning. These skills are not “extras” but essential components of a meaningful education. As schools work to create vibrant learning experiences, it is critical that durable skills become deeply integrated into core academic instruction, rather than treated as separate, add-on elements. This alignment will ensure that students graduate not only with subject-matter knowledge but with the competencies they need to succeed in both college and careers.

A particularly exciting takeaway from the survey is the strong commitment from Kentucky employers to collaborate with schools toward ensuring student success. The idea of employers working *with* schools—not just as distant supporters but as active partners—has tremendous potential to shape how we define a more meaningful diploma. Encouragingly, employers have expressed a clear willingness to help make this vision a reality, ensuring that Kentucky students are equipped with the tools they need to thrive in their communities.

At the Prichard Committee, we are supporting local school districts participating in the Kentucky Community Schools Initiative (KCSI) to build these crucial partnerships. The data gleaned from this survey will inform how we think about our work within the KCSI and the role that community schools can play in strengthening the bridge between education and employment.

Together, we have the opportunity to redefine what it means to prepare students for the future. By aligning the efforts of schools, employers, and communities, we can help every student in Kentucky graduate with a diploma that truly reflects their readiness for college, career, and life. Thank you for your continued partnership and for the work you do to help build a Big, Bold Future of all Kentuckians.

Sincerely,
Brigitte Blom
President/CEO
The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

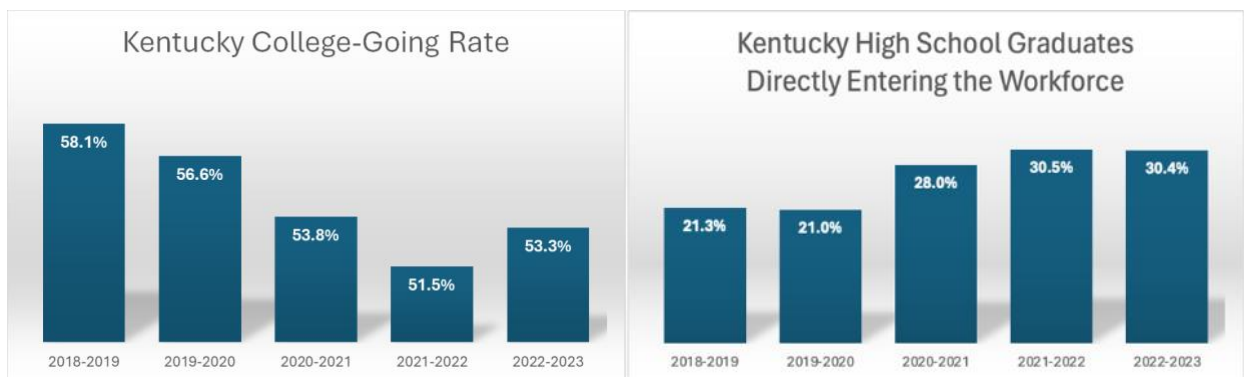
The Challenge: A Critical Moment for Kentucky Education

Kentucky ranks 4th in the nation in high school graduation rate, with 92.3% of students graduating in 2024. However, despite obtaining diplomas, deeper analysis reveals concerning gaps between graduation rates and actual student preparedness for life beyond high school. Only about one-third of Kentucky's 10th graders demonstrate proficiency in core subjects – 35% in math and 45% in reading. This academic shortfall is further reflected in the state's ACT performance, where Kentucky's average composite score of 18.2 trails behind the national average of 19.6. Looking at post-high school outcomes, 53.3% of Kentucky's 2023 high school graduates enrolled in college immediately after graduation (see Fig. 1), significantly below the national average of 61.4%. Among working-age Kentuckians (25-64), just 55% hold postsecondary credentials. At the same time, an increasing number of high school graduates opt to directly enter the workforce rather than pursue further education (see Fig. 2).

The impact of this preparedness gap extends into the workforce. The Commonwealth's workforce participation, the percentage of the population aged 16 or older either working or looking for work, was 57.3 in May 2024, 5.2 points lower than the U.S. rate and 1.3 points lower than the state's rate in January 2020. Even more concerning, approximately one in seven Kentuckians aged 16-24 are neither in school nor working, suggesting a substantial population of young adults struggling to find their footing in either academic or professional pursuits.

These statistics raise a fundamental question: Is a Kentucky high school diploma a reliable indicator of a graduate's readiness for post-high school success? As more high school graduates opt to enter the workforce directly rather than pursue further education, this question becomes increasingly urgent. Kentucky businesses and employers should reasonably expect that a high school diploma signals foundational preparation for various post-high school paths. However, the current data suggests a misalignment between K-12 education outcomes and the requirements for post-graduation success.

The situation demands a closer examination of what employers consider essential foundational skills for high school graduates. Understanding these expectations becomes crucial as we work to bridge the gap between academic achievements and real-world preparedness, ensuring that Kentucky's education system truly serves as a launching pad for student success, whether in college or the workforce.



Source: [Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education](#) and [Kentucky Center for Statistics \(KYSTATS\)](#)

Source: [Kentucky School Report Card](#)

To better understand employer perspectives on the workforce readiness of recent high school graduates, the Prichard Committee commissioned the 2024 Meaningful Diploma Employer Survey. Gathering feedback from over 600 employers across more than 20 industries in Kentucky, the survey explored employers' confidence in graduate preparedness, the importance of durable skills, the value of work-based learning, and the state of school-business partnerships. The findings offer valuable insights that can be leveraged by state and local education leaders, policymakers, and the business community to strengthen the connection between K-12 education and the workforce, ensuring all graduates are equipped to thrive in their chosen path, whether that's further education or immediate employment.

1. Employers' Confidence in Recent High School Graduates

Kentucky employers expressed varying levels of confidence in the preparedness of recent high school graduates. While 56% report moderate to high confidence levels, only 12% express strong confidence, and 14% report no confidence at all. Additionally, Kentucky employers report a significant gap in crucial workplace competencies among recent graduates. Less than 10% believe graduates are well-prepared in key areas, with notable concerns in professionalism and work ethic, critical thinking, and communication skills. While graduates demonstrate stronger preparation in technical and academic skills, with over 60% and 70%, respectively, of employers rating them as moderately prepared in these areas, the lack of readiness in fundamental workplace capabilities raises concerns.

2. Durable Skills as a Priority:

Kentucky employers overwhelmingly identify durable skills as essential for post-high school success, with 78.5% placing very high emphasis on these competencies when assessing employment readiness. This strong emphasis on durable skills underlies employers' broader talent development concerns, with many noting that traditional academic success alone doesn't guarantee workplace readiness. When asked what K-12 education systems should emphasize beyond academics, employers strongly prioritize professionalism, work ethic, and durable skills. Additionally, employers highly value interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence as crucial competencies. These findings suggest the critical need to integrate durable skills learning more effectively into students' core academic experiences.

3. Untapped Potential in Work-based Learning

Kentucky employers strongly endorse practical work experience as an essential component of high school education. However, only 21.4% of survey respondents currently offer work-based learning opportunities to high school students. An additional 54.2% expressed willingness to provide these experiences, indicating significant potential for growth. This strong endorsement of hands-on learning opportunities suggests a strong opportunity for expanding real-world applications to learning.

4. Valuable Skills besides Academic Competencies

Beyond durable skills and work-based learning, employers identify specific areas where K-12 education must strengthen student preparation for post-graduation success. Financial literacy emerges as a critical need, with employers emphasizing that graduates often lack basic understanding of personal finance and budgeting. Employers note that real-world professional skills are also lacking - from understanding appropriate workplace communication to managing time and meeting deadlines. They specifically highlight deficiencies in handling constructive criticism, coping with and managing stress, and adapting to different professional situations. Additionally, concerns about unrealistic salary expectations and limited understanding of career progression point to the need for more comprehensive preparation in these practical life skills that are essential for workplace success.

5. School-Business Partnerships

Kentucky employers strongly recognize the value of partnering with local schools to develop future talent, with 83.7% believing these partnerships are pivotal for workforce development. While only half of surveyed companies report previous partnerships with K-12 schools, there is substantial willingness to engage more deeply. Over 55% of employers express strong interest in collaborating on curriculum alignment, and nearly 65% expressed varying levels of interest or capacity to commit resources to support career preparation initiatives. However, a significant communication gap exists - only 19.8% of employers report frequent interaction with schools. This gap between high partnership interest and low active engagement suggests tremendous untapped potential for expanding meaningful collaboration between schools and employers.

Conclusion

The findings of the 2024 Meaningful Diploma Employer Survey present compelling opportunities for Kentucky to redefine what it means to earn a high school diploma - one that truly prepares graduates for success in college, careers, and life. This is not just a workforce readiness challenge, but a fundamental necessity to ensure all students have access to educational experiences that cultivate the knowledge, skills, and mindsets necessary to thrive in their chosen path beyond high school.

The survey findings reveal not just challenges but significant opportunities for meaningful partnership development across Kentucky's education and business landscape. While the survey findings reveal notable gaps - with only 51% of employers actively partnering with schools despite 84% recognizing their crucial importance - there is substantial willingness to engage that can be leveraged to support positive student outcomes.

Survey insights from existing partnerships demonstrate the tangible benefits of engagement. Companies maintaining regular communication with schools report 29% higher partnership satisfaction rates, while 56% of employers offering work-based learning programs cite direct benefits through strengthened talent pipelines. These outcomes provide compelling evidence for expanded collaboration.

The Meaningful Diploma Employer Survey findings present valuable opportunities for strengthening connections between Kentucky's education and business communities. At The Prichard Committee, we envision these results serving as a springboard to bring educators and Kentucky's business industries together for thoughtful discussions about ensuring a Meaningful High School Diploma for all Kentucky students. The Prichard Committee will support this work through:

- Documentation of successful Kentucky school-employer collaborations and best practice sharing
- Engaging with educators and industry leaders to identify local and state-level solutions
- Championing stakeholder feedback that informs policy and practice

We invite stakeholders to engage with us in several ways:

- Access and utilize the [Meaningful Diploma Toolbox Resources](#)
- Share successful partnership stories and lessons learned
- Participate in consensus-building around practical solutions

For more information or to get involved, contact admin@prichardcommittee.org

KEY SIGNALS FROM KENTUCKY'S BUSINESS COMMUNITY

The 2024 Meaningful Diploma Employer Survey reveals insights about Kentucky's education-to-workforce ecosystem. Drawing from over 600 employers across 20+ industries, numerous key signals emerge that highlight substantial opportunities to strengthen alignment between K-12 education and workforce needs. While Kentucky maintains a 92.3% high school graduation rate, employers indicate specific gaps between diploma attainment and career readiness. The following signals merit particular attention from education leaders and policymakers as they continue efforts to ensure Kentucky's education system effectively prepares all students for post-high school success.

- **Readiness Gap**
 - While over 30% of graduates directly enter the workforce, only 12% of employers express strong confidence in graduate preparedness
 - According to employers, less than 10% of graduates demonstrate mastery of critical workplace competencies
 - Public education remains a critical public trust but needs recalibration to better serve students to prepare them for post-high school success
- **Skills Priority Misalignment**
 - Current accountability systems don't capture what employers value most
 - Nearly 80% of employers highly prioritize durable skills (communication, critical thinking, professionalism, etc.)
 - Financial literacy and real-world application of learning emerge as critical gaps
 - Traditional academic metrics alone aren't sufficient indicators of career readiness
- **Untapped Partnership Potential**
 - 83.7% of employers support stronger business-school collaboration
 - More than half of businesses want to offer work-based learning in addition to the 21.8% that already do
 - Only 19.8% report consistent school-business communication
 - Significant opportunity exists to expand real-world learning experiences
- **Talent Pipeline Development Challenges**
 - Key barriers include staff and mentor availability, student engagement, and scheduling
 - Geographic and transportation issues affect rural areas disproportionately
 - Current structures don't effectively support school-business partnerships
 - Resource allocation needs reassessment to support workforce readiness initiatives

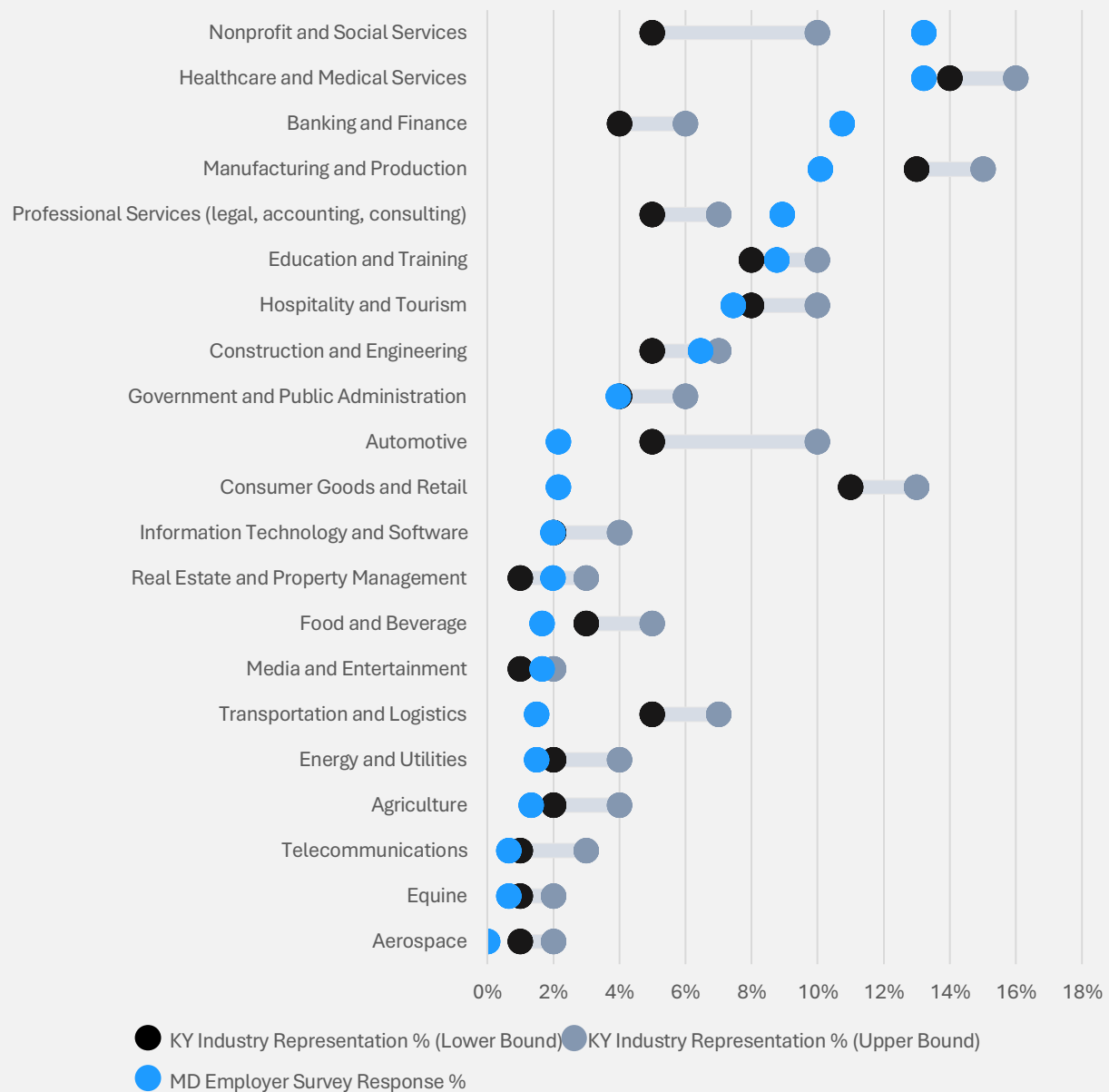
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Between July and September 2024, the Meaningful Diploma Employer Survey received a total of **608** responses.

Industry/ Company Associations

The survey response rates for each major industry were compared to the approximated corresponding industry's representation percentage in Kentucky. In most cases, the response rates are either within or closely approaching the actual representation of those industries in the state. Figure 1 below provides a summary of this comparison.

Figure 1. MD Employer Survey Response Rate and KY Industry Representation Comparison



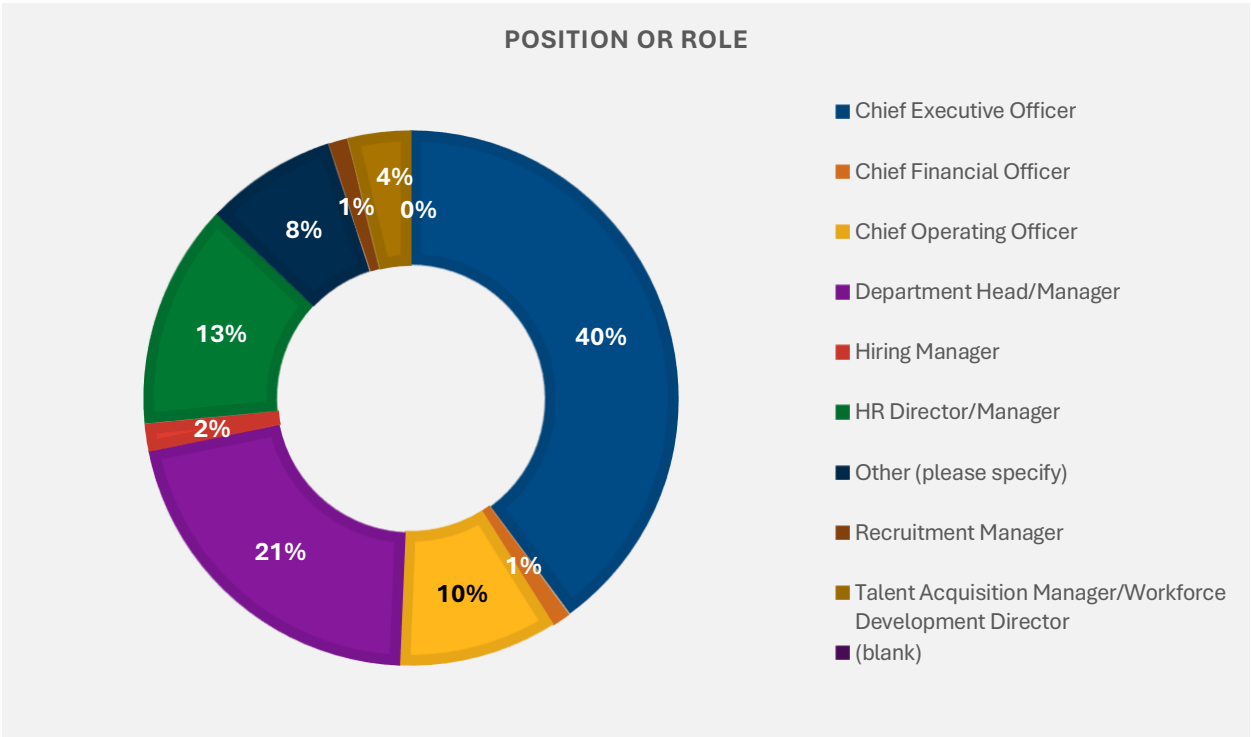
The following industries have survey response rates that align closely with their representation in Kentucky: **Healthcare and Medical Services, Education and Training, Hospitality and Tourism, Construction and Engineering, Government and Public Administration, Information Technology and Software, Real Estate and Property Management, Media and Entertainment, Energy and Utilities, Agriculture, Telecommunications, and Equine.** Table 1 summarizes the comparison data for all surveyed industries.

Industry	MD Employer Survey Response %	KY Industry Representation % (Lower Bound)	KY Industry Representation % (Upper Bound)
Healthcare and Medical Services	13.22%	14%	16%
Nonprofit and Social Services	13.22%	5%	10%
Banking and Finance	10.74%	4%	6%
Manufacturing and Production	10.08%	13%	15%
Professional Services (legal, accounting, consulting)	8.93%	5%	7%
Education and Training	8.76%	8%	10%
Hospitality and Tourism	7.44%	8%	10%
Construction and Engineering	6.45%	5%	7%
Government and Public Administration	3.97%	4%	6%
Consumer Goods and Retail	2.15%	11%	13%
Automotive	2.15%	5%	10%
Real Estate and Property Management	1.98%	1%	3%
Information Technology and Software	1.98%	2%	4%
Media and Entertainment	1.65%	1%	2%
Food and Beverage	1.65%	3%	5%
Energy and Utilities	1.49%	2%	4%
Transportation and Logistics	1.49%	5%	7%
Agriculture	1.32%	2%	4%
Equine	0.66%	1%	2%
Telecommunications	0.66%	1%	3%
Aerospace	0.00%	1%	2%

Job Positions/ Roles

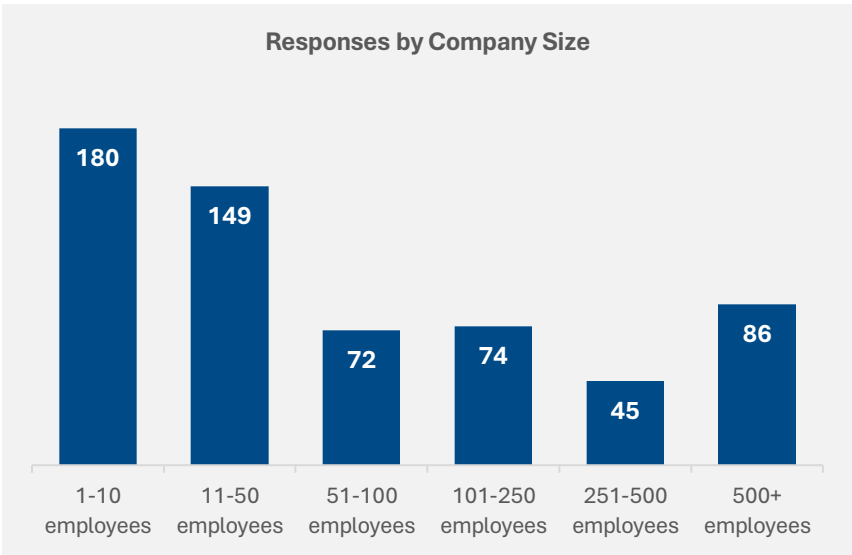
The survey responses reflect a wide range of leadership and managerial roles. **Chief Executive Officers (39.9%)** make up the largest group of respondents, followed by **Department Heads/Managers (21.19%)** and **HR Directors/Managers (13.58%)**. **Chief Operating Officers** also represent a notable portion of the responses at **9.6%**.

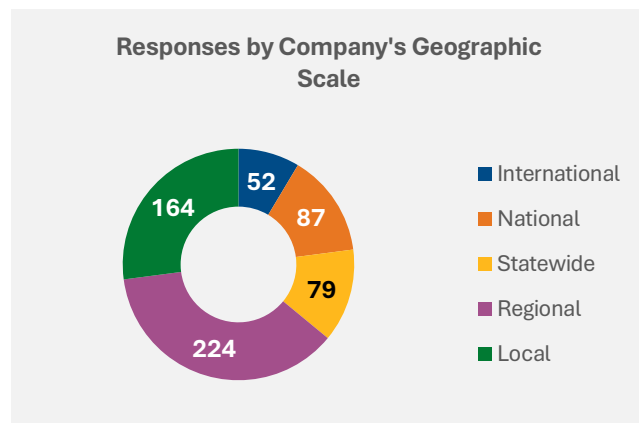
A smaller percentage of responses come from **Chief Financial Officers (1.16%)**, **Hiring Managers (1.66%)**, **Recruitment Managers (1.16%)**, and **Talent Acquisition Managers/Workforce Development Directors (3.81%)**. Additionally, **7.95%** of respondents selected the **"Other"** category, specifying roles outside of the listed options.



Company Size

The survey responses come from organizations of varied sizes. Overall, our study received 180 responses from organizations with 1 – 10 employees, 149 responses from 10 – 50 employees, 86 responses from organizations with 500+ employees, followed by 74 responses from 101-250 employees.





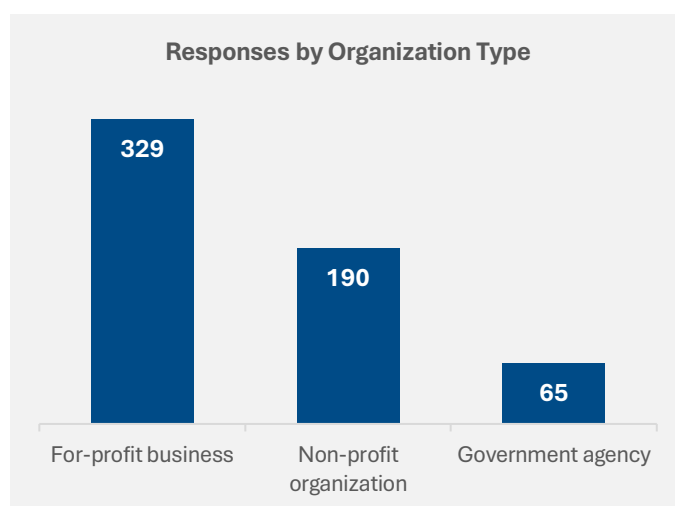
Geographic Scale

The survey respondents represent a wide range of company scales. **Regional companies** make up the largest portion of the responses, with **224** participants indicating this scale. **Local companies** follow with **164** responses. Additionally, **National companies** account for **87** responses, while **Statewide companies** received **79** responses. A smaller but significant portion of respondents represent **International companies**, with **52** responses.

Organization Type

The survey covers multiple for-profit businesses, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. Overall, our study received **329** responses from **for-profit businesses**, **190** responses from **non-profit organizations**, and **65** responses from **government agencies**.

The survey also received many responses from other types of employers, such as quasi-governmental organizations, higher education institutions, industry associations, and privately owned organizations.



Education Qualifications and Job Offerings

The survey results indicate that the majority of jobs at respondents' companies require some level of education beyond a high school diploma. The most common requirement is **some college, no degree**, accounting for **40.5%** of jobs. **Bachelor's/4-year degrees** are required for **30.3%** of positions, while **industry-recognized credentials** are needed for **21.1%** of jobs.

A smaller percentage of positions require an **associate/2-year degree (12.8%)**, and **graduate degrees** are required for **9.1%** of jobs.

EMPLOYERS' CONFIDENCE IN RECENT HS GRADUATES

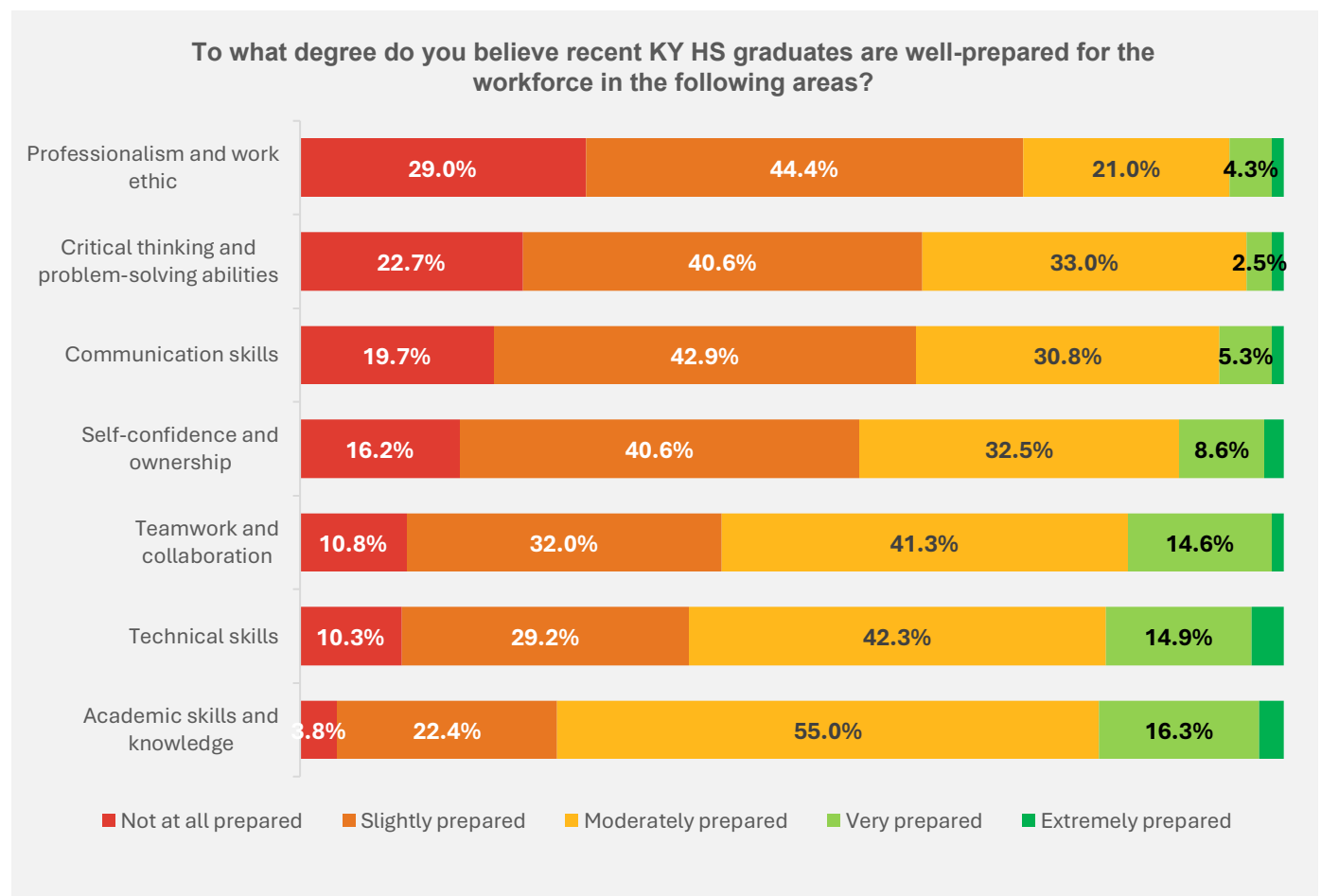
Question: How confident are you in the preparedness of recent HS graduates?

While 56% of employers express moderate to high confidence in graduate preparedness, only 12% report strong confidence. Additionally, 14% indicate no confidence.



Preparedness in Key Areas

Less than 10% of respondents believe that recent Kentucky high school graduates are very or extremely prepared for the workforce in crucial areas: Professionalism and work ethic, Critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, Communication skills, Self-confidence and ownership.



Employer Perspectives: A Closer Look

Areas Needing Significant Development

1. **Professionalism and Work Ethic:** A staggering 73.4% of employers report that recent graduates are not at all prepared or only slightly prepared in this area. This highlights a critical need for instilling workplace values and expectations during high school education.
2. **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:** 63.3% of employers find graduates lacking in these essential skills, crucial for adapting to the ever-changing workplace environment.
3. **Communication Skills:** 62.6% of employers note significant shortcomings in graduates' ability to communicate effectively, a skill vital for almost every job role.
4. **Self-confidence and Ownership:** 56.8% of employers observe a lack of preparedness in this area, suggesting a need for more opportunities for students to develop autonomy and self-assurance.
5. **Teamwork and Collaboration:** While faring slightly better, 42.8% of employers still find graduates underprepared in this crucial interpersonal skill.

Despite these challenges, there are areas where Kentucky's high school graduates show promise:

Areas of Stronger Preparation

1. **Technical Skills:** 60.5% of employers say graduates are moderately to extremely prepared in this area, indicating a solid foundation in practical, job-specific abilities.
2. **Academic Skills and Knowledge:** An encouraging 73.8% of employers rate graduates as moderately to extremely prepared in this domain.

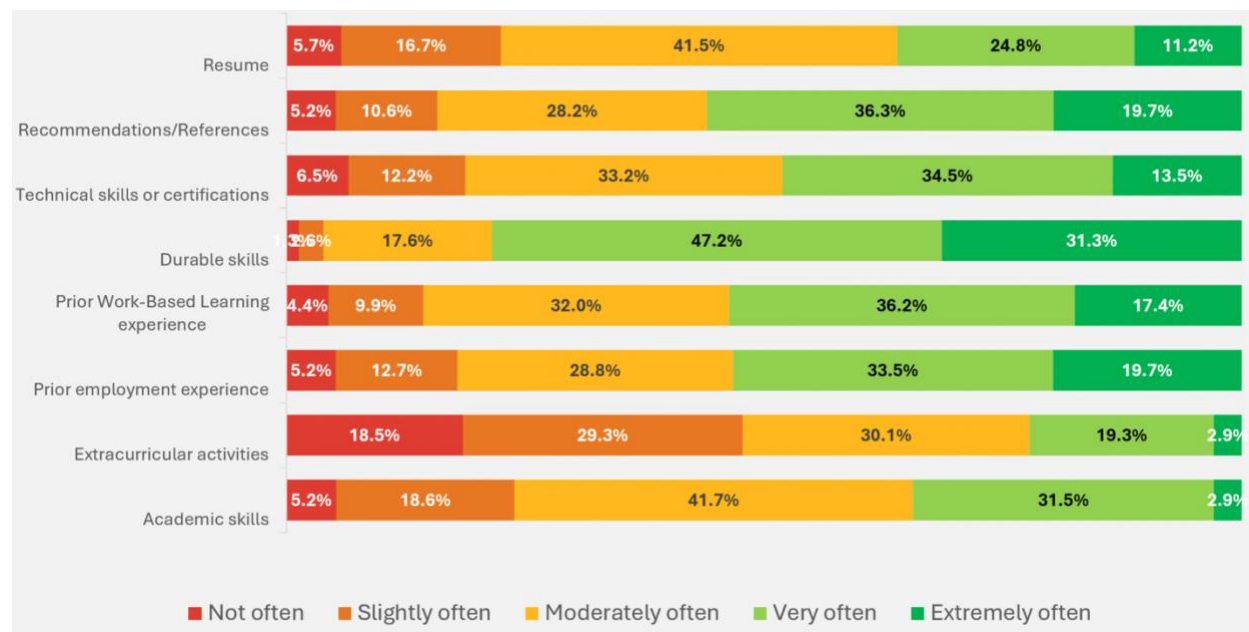
Industry-Specific Patterns

The technical preparation varies significantly across industries:

- Healthcare and Medical Services employers: 67% rate graduates as adequately prepared in technical skills.
- Construction and Engineering: 63% report moderate or above technical preparation.
- Manufacturing: Only 42% report graduates as moderately to extremely prepared with technical preparation.

EMPLOYMENT READINESS INDICATORS

Question: What factor(s) do you rely on most when assessing a recent high school graduate's readiness for employment?



Durable skills are paramount

78.5% of Kentucky employers place a very high emphasis on durable skills competencies when assessing graduates' readiness for employment. When combined with employers that place moderate emphasis on these skills, nearly every employer (96.1%) values durable skills as an indicator when assessing readiness for employment. This emphasis on durable skills remains consistently high across all industries, company sizes, and geographic locations.

Academic skills remain relevant

While not as heavily weighted as durable skills, academic proficiency is still important, with 75.1% of employers relying on it moderately to extremely often. This indicates that a well-rounded education combining both practical and academic skills is valued by employers.

Experience matters

Over half of the employers highly value prior work-based learning (53.6%) and employment experience (53.2%). This highlights the importance of internships, part-time jobs, or other work-related programs for high school students.

Personal vouching carries weight

Recommendations and references are relied upon very or extremely often by 56% of employers, suggesting that networking and building positive relationships can significantly impact a graduate's employability.

Technical skills have a place

While not as critical as durable skills, 48% of employers highly value technical skills or certifications. This indicates that industry-specific knowledge can give graduates an edge in certain fields, particularly in Manufacturing and Production, Information Technology and Software, and Energy and Utilities, where 70% of respondents from these industries rely on technical skills very or extremely often.

Extracurriculars are less emphasized

Interestingly, 47.8% of employers do not or only slightly rely on extracurricular activities. This suggests that while such activities may have personal development benefits, they're not as crucial for employment readiness in employers' eyes.

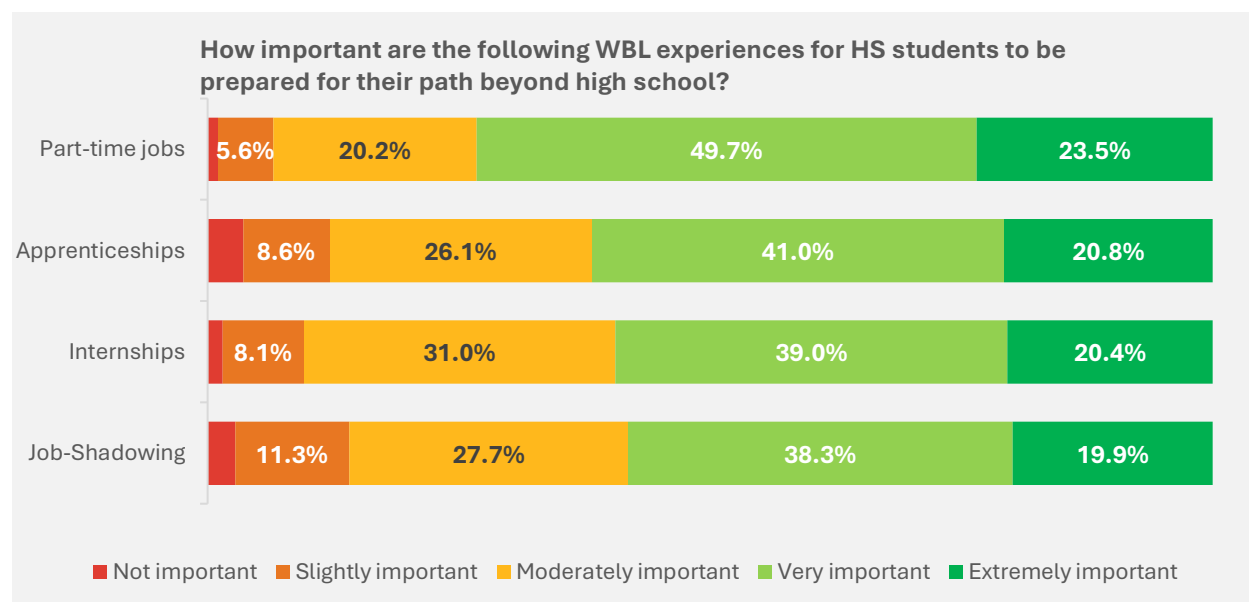
Resumes remain a key tool

77.5% of employers moderately to extremely often rely on resumes, reinforcing the importance of this traditional job-seeking document for recent graduates.

WORK-BASED LEARNING AND INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CREDENTIALS

How important are the following work-based learning (WBL) experiences for high school students to be prepared for their path beyond high school?

Employers Overwhelmingly Endorse Real-World Work Experiences for High School Students:



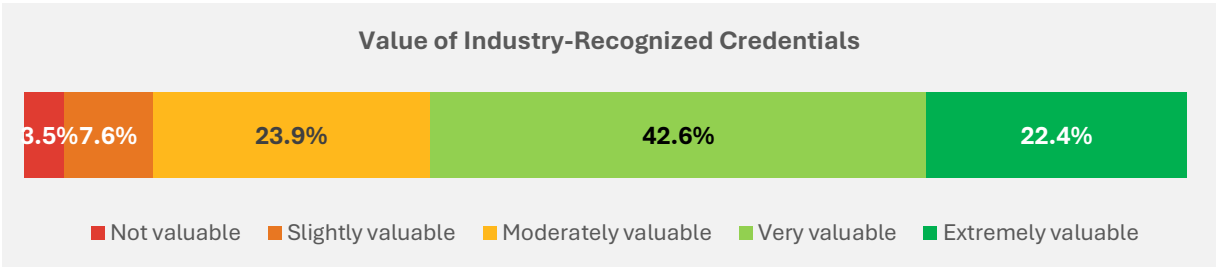
All experiences are highly valued: Even the lowest-rated experience (job-shadowing) is considered very or extremely important by over half of employers.

This data paints a clear picture: employers strongly believe that hands-on work experiences are crucial for preparing high school students for their future paths. Part-time jobs stand out as the most highly valued, suggesting that employers see significant benefit in students gaining early exposure to workplace responsibilities.

and expectations. The strong showing for apprenticeships indicates a growing recognition of their value in bridging education and practical skills development. Internships and job-shadowing, while slightly less emphasized, are still considered vital by a majority of employers. Overall, this data underscores a shift towards valuing practical, work-based learning as a key component of high school education, signaling a need for stronger partnerships between schools and local businesses to provide these opportunities.

Value of Industry-Recognized Credentials

An overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) consider industry-recognized credentials valuable to some degree, with 42.6% rating them as very valuable and 22.4% as extremely valuable. Only a small proportion (11.1%) view them as having limited value, with 7.6% considering them slightly valuable and just 3.5% rating them as not valuable. The data suggests that industry-recognized credentials are generally seen as important qualifications when evaluating candidates' job readiness.



DURABLE SKILLS

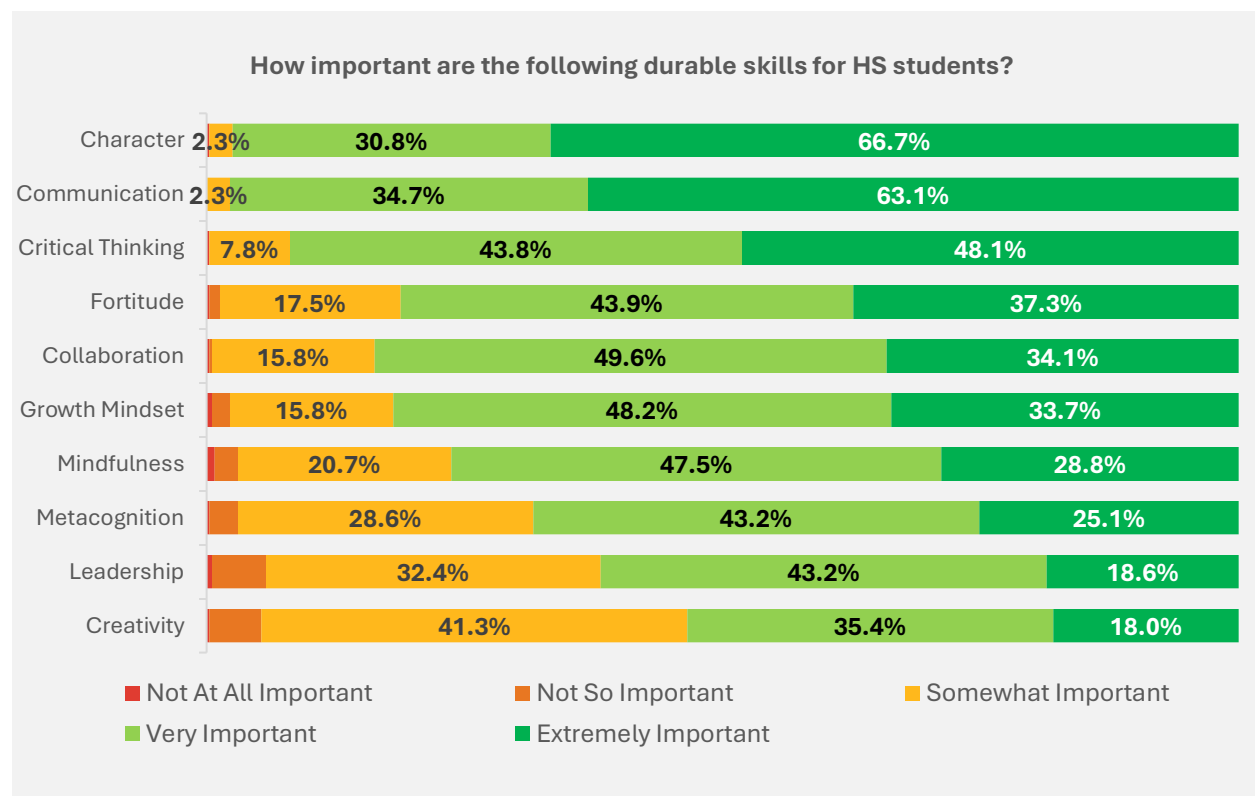
Overall Employer Priorities for Durable Skills

When evaluating the needed durable skills for high school graduates, employers overwhelmingly prioritize fundamental communication and character traits. Nearly all employers (97.8% and 97.5% respectively) consider communication and character crucial skills, closely followed by critical thinking at 91.9%. This suggests these three capabilities form the core foundation of expected durable skill competencies.

The next tier of highly valued skills focuses on collaborative and growth-oriented capabilities. Collaboration ranks high at 83.7%, while growth mindset and fortitude follow closely behind at 81.9% and 81.3% respectively. This indicates employers strongly value employees who can work well with others while demonstrating resilience and adaptability.

Cognitive and self-awareness skills form another important category, with mindfulness valued by 76.5% of employers and metacognition by 68.6%. While leadership (62%) and creativity (53.4%) rank lower comparatively, they are still considered important by more than half of employers.

This hierarchy of skills suggests employers seek high school graduates who can communicate effectively, demonstrate strong character, think critically, and work well with others, while also maintaining the capacity to adapt and grow. The data indicates a clear preference for well-rounded individuals who possess both interpersonal and cognitive capabilities, with particular emphasis on foundational communication and character traits.



Company Size Analysis

Small Companies (1-10 employees)

Character and communication emerge as top priorities, with 68% and 63.2%, respectively, rating these as extremely important. These employers place notably high value on creative thinking, with 54.8% rating it as extremely important - the highest among all company sizes for this skill. Their emphasis on mindfulness and metacognition (with combined "extremely" and "very important" ratings of 81.4% and 76.8%) suggests they value employees who can work independently and self-regulate.

Small-Mid Companies (11-50 employees)

These organizations show particularly high emphasis on communication (67.3%) and character (67%). Distinctively, they place the highest emphasis on fortitude among all company sizes, with 43.9% rating it as extremely important, suggesting they value resilience and perseverance in their employees.

Mid-Sized Companies (51-100 employees)

These companies maintain similar priorities in communication and character (both at 60.4% extremely important) but show a unique emphasis on growth mindset, with 43.8% rating it as extremely important. Interestingly, they place the lowest emphasis on leadership among all size categories, with only 8.3% rating it as extremely important, possibly reflecting their organizational structure and needs.

Larger Mid-Sized Companies (101-250 employees)

The emphasis on character (66.7%) and communication (62.2%) remains strong. These organizations show particularly high combined emphasis on creative thinking, with 95.6% rating it as extremely or very important, suggesting they value innovative problem-solving abilities in their workforce.

Large Companies (251-500 employees)

These organizations show the strongest emphasis on core skills among all size categories. They rate character (86.2%), communication (70%), and collaboration (56.7%) as extremely important at the highest rates across all company sizes. This strong emphasis on fundamental workplace skills might reflect their more structured organizational environments and team-based work approaches.

Largest Companies (500+ employees)

While their "extremely important" ratings for communication (55.3%) and character (57.4%) are somewhat lower than smaller companies, they show consistently high combined ratings across all skills when including both "extremely" and "very important" categories. This suggests they seek well-rounded employees who can function effectively in complex organizational environments.

Understanding These Variations: Practical Applications

For Educators and Schools

Knowing how durable skill priorities vary across employer sizes can help educators better prepare students for their local job market. In communities dominated by small businesses, schools might emphasize independent work and creative problem-solving. Where larger employers are prevalent, programs could focus more on collaborative

projects and team-based learning. This understanding of company size and preferred skill sets can help schools design more relevant project-based learning experiences, career exploration activities, and work-based learning opportunities that reflect actual workplace demands in their community.

For Students and Career Planning

Different work environments demand different skill combinations. Small businesses often require employees who can work independently and wear multiple hats, while larger organizations typically need team players who can navigate complex organizational structures. Understanding these variations helps students make informed decisions about their career paths and skill development.

For School-Business Partnerships

The distinct skill priorities across different business sizes provide insights for creating meaningful partnerships. Schools can better structure their internship programs, mentorship opportunities, and career exploration activities when they understand what their local business partners value most. This knowledge helps ensure that partnerships are mutually beneficial - businesses gain access to better-prepared potential employees, while schools can offer more relevant experiential learning opportunities.

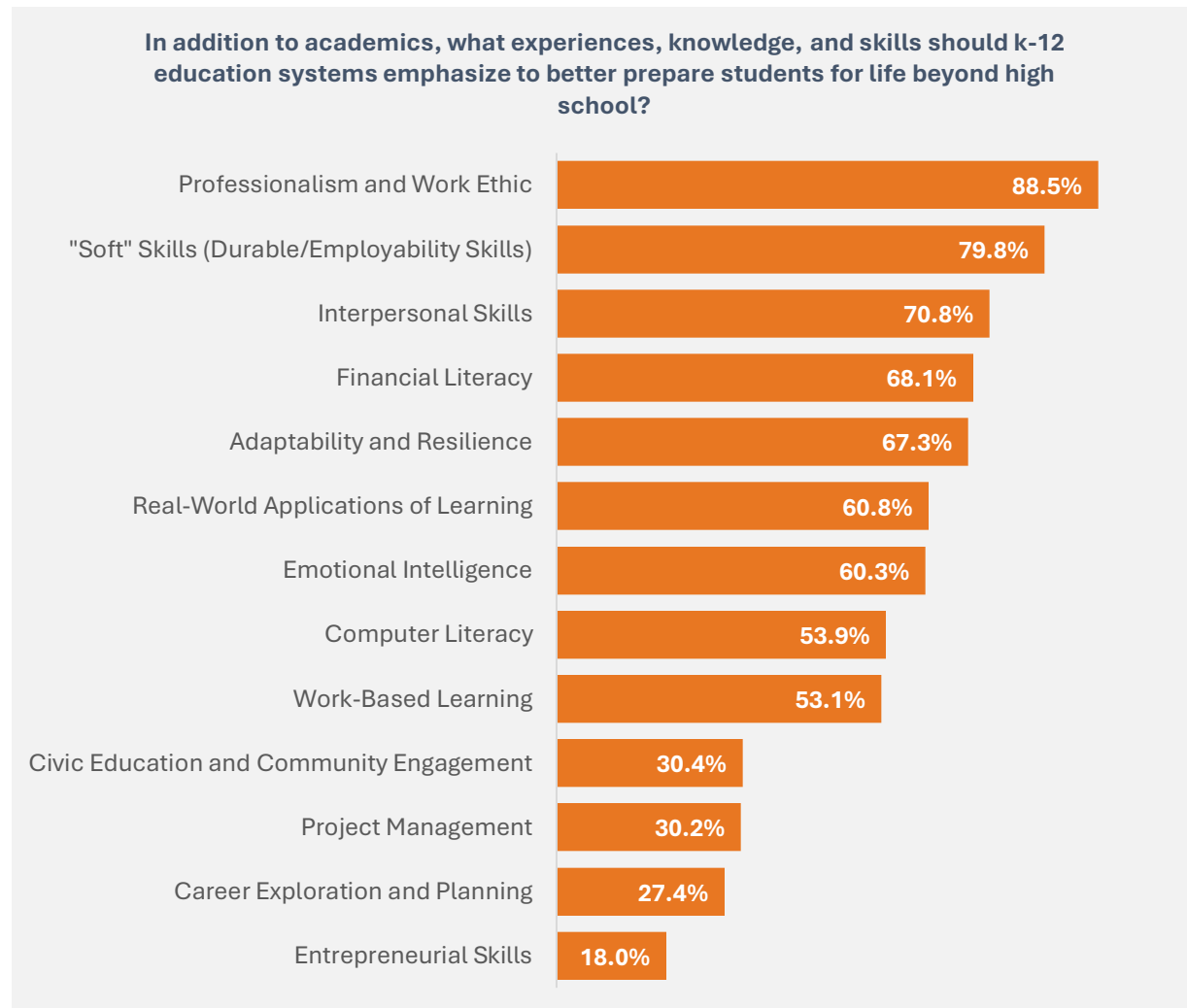
For Workforce Development

Understanding how skill requirements vary across the business landscape helps inform more effective workforce development strategies. Training programs can be tailored to reflect the actual needs of local employers, whether they're primarily small businesses, large organizations, or a mix of both. This understanding supports the development of more relevant credentials and training programs that truly prepare individuals for success in their local job market.

ADDITIONAL COMPETENCIES

In addition to academics, what experiences, knowledge, and skills should k-12 education systems emphasize to better prepare students for life beyond high school?

Durable skills dominate the top: The highest-ranked items are predominantly durable skills or personal attributes, rather than technical knowledge.



- Professionalism and work ethic lead: At 88.5%, this is by far the most emphasized area, indicating a strong belief that cultivating a professional mindset early is crucial.
- Durable skills are highly valued: Coming in second at 79.8%, this suggests a focus on skills that remain relevant despite changing job markets and technologies.
- Interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence: Both rank highly (70.8% and 60.3%, respectively), underlining the importance of social and emotional competencies.
- Financial literacy ranks high: At 68.1%, this practical life skill is seen as more important than some traditional academic focuses.

- Adaptability and real-world application: Both ranking above 60%, these emphasize the need for students to be flexible and able to apply their learning practically.
- Technology skills are mid-range: Computer literacy at 53.9% is seen as important, but not as crucial as durable skills.
- Lower emphasis on specific career skills: Career exploration (27.4%) and entrepreneurial skills (18%) rank lowest, suggesting a preference for broader, more generally applicable skills.
- Civic education is a relatively low priority: At 30.4%, this suggests less emphasis on traditional civics compared to workplace and life skills.

A Clear Direction for Preparedness

Kentucky employers have provided a compelling vision for what students need to be prepared for life beyond high school. With professionalism and work ethic leading at 88.5%, durable skills at 79.8%, and interpersonal capabilities at 70.8%, these priorities reveal more than just workplace preferences – they point toward learning environments that develop capable, confident, and purposeful individuals that are ready to face the challenges of life beyond high school in an ever-evolving world.

Professional Environments for Authentic Growth

The overwhelming emphasis on professionalism (88.5%) suggests that classrooms themselves must evolve to spaces where meaningful work happens. Rather than simply teaching about professional behavior, learning environments should naturally develop these capabilities through work that matters. When students engage in projects with real consequences, manage authentic deadlines, and take genuine responsibility for outcomes, they develop not just professional skills but a deeper understanding of their own capabilities.

Building Lasting and Transferable Capabilities

The strong priority placed on durable skills (79.8%) reveals the need for learning experiences that develop lasting abilities. These skills – problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability – emerge when students tackle complex challenges that require genuine thought and innovation. As students work through real problems without predetermined solutions, they develop both competence and confidence. This suggests moving away from isolated skill development toward integrated experiences where multiple capabilities develop simultaneously through core academic learning.

The Social Nature of Learning and Work

The high value placed on interpersonal skills (70.8%) and emotional intelligence (60.3%) points to the importance of collaborative learning environments. When students work together on complex projects, navigate team dynamics, and develop leadership capabilities, they build both social skills and individual identity. This suggests structuring learning around shared challenges that require genuine collaboration, where students learn not just to cooperate but to truly work together toward meaningful goals.

Connected Learning for Lasting Impact

The significant emphasis on financial literacy (68.1%) and real-world application (above 60%) reveals the importance of connecting learning to life beyond school. When students engage with authentic challenges, manage real resources, and see the practical impact of their work, their learning becomes both deeper and more lasting. Employers clearly value experiences where academic content naturally connects to practical application, and where students can see the relevance of their learning to their future lives.

Technology as a Pathway to Purpose

While technology skills rank at 53.9%, this moderate priority suggests something important: technology serves learning best when it enables meaningful work rather than existing as a separate focus. This points toward integrating digital tools naturally into learning experiences, using technology to enhance collaboration, creativity, and connection to the wider world.

Toward Meaningful Transformation

These employer priorities outlines an education system that fosters not just skills but capability, not just knowledge but understanding, not just professionalism but purpose. The data suggests that effective learning environments should:

- Engage students in work that matters
- Build confidence through genuine accomplishment
- Develop capabilities through authentic challenges
- Foster collaboration around meaningful goals
- Connect learning to life beyond school
- Use technology purposefully
- Prepare for adaptation and growth

SCHOOL-EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS

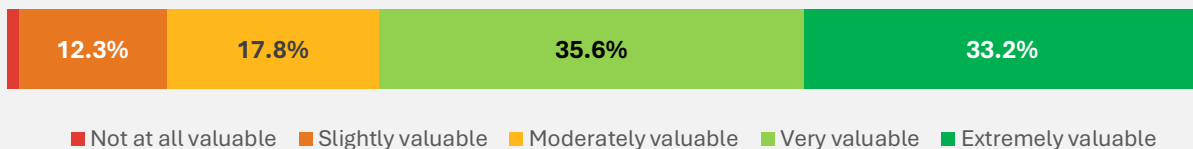
Key Themes:

1. There's a strong recognition of the value and importance of school-employer partnerships.
2. Current engagement levels are moderate, with significant room for growth.
3. A communication gap exists between employers and K-12 institutions.
4. There's substantial willingness among employers to engage more deeply in various partnership activities.
5. The data suggests untapped potential for expanding work-based learning opportunities, curriculum collaboration, and resource allocation.

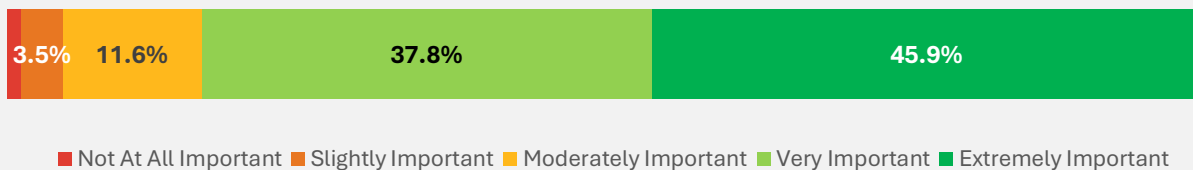
Strong Recognition of Partnership Value

The data reveals strong overall recognition of partnership value, with 68.8% of respondents viewing K-12 partnerships as very or extremely valuable for workforce development, and an overwhelming 83.7% believing these partnerships are crucial for fostering future talent pipelines. However, when disaggregated by organization size, interesting patterns emerge. Large employers (500+ employees) show significantly higher value recognition, with 66.67% rating partnerships as "Extremely Important" compared to 38.89% of small employers. While leadership recognition is strong, with 45.33% of CEOs rating partnerships as "Extremely Important," this recognition doesn't consistently translate into action.

How valuable are partnerships with local K-12 education to developing a skilled workforce for your business?



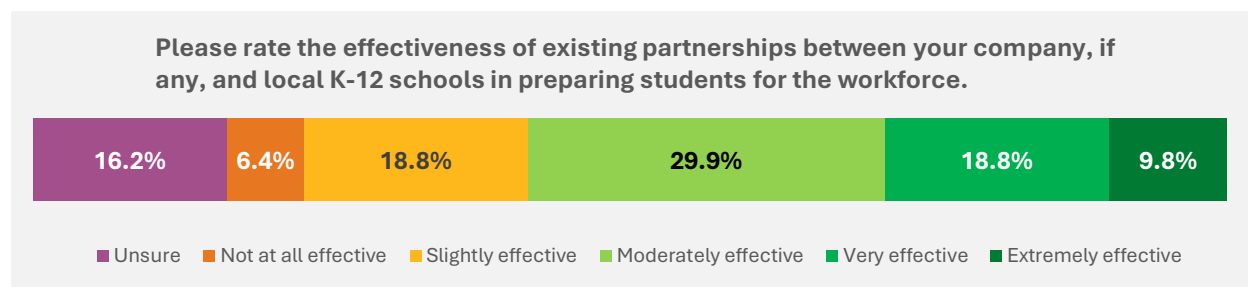
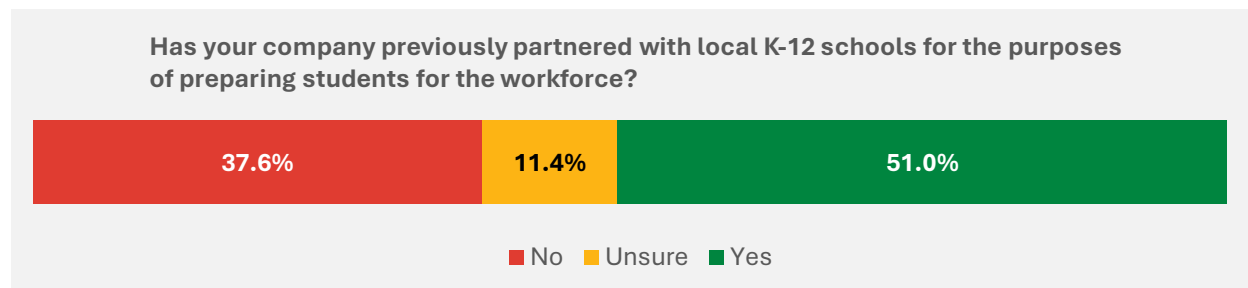
How important is it for K-12 schools to partner with the business community to foster future talent pipeline?



Current Partnership Landscape

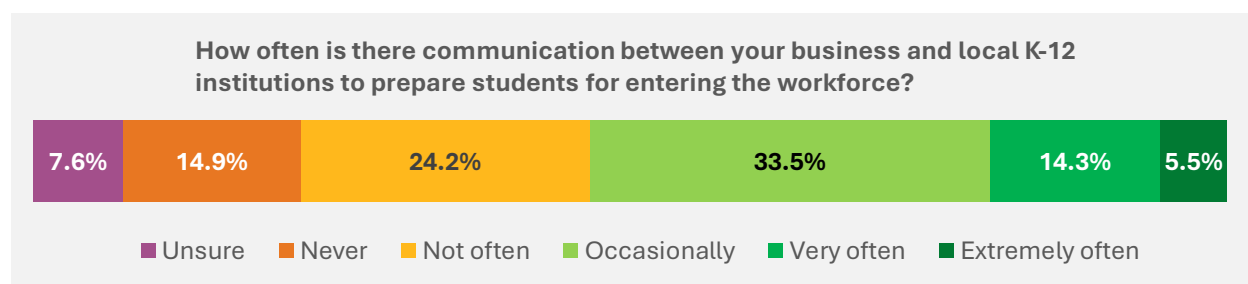
While just over half (51%) of companies report existing partnerships with K-12 schools for workforce preparation, effectiveness varies considerably. Among active partnerships, 28.6% report very or extremely effective collaborations, while 25.2% indicate little to no effectiveness. When disaggregated by organizational size, stark differences appear. Large employers show significantly higher partnership rates at 79.49% compared to just

42.06% of small employers. Geographic scale also matters significantly, with regional companies showing partnership rates 15 percentage points higher than local companies.



Communication Gap

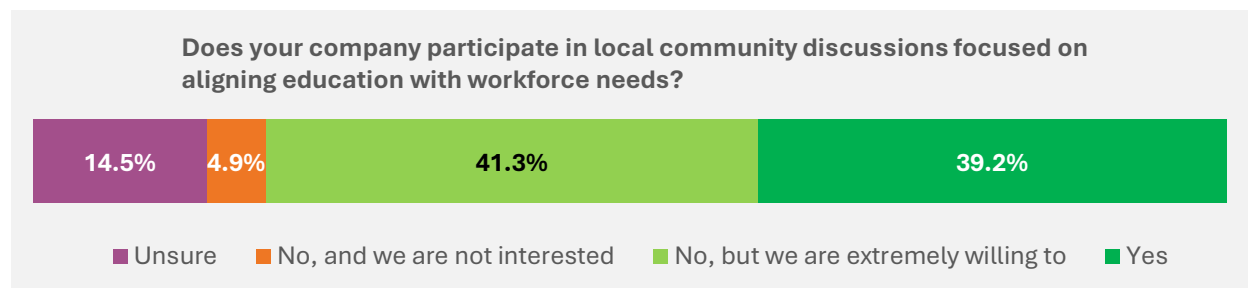
A significant communication challenge exists, with only 19.8% of employers maintaining frequent communication with K-12 institutions and 39.1% reporting little to no communication. When disaggregated by geographic scale and size, the disparity becomes more pronounced. While 35.90% of national companies maintain "Very frequent" communication, only 10.28% of local companies achieve similar levels. Organization size plays a crucial role - large employers report significantly higher communication rates at 35.90% compared to smaller organizations. Notably, companies with regular communication show 28.6% higher partnership satisfaction rates.



Current Engagement Level

Current engagement shows both promise and room for growth, with 39.2% of companies actively participating in community discussions on education-workforce alignment and an additional 41.3% expressing strong willingness to engage. Companies actively participating in community discussions show markedly different outcomes - 28.6% report higher confidence in graduate preparedness, 45.8% maintain more frequent communication with schools, and 39.2% are more likely to offer work-based learning opportunities.

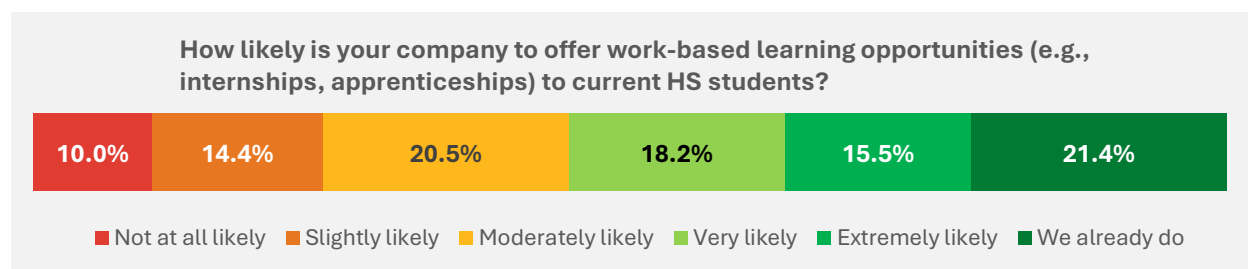
When disaggregated by role and organization size, significant variations appear. Recruitment Managers and Talent Managers demonstrate the highest engagement (80% and 75% respectively), while CEOs show lower actual participation (45.33%). Larger organizations (500+ employees) display notably higher engagement at 66.67% compared to 31.48% of small companies, potentially suggesting resource capacity influences participation levels.



Work-Based Learning Opportunities

The landscape of work-based learning shows significant untapped potential, with 21.4% of employers currently offering opportunities and 54.2% indicating likelihood of future participation. Among employers currently offering work-based learning, 55.7% report access to future employees as the primary benefit, demonstrating a direct pipeline from education to employment.

When disaggregated, several compelling patterns emerge that highlight both opportunities and challenges. Organization size reveals a clear implementation divide - 31.58% of large employers (500+ employees) currently offer programs compared to 13.08% of small companies. Leadership perspectives also show interesting gaps: while 50% of Talent Acquisition Managers already implement programs, only 16.78% of CEOs do so, despite 37.58% expressing strong likelihood to participate. Industry differences are equally telling - healthcare shows the largest implementation gap with 76.31% valuing work-based learning but only 25.64% offering programs, while manufacturing demonstrates strong preference for specific approaches, with 71.43% emphasizing apprenticeship programs.



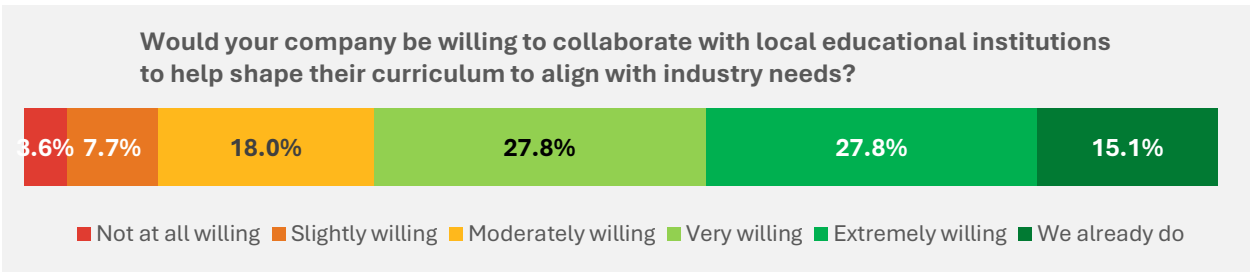
Curriculum Collaboration

While only 15.1% of employers currently collaborate with educational institutions on curriculum alignment, willingness to engage varies significantly when disaggregated by role and organization size. Among leadership roles, Talent Acquisition Managers show the highest current engagement at 54.55% already collaborating, while only 12% of CEOs and 7.55% of HR Directors actively participating. The size gap is equally telling - 29.73% of large employers (500+ employees) currently collaborate compared to 13.08% of small businesses (1-10 employees). Despite low current participation, willingness is high: Department Heads show 46.15% "Very or Extremely willing"

to collaborate with only 14.75% currently doing so, and among CEOs, 58.66% express strong willingness while just 12% currently engage.

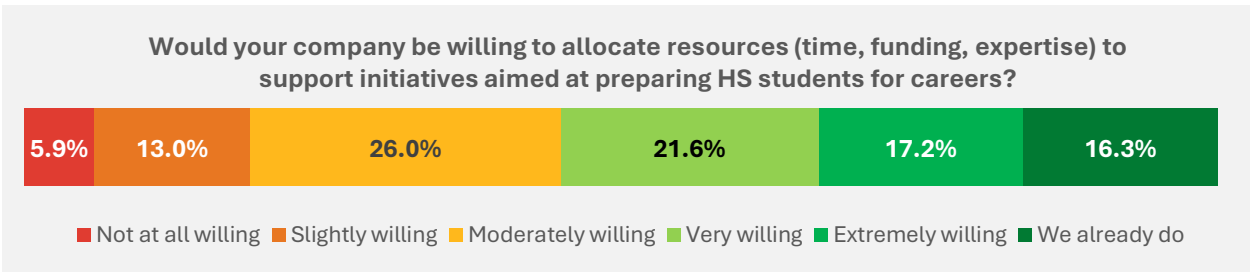
Geographic scale also impacts collaboration rates:

- Regional companies: 13.11% currently collaborating vs. 63.94% expressing strong willingness.
- Local companies: 17.89% currently collaborating vs. 50.52% expressing strong willingness.
- National organizations: 5.77% currently collaborating vs. 55.77% expressing strong willingness.



Resource Allocation

Resource commitment patterns reveal a significant gap between willingness and action. While 38.8% express strong willingness to allocate resources, only 16.3% currently do so. When disaggregated by leadership role and organization size, interesting patterns emerge. CEOs show a notable disconnect - 45.33% rate partnerships as "Extremely Important," but only 13.33% commit resources currently. Organization size reveals another clear pattern - large organizations demonstrate more consistent follow-through, with higher correlation between stated importance of partnerships (76%) and actual resource commitment (33.33%), compared to just 11.21% of small employers currently allocating resources.



BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKFORCE READINESS PROGRAMS

The survey results reveal a range of significant barriers that hinder the successful implementation of workforce readiness programs for high school students in Kentucky. While the overall responses show a high degree of consistency, with 35-50% of respondents citing most factors as very significant or significant barriers, and an additional 15-25% viewing them as somewhat of a barrier, certain challenges stand out as particularly pressing.

The Most Significant Barriers

The three most significant barriers identified by employers are:

1. Limited availability of qualified instructors or mentors: 50% report this as a very significant or significant barrier, while 17.2% view it as somewhat of a barrier.
2. Difficulty in engaging students who may not immediately recognize the value of workforce readiness programs: 45.8% report this as a very significant or significant barrier, with 20.5% seeing it as somewhat of a barrier.
3. Challenges in coordinating schedules between schools and employers: 45.1% report this as a very significant or significant barrier, and 24.6% view it as somewhat of a barrier.

These findings, with over 45% of respondents citing them as very significant or significant, underscore the critical need to address the talent pipeline for qualified instructors and mentors, while also developing strategies to effectively communicate the value of these programs to students and ensure seamless coordination between schools and employers.

Moderate Barriers

In addition to the most significant challenges, the survey also identified a range of moderate barriers, including:

- Lack of awareness or understanding among employers about how to effectively engage with high school students (39.5% very significant/significant, 23.6% somewhat).
- Concerns regarding liability or legal issues related to student participation in workplace activities (39% very significant/significant, 21.1% somewhat).
- Geographic or transportation barriers for students accessing off-site training or internship opportunities (38.1% very significant/significant, 19% somewhat).
- Lack of collaboration or partnerships between schools, employers, and community organizations (38.1% very significant/significant, 18.8% somewhat).
- Inadequate funding or financial resources (38.4% very significant/significant, 15.9% somewhat).

Addressing these moderate barriers, with around 35-40% of respondents citing them as very significant or significant, will be crucial for creating a more supportive environment for the implementation of successful workforce readiness programs.

Least Significant Barriers (But Still Notable)

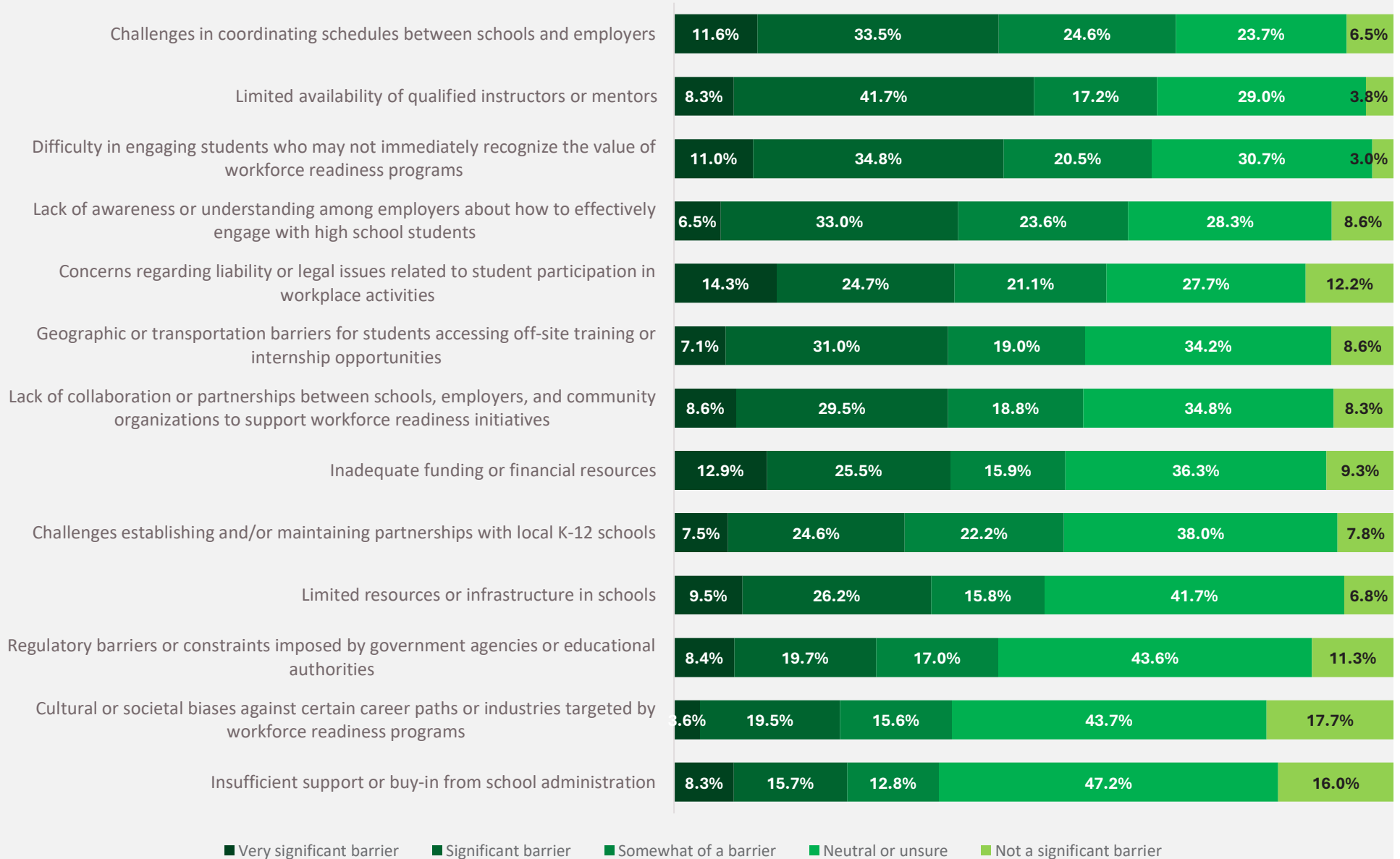
While somewhat less pressing than the top challenges, the survey also identified barriers related to:

- Challenges establishing and/or maintaining partnerships with local K-12 schools (32.1% very significant/significant, 22.2% somewhat)
- Limited resources or infrastructure in schools (35.7% very significant/significant, 15.8% somewhat)

These obstacles, while not as severe, with around 30-35% of respondents citing them as very significant or significant, still require attention to ensure a comprehensive approach to overcoming the barriers to workforce readiness programs.

By carefully examining and addressing these varied barriers, Kentucky can unlock the full potential of workforce readiness initiatives and better prepare high school students for success in the modern economy.

To what extent do the following factors act as barriers to the successful implementation of workforce readiness programs for HS students?



INCENTIVES TO INCREASE SCHOOL-EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS

When asked about the importance of different incentives or benefits that would encourage their company's involvement in school-employer partnerships focused on workforce preparedness, the survey respondents expressed a clear hierarchy of priorities.

Top Incentives: Workforce Development and Training

The most compelling benefits for companies were those related to workforce development and training opportunities. Access to potential future employees emerged as the top incentive, with 55.7% of respondents rating it as extremely or very important. This was closely followed by tailored training opportunities for potential hires, which 51.5% considered highly important.

Structured Collaboration and Clear Value Proposition

Practical support mechanisms were also highly valued by employers. Nearly half (48.6%) viewed clearly defined employer benefits as extremely or very important, while 46.9% prioritized school-sponsored programs that facilitate these partnerships. The data suggests companies prefer formalized, structured collaboration methods, with 79.7% citing school-sponsored programs and 75.8% valuing industry advisory board participation as important.

Financial Incentives Rank Lower

Notably, financial incentives received comparatively less emphasis from the respondents. Only about a third (34.9%) considered financial incentives or subsidies extremely or very important, and just 25.9% viewed tax incentives as highly important. In fact, 33.4% of respondents saw tax incentives as not important at all.

Preference for Systemic Support over Direct Subsidies

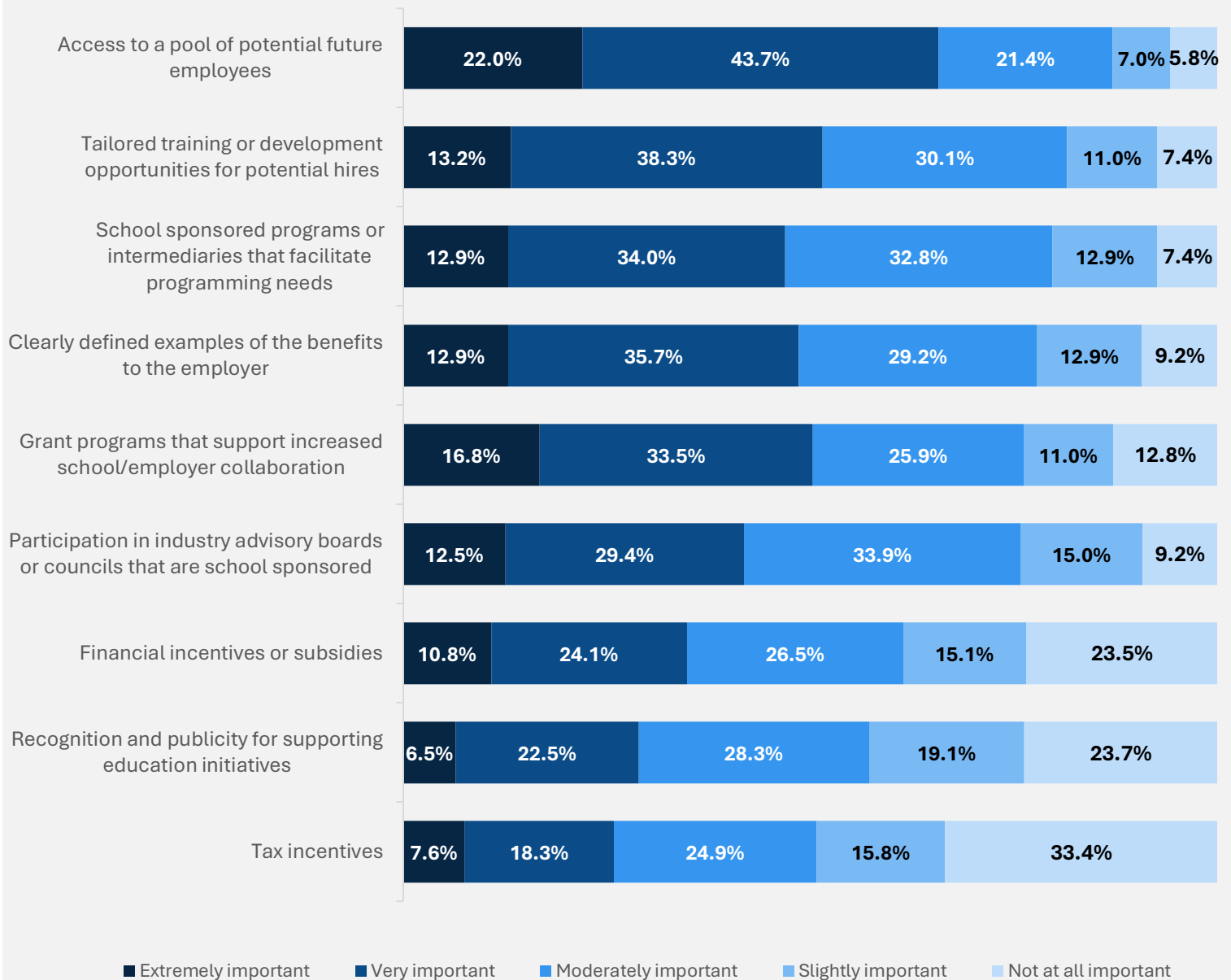
The data indicates that companies value long-term, strategic benefits like workforce development and training opportunities more highly than immediate financial incentives when considering school-employer partnerships. This is further evidenced by the higher importance placed on grant programs supporting collaboration (76.2% combined) compared to direct financial incentives.

Implications and Insights

The survey findings suggest that companies are primarily interested in incentives that can help them shape the skills of potential hires and gain access to a pipeline of future talent. They value structured, formalized collaboration with schools and a clear understanding of the benefits their involvement will bring. While financial incentives are not irrelevant, the data indicates that companies are more responsive to systemic support and programs that address their long-term workforce needs.

By understanding these employer priorities, education and policymakers can design more effective incentive structures and partnership models that encourage meaningful, sustainable engagements between schools and businesses to better prepare students for success.

How important are the following incentives or benefits that would encourage your company's involvement in school/employer partnerships regarding students' workforce preparedness?



What challenges do you face in recruiting and retaining skilled employees, and how do you believe K-12 schools could better address these issues?

According to qualitative survey responses, employers in Kentucky face a variety of challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled employees. These challenges can be broadly categorized into the following areas:

Durable Skills Gaps

Employers report significant deficiencies in the durable skills of recent hires, including:

- Poor communication skills (verbal, written, and interpersonal)
- Lack of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities

Workplace Behavior Concerns

Employers also cite issues with the professional behaviors of job candidates, such as:

- Lack of professionalism
- Weak work ethic
- Poor time management and punctuality

Shortcomings in Basic Skills

Employers note gaps in candidates' fundamental skills, including:

- Deficiencies in reading, writing, and math
- Lack of financial literacy
- Insufficient technological skills

Attitude and Expectation Misalignment

Employers grapple with candidates who exhibit:

- Unrealistic salary expectations
- Lack of commitment and loyalty
- Unwillingness to start at entry-level positions
- Entitlement mentality

Practical Recruitment Challenges

Employers also face practical difficulties, such as:

- Finding candidates with specific technical skills
- Competing with other employers, especially in rural areas
- Retaining employees due to job-hopping tendencies

K-12 Suggestions to Address Employer Challenges

To help address these talent challenges, employers provided several suggestions for how K-12 schools can better prepare students:

Enhance Durable Skills Education

- Focus on communication skills, including public speaking and professional writing
- Teach time management, punctuality, and cultivate a growth mindset
- Incorporate more teamwork and collaboration into the curriculum

Improve Foundational Skills

- Strengthen the fundamentals of reading, writing, and math
- Increase financial literacy competencies
- Enhance technological education

Provide Real-World Exposure

- Offer more internships and work-based learning opportunities
- Invite guest speakers from various industries
- Conduct mock interviews and resume-writing workshops

Strengthen Career Readiness

- Expand vocational and trade education options
- Provide comprehensive career counseling and exploration
- Teach job search skills and interview etiquette

Develop Life Skills and Personal Growth

- Foster resilience, adaptability, and a growth mindset
- Teach conflict resolution and emotional intelligence
- Educate students on professional conduct and workplace expectations

Adjust Curriculum and Instruction

- Balance academic knowledge with practical, real-world applications
- Incorporate more project-based learning
- Integrate critical thinking and problem-solving across all subjects

In your opinion, what are the primary obstacles in the current education-to-career landscape that hinder the development of a competent and ready workforce?

According to the survey responses, employers in Kentucky identified several key obstacles that hinder the development of a competent and ready workforce:

Disconnect between Education and Workplace Demands

Employers perceive a significant gap between academic education and the practical skills required in the workplace. They strongly desire more integration of real-world experiences, internships, and practical skills training in education to better prepare students.

Durable Skills Deficiencies

Employers view durable skills, particularly communication, professionalism, and work ethic, as major areas of deficiency among recent graduates. There is a call for more emphasis on developing these essential workplace competencies throughout the educational experience.

Overemphasis on Traditional Degree Programs

Many employers feel there is an overemphasis on traditional 4-year college degrees, potentially at the expense of vocational and technical training that could lead to skilled jobs in high demand.

Mismatch in Expectations and Realities

Employers note a perceived mismatch between graduate expectations and workplace realities, particularly regarding starting salaries, job responsibilities, and career progression.

Lack of Parental Engagement and Support

Responses indicate the need for stronger support and engagement from parents, who are seen as potential obstacles in the development of students' post-high school readiness.

Inadequate Career Guidance and Exploration

Employers believe career guidance and exploration opportunities are currently inadequate, and that students need more exposure to various career options and industries throughout their education, starting at an earlier age.

Curriculum Misalignment with Workforce Needs

The current curriculum is often viewed as not sufficiently aligned with workforce needs. There are calls for more practical life skills education and better alignment with industry requirements.

Challenges with Technology Integration

Technology dependence is seen as a double-edged sword, with concerns about its impact on interpersonal skills and workplace focus.

Need for Developing Adaptability and Resilience

Employers emphasize the importance of improving students' adaptability, resilience, and ability to handle constructive criticism as key areas for preparation in the workforce.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Are there any policies you believe should be in place to incentivize and support school/employer partnerships?



A smaller subset of qualitative survey responses provided a range of policy considerations that employers believe should be implemented to incentivize and support school-employer partnerships in Kentucky. These recommendations can be categorized into the following key areas:

Financial Incentives

Many respondents suggested various forms of financial incentives to encourage partnerships, including:

- Grants and funding for schools and businesses
- Subsidies to help pay for co-op, internship, and apprenticeship programs

Regulatory and Legal Support

Several responses highlighted the need for policies that address legal and regulatory concerns, such as:

- Clearer policies outlining the legal parameters for student participation in workplace activities
- Ensuring compliance with relevant labor laws

Transportation and Logistics

Some respondents mentioned the need for support in practical matters related to transportation, including:

- Assistance with transportation for students participating in off-site programs

Curriculum and Educational Integration

Respondents provided suggestions for better integrating work experiences into the educational curriculum, such as:

- Policies that prioritize education curriculum and schedules for students partnered with employers
- Clear educational components for apprenticeship and internship programs