

## Your Question:

A state education leader asked us for information on how states are teaching or assessing soft skills.

## Our Response:

Students, state leaders and employers have emphasized the importance of soft skills in students' successful transition into jobs, careers and life. [Soft skills](#) are generally considered:

- Interpersonal communication.
- Relationship skills.
- Teamwork and collaboration.
- Leadership.
- Problem solving and critical thinking.
- Work ethic and persistence.
- Organizational skills.
- Creativity.

With this emphasis, states, schools and districts have sought ways to incorporate soft skills into alternative assessments for [graduation requirements](#) in K-12 settings. Often, this includes assessing social and emotional learning and related skills, such as how students communicate and engage with others.

Additionally, states have considered work-based learning and other hands-on learning opportunities as means for students to develop soft skills. Through engagement with employers, students have opportunities to develop communication and interpersonal skills that help them navigate career opportunities in addition to skills employers demand.

The following state examples highlight ways states have incorporated soft skills into competency-based graduation requirements, competency-based education and accountability, and work-based learning.

## **Competency-Based Graduation Requirements**

Through competency-based graduation requirements, some states require students to demonstrate skills before graduation. Often, these skills include soft skills and other communication or interpersonal skills that support them in their learning, lives and careers beyond high school. It is important to note that these assessments do not require the removal of standardized testing mandates; it means expanding how students are evaluated.

**Indiana:** As a pathway to graduation, the state [requires](#) students to demonstrate employability skills and postsecondary readiness. The state has [four categories](#) of employability skills that the student product must satisfy, which include:

- Mindset.
- Learning strategies.
- Social and emotional skills.
- Work ethic.

Students may demonstrate employability skills through one of three options.

- **Project-Based Learning:** Project-based learning allows students to gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge. The project is framed by a meaningful problem to solve or a question to answer at the appropriate level of challenge. Students engage in a rigorous, extended process of asking questions, finding resources and applying information. Students often make their project work public by explaining, displaying and/or presenting it to people beyond the classroom.
- **Service-Based Learning:** Service-based learning integrates meaningful service to enrich and apply academic knowledge, teach civic and personal responsibility (and other employability skills), and strengthen communities. Service-Based Learning can be classified by three core indicators:
  - Integrating academic study with service experience,
  - Reflecting larger social, economic and societal issues, and
  - Collaborative efforts between students, schools and community partners.
- **Work-Based Learning:** Work-based learning is a strategy to reinforce academic, technical and social skills learned in the classroom through collaborative activities with employer partners. Work-based learning experiences allow students to apply classroom theories to practical problems, explore career options, and pursue personal and professional goals. Work-Based Learning includes activities that occur in workplaces and involve an employer assigning a student meaningful job tasks to develop their skills, knowledge and readiness for work. It supports entry or advancement in particular career fields and can serve as the culminating course or event in a student’s chosen career pathway. Through Work-Based Learning, students can apply the concepts, skills and dispositions learned in previous coursework in real-world business or industry settings.

**Texas:** State [policy](#) establishes that students must demonstrate proficiency, as determined by the district, in delivering clear verbal messages, choosing effective nonverbal behaviors, listening for desired results, applying valid critical-thinking and problem-solving processes, and identifying, analyzing, developing and evaluating communicating skills needed for professional and social success.

## Competency-Based Education and Accountability

[Student-centered learning](#) encompasses practices designed to meet each student’s individual needs. This means creating learning environments that are personalized, competency-based, student-driven and connected to real-world experiences. Student-centered learning approaches are intended to speak to students’ diverse and distinct needs, interests and cultural backgrounds; these approaches are also intended to support the development of the skills and knowledge necessary for success in college, career and civic life. Although education leaders use various terms to describe student-centered learning practices, personalized, [competency-based learning](#) is a key strategy for creating student-centered learning environments, schools and education systems.

Many states, including [Wyoming](#), have developed profiles of a graduate. In some instances, states have considered this for inclusion in their school report card.

**Utah** recently underwent an [accountability redesign](#) process to better align its accountability system to the state’s personalized, competency-based learning [framework](#) and [grant program](#). In addition to proposing new indicators for high schools, the [final report](#) also proposes the identification of two local accountability indicators aligned to the state’s [profile of a graduate](#) for inclusion in the school report card. The report recommended requiring each school to submit evidence for supporting students in meeting up to three competencies identified in the graduate profile but noted that these competencies are challenging to measure.

## Work-Based Learning

Students can develop soft skills in a work environment through a range of work-based learning activities. These activities are with employers and support students in developing an understanding of what employers are looking for beyond technical skills. From providing job shadowing activities to supporting apprenticeship programs, states have supported a range of work-based learning opportunities that allow students to learn soft skills. As noted in the **Indiana** example above, there are instances where competency-based graduation requirements are aligned with work-based learning to demonstrate required competencies.

**Minnesota:** Soft skills are included in the state’s work-based learning workplace readiness training [performance measures](#) (pg. 51–54). Specifically, actions related to written communication, verbal communication, active listening, punctuality, respect for others and teamwork, among other skills are included.

**Oklahoma:** Through the state’s work-based learning [program and guidance](#), the state emphasizes that students who engage in work-based learning have opportunities to develop soft skills businesses demand. Further, the state emphasizes that businesses play an active role in developing students’ skills.