

Your Question:

You asked how states are supporting the development of pre-employment skills for high school students.

Our Response:

[Pre-employment activities](#) provide individuals with basic skills that will allow them to enter and have success in a work setting. The activities generally focus on foundational skills (sometimes referred to as [employability skills](#)) and allow opportunities to develop more technical skills in the future.

Generally, state activity to support high school students' transition to employment post-graduation has focused on four interconnected areas, [career and technical education](#), [industry certification attainment](#), [high school graduation requirements](#) and [work-based learning](#). Through each of these areas, states have considered ways to provide opportunities for future learning in addition to foundational skills.

Below please find a general overview of each category as they relate to pre-employment activities in high school.

Career and Technical Education

While career and technical education provides opportunities for students to build technical skills within a particular field, many programs support the development of foundational employment skills alongside technical skills. In 2018, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education developed an [Employability Skills Framework](#) that connects foundational employability skills with career and technical education and secondary education. The framework outlines three groups of skills that support a student's ability to gain employment beyond high school and their CTE experience:

1. **Applied Knowledge:** The framework establishes that for students to be employed, they need foundational critical thinking and applied academic skills to succeed in their future job.
2. **Workplace Skills:** In addition to applied skills, the framework suggests that students need to build resource management, information use and communication skills to function and succeed in a work setting.
3. **Effective relationships:** The final piece of the framework outlines the need for students to establish relationships and have skills to take responsibility, use technology and communicate.

The development of these skills takes place in CTE programs and high school classrooms across the states. Many of the skills outlined in the Employability Skills Framework exist in the skills statements within the [National Career Clusters Framework](#) that states use to develop their CTE courses and career clusters.

Industry Certifications and High School Graduation Requirements

States have adopted a series of policies that allow students to earn industry certifications while in high school. [At least 27 states](#) have policies in place that allow students to earn credentials through CTE coursework. While these opportunities can take many forms, students who complete a sequence of CTE courses in a specific career cluster can complete assessments to earn relevant industry certifications.

For example, **Colorado** has a [policy](#) to allow students to earn industry certifications and the department of education provides [graduation guidelines for industry certificates](#). Each school district in Colorado determines which industry certificates or certifications will be accepted for a student's demonstration of learning according to the graduation guidelines menu of options.

Further, some states allow students to count career-focused coursework or assessments toward their [high school graduation requirements](#). Students can earn a range of certifications while in high school. On the employability skills side, assessments such as the WorkKeys are common. As part of their non-course requirements for high school graduation, [Ohio](#) students must meet specific scores on various assessments, including the ACT WorkKeys assessment.

It should be noted that some of the credentials earned in high school are [not necessarily in high demand](#) by employers and may lead to jobs that pay a living wage. A [2019 analysis](#) of 24 states' career and technical education programs and credential opportunities within them found that few were of high demand. [Quality of the credential](#) and connection the learning and credentials have to future learning are important considerations.

Work-Based Learning

Understanding what it is like to work in a specific job can support students' success in the workplace. Supporting activities and work-based learning activities along a [broader work-based learning continuum](#) can provide students with a range of hands-on experiences that can ultimately help them identify interests and develop employer-relevant skills to succeed in a job.

Some states have begun to put [early career exploration opportunities](#) in place for middle school and early high school students to explore and begin to understand what it is like to work in specific jobs and industries.

[Research](#) suggests that middle school is when students can benefit the most from career exploration. Given where adolescent children are developmentally, there is an opportunity for students to [develop employability skills](#) and gain a sense of their interests through career exploration in middle school and early high school.

[Virginia statute](#) requires each school board to require each middle school student to take at least one career-investigation course or engage in an alternative activity that allows for career exploration. The course or alternative experience must provide a foundation for the student to develop their academic and career plan. The state board of education must develop content standards for the career-investigation course and experiences.

Early opportunities can connect and support student participation in work-based learning in careers or fields they are interested in pursuing after high school graduation. **Tennessee** established a [work-based learning continuum](#) that begins with industry awareness and exploration and culminates with hand-on, workplace training. The continuum allows high school students to grow through a series of workplace learning opportunities and gain experiences that will help them access and succeed in a specific career after graduation.