



THE PUBLIC EDUCATION PROMISE

Toolkit Executive Summary

Principle 2:

The New Basics: Real Skills for Real Life

Developing skills that help students think creatively and critically, set goals, and succeed in school and beyond.

Purpose

This toolkit helps district leaders understand why Real Skills matter, how the science of learning and brain development strengthens our approach, and what it takes to prepare students for real life in a rapidly changing world. Grounded in neuroscience, developmental research, and practical skill-building, it offers a clear path for embedding the habits and mindsets today's students need to learn and thrive.

This guidance will help districts:

- Understand that executive function skills such as cognitive flexibility, self-control, working memory, and reflection are foundational to our students' success in reading, writing, and math and are necessary for students to successfully develop the Real Skills in a district's Portrait of a Graduate.
- Define, teach, and strengthen Real Skills—such as focus, self-regulation, problem-solving, adaptability, creativity, and collaboration—that drive long-term learning and adult success.
- Use their Portrait of a Graduate to name these competencies clearly, embed them into teaching, learning, and culture, and align them with students' pathways to college, career, and real life.

Core Understandings

- Modern workforce expectations have shifted: adaptability, creativity, analytical thinking, teamwork, digital literacy, and self-regulation are now baseline expectations. Students must learn how to learn, not just what to remember.

- The science of learning is unequivocal: executive function skills, healthy routines, play, exploration, and opportunities to practice real skills directly shape academic success and well-being now and in the future.
- When schools intentionally develop real skills and the environment and mindsets that support them, students gain agency and purpose—setting goals, managing challenges, and making informed decisions about their futures.

Key Insights from Participants

Community-Defined “Why”

Districts that clearly define their “skills that matter” with students, families, and employers build stronger buy-in. The Portrait of a Graduate should be the anchor for naming and communicating real-life competencies.

Early and Integrated Practice

The New Basics begin in early childhood and progress through graduation and beyond. Districts that embed these skills inside everyday learning—not as add-ons—see stronger transfer into real-life settings.

Student Learning Experiences

Teachers need room to teach both content and Real Skills. Curricular overload crowds out the time students need to understand the content and skills they are learning, process and apply them to become adaptable problem-solvers.

Workforce-Relevant Experiences

Increasingly, employer hiring decisions hinge less on test scores and far more on problem-solving, communication, teamwork and adaptability. Similarly, in the age of AI students want to know how what they are learning will help them in real life. Districts that build community-connected learning (CTE, internships, service, job shadows) reinforce these skills.

Brain-Informed Professional Learning

Educators benefit from training that integrates the science of learning with practice—so they can see how Real Skills improve their own and students’ learning. Opportunities to learn executive function skills and how to apply them builds mastery in both educators and students.

Context and Language Matter

Some have questioned the use of the phrase “Real Skills for Real Life.” This language is important because many times our students have told us that school does not feel like “real life” and they are not sure why they are learning what they are learning. Though different communities may prioritize different skills they believe their students need to be successful, and they might use different language to illustrate their goals, the priority remains. These Real Skills are developed on a foundation that includes executive function skills and reading, writing, and math. Brain research tells us that these executive function skills are necessary and must be intentionally taught (which means that adults need to develop and model these skills too) and actually lead to success in reading, writing, and math.

Connection to Other Public Education Promise Principles

Principle 2 strengthens Principle 1 (Prioritize Student-Centered Learning) and depends on Principle 5 (Measure What Matters) to capture what students can actually do.

Conclusion

Real Skills for Real Life are not optional—they are the New Basics. Districts that start early, embed these skills across learning environments, and stay aligned to what the brain needs to develop well-rounded, adaptable learners will prepare students for futures they cannot yet imagine. When communities understand and value these skills, and educators have the tools to teach them, students graduate confident, capable, and ready for real life.

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