

The pomp and circumstance of high school graduations once again are upon us. If the past two and a half years have taught us anything, it is that life's unpredictability requires students graduate equipped with versatile knowledge, skills and competencies to succeed in any environment.

Durable skills — what used to be referred to as soft skills — are necessary to thrive in any postgraduate setting. The ability to think critically and creatively, collaborate and communicate with others, and engage productively in the community — these are the skill sets that endure and position individuals for future success.

It's unsurprising that these skill sets also are in high demand among employers. For Virginia to continue recovering and thrive in a postpandemic economy, it is imperative that the education and business communities work together to prioritize the development of durable skills in our student body.

This year's high school graduates will receive their diplomas after meeting graduation requirements that first were implemented in 2015 as part of the Profile of a Virginia Graduate. This means that not only will they graduate with a strong grasp of core subject areas — they also are equipped with the knowledge, skills, competencies and experiences that the Virginia Board of Education deemed necessary to ensure graduates were "life ready" and prepared for college or work.

In 2015, the Standards of Learning Innovation Committee produced a report that developed the profile, in consultation with education stakeholders including members of the business community. The committee suggested educators prioritize the "5 Cs" that are needed for success in Virginia's economy: critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication and citizenship. Educators from across the commonwealth began to modernize their public schools using this new profile.

To further this endeavor, members of the Commonwealth Learning Partnership — a network of education schools and nonprofits — coordinated efforts by state and local education leaders to develop several companion profiles. The profiles created a vision for how the classroom, educators and education leaders could best support students and prepare them for the future. They also provided a rich understanding of how the classroom experience and educator workforce influence student success.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 struck in the midst of this innovative work, and everyone — parents, students, educators and business owners, alike — experienced a profound disruption in daily life. Every community member and institution was forced to triage their work and prioritize the essentials. That meant some progress toward learning innovation stalled.

But now, as we all move through this next phase of pandemic recovery, there has been rigorous discussion and activity in education circles to combat learning loss, and to position today's students for success in a postpandemic world.

As businesses grapple with this new normal, one thing is certain: Skills-based hiring has become the new norm as more companies shift away from hiring based on educational attainment.

Virginia Learns has data to back up this claim. Our new statewide K-12-focused nonpartisan nonprofit teamed up with America Succeeds and Emsi Burning Glass to create the "High Demand for Durable Skills" report. This details which durable skills Virginia employers want their employees to have.

We refer to them as "durable skills" because learners can take them to whatever careers they choose and wherever they go professionally.

They are not a new concept, either. These skills are the same "5 Cs" that the Board of Education identified years ago to create the Profile of a Virginia Graduate.

After studying more than 38,000 companies and more than 2.3 million job postings across Virginia, the "High Demand for Durable Skills" report found 1.8 million jobs demanded durable skills. The top three sought by Virginia employers are communication, leadership and metacognition.

The need for durable skills clearly is already embedded in our workforce. The next step is integrating those skills into our education system at every level.

The report's findings are something educators, policymakers and business leaders alike should pay attention to.

They should ask themselves: "Are we really preparing students for the future?"

Virginia Learns believes there should be an educational shift in focus to teach students critical life skills so they are positioned for future success. By doing so, we are creating the workforce Virginia employers need and supporting a future that benefits members of the community.

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