

**Employability Counts:  
Implementing Workforce Development in  
Grades 3-12**

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## **Introduction**

Employers across Tennessee are facing what is becoming a nationwide problem with a workforce that is lacking basic soft skills. Henry County is certainly not immune to this problem. According to Indeed.com, soft skills “are personality traits and behaviors that will help candidates get hired and succeed in their work (Herrity, J, 2022). Unlike technical or hard skills, soft skills are interpersonal and behavioral skills that help you to work well with other people and develop your career.” Research from Harvard University, Carnegie, and Stanford Research over 100 years ago in 1918 determined that 85% of success on the job comes from having well-developed soft and people skills. We have known for many years how important these skills are to the success of employees but yet, year after year, significantly more funding is provided to technical skills and learning development rather than the development of soft skills. According to the National Soft Skills Association, over \$170 billion is spent annually on employee training, while only approximately 25% of those funds are used on the development of soft skills (National Soft Skills Association, n.d.). How does a community attempt to change the culture that currently exists that is deficient in these skills? Is implementing the teaching of these skills in a consistent way beginning in third-grade imperative in changing the culture of today’s workforce?

## **Background**

Henry County is located in northwest Tennessee, bordered to the North by Kentucky. Located approximately 100 miles West of Nashville and 125 miles Northeast of Memphis, centrally located between two metropolitan areas. We are a rural area with a population of approximately 34,000. We love to encourage people to visit our community to experience the

annual World's Biggest Fish Fry each April or to take a photo in front of our 66 feet tall Eiffel Tower replica in our county's largest city, Paris. Community pride runs abundant here as we continue to have a thriving downtown with many locally owned small businesses and a quality of life that we feel is second to none.

Within the county, there are two school systems: Henry County School System and Paris Special School District. Henry County School Systems serve approximately 3,016 students in grades K-12, while Paris Special School District serves approximately 1,580 in grades K-8. Both school systems are equipped with excellent leaders and teachers who work diligently to equip our students with the skills needed to be successful in life. These school leaders are also always willing to listen to the needs of employers as they provide feedback as to technical and non-technical skills that they are having problems within their workforce. The Career & Technical Education (CTE) program works with local employers and the Paris Tennessee College of Applied Technology to provide dual enrollment opportunities in such areas as welding, collision repair technology, machine tool technology and health information management technology. The CTE program is available to students beginning in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Our workforce is predominantly engaged in agriculture and manufacturing. Tosh Farms is located in southwest Henry County and is the largest pork producer in the state of Tennessee. Here you will also find Clifty Farms Country Hams and Allegro Fine Foods who are nationally known for their products and are also key community partners. Several automobile suppliers are located in Henry County including Dana Incorporated, PML, and Setco Automotive. Many new opportunities will be presented in the upcoming years for these suppliers as the development of Ford's Blue Oval City progresses in Haywood County, approximately 80 miles to the southwest of Henry County.

The Paris-Henry County Industrial Committee (PHCIC) is the primary economic development organization for Henry County. The PHCIC is a joint cooperative effort between Henry County, the City of Paris, and the Paris Board of Public Utilities that is tasked with industrial recruitment and workforce development. This includes working closely with local employers to identify training opportunities for workers in obtaining both technical and non-technical skills needed to be successful in their chosen careers. The PHCIC also partners with both of our local school systems, including the CTE program at Henry County High School, to offer internships and work-based learning opportunities.

Henry County is fortunate to have city and county officials who have great working relationships with one another, our school systems, local employers and are extremely supportive of all attempts of the Paris-Henry County Industrial Committee to recruit new industry and to assist current employers.

### **Applicable TCED coursework**

The Business Expansion and Retention course presented provided many ideals and principles used in addressing problems being faced by current employers. There is a shortage of talent in all areas of the workforce. Working closely with existing employers is a major component of economic development with many job creations coming directly from existing industries. Working closely with your existing employers to identify and address problems being faced can make a very positive impact on your relationship with employers to let them know that they have support from within the county's economic development team.

A key component that was stressed in the Workforce Development course and has been instrumental in attempting to address the workforce problems being faced is collaborating with

members of the community. Forming a team that is made up of community leaders from different areas such as government, education, and industry officials helps to bring ideas and experiences from different walks of life to the table to work towards a common goal.

### **Project Description**

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic provided many challenges to economic development. Industrial recruitment came to a standstill as prospects paused any potential relocations due to the economic uncertainty posed by the situation. This unfortunate situation, however, provided ample time to get feedback from organizations throughout Henry County on what issues they were facing with their workforce. PHCIC members and local Henry County employers began having conversations, primarily via virtual connections. Concerns were presented that were being experienced with the current workforce primarily dealing with the lack of soft skills. Recurring themes that were identified as problematic included employees struggling with working as a team, persevering through adversity, communication (both oral and written), being adaptable, taking accountability for your actions, problem solving, critical thinking, and time management issues.

After continuing conversations with these industry leaders, further research was conducted to determine if these soft skills that appear to be lacking in our local workforce, were also problems being faced nationwide. According to Karimi, H. & Pina, A. (2021):

“Industry reports indicate, employers are placing higher importance on soft skill competencies than they are on technical skills. However, research also claims that soft skills competencies in prospective employees have become a challenge for employers to find, thus impacting their organizational efficacy. Employers realize that they cannot solve the skills gap issue alone and that more work needs to be done by businesses and educational systems to ensure that the U.S. workforce is prepared for the future of work.”

The PHCIC initiated a meeting with leaders of both the Henry County School System and Paris Special School District to relay these concerns being expressed by local employers and try to come together to implement a curriculum to address these skills that are lacking. After much collaboration with the Directors of Schools, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) teachers, and school counselors, Employability Counts was formed.

Employability Counts is a program incorporated throughout the entire school year focusing on the following traits:

- Teamwork
- Perseverance
- Communication
- Adaptability
- Time Management
- Problem Solving
- Critical Thinking
- Accountability

Each month, beginning in August, would be devoted to one individual trait. The culmination of these traits would be put into place at the end of the year as students showcased skills learned in projects submitted to the schools' STEM and STEAM fairs.

According to the Tennessee Department of Education, ages 8-10 have the following developmental standards:

- Learning to cooperate in group settings and group games

- Developing lasting friendships and beginning to handle peer pressure
- Enjoy group activity and group games that focus on a common interest, such as clubs
- Use problem solving, negotiating, and compromising skills with their peers
- Developing interest in long-range projects
- Concerned with rules which leads them to become bossy
- Beginning to develop sportsmanship and learn about winning and losing gracefully
- Developing competence in competitive games and team sports
- Learning to accept responsibility for their actions
- Growing confidence may lead them to take risks
- Becoming sensitive to what others think of them and to adult approval

By taking into consideration these standards presented, school system leaders came to the agreement that in order to have the best chance of success in changing the current culture, Employability Counts would be presented to students beginning as young as third grade.

In researching how other schools across the state of Tennessee were incorporating workforce development into their school year, it was discovered that most schools were integrating workforce development into schools by having students participate in job shadowing, field trips to local industries, and bringing in guest speakers. Our school systems also integrate these practices and while each of these provide valuable experiences for students and exposure to different career fields, we were not able to find any program that would attempt to focus on specific traits related to workforce development throughout the entire year on a monthly basis.

Employability Counts set out to do just that. By attempting to expose students to these traits on a regular basis, the hope is that it becomes engraved in their mindsets and can be incorporated into their daily lives throughout school and as they enter the workforce in the future.

### **Community Partnerships and Support**

One of the focuses of this program was to have participation from many local leaders and employers to give real-life examples of how these traits are needed in their particular career field. These individuals participated in short videos spotlighting their careers and the chosen theme for the month. By allowing students to hear firsthand that these skills being focused on every month are actually important in the daily lives of employers in their community, it allows students to see a real-life correlation between the skill and how it is put into practice. The videos (Appendix 1) are then presented to all students in grades 3-12 for discussion. Current community partners who have participated in the videos include:

- Mohsin Virani, VP of Setco Automotive
- Terry Wimberley, CEO/President of Paris Board of Public Utilities
- Troy Buttrey, President, FirstBank
- John Penn Ridgeway, Henry County Mayor
- Kim Foster, Paris City Manager
- Michael Murphey, President of Clifty Farms Country Hams
- Patrick Smith, Professional Engineer
- Kelly Buffington, Human Resources Manager, Four Seasons
- Sheena Davis, Mockingbird Catering owner



- Carlton Gerrell, former City of Paris mayor
- Nicci Harrod, TCAT instructor
- Jeremy Stone, CPA
- Judge Vicki Snyder, Henry County General Sessions and Juvenile Court

Teachers from both school systems began devising creative ways to not only teach the trait, but pique the student's interest in the topic by doing it in a fun way that would help them retain the information being presented. For example, the theme was teamwork in the initial month of the program's introduction into the 2021 school year. Mr. Patrick Corbin, a STEAM teacher with Paris Special School District had his students participate in an egg launch project. Students were placed in teams of four and were tasked with working together to build some sort of holder that could protect an egg while being shot out of a cannon. Ms. Leigh Ann Durham, a STEM teacher with Henry County Schools would present projects to students that required them to be able to adapt to changes throughout the project and work within a particular time frame such as building with robotics. Students that were able to apply these traits most effectively were chosen to be acknowledged on the school's website (Figure 1 and 2) and rewarded for their efforts.



Figure 1: [www.henryk12.net](http://www.henryk12.net)



Figure 2: [www.henryk12.net](http://www.henryk12.net)

## **Project Funding**

Funding has been relatively minimal for this program. Each school system has allocated funds that they feel are reasonable and necessary to implement these skills into their respective classes. Funds from the State of Tennessee's ThreeStar program were used in 2022 to purchase supplies to be used in different projects in the STEM and STEAM departments for both school systems. Seeing the value in the reinforcement of these skills, local automotive supplier, Setco Automotive signed on to be a corporate sponsor. They have provided funds to assist marketing efforts. Electronic billboard signs have been reserved throughout each month to highlight the themes and physical signs (Figure 3) were installed on each school campus.



*Figure 3: E.W. Grove School – Henry County School System*

The PHCIC and both school systems hope that in the future as the program gains traction, additional businesses/manufacturers will invest in the program.

## **Results**

One of the biggest problems with implementing a program such as Employability Counts is that the measure of success is long-term. The program is currently in the middle of year two of the program. Although the total success of the program will not be able to be seen for years to

come (as many as nine), certain benchmarks throughout the year can measure some progress being made such as a reduction in school absences, feedback from teachers on students' execution of skills taught and overall student participation in the program. Overall, a certain measure of success can be accounted for by simply the number of kids who are exposed to, and taught, these valuable life skills.

At the end of the pilot year in 2022, teachers submitted surveys of feedback on what they had experienced throughout the year. Teachers reported significant participation in projects throughout the month focusing on each theme. Absentee rates had stayed consistent throughout the year but will be evaluated at the end of the current school year. The PHCIC and both school systems look forward to re-evaluating the program at the end of each year to see what changes could be made to improve the program's overall success.

As this problem of deficiencies in soft skills is not strictly a Henry County problem, it will be extremely beneficial to continue to research and to form partnerships with other communities across the state who are attempting to address these issues and form ways to successfully equip students with the skills needed to be employable.

## **Conclusion**

Employability Counts represents a marathon, not a sprint. It will take dedication, patience, and stamina to see results from students being taught these specific traits that could take as long as nine years to be fully evident. Everyone involved with the Henry County School System and the Paris Special School District recognizes this is a long-term commitment. Overall, implementing workforce development starting in grades 3-12 has the potential to greatly

benefit both students and the workforce as a whole. By helping students develop the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the modern job market, these programs can improve the lives of the individual students and contribute to the overall economic well-being of the community.

**Appendix 1**

[Employability Counts - Accountability - YouTube](#)

[Teamwork - Employability Counts - YouTube](#)

[Employability Counts - Perseverance - YouTube](#)

[Employability Counts - Problem Solving - YouTube](#)

[Communication-Employability Counts - YouTube](#)

[Employability Counts - Critical Thinking - YouTube](#)

[Time Management 1 - YouTube](#)

[Adaptability-Employability Counts - YouTube](#)

## **References**

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