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## SOFT SKILLS GIVE WORKERS A BIG EDGE. IT'S TIME TO START FOCUSING ON THEM IN SCHOOL, REPORT SAYS

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Teaching and improving soft skills – such as conscientiousness, adaptability and perseverance – can provide huge economic gains for young people, and should receive more attention from education policy makers, according to a new report from the Hamilton Project.

Soft skills, also known as noncognitive skills or foundational skills, are increasingly in demand in today's economy. More Americans work in service-sector jobs that require human interaction, and automation and technology are replacing jobs involving routine tasks.

That's given workers with strong soft skills a big advantage in the labor market, the group said in the paper, released Tuesday, that compiled existing research on various aspects of soft skills in the labor market. (The Hamilton Project is an economic policy arm of the Brookings Institution.)

But employers and hiring managers across the country complain of a growing deficit of workers with adequate soft skills, including the ability to communicate, work in teams, take the initiative and pay attention to detail.

Education policy in recent years has focused on closing test-score gaps and improving cognitive skills, but less attention has been paid to the importance of soft skills, authors Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, Ryan Nunn, Lauren Bauer, Megan Mumford and Audrey Breitwieser wrote.

"As we learn more about cognitive and noncognitive skills, it is critical that we adjust our educational policies to make the best possible use of new evidence," they said.

Research has shown workers with strong noncognitive skills and cognitive skills earn more money than workers with just one or the other, a relationship that has grown stronger in recent decades. And workers with strong soft skills – measured by some studies as their participation in extracurricular activities – who were born in the early 1980s are now more likely to be employed full-time than similar workers born in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

On the other hand, students with weak soft skills are only about one-third as likely to earn a college degree as those with strong soft skills, even after adjusting for their cognitive skills, the report said.

Despite the belief among many employers that these skills can't be taught, the Hamilton report highlights research that showed programs emphasizing social and emotional learning do work. For example, a study of programs that incorporated community service into a school's academic program were found to improve student achievement and social skills, while so-called "mindfulness interventions" boosted self-awareness and reduced emotional distress.

When it comes to teaching such skills, the earlier the better, the report says. Preschool intervention programs emphasizing soft skills can have long-term economic benefits, including boosting employment rates and decreasing arrests for men, while increasing high-school graduation rates and physical activity for women.

The report also found a teacher's ability to improve a student's soft skills has a bigger effect on graduation rates than her ability to improve tests scores.

The importance of soft skills has received increased attention in recent months. A recent report from Goldman Sachs' research department highlighted the shift in economic roles – from "doing" work to "organizing, coordinating and supervising" the complex tasks behind it – that has led to a rise in "adaptive occupations" requiring more soft skills.

The Aspen Institute, a public policy and research organization in Washington, D.C., last month announced the creation of a national commission focused on social and emotional skills. The group, made up of business, government and education officials, plans to develop a proposal for overhauling K-12 education to place the same emphasis on teaching soft skills that they do on "academic learning."