



The Urban Assembly



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# Research Brief

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AS A FOUNDATION FOR WORKFORCE READINESS



# Overview

**As the demands of the 21st-century workforce evolve, educators are increasingly focused on preparing students with both strong social-emotional competencies and future-ready skills.**

To examine how these domains intersect and to evaluate how Urban Assembly high school students perform on an assessment typically used to measure workplace “soft skills” researchers partnered with two high schools in New York City to conduct a small-scale evaluation. Urban Assembly schools emphasize career readiness, social-emotional learning (SEL), and college access for students in historically underserved communities.

## MEASURES

Students completed two self-report assessments:

- **DESSA High School Student Self Report:** A 50-item assessment that measures social-emotional competence across six domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and optimistic thinking. A social-emotional composite score, plus scores in each of the six competencies, are reported.
- **ACT WorkKeys:** A workplace-readiness assessment which evaluates six key career-related competencies: work ethic, collaboration, resilience, creativity, leadership, and integrity. Although intended for individuals 18 and older, the WorkKeys was used here to explore how high school students perform on workforce-aligned indicators.

## PARTICIPANTS

A total of 107 high school students in grades 11–12 from two Urban Assembly public high schools participated. Approximately 50% of students were male, 47% female, and 3% preferred not to answer. Seventy percent of students were Hispanic, 14% Black, 6% White, 5% Asian, and 5% Two or more races.



# Findings

**On the DESSA, most students (84%) demonstrated well-developed social-emotional skills that support their transition to post-school readiness.**

**Students also performed strongly on the WorkKeys assessment. Notably, 85% of students exhibited strong leadership abilities, and 81% showed high levels of collaboration.**

These results suggest that when schools prioritize both social-emotional development and career readiness, students are more likely to cultivate the competencies needed for success.

These results suggest that intentional investment in SEL and workforce preparation during high school can support the development of key competencies valued in the workplace. Statistical analysis revealed significant positive correlations between students' DESSA composite scores and all six WorkKeys domains with the strongest correlation being "social-emotional competence" and "creativity" (.61). Other notable relationships included "self-management" and "work ethic" (.67) as well as "optimistic thinking" and "creativity" (.57).

Correlation coefficients among DESSA competencies and WorkKeys constructs ranged from .03 to .66 (see Table 1), with most statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating a moderate-to-strong relationship between social-emotional competence and workplace-readiness skills.

One exception was the WorkKeys' "resilience" competency, which had lower, non-significant correlations with the DESSA competencies of "self-awareness", "social awareness", "relationship skills", and "responsible decision making". This competency focuses on a person's response to stress and their ability to regulate emotions in the workplace setting.

**TABLE 1. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DESSA COMPETENCY AND WORKKEYS CONSTRUCTS PERCENTILE SCORES**

COMPETENCY	WORK ETHIC	COLLABORATION	RESILIENCE	CREATIVITY	LEADERSHIP	INTEGRITY
SEC	.59**	.35**	.24*	.61**	.45**	.30**
SA	.45**	.29**	.17	.54**	.42**	.28**
SM	.67**	.27**	.29**	.57**	.42**	.17
SO	.53**	.33**	.11	.45**	.26**	.28**
RS	.39**	.36**	.03	.46**	.34**	.39**
RDM	.56**	.29**	.13	.56**	.43**	.29**
OT	.48**	.27**	.34**	.57**	.48**	.23*

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Note. SEC = Social-Emotional Composite; SA = Self-Awareness; SM = Self-Management; SO = Social Awareness; RS = Relationship Skills; RDM = Responsible Decision-Making; OT = Optimistic Thinking.

## Implications

**These findings provide empirical support for the growing recognition that SEL is foundational to postsecondary success.**

The clear relationship between students' SEL skills and workplace competencies suggests that investments in SEL programming in K–12 education may pay dividends beyond graduation.

At the same time, the results highlight the opportunity to build on this foundation by integrating explicit future skill development such as adaptability, critical thinking, and collaboration into the curriculum. Doing so can help ensure that all students are not only socially and emotionally prepared for life beyond school, but also ready to navigate the expectations of postsecondary education and the workplace.

## Conclusion

**This study affirms the role of SEL as a cornerstone of future readiness and encourages continued exploration into how K–12 systems can align assessment and instructional practices with both human development and labor market demands.**

While further research with larger and more diverse samples is needed, the early findings from these two New York City high schools offer a promising starting point.