EAB

INSIGHT PAPER

The Student Readiness Crisis

A Mandate for Change in Education and the Workforce



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Executive Summary

Millions of children and young adults have high aspirations for their future, including good jobs, work that inspires them, and security for themselves and their families. However, in recent years, a troubling trend has emerged: young people are increasingly unprepared for the demands of higher education and the workforce. This rapid decline in student readiness is causing unprecedented numbers of young adults to either forgo college completely or enter college without the skills needed to be successful. **To safeguard the prospects of the next generation, ensure a robust workforce, and deliver on the promise of economic mobility, educators and industry need to act now to prevent these readiness gaps from growing.**

Despite educators' best efforts, the pandemic disrupted children's academic and social development through prolonged school closures, leading to significant learning losses and gaps in essential academic skills. The shift to remote learning limited interactive and hands-on learning experiences, contributing to decreased engagement and motivation. Additionally, social isolation due to lockdowns and restrictions hampered children's social skills and emotional well-being, impacting their ability to make friends and navigate social situations.

Academic readiness and socio-emotional readiness are two of the most significant predictors of whether students will attend college, complete their degree, and thrive in the workforce. K-12 education serves as the foundation for career and college readiness, encompassing foundational reading and math skills, social relationship navigation, and an understanding of the world of work. **Unfortunately, these foundational needs have suffered significant disruptions, potentially steering students—and future employees—off course in the long term.**

Academic readiness is crucial, encompassing students' foundational knowledge in key areas such as reading and math, which is essential for further learning. Equally important is socio-emotional readiness for college, which involves managing emotions, building and maintaining relationships, and navigating the social and emotional challenges of the college environment. Mastery of both areas is not just beneficial but necessary. Without it, students may struggle to grasp new concepts, cope with stressors, and build the confidence needed to shape their career paths.

However, colleges and universities are witnessing a growing number of students who are ill-equipped for the rigors of college coursework, struggling with mental well-being, and feeling unprepared to join the workforce. Similarly, employers are already citing new graduates who lack the durable and technical skills needed to succeed in a professional environment. The United States recently dropped three points in global economic competitiveness rankings,[1] falling out of the top ten most competitive economies in the world, placing even more urgency on workforce readiness.

This might seem like a straightforward issue with an easy solution: prepare more high school graduates to attend college and enter the workforce. **However, this is more difficult than it seems given the most significant impacts of the pandemic are still on the horizon.** Students who were in elementary school when the pandemic began are not expected to fully recover[2] academically by the time they reach college in the next three to five years, meaning current student readiness trends are likely to get worse before they get better.

In the 2023–24 school year, the gap between pre-COVID and COVID test score averages increased by 36% in reading and 18% in math[3] across nearly all grades. To catch up, the average student will require an additional 4.8 months of schooling for reading and 4.3 months for math. Over time, these declines in student readiness could reverse hard-earned gains in college retention and persistence or even lead to students opting out of college entirely.

While this is definitively a problem of the future, it's also a problem of the present. College-going rates have been in steady decline for the last decade, despite increases in high school graduation rates. Since 2016 the college-going rate for recent high school graduates has declined from 70% to 62%.[4] Among the students who made it to college between the fall semesters of 2022 and 2023, 24% of all first-time freshmen dropped out[5] within in one year.

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If left unaddressed, these declines in student readiness could lead to a significant decrease in college enrollment rates, further exacerbating skills gaps in the workforce and resulting in talent shortages. **Tackling this problem requires a collaborative approach involving both educators and employers.**

This paper aims to assist K-12 educators, colleges, and employers in understanding and addressing the readiness crisis through cross-sector collaboration. It provides strategies for supporting individuals at various points along the readiness spectrum, including those who have missed important academic, socio-emotional, and career readiness milestones. The insights in this paper are drawn from EAB and Seramount's work with more than 2,800 institutions, including over 150 partner interviews and comprehensive data analysis.

*Together, EAB and Seramount are committed to making education smarter, communities stronger, and workplaces more inclusive and higher-performing. We work with more than **2,800 institutions**—from kindergarten to college to career—to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities, which we tailor to meet the unique needs of every leadership team and the students and employees they serve.*

What Is Student Readiness?

We define readiness as each student having the knowledge, skills, and support needed to access and succeed in college, career, and life. Helping today's students achieve this "readiness" will require working together across sectors to overcome academic, socioemotional, financial, and career preparedness gaps exacerbated by the disruptions of the pandemic.

How to Read This Paper

This paper analyzes student readiness barriers and their impact on K-12, higher education, and the workforce. Sector-specific recommendations for **K-12**, **higher education**, and **the workforce** can be found in section 3, beginning on page 24.



Education's efforts are well-meaning but piecemeal—if nothing changes, employers will feel the effects for years."

Managing Director, EAB



We can't just pull one lever and expect things to shift—we have to pull multiple levers and take a multipronged approach."

K-12 Superintendent

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Section 1

Academic Readiness

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Student academic readiness:

What do we know?

What is the K-12 landscape?

The foundation for ongoing academic and career success is established in K-12 education. Despite the hard work of teachers and school districts to address the impacts of pandemic disruptions, attainment gaps persist. Before the pandemic, public schools reported that an average of 36% of their students[6] were behind grade level. At the start of the 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years, this figure had risen to approximately 50%. Students across all demographics have experienced declines in reading and mathematics achievement, with some national test scores reaching their lowest points in decades.

Several factors contribute to the current challenges in education, with chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10% or more of the school year—being among the most significant. Since the pre-pandemic period, chronic absenteeism has nearly doubled,[7] with almost 15 million students missing 10% or more of their school days. This disruption in attendance interferes with the continuity of instruction, leading to gaps in the foundational knowledge essential for developing reading and math skills. Frequent absences also impede students' ability to practice and reinforce these skills, making it more difficult for them to achieve proficiency and progress in their education.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often regarded as the nation's educational "report card," shows that two-thirds of US students lack proficiency in reading,[8] a decline since 2019. If students haven't mastered reading by third grade,[9] they are more likely to struggle in all of their subjects.



67% of 4th graders weren't proficient in reading in 2022, up **2% from 2019**

69% of 8th graders weren't proficient in reading in 2022, up **3% from 2019**

Focusing on basic reading skills rather than reading proficiency, which represents the minimum necessary for developing proficiency, reveals that about one-third of US children are struggling with fundamental reading skills.

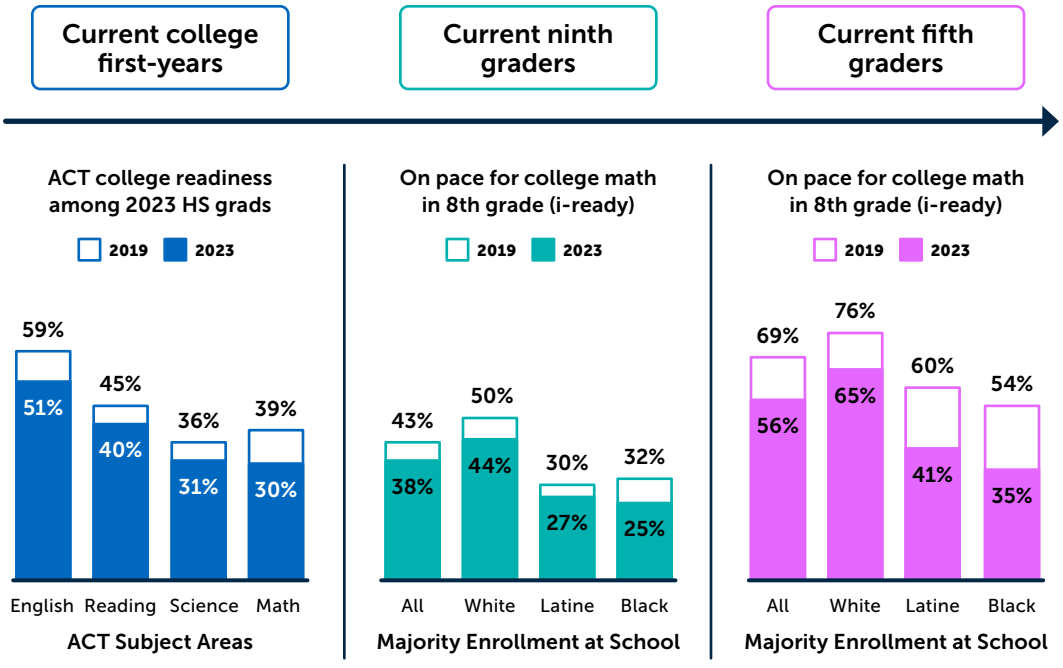


37% of 4th graders weren't reading at a basic level in 2022, up **4% from 2019**

30% 8th graders weren't reading at a basic level in 2022, up **3% from 2019**

Additionally, math scores, which are strong predictors of how successful students will be in the long term, have suffered the most. ACT and I-Ready math benchmarks, which predict how prepared students are to take college-level math, have both dropped significantly since the pandemic.

Pre- and post-COVID math readiness by age cohort



Source: EAB analysis of data from Curriculum Associates "State of Student Learning in 2023"; ACT U.S. High School Class of 2023 Graduating Class Data; NAEP Scores 'Flashing Red' After a Lost Generation of Learning for 13-Year-Olds.

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Math has long been a hurdle for students as they prepare for college. Many of these students may go on to require developmental math or delay taking college-level math altogether, which lessens the likelihood that they will complete their educational pathway.

K-12 educators are trying to pull students back on track academically, but they are reporting that it's been challenging given that:

- Students' study skills and ability to focus have been disrupted.
- Students may have gaps in their learning that are difficult to identify. For example, a student might be highly competent in some areas while having missed crucial instruction in others.
- Students in the same class may be at different competency levels, making instruction challenging.

Without significant interventions, the next cohort of high school graduates will be dangerously underprepared for college-level work and the skills needed to thrive in the workforce.



42% of ACT-tested 2022 HS grads met none of the college-readiness subject benchmarks in English, reading, science, and math[10]

What does declining academic readiness mean for higher education?

Declines in academic readiness mean that students may arrive at college lacking essential skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, which are critical for success in higher education. This gap can lead to difficulties in mastering college-level coursework, leading many students to be placed in remedial classes that delay progress and increase educational costs for both students and institutions. Unprepared students may also experience lower academic performance, decreased confidence, and higher dropout rates.

Higher education professionals are already seeing the consequences of academic readiness gaps. EAB interviews and analysis show:

- High school grades and GPAs are becoming unreliable measures of readiness due to grade inflation. Students are arriving with "Swiss cheese learning," where rather than missing an entire year of learning, they may be missing one module or topic, making it hard to predict where they need the most support.
- Students cannot keep up with the rigor of college classes and are increasingly requesting extensions and alternate assignments and making appeals regarding their grades.
- Students who are struggling with reading are on the rise, impacting their ability to succeed in other courses.
- In-person attendance has dropped, and students may not see the value of showing up for class.
- Students are highly disengaged in the classroom and may feel unprepared to contribute to group discussions and activities.
- Decreases in academic readiness are impacting enrollment in STEM pathways, as students may lack the necessary math skills for success.
- Graduate students are lacking writing skills and are seeking more tutoring than in the past.

Offering a menu of support isn't enough—both K-12 and higher education institutions need to proactively identify students who are experiencing readiness gaps and connect them with tailored, targeted supports that speak to their specific needs. Without thoughtful intervention, students will continue to struggle with basic skills, causing more students to opt out of higher education and not reach their career goals.

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I recently spoke with a faculty member who used to assign eight readings a semester. Now, he says he can hardly get students to read two."

Senior Director of Research, EAB



Faculty expect mature, "fully formed" students at the graduate level but that's not always what they get. Graduate students often don't 'have it together' just like K-12 and undergraduate students."

Managing Director, EAB

What does declining academic readiness mean for employers?

Declines in academic readiness pose significant challenges for employers in the long term. As the pool of job candidates with essential skills diminishes and fewer people pursue postsecondary education, employers may face difficulties in finding qualified individuals to fill roles effectively. This shortage of skilled workers can lead to increased training costs as companies invest resources in bridging skill gaps among employees. Moreover, industries reliant on specialized knowledge and expertise, such as technology and health care, may experience heightened competition for talent, potentially hindering innovation and growth.



The decline in critical thinking skills and executive presence have been the most notable, and it's compounded because they are scared to ask for help."

HR Executive

Additionally, over the next forty years, the United States will face a significant shortage of working-age adults, with a projected deficit of six million people between labor supply and demand by 2028. This shrinking talent pool will increase competition for all talent, especially early career talent, as more baby boomers approach retirement age. While some industries may consider reducing their education requirements to attract new workers, this does not negate the need to address foundational skill gaps.

EAB and Seramount interviews and analysis show:

- Recent graduates struggle with professional writing, ranging from crafting emails to crafting public-facing documents.
- Recent graduates may be overconfident in their technical skills and surprised that they are expected to keep investing in professional development.
- New hires are lacking industry-specific technical skills that historically may have been taught by employers.
- New hires who lack technical and academic skills may struggle to achieve incremental knowledge growth in their roles.

Beyond the immediate implications for individual businesses, declines in academic readiness can have broader economic consequences. A less prepared workforce may struggle to drive productivity and innovation, ultimately impacting national competitiveness and economic growth.

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Section 2

Social and Emotional Readiness

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Student socio-emotional readiness:

What do we know?

What is the K-12 landscape?

Many of the skills needed to navigate social relationships and develop a strong sense of self are built at school through face-to-face play, lunchtime with peers, sports, and extracurriculars—all of which were unavailable during the pandemic. Younger children, in particular, didn't have the opportunity to learn about basic school routines and social norms, such as how to walk to class, play at recess, or express their needs in a classroom.

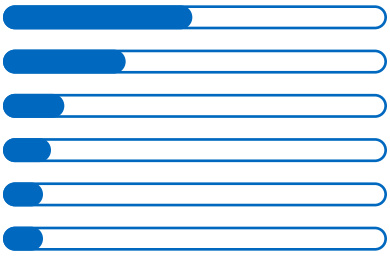
Now, many students feel socially isolated, struggle to make friends, and have difficulty regulating their emotions at school. When students don't feel like they belong at school and lack a strong social network to lean on, they are more likely to struggle academically, experience stress, and face mental health concerns.

More than 80% of public schools[11] have observed stunted behavioral and socio-emotional development in their students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Center for Education Statistics[12] reports 69% of public schools have seen an increase in students seeking mental health services at school since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, 87% of public schools don't feel confident that they can effectively provide mental health services to all students in need.

This is particularly concerning since the most recent Youth Risk Surveillance[13] report from the CDC shows in 2021, 42% of students reported feelings of sadness or hopelessness, up 28% from 2011, and 22% reported seriously considering suicide, up from 16% a decade earlier. **In short, the demand for mental health interventions is outpacing what districts can support, putting increased stress on educators, community resources, and parents.**

In older students, mental health is also playing a role in how they prepare for college. A recent Appily poll of high school students[14] found that almost half (48%) reported that stress and anxiety overshadowed their college search and planning. Students reported feelings of increased anxiety, nerves, and worry.

Specific responses when asked about feelings and thoughts related to college planning include:



48% | Having increased anxiety, nerves, and worry

25% | Feeling more stress than usual

10% | Feeling the process is complicated or difficult

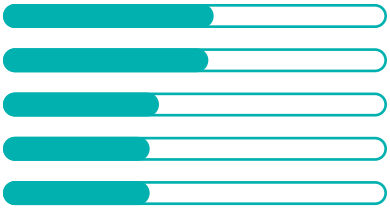
9% | Not having enough time

8% | Experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed

8% | Having trouble making a decision

Of the students who are currently applying or considering applying to college, nearly a third (28%) reported that mental health concerns are a reason they may choose not to attend college. Some underrepresented students groups reported an even higher likelihood of this happening.

Survey results show some underrepresented student groups:



54% | Trans students

53% | Nonbinary students

33% | Black students

30% | Native American students

30% | Female students

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Last, K-12 educators are reporting that students are struggling with interpersonal skills, which makes it harder to build friendships, resolve conflict, and feel comfortable at school. Increased anxiety and depression can make students lose further interest in social relationships, making it critical that school districts prioritize mental well-being interventions.



We are seeing more students unprepared to enter school at the pre-k and kindergarten level. They were babies and toddlers during the pandemic and their parents didn't have social outlets for them. Young children need opportunities to practice 'serve and return' type social interactions so they learn how to read other people's emotions."

K-12 Superintendent

What does declining socio-emotional readiness mean for higher education?

Ideally, when students arrive at college, they have the social skills and emotional resilience to navigate new experiences, make friends, and manage the rigors of college life. **Today's students are on a delayed trajectory due to missed opportunities during the pandemic, which has stalled the development of crucial social and independence skills necessary for a successful college or career launch.**

Some of these skill gaps can be tied to rising mental health concerns that impede mental well-being and make it more difficult for students to navigate social interactions. According to the latest Healthy Minds survey,[15] college students are experiencing unprecedented levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. The survey, conducted annually and gathering responses from 96,000 US college students across 133 campuses during the 2021–22 academic year, revealed alarming statistics. Forty-four percent of respondents reported experiencing symptoms of depression, while 37% indicated they had experienced anxiety. Most concerning is that 15% admitted to seriously contemplating suicide, marking the highest rates recorded in the survey's 15-year history.

Higher education institutions are reporting more students are:

- Seeking mental health counseling and crisis services
- Overwhelmed by baseline academic expectations, such as completing assigned readings
- Struggling with resiliency and give up on assignments easily or immediately request alternate assignments
- Having difficulty with interpersonal communication and conflict resolution
- Less involved with student organizations and other social opportunities
- Struggling with executive-function skills, including time management, decision-making, and problem-solving
- Reporting that trauma is playing a larger role in their mental well-being
- Not building independence from their families
- Causing faculty and staff to feel overwhelmed by growing mental well-being and social readiness barriers

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If institutions don't develop a plan of action to develop a multi-tiered system of support and a network of providers that offer improved access to mental health resources, expand self-service options, and emphasize a sense of belonging, the impacts of mental well-being barriers may continue to spiral. In the coming years, colleges will need to invest more in mental well-being screenings and tiered supports.



It seems like every day there is a student in one of our offices that's in some version of crisis."

VP Student Success,
Midwest Community College



Anxiety and fear make it very difficult for me to plan for college because I overthink every outcome that my life could possibly take. I feel like college is the biggest decision of my life thus far, and that can be very heavy for a 17-year-old to handle."

Appily Survey Respondent

What does declining socio-emotional readiness mean for employers?

One of the purposes of education is to equip students with the social, emotional, and soft skills needed to enter the workforce. However, when a recent survey asked if college helped them develop the skills needed to navigate the emotional challenges of transitioning into the workplace, 39% of recent graduates stated that it did not.[16]

Employers are reporting that new professionals struggle with:

- Showing up on time, dressed appropriately and ready to start their day
- Communicating professionally with supervisors and leadership
- Independent problem-solving and critical thinking
- Managing stress
- Understanding professional boundaries and etiquette
- Collaborating with colleagues
- Giving and receiving constructive feedback
- Working in multigenerational settings
- Meeting deadlines and understanding that deliverables can be time-sensitive

Many employers are already starting to modernize their culture and working practices to match Gen Z's priorities,[17] such as hybrid work and a strong inclusion mindset. In addition, employers should be ready to provide additional support for employees who may require guidance in learning about professional norms, particularly if they are first-generation professionals.

Employers need to build stronger relationships with the education sector to communicate their needs and expectations to future talent at an earlier stage. Without addressing mental well-being and social barriers through workplace interventions and partnerships with higher education, new employees will continue to face challenges, leading to retention difficulties for employers.



The lack of confidence in students transitioning into the workforce is prevalent, as well as lack of resiliency."

Associate Director,
Four-Year Public University

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What Are the Key Student Readiness Gaps?

Our research has identified key readiness gaps affecting many students that educators and employers need to address collaboratively.

Students are disengaged from education

Students lack foundational academic skills and competencies

Students don't clearly understand what is expected of them in a college classroom

Students need additional support to manage their mental well-being and social relationships

Early career employees don't fully understand their daily responsibilities and what employers expect from them

The following recommendations are intended to help educators and employers quickly adapt their current practices, identify opportunities for collaboration, and anticipate the interventions students will need in the coming years.

Section 3

Recommendations

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Confronting Readiness Challenges

12 Recommendations

Through research and interviews, EAB and Seramount have compiled 12 recommendations for how educators and industry can start to face student readiness gaps. These recommendations represent areas in which education and industry can partner, including specific places where individual sectors need to invest resources.

K-12

1. Reestablish classroom attendance as a priority 25
2. Strengthen literacy with science-based method 27

Higher Education

3. Expand math interventions and reassess curricular alignment 31
4. Bridge expectation gaps between faculty and students 33
5. Implement differentiated entry points based on individual student readiness 36

K-12 and Higher Education

6. Recognize early-stage mental health concerns to reduce escalation 39
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K-12

1 Reestablish classroom attendance as a priority

Chronic absenteeism has doubled since the pandemic, making it difficult to recover ground both academically and socially. Some families, especially those with younger children, may never have established a consistent school-going routine during the pandemic, and for older children, that routine was disrupted.

K-12 educators are reporting that inconsistencies in attendance make it more difficult for students to rebuild both academic and socio-emotional skills. Teachers are also struggling to manage classrooms in which all students are at varying points of content mastery, with some students excelling and some students struggling to catch up.

Now, as students start to enter college and the workforce, faculty and employers are reporting that young adults aren't showing up for class or work, and when they do, they are difficult to engage.



Is there an adult at school that cares about you—yes or no? That's it. That's the question that can tell you everything."

Sujie Shin,
California Collaborative for Educational Excellence[18]

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Strategies for reestablishing attendance as a priority include:

1. **Highlight the benefits of attendance:** Open lines of communication between schools, parents, and students are crucial. Regularly communicate the importance of attendance through newsletters, emails, and parent-teacher meetings. Set the expectation that building strong attendance now will build good habits in college and at work.

2. **Early intervention:** Identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism early and provide targeted interventions. This could involve mentorship programs, counseling services, or academic support to address underlying issues such as mental health concerns or learning disabilities.

3. **Family support:** Provide support and resources to families to help overcome barriers to attendance. This could include access to transportation, assistance with childcare, or connecting families with social services if needed.

4. **Make school a place students want to be:** Foster a positive school climate where students feel safe, valued, and connected to their peers and teachers. A supportive environment can help reduce absenteeism by increasing students' sense of belonging. As one educator shared, "This takes a whole school repertoire—everyone needs to be bought in for it to feel authentic."

2 Strengthen literacy with science-based methods

Reading readiness declines are already being felt on college campuses. As one vice president at a community college shared: *"We've always had supports in place for math, but more and more we are seeing students who can't read at a college level. We might need to start partnering with off campus literacy groups to get students up to speed."*

Many K-12 teachers lack preparation and guidance in teaching foundational reading skills, with approximately 80% of elementary teachers[19] providing minimal or no instruction in phonemic awareness. Consequently, students often rely on pictures and context clues rather than utilizing decoding skills. A way K-12 districts can help close reading gaps is by investing in the science of reading,[20] which is a body of research that helps explain how people learn to read and write proficiently.



EAB's research provided scientific insights on how students learn to read and what evidence-based instructions looks like. It helped our teachers find common cause around the challenges of teaching all students to read."

Alyssa Phillips,
Literacy Specialist, Republic School District

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Ways to mitigate pandemic learning loss[21] with the science of reading include:

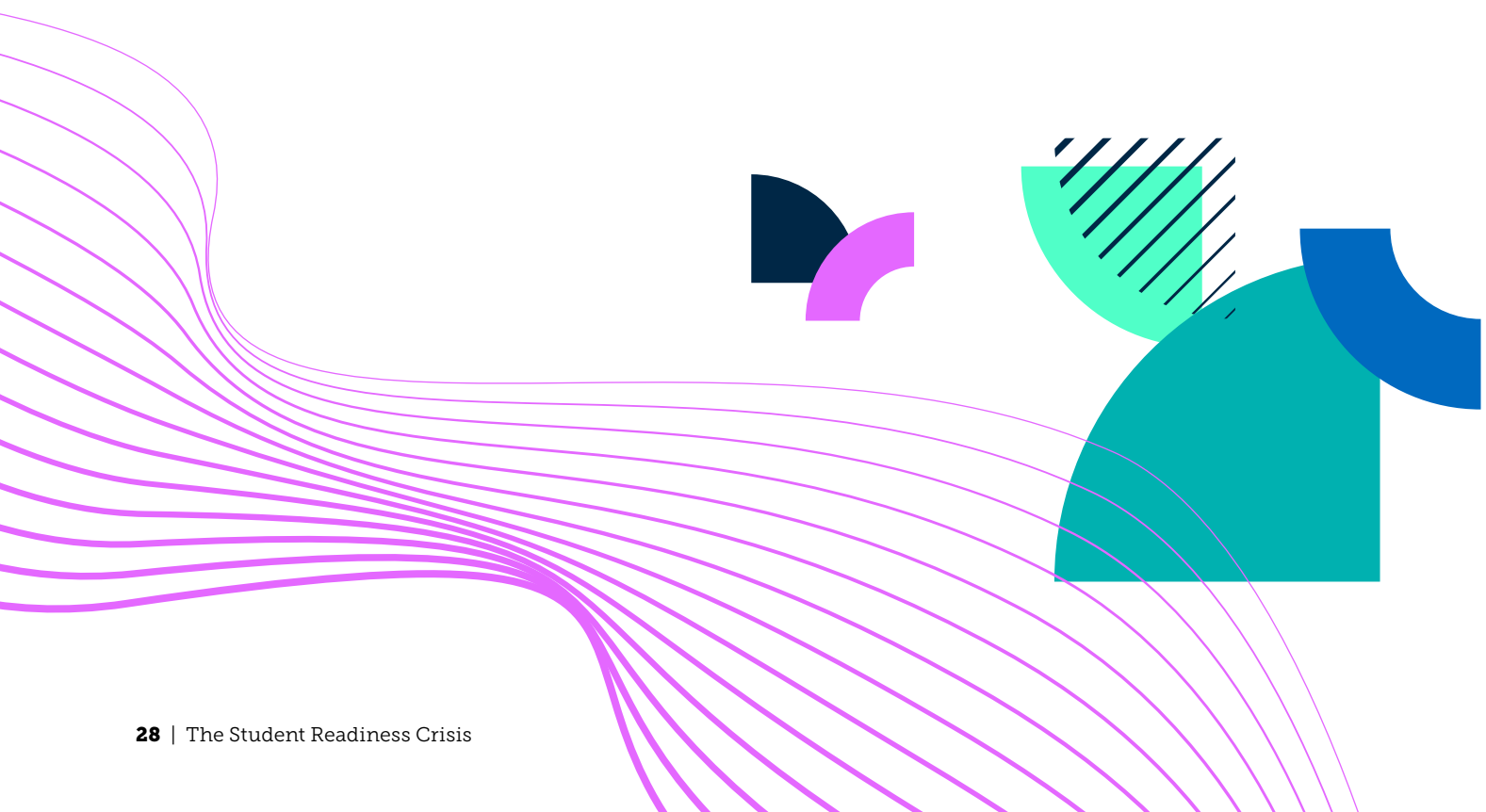
1. **Build school-wide expertise in the science of teaching reading:** Create professional development programs to fill any knowledge gaps teachers may have regarding the science of reading. Mississippi has used this approach to improve first-grade reading attainment by 24%.[22]

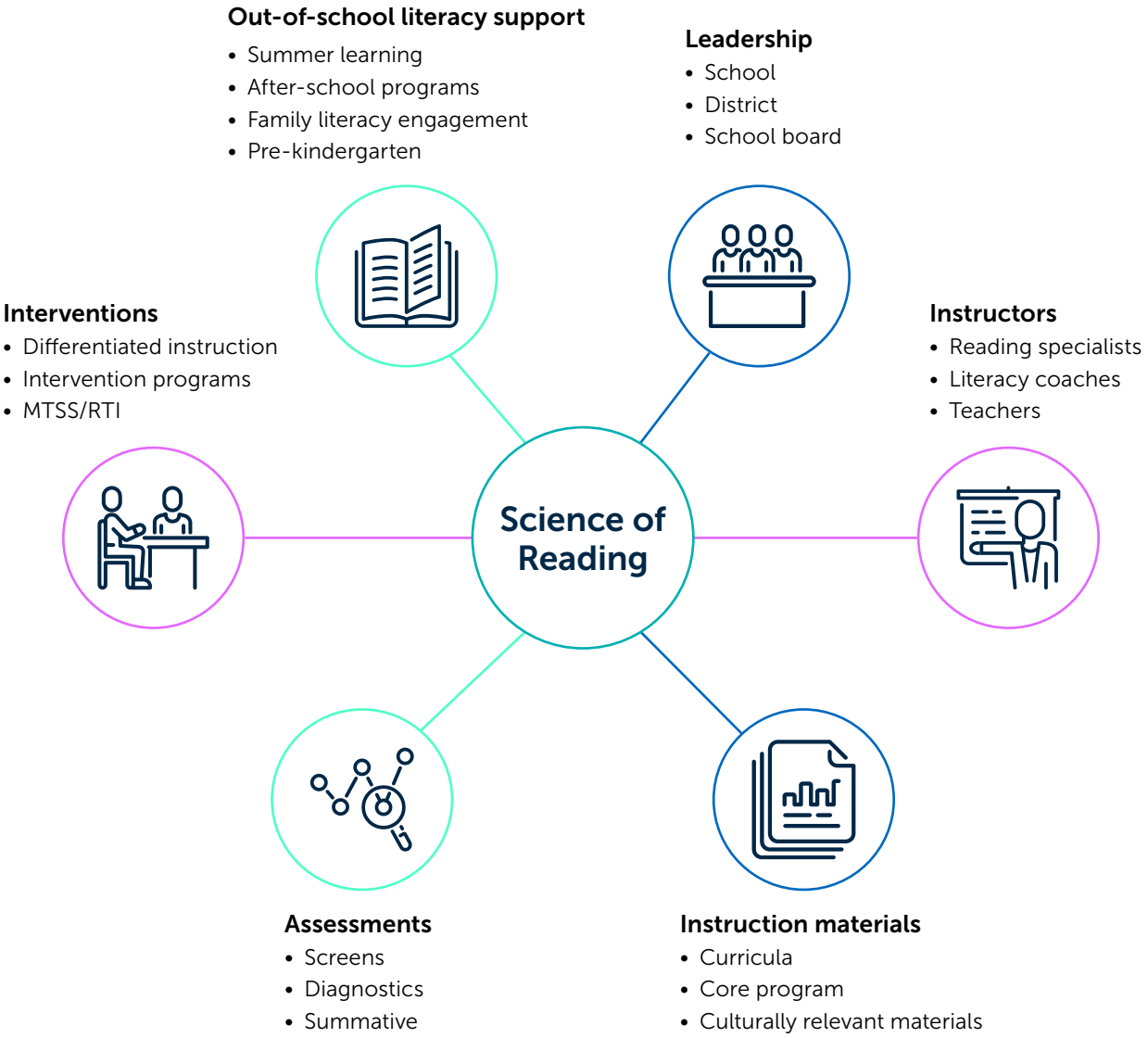
2. **Redesign small-group instruction to target student skill deficits:** Organize instruction groups based on skill needs, not reading level.

3. **Aid teachers in implementing science-based instruction:** Set concrete, grade-level guidelines for how reading-block time should be allocated across foundational reading skills.

4. **Mitigate summer slide with engaging summer programming:** Incentivize summer school enrollment and spur continued attendance by creating a summer camp-like atmosphere.

5. **Provide continuous basic skills practice:** K-12 institutions should prioritize offering ways for students to routinely practice basic skills so those concepts can be recalled when they land in a college classroom.





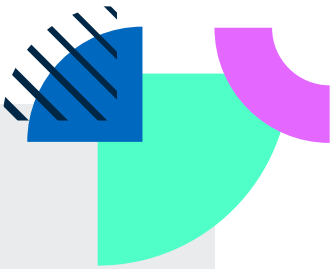
Source: Narrowing the Third-Grade Reading Gap, EAB, (2020).

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School spotlight

EAB and Republic School District[23]:

> Republic turned to EAB's District Leadership Forum for the tools to develop a teacher training program grounded in evidence-based reading instruction and best practices for teaching phonemic awareness. These efforts resulted in incredible strides in students' proficiency, including a 15-percentage-point increase in rhyme recognition.



Solution Spotlight:

District Leadership Forum

> Helps K-12 district leaders identify and implement proven solutions to current, critical challenges. Through our research, events, and advisory services, we provide superintendents and their teams with expert guidance as well as hands-on support to make meaningful change in their districts.
>
> **Learn more at** eab.com/k12.

Higher Education

3 Expand math interventions and reassess curricular alignment

As K-12 students who struggle with math prepare to attend college, institutions will need to rethink their math supports and curriculum to keep students on track, especially in STEM-related fields. Some branches of higher education, such as community colleges, have a long tradition of tailored math interventions, but many institutions do not. Four-year institutions specifically may need to take stock of their current math placement practices, curricular alignment, and academic supports to make sure students can stay on track.



...we don't sustain focus on basic math skills and basic numeracy, or even those core algebra one concepts that are so important for success in other areas. And so, what we keep hearing is that students don't have those basic math skills that are the foundation for other success in other areas, both in high school and also when they get to college."

Sr. Director of Research Growth Strategy, EAB

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Here's how colleges can prepare to close math skill gaps in recent high school graduates[24]:

1. **Multiple Measures Assessment (MMA):** Replace traditional math placement tests with MMA, which considers test scores, high school grades, and noncognitive elements for more accurate placement and improved student experience.

2. **Cocurricular Supplemental Instruction:** Expand supplemental instruction to support increased demand for developmental education, enrolling developmental students in college-level math concurrently with supplemental instruction to enhance outcomes and avoid delays in progress.

3. **Math Tutoring and Academic Support:** Strengthen math tutoring and academic support services by improving systems for early identification of struggling students and connecting them to appropriate support resources.

4. **Realignment of Math Requirements:** Realign math requirements with associated programs and majors, moving toward courses such as Statistics and Quantitative Reasoning that better align with program curricula and away from traditional Calculus sequences that may act as student success barriers.

5. **Pre-College Math Boot Camps:** Implement pre-college math boot camps to proactively prepare students for college-level math, providing a no-risk introduction to math classrooms while fostering connections and help-seeking behaviors. These boot camps can be promoted through partnerships with high schools and youth-serving organizations.

School spotlight

Math Interventions:

> Read more about how Broward College uses Navigate360 to raise alerts for students struggling in developmental math, enabling them to receive early interventions, at https://pages.eab.com/elevating-the-community-college-experience-Broward-College-case-study.html.



Solution Spotlight:

Navigate360

> Navigate360 is higher ed's most trusted solution for student success, powered by more than a decade of research gleaned from billions of student interactions. Navigate360 unites administrators, faculty, staff, and students in a collaborative network that supports the entire student journey. Our partners typically see graduation rate increases of 3% to 15% and retention rate increases of 2% to 12%.
>
> **Learn more and schedule a demo at** eab.com/Navigate360.

4 Bridge expectation gaps between faculty and students

When many students get to college, they struggle to understand social and classroom norms that differ from those they experienced in high school. For example, many high schools offer flexible submission deadlines, repeated opportunities to take tests, and the ability to make up assignments. Socially, students may be accustomed to their families scheduling their calendars, communicating with their school, and even managing conflicts with their peers.

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College has a different academic and social contract, and there is a growing gap between what students and institutions expect. College faculty report that students, including those in graduate programs, are surprised when they are asked to adhere to deadlines, attend class regularly, and participate in classroom discussions. This shift in rigor catches many students off guard, leaving them feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and frustrated.

In addition to understanding academic norms, students are struggling to communicate with faculty, manage conflict and interpersonal communication, and practice self-advocacy.

"Students are involving their parents in disagreements with faculty and their roommates," shared one university vice president, and "they need to learn when it's appropriate to escalate problems and what things they can resolve themselves."



Imagine my surprise at orientation when a student brought their parents to the advising appointment."

Provost,
Four-Year Public University



Higher education looks very traditional. They could learn a lot from us in K-12, like engagement strategies and classroom management. We need closer bonds with our college partners so we can have a more synchronized approach to college readiness."

K-12 Superintendent

To close those expectation gaps, higher education needs to **explicitly define social and academic expectations. Here are strategies to more clearly define norms and ease the transition to college:**

1. **Upgrade from orientation to onboarding:** Develop comprehensive onboarding programs[25] for incoming students that cover not only academic expectations but also social and cultural norms unique to the college environment. These programs need to be sustained over time, as opposed to a "one and done" event, to prevent students from becoming overwhelmed by information.

2. **College success courses:** Offer college success courses that focus on helping students develop the skills and knowledge necessary for academic and personal success in college. These courses can cover topics such as time management, study skills, effective communication, and navigating campus resources.

3. **Peer mentorship programs:** New students may feel more comfortable asking for help from their peers rather than an administrator or faculty member. Peer mentorship can give students a place to ask about how to juggle assignments, resolve interpersonal disputes, or request academic support. At Florida International University[26], peer mentors assist first-year-experience faculty in the classroom and help students navigate their first few weeks of college.

4. **Summer bridge partnerships:** Giving students the opportunity to experience college life in a smaller, more controlled setting before the official semester starts can help students learn critical skills without the pressure of a full schedule.

5. "**Coaching" support models:** A coaching model involves personalized guidance and support tailored to students' individual goals and challenges. Matching students with a dedicated coach can help them understand what their responsibilities are and what tools are available to help them navigate the transition to college.

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6. **Expanded support for graduate students:** Expectation gaps can extend to adult graduate students as well. Supports historically associated with undergraduates, such as holistic onboarding, peer mentoring, and early alerts, can help adult learners understand what is expected of them in their graduate coursework.

7. **Pre-collegiate K-12 partnerships:** These programs typically offer coursework, tutoring, mentoring, and college readiness workshops to help students develop the skills and knowledge needed for success in higher education. Programs can target specific demographic groups, interests, or regions to provide students with a low-pressure introduction to college, helping them set realistic expectations for college life.

Along with these interventions, institutions need to consider how prepared faculty are to meet student expectations. Post-pandemic students have a digital-first mindset, are open to online learning, and are used to pedagogical approaches that incorporate technology. Closing the expectation gap is a two-way street—with institutions bearing a responsibility in modernizing their instruction strategies.

5 Implement differentiated entry points based on individual student readiness

While some students may take a traditional pathway to college right after high school, thousands of other prospective students find themselves on a different timeline. Students who don't choose to attend college immediately after high school, college stop-outs, and adults seeking additional education may find that their version of "readiness" looks different than that of younger students. Consequently, institutions need to consider flexible entry points and on-ramps that acknowledge readiness can ebb and flow based upon where a student is in their life.

Here are ways colleges can build more flexible entry points to meet students where they are on their readiness journey:

1. **Flexible start dates and rolling admissions:** These can make it easier for people who have delayed or stopped-out of college to enroll at a later time, when their life circumstances permit. Some students may need only a short pause in their education, and delaying their enrollment by months to align with traditional start dates might deter them from enrolling.

2. **Prior learning assessment:** Prospective students who have been in the workforce may be well prepared for college based on their professional experience. Implementing a prior-learning assessment strategy can help these students enter college needing fewer prerequisite courses, thus positioning them further along in their program.

3. **Stackable credentials:** Creating smaller credentials that "stack" into larger degree offerings can create manageable on-ramps for students who feel unprepared for the commitment of a longer program. These programs also make it easier for students to leave and reenter the college over time, accumulating smaller credentials as they grow in their career.

4. **Some credit, no degree:** In 2022 there were nearly 37 million adults[27] in the United States who have some college but no degree (SCND), and increase of 2.9% over the prior year. As readiness gaps continue, this population may continue to increase. Institutions need to partner with their state-level leadership, community organizations, and employers to identify SCND adults who are open to resuming their education.

5. **Executive format graduate programs:** Some prospective graduate students may be highly prepared to start a program based on their existing career experience but need part-time and flexible options to accommodate their lives. Executive-style graduate programs with part-time, flexible, and remote options can provide on-ramps for eager mid-career professionals.

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Pathways to and through college and career are far more diverse than completing high school and immediately enrolling in postsecondary education. Technological advancements, changes in working patterns, career pathways resembling lattices rather than ladders—this fluid environment necessitates multiple on- and off-ramps to and through higher ed. The most innovative institutions and employers are partnering to conceive not of a better degree but rather a flexible lifelong curriculum."

Carla Hickman,
Vice President of Strategic Advisory Services, EAB

Solution Spotlight:

Strategic Advisory Services

EAB's campus-wide research and advisory support helps higher education leadership teams accelerate long-term strategic initiatives while staying responsive to rapid landscape shifts. We provide presidents and their cabinets with expert guidance and hands-on support to drive meaningful change.

Learn more at eab.com/strategic-advisory-services.

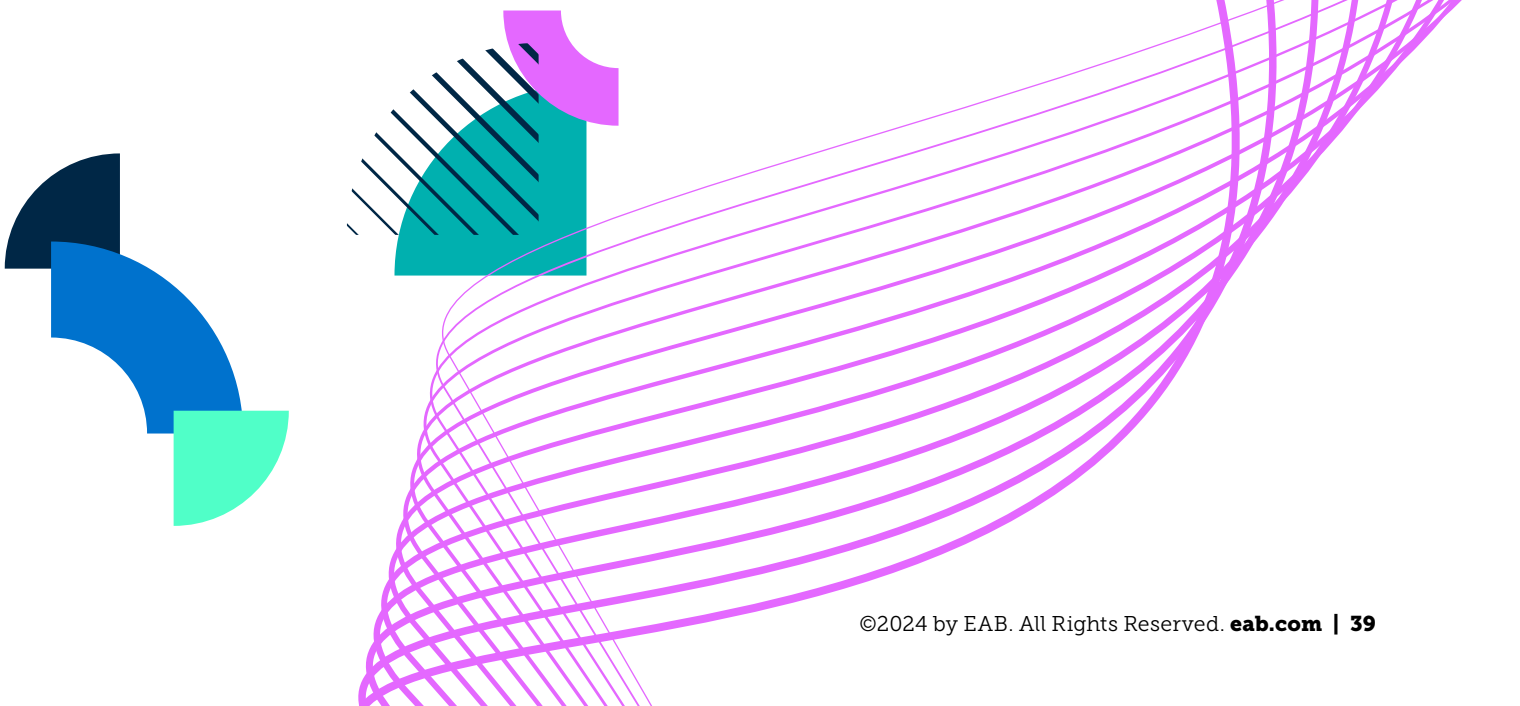
K-12 and Higher Education

6 Recognize early-stage mental health concerns to reduce escalation

Several obstacles hinder mental health support in schools, including social stigma, lack of resources, and inefficient care coordination. These barriers prevent students, parents, and staff from addressing mental health challenges promptly and effectively, leaving many students vulnerable and without necessary support when they need it most.

With a chronic shortage of community providers across the country, responding to this crisis will fall largely to school districts and colleges that are already under-resourced and strapped for funds. Many institutions have started partnering with external organizations to enhance mental health interventions. However, by the time student mental health concerns are referred out to external sources, they are often nearing a crisis.

By proactively screening students about their mental well-being, schools and colleges can connect students to resources before their concerns escalate, collect data on which kinds of mental health concerns are most prevalent, and signal to students that their mental health is valued.



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Here are ways institutions can proactively identify mental health concerns:

1. **Universal screening tools (K-12):** Universal screeners[28] enhance student outcomes and reduce district costs by requiring minimal specialized training for administration, enabling early identification of students who need mental or behavioral support.

2. **Onboarding surveys (higher education):** Screening students for what concerns them about the upcoming semester, how they handle stress, and how they rank their emotional health can help colleges identify students who may need additional support. This includes screenings for graduate students who are showing higher levels of social unpreparedness than in the past.

3. **Mid-semester check-ins:** Simple, short, "pulse check" type surveys[29] at various points in the year can offer a lifeline to students who might be feeling overwhelmed by academic and social demands.

4. **Implement a stepped care model:** Use a stepped care framework to organize existing mental health and well-being support into escalating layers that connect students to the degree and type of care they need, while reserving individual counseling center appointments for the most acute issues.

5. **Reduce community-wide stigma around mental health:** To effectively address the increasing rates of anxiety and suicide, it's crucial for students, staff, and caregivers to seek support when needed. However, persistent mental health stigma often deters individuals from expressing or recognizing their struggles. Implementing year-round awareness, implementing mentoring, and launching educational initiatives for families can decrease stigma.

6. **Increase socio-emotional professional development:** Screening students is not enough; educators must know how to respond to the insights gained from these screening tools, which requires additional training. Seventy percent[30] of public schools say that they need to offer more training on students' socio-emotional health to better support student well-being.

School spotlight

Learn more about how Calvin University and Allegany College use a stepped care model to offer students support that's scaled to their needs: https://eab.com/resources/blog/unknown/7-steps-to-improve-mental-health-support/.



Solution Spotlight:

Mantra Health

Stepped care models are a practice recommended by Mantra Health. Mantra Health partners with higher education institutions to provide students with comprehensive, high-quality mental health and wellness solutions.

Learn more at https://mantrahealth.com/.

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7 Reinforce critical thinking and socio-emotional intelligence skills

One of the biggest readiness barriers colleges and employers are seeing is that students are struggling to communicate with each other, problem-solve, and resolve conflict. For example, some students may speak too informally with faculty and advisors. From an employer perspective, recent hires are struggling to work in groups and interact with clients or stakeholders.

Executive-function skills are essential, long-lasting competencies such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork, which remain valuable and applicable across various jobs and industries throughout a person's career. Students need ways to practice these skills the same way they practice academic skills to build stronger competencies.

Here are way educators can build interpersonal and executive-function skills in students:

1. **Foster Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** Incorporating SEL programs[31] that focus on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making helps students build emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills crucial for their future careers and personal lives.

2. **Teach students the self-regulation skills needed to achieve their goals:** As students define their goals, they must develop self-awareness and self-management skills to persevere through challenges. Educators should design challenging tasks adaptive to student needs and explicitly include perseverance as an objective, using tools such as emotional awareness protocols and self-management strategy banks[32] to help students reflect on and improve their perseverance strategies.

3. **Teach students how to foster constructive disagreement:** Today's students, often confined to echo chambers on social media, need educational environments that foster safe spaces for understanding diverse perspectives and engaging in respectful dialogue, as exemplified by Irshad Manji's five step approach.[33]



Higher-ed institutions serve as the vessel where diverse perspectives are encountered; students might not experience some forms of 'diversity' until they reach your campuses at the age of 18. The ability to navigate these differences—whether of thought, background, race, religion, or political affiliation—are becoming a crucial skill for the workplace."

Subha Barry,
President, Seramount



These are students that are raised on social media where they can block, unfollow, and unsubscribe when things get difficult. They need opportunities to build grit, fumble, and learn adaptability so they have resilience after college."

Sr. Director,
Four-Year Private University

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Employer and Industry

8 Restructure new-hire onboarding to emphasize organizational culture and support

Ideally, the onboarding process should span months or even years, rather than just a few days, and should focus on more than merely completing clerical tasks. Onboarding strategies[34] should explicitly set cultural norms for how employees interact with their managers, working hours, communication etiquette, collaboration, and creative problem-solving. This time can also be used to connect the new hire with employee resource groups and mentorship opportunities, both of which are associated with higher retention and engagement.



The lack of training for middle managers is an epidemic in corporate America, especially since they are the ones most likely to interact with new hires and interns."

Executive HR Professional

Here are strategies that employers can use for holistic onboarding:

1. **Entry interviews:** A meeting between a new employee and their supervisor or HR representative to discuss the employee's role, expectations, company culture, and any initial questions or concerns can help new hires feel connected to the organization. It helps facilitate a smooth transition into the new job and ensures the employee feels welcomed and informed.

2. **New-hire mentors:** A new-hire mentor is an experienced employee assigned to guide and support a new employee during their initial period at the company, offering advice, answering questions, and helping them navigate the workplace culture. This relationship helps the new hire acclimate more quickly and effectively, enhancing their overall onboarding experience.

3. **Employee resource groups:** Perhaps because of their inherent diversity, Gen Z care about their company's commitment[35] to DEI: 83% of Gen Z job seekers indicate that a company's commitment to DEI is important. Establishing employee resource groups that connect people with similar backgrounds and experiences can foster a stronger sense of community.

4. **Continuous feedback:** Often, employers may give feedback only once a year, making it hard to take immediate action on things both positive and negative. Offering continuous, "just in time" feedback, including recognition and praise, during an employee's first year is a way to signal that they are on track.

5. **Support middle managers:** Middle managers are often responsible for onboarding interns and new hires, yet they frequently lack formal training in people management. This can be especially challenging given the growing readiness gaps among new professionals. Those working directly with early career professionals need training on providing feedback, helping others set goals, managing expectations, and incorporating mentorship into their roles.

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Learn more about inclusive onboarding

Employees who have a positive onboarding experience are almost 3x as likely to feel ready and supported in their role. Seramount helps organizations create inclusive onboarding practices at seramount.com/resources/inclusive-onboarding-guide.



9 Challenge myths about Gen Z

Part of helping employers close readiness gaps for Gen Z is understanding what Gen Z truly needs in a workplace. Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is becoming a significant part of the global workforce, with projections indicating they will make up one-third of the US workforce by 2029.

However, Gen Z faces numerous stereotypes, such as being perceived as lazy, disloyal, and overly focused on money. Additionally, they are often criticized for pushing for political statements, resisting traditional office settings, and questioning authority.

New research from Seramount shows that Gen Z is actually more similar to the rest of the working population than commonly believed and that negative stereotypes about them are both unhelpful and distract managers from building a strong organizational culture. As one HR professional shared, *"Every new generation in the workforce has had the generations before them lament over how 'they expect too much'—what's happening now actually isn't that different than what's happened in the past."*

Here are five things employers need to consider when building a Gen Z inclusive workplace[36]:

1. **They want to build careers:** Gen Z is more optimistic about advancing to leadership positions (33% vs. 19% for older counterparts) and more eager to supervise others (44% vs. 27%), yet they express concerns about maintaining work/life balance as career advancement requirements conflict with their priorities.

2. **They prefer hybrid work:** Gen Z values flexibility but remains attached to the office, as 74% prefer hybrid work arrangements compared to 52% of older generations, with only 11% preferring full remote work; both groups prioritize maintaining work/life boundaries regardless of their work location preferences.

3. **They're navigating expectations and biases:** Gen Zers, like all new employees, are adapting to the workplace, with 28% feeling they don't need to compromise their authenticity, though 59% adjust how they communicate. Both Gen Z and non-Gen Z employees encounter challenges in cross-generational communication.

4. **They put the "I" in DEI:** Gen Z's evolving understanding of DEI emphasizes inclusion of neurodivergent employees and those with disabilities, though fewer of them feel personally responsible for advancing DEI compared to older colleagues, and they are less confident in their company's commitment to DEI progress.

5. **They have the potential for loyalty:** Gen Z and non-Gen Z employees have comparable short-term retention plans, but Gen Z is more inclined to leave due to limited advancement opportunities or work/life balance issues rather than lack of career interest.

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Across All Sectors

10 Help students identify and access best fit-career pathways

New graduates feel unprepared for the demands of their careers, with 39% stating that their education did not adequately prepare them to transition into the workforce. Part of this stress can come from not fully understanding what the "day to day" of their profession entails and what skills they need to be successful in their field.

Prospective employees need a realistic understanding of what different jobs "feel" like on a daily basis to understand if they are a good match for that career path. This extends beyond "career exploration" into "career literacy," which is a deeper understanding of what it means to work in a specific field. Without this practical understanding, students might end up in fields that aren't a good match, leaving them feeling unprepared and caught off guard when they start working.

Students also need to understand what specific steps they need to take to access specific careers—with a recognition that different careers have different on-ramps. Ideally, students need to have access to multiple opportunities to explore careers over several years so they can compare and contrast their options and feel prepared to enter the workforce.



Solution Spotlight:

Forage

> Forage job simulations allow candidates to experience different roles at different companies. Our recruiting platform allows employers to build global brand awareness and identify top talent for hard-to-fill early career roles.
>
> **Learn more at** seramount.com/solutions/forage/.

Employers can partner with educational institutions to help students understand the day-to-day aspects of different roles and how to access them through the following ways:

1. **Job simulations:** Digital tools such as Forage help students to experience what it is like to be an accountant, investment banker, software engineer, and more through free online courses designed by top companies such as Citibank, Goldman Sachs, KPMG, and Lululemon. Forage's interactive job simulations expose students to different career paths, build skills related to specific roles, and prepare students for interviews.

2. **Job shadowing:** Shadowing offers less of a commitment than an internship and can actually help students narrow their internship options before committing to a more long-term agreement. Shadowing may allow students to visit with an employer for a short amount of time, meaning students can shadow multiple employers quickly.

3. **Recent alumni mentorship:** Recent alumni are valuable resources for both undergraduate and graduate students by offering mentorship, networking opportunities, and practical advice. They can share job-hunting experiences, provide industry-specific guidance, offer resume critiques and mock interviews, and facilitate introductions or referrals within their professional networks.

4. **Mentoring from industry professionals:** Starting career mentoring as early as K-12 can help students understand what skills and knowledge are needed for different career paths and how to stand out in the hiring process. Mentoring can also help students learn where to look for jobs, how to create strong resumes, how to build social capital, and how to develop effective interviewing strategies.

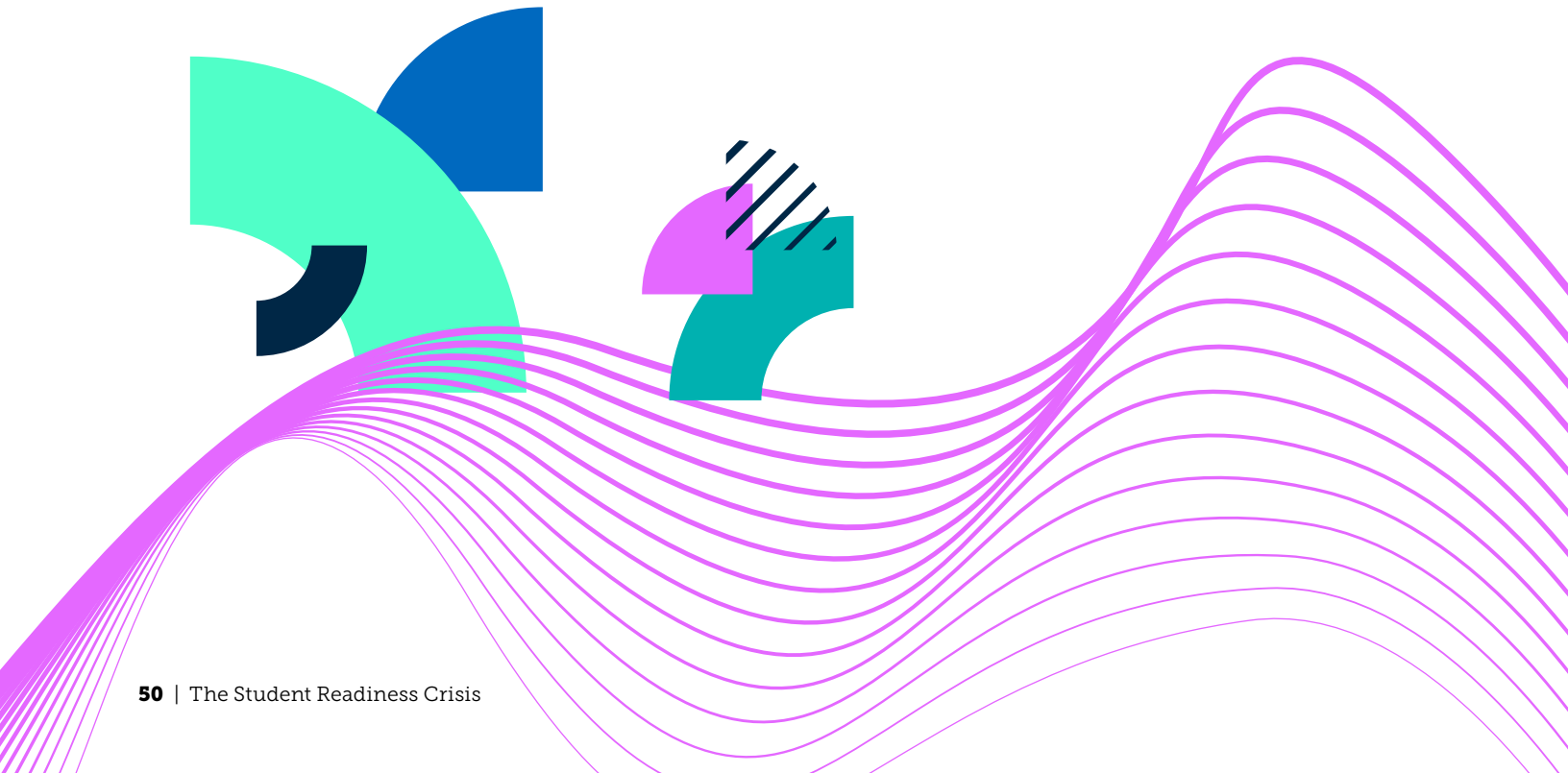
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> *"If they know what the 'work' is it helps employers qualify the candidate, but it also helps candidates qualify the job."*
>
> **John DeNavi,**
> **Director of Employer Partnerships, Forage**

School spotlight

Stoneybrook University:

At Stoneybrook University students can gain professional skills and connect with global employers through the Forage platform, enhancing their resumes and exploring career paths with top companies. Short virtual simulations introduced by faculty and staff help students develop career competencies, supporting their success after college.



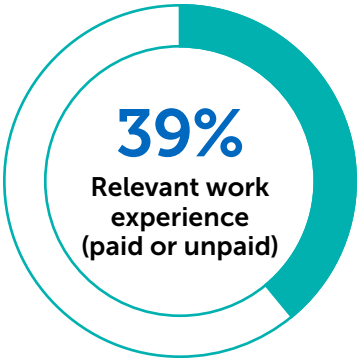
11 Combine classroom learning with relevant work experience through employer partnerships

Nearly 40%[37] of students believe that relevant work experience is crucial for getting a job. Today's students want to see a clear link between their classroom activities and their future careers. Making these connections early can help students stay motivated in their education. If students don't see the practical connection between their education and career goals, and they face readiness gaps, they are more likely to disengage from their studies.

By collaborating, educators and employers can align educational curricula with industry needs, provide students with practical experience through internships and apprenticeships, and facilitate smoother transitions from education to employment. This partnership also helps to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world applications, creating a clear connection between their academic coursework, soft skills, and long-term goals.

What's most important to get a job?

Forage Survey
n=9,636





14%
of students and early talent believe college provides the skills necessary for workplace success

Source: The Great Disconnect, Forage, 2021 (n=9,636 college students and recent graduates); EAB Interviews and analysis.

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These tactical relationships also help build pools of qualified candidates that can benefit employers in the future. As one HR professional shared: *"We know when we partner with higher education on specialized programs that not all those students are going to choose to work with us right away. But, a few years down the line when they see one of our job postings they are going to understand what the work is and that they are qualified. Growing the overall talent pool is a win for us."*

Here are ways educators and industry can partner to combine classroom and workforce experience:

1. **Credential focused dual enrollment:** Develop pathways that bridge K-12 and higher education with curricular guidance from employer partners. The Future Ready Centers[38] are a Wichita Public School and WSU Tech partnership that provides students with hands-on training, learning opportunities, and mentoring from industry experts while they are still attending their base high schools. Students receive instruction from WSU Tech faculty and leave the program prepared to start their career or continue on their degree path.

2. **Experiential learning:** Almost 80% of high school students[39] now consider on-the-job learning experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships, essential components of their postsecondary education, marking a 14-percentage-point rise since 2022. Experiential learning, or learning through doing, enhances understanding by linking classroom theories to real-world scenarios through community service, research, internships, and capstone projects. By engaging in hands-on experiences and reflection, students develop durable skills and apply theoretical knowledge in meaningful ways beyond traditional coursework.

3. **Project-based learning:** Involves students working on real-world projects[40] for an extended period, typically a week to a semester, often in partnership with an employer. Students tackle complex problems or questions and showcase their learning through public presentations or products. This fosters deep content understanding and builds durable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication.



We need more emphasis on process-based learning versus product based. Team work, collaboration, and problem solving all need to be explicit learning objectives so students can articulate those skills to employers in the future."

Chief Academic Officer,
Community College State System



Historically we would expect that your first two years on the job would be spent learning skills, and not necessarily contributing to productivity. Now, we need to partner with education to teach those specialized skills so the on-ramp to productivity happens faster."

Jeremy Broome,
Global Head of Talent, Visa

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12 Create environments where human connection is a priority

Loneliness is a growing epidemic,[41] particularly among young people aged 16 to 24, with 73% of Gen Z reporting frequent feelings of loneliness. Despite being hyperconnected online, Gen Z's digital interactions have not fulfilled the essential need for emotional connections in the physical world.

Students' sense of belonging at school is a top factor in their retention and persistence, and feeling connected at work increases employee satisfaction. School and work are places where people have historically made friends, had strong social bonds, and enjoyed a shared culture—but the pandemic destabilized these opportunities to connect.

Learn more about how you can support student belongingness

*EAB's Student Belongingness Resource Center can help your institution strengthen its belongingness strategy at **eab.com/resources/resource-center/student-belonging-resource-center/.***

Here's how schools and employers can rebuild opportunities for engagement and connection:

1. **Cocurricular and social engagement:** Students who participate in clubs, sports, and activities aligned with their interests are more likely to make friends, build connections, find communities where they can belong, and leave the institution with positive memories about their experience. For students who feel anxious about socializing, small group activities—such as a game night exclusively for students on a specific floor of a residence hall—can help ease them into building a sense of community.

2. **Mentoring and coaching:** Meaningful faculty and industry connections with mentors are crucial for student belonging, but these relationships are often difficult to establish, especially for students from underrepresented or marginalized backgrounds, due to limited structured opportunities. Institutions and employers need to be intentional in creating space for mentorship by proactively matching students with mentors who share their backgrounds, academic interests, and/or career goals.

3. **Hybrid Options > Remote Options:** Gen Z does prioritize flexibility, but they still value time in the office. Only 11% of Gen Z would prefer to be fully remote, compared with 34% of non-Gen Z employees. Offering hybrid work options (and program options for colleges) is a way to strike a balance between Gen Z's desire for flexibility and need for meaningful engagement. Similarly, children in K-12 environments need face-to-face interactions with their peers to learn about social cues, emotional regulation, and classroom expectations.

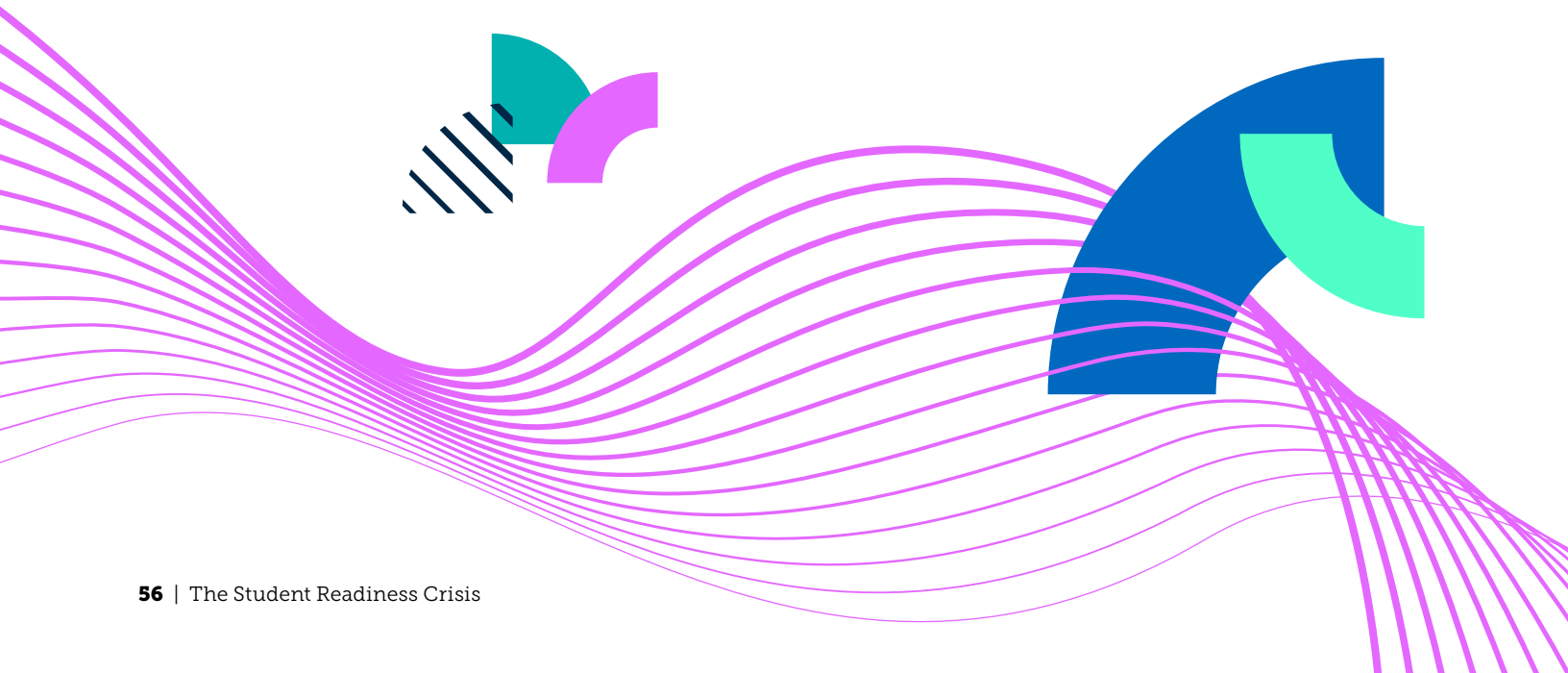
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Summary

Millions of children across the country deserve a stable career, rewarding work, and financial security. Many students envision themselves moving up the economic ladder and providing greater stability for their families. These students, who are our family members and neighbors, are people who need the systems and structures around them to improve and respond to issues they didn't create. They all deserve the tools to help prepare them for this future, as their goals are within reach with the right support.

Student readiness gaps are expected to widen, with long-term implications for educational institutions and employers alike. However, with swift and sweeping action, thousands of students can reach academic milestones, become more connected to education, and stay on track for their dream career. The good news is that by acting now, education and industry can partner to correct the trajectory that many students are on by putting guardrails in place to narrow readiness gaps before they widen further.

As we continue to confront readiness challenges, EAB and Seramount remain committed to comprehensively studying this problem over time and providing industry-responsive technology, research, and best practices focused on closing readiness gaps and preparing students to meet their career goals.



How Can EAB Help?

Access Related Resources

EAB's Student Readiness Resource Center offers research and expert insights to address the readiness challenges detailed in this paper. Explore resources for both educators and employers.

Visit the Student Readiness Resource Center.

Connect with EAB

Want to speak with our experts or learn more about EAB solutions to confront student readiness challenges at your institution?

Contact us at pages.eab.com/StudentReadiness-RequestforExpertConsult.html

About Us

Together, EAB and Seramount are committed to making education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with more than 2,800 institutions—from kindergarten to college to career—to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities, which we tailor to meet the unique needs of every leadership team and the students and employees they serve.

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