

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Helping Students Thrive in School, Career, and Life

What Are Essential Skills?

Essential Skills are the personal qualities and work habits that influence how you interact with others, manage tasks, and approach challenges. These foundational and transferable skills are key to success in school, the workplace, and everyday life—no matter what career or path you choose. In the past, you may have heard these referred to as “soft skills.”

Time and again, employers consistently rank communication, collaboration, adaptability, and professionalism as top skills. Yet students often leave school underprepared to apply these vital skills in their future careers.

Why These Skills Matter in South Dakota

Employers across every region and industry in South Dakota are asking for students who not only have technical training but also know how to communicate, problem solve, and work well with others. These Essential Skills are the foundation for success in the South Dakota workforce.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) is uniquely positioned to help students develop these skills through hands-on, practical learning. Whether it’s in a classroom, shop, lab, work-based learning experience, or student organization, CTE provides powerful opportunities for students to build the Essential Skills they’ll use every day in their careers and communities.



SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Take initiative in managing your personal and professional growth.



STRATEGIC THINKING

Think critically to recognize opportunities and challenges and create effective solutions.



TIME MANAGEMENT

Efficiently organize one’s time, tasks, and commitments.



ADAPTABILITY

Navigate changes, setbacks, or uncertainty with a growth mindset and flexible approach.



DIGITAL LITERACY

Use an array of technology tools for information, communication, and problem solving in an increasingly digital world.



COMMUNICATION

Convey and receive information clearly, accurately, and effectively.



PROFESSIONALISM

The ability to be counted on by others, show up on time, follow through on your commitments, and take ownership of your actions.



LEADERSHIP

Motivate and guide others toward achieving a shared goal or objective.



COLLABORATION

Proactively work with others to accomplish a common goal.



INNOVATION

Use creativity and curiosity to generate new ideas, improve processes, and develop solutions that add value in the workplace and community.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Goal setting
- Reflection
- Self-awareness

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Take initiative in managing your personal and professional growth.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Set short- and long-term goals related to school, career, or personal growth.
- Seek out feedback and adjust actions accordingly.
- Explore different careers and opportunities to advance within those careers.
- Build and maintain a network of supportive peers and mentors.
- Participate in learning beyond classwork (e.g., workshops, CTSOs, work-based learning).

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Goal Mapping & Mentor Match:** Students set short- and long-term goals, identify a mentor, and conduct an interview to learn about growth and setbacks. They revisit goals monthly.
- **Growth Journal:** Students reflect weekly on strengths, challenges, and progress toward goals using a structured journal format.
- **Skill-Building Tracker:** Students select a skill they want to improve (e.g., time management), research how to improve it, and log practice attempts over a set period.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Presentation skills
- Active listening
- Verbal and nonverbal communication

COMMUNICATION

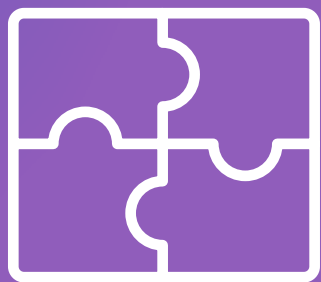
Convey and receive information clearly, accurately, and effectively.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Use proper tone and body language during conversations and presentations.
- Write clearly for different audiences (emails, reports, resumes).
- Ask thoughtful questions and summarize responses accurately.
- Listen actively by paraphrasing or responding appropriately.
- Adapt communication style to different people and situations.
- Apologize when needed and make corrections.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Presentation Remix:** Students give a 1-minute talk, then adapt the same message for different audiences, focusing on tone, word choice, and delivery.
- **Communication Charades:** In pairs or small groups, students practice non-verbal communication through a fun charades-style activity, followed by reflection.
- **Constructive Conversations Role-Play:** Students take on different roles and practice active listening, asking clarifying questions, and respectfully disagreeing during structured dialogues.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Problem-solving
- Reasoning skills
- Creativity

STRATEGIC THINKING

Think critically to recognize opportunities and challenges and create effective solutions.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Identify the root cause of a problem, not just symptoms.
- Brainstorm multiple solutions and weigh their pros and cons.
- Use data and research to support an idea.
- Stay open to new perspectives and revise conclusions when new evidence appears.
- Brainstorm ideas and create solutions to meet a need.
- Appreciate others' creative ideas and build on them in team settings.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Community Fix-It Challenge:** Students identify a local issue, research it, brainstorm solutions, and present their plan to the class or school.
- **Scenario Stations:** Rotate through classroom “problems” (e.g., group project conflict, budget shortfall, missing tools) and develop responses using logic and collaboration.
- **Design Thinking Sprint:** Use the design thinking process to develop a simple prototype to solve a student-identified problem.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Integrity
- Reliability
- Accountability

PROFESSIONALISM

The ability to be counted on by others, show up on time, follow through on your commitments, and take ownership of your actions.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Arrive on time and meet deadlines consistently.
- Follow through on commitments, even without supervision.
- Dress and act appropriately for the setting.
- Take ownership of mistakes and work to correct them.
- Demonstrate a strong work ethic through focus and perseverance.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Distraction Detox Project:** Students research how cell phones affect focus and productivity in school and the workplace. They track their own phone use during tasks, analyze the impact, and create a guide or PSA for managing distractions on the job.
- **Workplace Scenario Skits:** In small groups, students act out common professionalism issues (e.g., being late, checking a phone during a meeting) and demonstrate better alternatives. Follow with class discussion.
- **Professional Behavior Checklist:** Students observe a professional setting (in-person, virtual, or a video) and complete a checklist of behaviors they notice and reflect on what stands out.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Organization
- Prioritization
- Responsibility

TIME MANAGEMENT

The ability to efficiently organize one's time, tasks, and commitments.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Break large projects into smaller steps with deadlines.
- Use a planner or calendar to track important dates.
- Set reminders for assignments and commitments.
- Estimate how long tasks will take and adjust as needed.
- Avoid distractions by creating a focused workspace.
- Balance school, extracurriculars, and personal time.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Task Breakdown Challenge:** Students choose a big assignment (like a research paper) and create a step-by-step timeline to finish it on time, with checkpoints.
- **Time Audit:** For one day, students record how they spend their time, then analyze it to find areas to improve.
- **Productivity Playlist:** Students design a personal strategy list (tools, music, break timing, apps) to help them stay focused and manage their time better.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Respectfulness
- Consistency
- Decision-making

LEADERSHIP

Motivate and guide others toward achieving a shared goal or objective.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Take initiative to organize and lead group efforts.
- Set a positive example through words and actions.
- Encourage participation and make sure all voices are heard.
- Delegate tasks based on teammates' strengths and needs.
- Reflect on your own leadership style and seek to improve it.
- Seek more leadership roles within CTSOs, athletics, or your school.
- Follow through on commitments you make.
- Treat people respectfully and fairly.
- Reflect on the impact of decisions before and after they're made.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Lead the Way Rotation:** Each student leads a small group activity, assigns roles, and debriefs performance with peer feedback.
- **Leadership Styles Gallery Walk:** Research different leadership styles and create visual posters. Students walk around the room, take notes, and reflect on which style fits them.
- **Classroom Committee Roles:** Assign rotating leadership roles (e.g., discussion leader, timekeeper, note taker) for class tasks to build leadership skills in context.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Resilience
- Growth mindset
- Positive attitude

ADAPTABILITY

Navigate changes, setbacks, or uncertainty with a growth mindset and flexible approach.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Adjust plans or approaches when things don't go as expected.
- Keep a positive attitude in stressful situations.
- Learn from failure and try again with new strategies.
- Take on unfamiliar tasks without hesitation.
- Juggle multiple responsibilities and shift focus as needed.
- When you're frustrated, don't give up! Ask for help from a supportive person if needed.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Failure Resume:** Students list past challenges and reflect on what they learned and how they adapted. Share in small groups.
- **Bounce-Back Box:** Create a "toolkit" of motivational strategies (quotes, songs, actions) to turn to when facing setbacks. Keep it for future challenges.
- **Resilience Scenario Response:** Present common student challenges (e.g., low test score, team conflict) and brainstorm three possible responses to each.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Teamwork
- Conflict resolution
- Networking

COLLABORATION

Proactively work with others to accomplish a common goal.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Use respectful communication skills and avoid assumptions or stereotypes.
- Engage in conversations with all members of the team.
- Recognize everyone's skill and the value they bring to the team.
- Explore ways for each team member to contribute meaningfully.
- Adapt communication to reflect the needs of the team.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Communication Styles:** Students work in small groups to complete a hands-on challenge (e.g., building a structure from limited materials, solving a puzzle, or planning an event). Each student draws a "communication card" that gives them a specific way to communicate (e.g., very direct, quiet and reserved, enthusiastic and talkative). After completing the task, students reflect on what it was like to work with teammates who approached communication differently and how they adapted to collaborate effectively.
- **Team Challenge with All Voices:** Teams must design a project where each member's ideas are included. After presenting, students reflect on how hearing different ideas helped improve the final result.
- **Listening Lab:** Students practice active listening by interviewing a partner, summarizing what they heard, and asking follow-up questions. They reflect on how listening helps avoid misunderstandings.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- AI literacy
- Analyzing information
- Continuous learning

DIGITAL LITERACY

Use an array of technology tools for information, communication, and problem solving in an increasingly digital world.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Evaluate sources for credibility when researching online.
- Use productivity tools (e.g., spreadsheets, calendars, learning platforms).
- Create professional digital content (presentations, resumes, portfolios).
- Practice safe and ethical use of technology (privacy, copyright, cybersecurity).
- Choose appropriate technology for a task or project.
- Continue to learn about new and growing digital tools.
- Utilize artificial intelligence in a responsible manner.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Tech Tool Showdown:** Test and compare tools for a class task (e.g., digital posters in Canva vs. Google Slides). Present findings with a recommendation.
- **Digital Skills Audit:** Students assess their comfort with common tech tools, set a goal for improvement, and complete a tutorial or project to build that skill.
- **Responsible Tech Debate:** Research and debate real-world tech issues (e.g., AI in schools, phone bans). Focus on ethics, safety, and informed use.



SUPPORTING SKILLS

- Design-thinking
- Curiosity
- Ingenuity

INNOVATION

Use creativity and curiosity to generate new ideas, improve processes, and develop solutions that add value in the workplace and community.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- Identify ways to improve everyday processes and test new approaches.
- Welcome feedback to refine and improve new ideas or innovations.
- Take informed risks to try new ideas, recognizing when to adjust or stop.
- Explore and discover new ideas to add value in the workplace and community.

PROJECT IDEAS

- **Idea Mash-Up Challenge:** Students combine two unrelated objects, tools, or trends to invent something new. They sketch or prototype the idea and present the problem it solves and who might benefit.
- **Failure-to-Function Redesign:** Identify an everyday item or process that doesn't work well (e.g., school lunch line, locker organization). Students brainstorm ways to improve it using creativity and feedback.
- **Innovation Pitch Tank:** In small teams, students identify a problem they care about and pitch a new solution to the class using visuals, cost considerations, and impact. Peers vote on feasibility and originality.