Within the Career Clusters framework, business people and educators have collaborated nationwide to establish 10 foundational areas of knowledge and skills needed for success in the workplace and in life. Among these topics are problem solving and critical thinking, teamwork, ethical responsibilities, and career development.

Students must go beyond memorization and comprehension to apply what they have learned. If students are expected to learn problem-solving skills, they have to solve challenging, real-world problems that could have multiple solutions. If students are expected to learn teamwork, they must work in teams. If students are expected to learn ethical responsibilities, they should be involved in activities that engage the community, and they should interact with adults to learn the ethical dilemmas of today’s workplace.

Achieving these goals requires an investment from educators, school administrators, and the local business community in innovative instructional and assessment practices. These practices can create a value-added educational system that goes beyond lectures and paper-and-pencil tests. The educational system should also bring students and educators to the workplace and the workplace to the classroom.

The Career Clusters framework involves an environment for learning that requires more rigorous and relevant learning, with expectations that students work to find solutions to real-life problems. Instruction must move from worksheets and teacher-centered learning to student-driven learning where students actively research and synthesize multiple solutions. Findings can be presented either individually or as a team to a panel of knowledgeable community members or to the public at large. Educators may look to the High Schools That Work network for materials, professional development and assistance that advance these goals and practices.

Schools and communities should collaborate to incorporate service-learning activities, where students find and apply solutions to problems in their community. Through these activities, students develop a sense of their value in the community, improve problem-solving and teamwork skills, learn to care for others, and become mindful of their human and natural environments.

Project-based learning and authentic assessments with panels of knowledgeable community members play a key role in establishing the value-added education at the core of the Career Clusters framework.