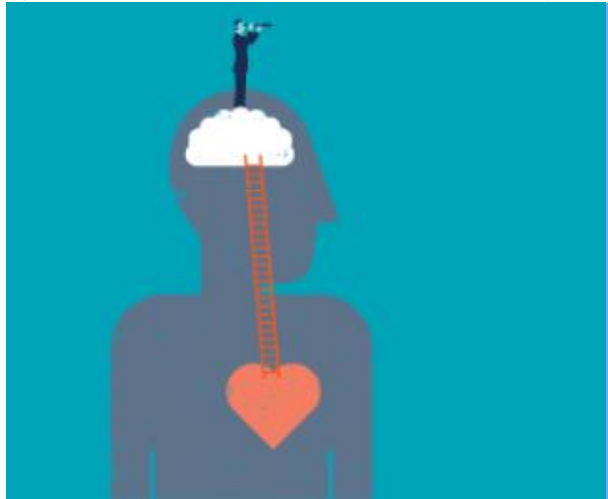


Nonacademic Skills Are the Necessary Foundation for Learning

By K. Brooke Stafford-Brizard Education Week July 22, 2016



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Most schools that focus solely on academic skills do not experience sustainable results. A growing body of research, drawn from the science of child development, demonstrates the extent of the impact that nonacademic and social-emotional skills—such as self-regulation, problem-solving, social awareness, and growth mindset—have on academic outcomes and success in the workforce and in life. While some label these skills as supplemental, recent studies have shown that what we have long considered to be the softer side of education is requisite for success.

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires that states include at least one nonacademic indicator in their school accountability frameworks, which is leading states to explore options for teaching and measuring nonacademic skills. Schools should meet this opportunity with rigor and responsibility, as there is also the risk of hastiness and harm. Being thoughtful about what to prioritize can help educators determine the best ways to integrate nonacademic skills into the classroom.

If academic standards are what students must learn, certain social-emotional skills support *how* they learn. In early childhood, supportive environments and relationships aid brain development and promote school readiness. Those who grow up in healthy homes and receive high-quality preschool instruction typically develop skills to regulate their emotions—they pay attention better and build relationships more easily with teachers and peers. Most K-12 schools are designed with the assumption that these skills are already in place when children enter the classroom.

But many children, particularly those who grow up in adversity, need additional supports for nonacademic development. According to a 2015 report from the Southern Education Foundation, the majority of children in the United States who attend the public school system [grow up in low-income households](#). Many of these students experience stress associated with challenges that include inadequate housing, lack of enough to eat, and home or neighborhood violence. A 2014 report from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard University highlights how chronic stress [impairs key learning centers](#) of the brain that are associated with attention, working memory, and emotional regulation. As a result, many children enter kindergarten without these essential skills.

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Teachers often lack the preparation to respond effectively to these student needs. As a result, these young people are often labeled with learning disabilities or behavioral disorders when, in fact, they may be missing foundational skills for learning that are actually teachable. The lack of appropriate diagnosis can add another layer of stress, turning an environment that should be supportive into one that feeds fear and distrust in which students struggle to process daily instruction. This is a significant contribution to the achievement gap.

As an adviser for Turnaround for Children, an organization that uses neuroscientific research to develop tools for academic improvement in high-poverty schools, I created a [student-development framework](#) for nonacademic skills. Building Blocks for Learning is grounded in the concept that, like academic skills, nonacademic skills are developmental and can be taught.

This resource serves to guide practitioners at all levels, informing teacher-student relationships, classroom instruction, and school design. Policymakers at the district and state levels can apply the framework when managing opportunities and requirements for students' nonacademic development. In order to use this resource effectively, educators should keep the following suggestions in mind:

- View nonacademic skills through a developmental lens with the understanding that they must be nurtured by the same explicit teaching, modeling, support, and opportunities given to academic skills;
- Place an emphasis on the key roles that students' environments and relationships play in the development of nonacademic skills;

- Use rigorous criteria to identify appropriate nonacademic skills to prioritize, including evidence that they are teachable and correlate to academic achievement; and
- Recognize that a focus on foundational nonacademic skills, such as self-regulation and relationship-building, will help to support the development of other skills, such as resiliency and agency.

Before leaders in K-12 education decide where to focus their efforts in the nonacademic domain-particularly what skills to measure and how to measure them-they must consider the complexities of this area of child development. Scientific evidence continues to paint an optimistic picture of what is possible when learning environments promote connection, trust, and confidence. But designing these environments and building the competencies for those who teach such skills must come first.

We cannot leap to including nonacademic indicators in school accountability frameworks until we create the capacity within classrooms where our students will develop them. When we prioritize the integration of nonacademic and social-emotional skills with traditional academics, we will move from what is now a simple requirement of ESSA toward the creation of learning environments that serve the needs of all students.

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