

## **Recommendations for Noncognitive Development in K-12 Schools in Delaware**

**July 2016**

We are pleased to offer the thinking of our small yet committed study group as a set of recommendations for Delaware K-12 education policymakers and practitioners. Meeting, studying and in many cases working classroom and school wide strategies for the development of students' noncognitive skills, we have developed our understanding and practice and believe our recommendations are a starting place for others to engage and to build upon.

**It is important to recognize that the field of noncognitive development is vast and in no way can one document succinctly summarize it**, nor one set of recommendations speak to every aspect. Thus we think it is important that we provide our rationale for picking the term “noncognitive” as an umbrella term, and help the reader fully recognize there is almost as much written about what term should be used as what matters about the terms. In this abundance of terms, some of which relate to one particular factor, e.g. “grit” or “resilience,” while still others refer to a set of skills and attributes, e.g. “character education” or “social emotional learning,” most of these terms are quite distinct from one another, yet they all are forms of noncognitive development. “Noncognitive” we think stays away from narrowing the discussion and pairs well with our belief in the development of the whole child, the noncognitive and cognitive *together, at the same time*. Briefly, for illustration, teaching students fractions in a math class could build the academic knowledge (cognitive development) and perseverance (noncognitive development) if the instruction and the learners' context were aligned.

While there is some debate about what these skills are and what to call them, there is far less debate on their importance in students' success in and out of school.

<https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Noncognitive%20Report.pdf>

However, **the research on the effects of programs or strategies intended to impact student achievement through the adoption of school and/or classroom strategies is promising but mixed.** No different from attempts to implement curricular programs or strategies, attempts to implement noncognitive reforms share common barriers: is the program research-based, were implementers given supports to understand the program, did the implementers implement as expected, was there support in terms of time, resources, etc.? Key leaders in the field regularly warn against a rush to adopt a “solution” as this is a nascent science. While there will be a rush to monetize and a plethora of programs to come to market, buyer beware.

In too many classrooms and schools across America, children are missing a critical piece of their education. Year after year, and test after test, students and their teachers focus on the cognitive elements of education, while other life skills are often absent from the in-school experience. Reading and writing are intentionally taught, but not always resilience and responsibility. Arithmetic and higher math skills are embedded in school goals, but not necessarily persistence and grit. In some classrooms, an “either/or” dynamic has been established where core knowledge is taught, but not the skills to work cooperatively with others, resolve conflicts, and persevere. The simple reality for the lack of attention given to explicitly supporting noncognitive development in our schools is related to their absence in the curriculum, the requisite time to teach the skills, understanding of what the skills are, and knowledge of how to teach them. Numerous studies have identified the interdependence between cognitive and noncognitive skills and these studies indicate that we may fail to improve cognitive when we ignore or

undervalue noncognitive skills. If instead, we bring intentionality to noncognitive skill development we can improve academic achievement.

**The research overwhelmingly shows the linkages among noncognitive learning, student outcomes, and school performance. But, noncognitive skills matter for their own sake.** When students do not feel they are in charge of and responsible for their learning and behavior, then noncognitive factors such as growth mindsets, resilience, self-control, and other pro-social and behavioral skills can be negatively impacted and contribute to acting out behaviors. On the other hand, Carol Dweck, a leading voice in the field, indicates research shows that *“...believing (or being taught) that social attributes can be developed can lower adolescents’ aggression and stress...and result in enhanced school performance.”* Similarly Camille Farrington argues that a key task for educators is to build these skills, strategies, and traits so that students can be successful in and out of school, in a math class and on the job.

Now, for the first time, we have strong evidence that those on the front lines of American education — **our nation’s teachers — embrace teaching non-cognitive skills.** A full 95 percent of teachers believe social and emotional skills are teachable. Nearly all teachers, 93 percent, believe SEL should be an important part of the in-school experience.

<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/513f79f9e4b05ce7b70e9673/t/526a2589e4b01768fee91a6a/1382688137983/the-missing-piece.pdf>

Most teachers and employers understand that teaching these skills promotes young people’s academic success, engagement, good behavior, cooperation with others, problem-solving abilities, health, and well-being, including being successful in school, work, and life.

Most people, when introduced to the idea of teaching these types of skills believe that they are important, but few think that developing healthy emotions and social connectivity is really a good return on investment. But now we have evidence

that there is a significant ROI too be had. Recently, researchers Henry M. Levin and Clive Belfield examined the economic returns from investments in six prominent noncognitive interventions.

Their findings are striking: Each of the programs had significant benefits that exceeded costs. In fact, the average among the six interventions showed **that for every dollar invested, there is a return of more than 11 dollars.** The lead researcher states, “These are unprecedented returns, particularly given that, while the estimates of the costs are clear, only a portion of the possible benefits are captured.” Benefits include reductions in child aggression, substance abuse, delinquency, and violence; lower levels of depression and anxiety; and increased grades, attendance, and performance in core academic subjects.

<http://cbcse.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/SEL-Revised.pdf>

While we believe the development of noncognitive factors matters, and matters greatly, we offer that there is considerable and growing consternation in the field of noncognitive development that when approached from a stance of “fixing what’s wrong or is lacking” or “blaming the victim,” we run the real risk of undermining the potential of the work. A view of children, especially disadvantaged children, that espouses if they simply had better “social skills” or more “grit” or better “self-esteem” they would be more successful in school and in life is, at the very least, off the mark and at the very worst, racist. **It is important to note that the benefits of developing noncognitive skills matter for students across the academic and socio-economic spectrums.** Teachers frequently observe gifted students who fear “being wrong” refusing to participate or “shutting down” if they encounter failure. So, we offer this significant caution and approach the work and our recommendations from a stance of developing the whole child and the whole of children.

Our group arrived at eight recommendations across policy and practice that adopted together could represent a strong step forward for Delaware.

**Recommendations: Policy**Recommendation One:

- ✓ Delaware should Create or Adopt K-12 Competencies for Noncognitive Development.

## Rationale:

Newly enacted federal legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires that state accountability systems and schools report some non-academic measure and that the measure will play a part in school accountability. ESSA lists student engagement, educator engagement, and school climate measures as examples, and measures of noncognitive development could be appropriate here.

Research indicates that similar to reading and math, some noncognitive skills develop sequentially and programs and strategies to address them should span K-12. More typically, if states have adopted standards for early childhood, which while clearly important as a foundation for developing cognitive skills, they are insufficient to address the students' needs as they continue to grow and develop. As with any curriculum, noncognitive efforts should be vertically and horizontally aligned.

With a statewide framework for noncognitive development, **the state, in partnership with schools, can develop a coherent, collaborative and compelling vision for students' noncognitive development**, build understanding and awareness of its role in the development of our students, and lead to the adoption of research-based strategies.

Only a few states have adopted K-12 competencies for noncognitive development including Illinois: (link for one of three goals) [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/social\\_emotional/standards.htm](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm) ,

Kansas:

[http://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/Content%20Area%20\(M-Z\)/School%20Counseling/Soc\\_Emot\\_Char\\_Dev/SECD%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2014-10-08-095527-790](http://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/Content%20Area%20(M-Z)/School%20Counseling/Soc_Emot_Char_Dev/SECD%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2014-10-08-095527-790)

West

Virginia: <http://wvde.state.wv.us/healthyschools/ElectronicManual4373New.html#SelfawarenessandSelfmanagement>.

Other states have competencies for only certain grade spans, and others have none. Delaware has begun developing standards for grades K-2.

Recommendation Two:

- ✓ Delaware should Link Common Core State Standards and Noncognitive Development

Rationale:

The link between cognitive and noncognitive development has been discussed earlier in our recommendations. CCSS standards are generally viewed as rigorous and demand new forms of teaching and learning. **Students can't rely on the same skills to achieve in this new climate; teachers can't let them.**

We need to work with a sense of urgency to develop a set of noncognitive skills and how they link to academic content, so that teachers can plan and teach with an eye on the whole child. As addressed earlier, teachers fully understand and support the need for schools to address noncognitive development and doing so through curriculum linked to the standards makes sense. Teachers in our group clearly saw links to the standards and we share their early thinking as it relates to their grade level curricula; in this instance, sixth grade mathematics and English language arts (see attachments).

Recommendation Three:

- ✓ Delaware should Provide a Student Survey of Noncognitive Development for all Schools

## Rationale:

The state and schools need data to know where our students stand. Simple surveys of students are the best place to start. Two schools in Delaware are validating a student survey on a subset of noncognitive skills and these items could be used. These same schools have had teachers use a survey from Panorama that includes items related to belonging, value, grit, and academic mindsets.

<https://www.panoramaed.com/social-emotional-learning>

Potentially, items from these surveys or others could be promulgated statewide. They could stand alone, or be incorporated into the currently administered Delaware School Climate Survey. The data from DSCS provides important data on school climate, an important consideration in noncognitive development, and the results can be examined through that lens.

**However, we believe it to be imperative that the results of these or related surveys not be used for student, teacher, or school accountability.** While a set of schools has gone down this road, many leading researchers and we do not support that effort.

<http://www.coreeducationllc.com/blog2/moving-beyond-just-academics-assessing-school-effectiveness/>

<http://edr.sagepub.com/content/44/4/237.full.pdf+html?ijkey=hixxiPxVRpaxg&keytype=ref&siteid=spedr>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/01/us/testing-for-joy-and-grit-schools-nationwide-push-to-measure-students-emotional-skills.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>

Recommendation Four:

- ✓ Delaware should Support a Pilot for Schools Doing Deep Work to Support Student Agency

## Rationale:

As discussed earlier, the field of noncognitive development is vast. Delaware has yet to substantively address the work. Trying to do so through a Herculean effort is futile. Trying to do so by lifting and examining work already underway is manageable and more likely to be fruitful.

A small number of schools in Delaware are engaged in promoting a subset of noncognitive skills, those that relate to self-skills including academic mindsets, value, belonging, and learning strategies. These schools are a part of a small national effort to link research and practice in school-based efforts to promote noncognitive development.

<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/in-action/student-agency-improvement-community/>

**Starting small and smart**, and leveraging a private investment, the state could support these schools to continue their work and practices shared through study visits, white papers, and policy briefs.

Recommendation Five:

- ✓ Delaware should Support After-school Programming to Provide Opportunities for Noncognitive Development

## Rationale:

Tapping into students' passions in their after-school activities is a natural place to extend school-based efforts aimed at noncognitive development. When students join 4H, Technology Students Association, a chess club, etc., they routinely work harder, persist, collaborate with others, or move out of their comfort zone because they see value in doing so. Making those efforts and the related skill development explicit to students can grow their mindsets about their abilities and that connection can extend to their academic mindsets.

**The research on the impact of extended-day and after-school programming that addresses noncognitive development is compelling.**

<http://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds/article/afterschool-programs-follow-evidence-based-practices-promote-social-and>

<http://jjie.org/reading-difficulty-in-young-children-linked-to-later-trouble-with-the-law/278989/>

Because many educators are offering this programming to the students they teach during the school day or who are from their own schools, it provides a place for teachers to experience success in developing noncognitive skills and make the bridge to the regular school day classrooms. Incorporating some of the same instructional skills, particularly those that are problem and project based, can extend and deepen these positive effects.

### **Recommendations: Practice**

#### Recommendation One:

- ✓ Schools should Explore Their Students' Beliefs of Supportive School Practices

#### Rationale:

Knowing where students stand can be a first step in opening school-based discussions about noncognitive development. Teachers value the role and importance of noncognitive development but most don't have a fix on where their students are on any continuum as they have been provided few/no ways to assess here. Two schools in Delaware have completed three rounds of surveying their students on a subset of noncognitive skills. The results have been used by school teams to develop and test classroom and schoolwide interventions by interested teachers. We have seen a significant reduction in student disciplinary referrals and the educators attribute this to the interventions that have sprung from the survey.

Recommendation Two:

- ✓ Schools should do initial study on the topic of noncognitive development.

## Rationale:

As noted earlier, this is a broad and deep field of study and work. A list of some of the noncognitive skills or factors include: persistence, resilience, grit, goal-setting, help-seeking, cooperation, conscientiousness, empathy, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-control, self-discipline, motivation, value, belonging, mindsets, effort, work habits, organization, homework completion, learning strategies, and study skills. There are more.

Teachers and administrators can take a first step in building understanding against needs in their local context by examining data sets such as attendance, discipline, course grades, etc., and have discussions about possible reasons for their data. Do they think it is possible that poor attendance in general or for a subset of their students is due to a lack of belonging; perhaps a lack of value for school? Working in this manner, **schools can initially narrow their focus** on an aspect or two of noncognitive development and then begin to learn more about that aspect and begin to test out strategies. Similarly, if schools surveyed their students, as we suggest in recommendation three, they would have additional data from which to begin a dialogue.

An excellent first read to come to understand the research and practice is:

<https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Noncognitive%20Report.pdf>

Recommendation Three:

- ✓ Schools should Engage Parents in Supportive Strategies

## Rationale:

**Schools shoulder the load for teaching academic content. They need to share the load in supporting the development of noncognitive strategies.**

Students cannot hear messages that support their ability to have a growth mindset in school, and hear no such messages at home.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/parents-who-see-failure-as-negative-bring-up-children-who-do-not-believe-they-can-improve-research-a7074331.html>

Schools can and should use time-honored practices for providing ways to support the home-school connection through the use of newsletters, websites, parent engagement meetings, PTA participation, student-led conferencing, etc. However, deep parental engagement is the exception, rather than the norm. A significant effort to engage our families in the development of their children's noncognitive skills could be modeled in Delaware from programs that have strong records in deeply engaging families in school improvement efforts. These are not simple, quick, or inexpensive approaches; they are approaches that work.

<http://prichardcommittee.org/our-initiatives/gcipl/>

<http://annenberginstitute.org/sites/default/files/product/209/files/HendersonRpt.pdf>

### Conclusion

It is our hope that the reader will take from our work the following:

- Students' noncognitive development is critical to their success in school and in life.
- The field of noncognitive development is vast and attempts to boil strategies or factors down to a few seemingly common and accessible terms such as motivation or self-control or grit are misguided.
- The state, genuinely collaborating with teachers and administrators, needs to lay the groundwork by creating K-12 competencies for noncognitive development.
- Initial implementation efforts should start small, both in terms of the number of noncognitive strategies and factors being taught and the

number of schools engaged. And this work should be accompanied with a plan for research and evaluation to support smart scaling efforts.

- In state or local performance evaluation processes, teachers should not be held accountable through assessments of students' noncognitive growth.

We thank the reader for her/his attention and stand ready to share our thinking with those who would like to learn more.