Everyone knows reading and math scores are important. However, what many educators are learning is that, while they know more and more about their students’ testing history, they know almost nothing about why students perform as they do. As a result, methods used to improve test scores often fail.

In the new post-No Child Left Behind world of the Every Student Succeeds Act, schools must gather information on a broader range of student skills. Such measures can offer added insights into what students need to do to succeed academically and in life.

Some call these “noncognitive skills,” but no term could be more inaccurate. These skills require plenty of cognition. A better label would be “success skills,” what successful students do to manage the learning process effectively and efficiently.

Teaching ‘Success Skills’ to Conquer Content

An approach for preparing students for college, careers and life

BY DAVID T. CONLEY
Expanding Access

Educators already know that most achieving students are proficient in success skills, which include time management, effective study habits, collaboration, help seeking, goal setting, persistence (or grit), self-monitoring and self-management. They also are closely associated with success in the workplace.

High-achieving students tend to develop success skills through a variety of experiences not always available to all students. These include activities that emphasize goal focus, practice, concentration, persistence and self-assessment. Examples include performance-oriented activities such as orchestra, band and choir, drama, speech and debate, team and individual sports, school-sponsored and out-of-school clubs and organizations, specialized summer camps, and enrichment programs.

Unfortunately, not all students have equal access to these opportunities. Some choose not to take advantage of them. Given their importance to student academic success, however, it is increasingly imperative that schools teach success skills to all students, with an emphasis on students who are struggling academically.

Character Grades

Some schools already see development of success skills as key to their mission and always have. Often these are private schools that know their clientele expect their children to develop these skills, which are key not only to their children’s academic success but also to succeeding in leadership roles through their lives. Other schools have come up with their own approaches to building the success skills they find most important.

Grant-Beacon Middle School in Denver, emphasizes character development throughout its program. Students receive a character point average, or CPA, in addition to a grade point average. The CPA consists of observations and feedback on student kindness, curiosity, integrity, perseverance and leadership.

Some charter schools that focus on college readiness have begun to incorporate instruction in success skills or at least the expectation that students will use effective learning strategies. These schools have experienced improved scores on state tests and increased college-going rates, although problems still arise with getting their graduates to persist in college.

The KIPP Houston schools provide all students with notebooks in which to record their assignments to emphasize personal self-management and organization. Teachers check to see if students are managing their time effectively to complete assignments, and they coach students on how to make the best use of study time. All KIPP Houston students at one point took self-
assessments of their college and career readiness and then developed personal plans to improve their cognitive strategies, such as problem solving, their approach to mastering key content, their learning skills such as time management and their “college knowledge,” what they need to know to pick a college and apply, get financial aid and adapt successfully to college culture.

The National Academy Foundation, a national network of education, business and community leaders, sponsors NAFTrack, a system that combines college- and career-ready skills and dispositions in a success skills framework. This career academy approach includes internships that assess students on collaboration and teamwork, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, initiative and self-direction, and professionalism and ethics.

Programs such as AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, have elements of success skills built into them. Central to the program is the AVID elective, a course in which students learn strategies for personal organization, study skills, note taking, collaboration and help-seeking while simultaneously completing highly challenging courses.

While AVID can be managed by a single teacher or group of teachers, it is most effective when implemented schoolwide so that all students, not just those in an AVID elective classroom, have access to the same strategies such as study skills. Over time, AVID schools tend to create cultures that support development of the success skills necessary for college and career readiness.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills emphasizes four Cs: communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity. Schools join P21 and adopt programs that best meet local needs.

Bate Middle School in Danville, Ky., uses project-based learning, flexible scheduling and a redesigned curriculum to develop critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills. Savannah High School in Anaheim, Calif., emphasizes college and career pathways to enhance student communication, collaboration and critical thinking in ways that develop personal planning, goal setting and self-management.

Another popular program, Brainology, created by Carol Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford University, emphasizes positive academic mindsets in students. The program helps students learn how effort can trump any perceptions that aptitude can prevent them from succeeding in a subject area. This is important in subjects such as mathematics, where students come to believe they just can’t do math. Through Brainology, students learn that an effort-based mindset can help them achieve at a high level.

A range of programs are available to improve study skills, teach goal-setting, enhance technological proficiency, explore career interests and develop what some have labeled as grit — the persistence, tenacity and resilience necessary for students to take on challenging academic work and succeed.

Lifelong Skills
Linking success skills to college and career readiness strengthens the rationale for developing
these skills. Many schools have adopted the Four Keys to College and Career Readiness schoolwide (see related story, page xx), including several in Orange County, Calif.

The Four Keys schools recognize it takes much more to be college ready than good scores on English and math tests. This more comprehensive view of college and career readiness enables schools to consider whether students are developing the problem-solving and critical thinking skills necessary in college and the workplace, whether they are taking ownership of their learning and whether they have all the specific “college knowledge” they need to maneuver the transition to postsecondary education and get the most out of a college education.

Every indication is that today’s students, who will live the rest of their lives in the 21st century, will need strong success skills throughout their careers and lives. And yet, schools that teach success skills are still the exception and not the rule. Why is this? Why don’t all schools develop student success skills with the same intensity and dedication that they devote to basic literacy and numeracy skills?

The problem is that doing so requires integrating these skills into the fabric of the school’s instructional program. Schools tend to solve problems by adopting programs, and many programs exist to teach success skills with the same intensity and dedication that they devote to basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Three Steps
Creating such a focus requires the following steps:

- **Make the case publicly for the need for success skills** as keys to improved student achievement as well as to readiness for college, careers and life as a 21st-century citizen. Make the case that the economy and society are changing in ways that require greater individual self-management, initiative, flexibility and perseverance.

- **Make space in the day for teachers to teach, encourage and support success skills.** Examples include a short weekly advisory period where these skills are discussed and reviewed, built-in routines such as assignment notebook checks that reward student self-management, opportunities for student goal setting in class with time to discuss how to achieve their goals, regularly scheduled times throughout the year when skills like note taking and time management can be taught in ways that integrate them into academic learning.

- **Value success skills by measuring and reporting them.** Calculate a success skills grade for students along with an academic grade. Use this grade to view changes in student skills over time but not to categorize or label students. Determine which students are improving their success skills, increasing their self-management and self-monitoring behaviors, and regularly using a range of techniques and strategies to learn better. Intervene with students who are not improving their success skills over time.

For some schools it may make the most sense to adopt a comprehensive program such as AVID or the Partnership for 21st Century Schools 4Cs model. At other schools, however, adding specific success skills one at a time may make more sense. Whichever route a school chooses, the net effect of emphasizing success skills will result in all students being better prepared for the challenges they will face in college, careers and life.

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