

Study: Boosting soft skills is better than raising test scores

Chicago analysis finds schools that foster social-emotional development get better results for students



Proof Points

Column by **JILL BARSHAY**

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We hear the phrase “failing schools” a lot but what really defines a failing school? Generally, we look at test scores. Schools that aren’t getting students to improve their math and reading achievement on the standardized tests administered by each state are the ones singled out for shame, punishment and sometimes closure. That’s led to excessive test preparation — and even fraud — to boost scores.

Education researchers are trying to come up with different ways to measure success. One of them, economist Kirabo Jackson of Northwestern University, has zeroed in on soft skills, which include traits like empathy and perseverance, and found that if you were to set up a competition between schools that raise test scores and schools that foster soft skills, the soft skills schools would win.



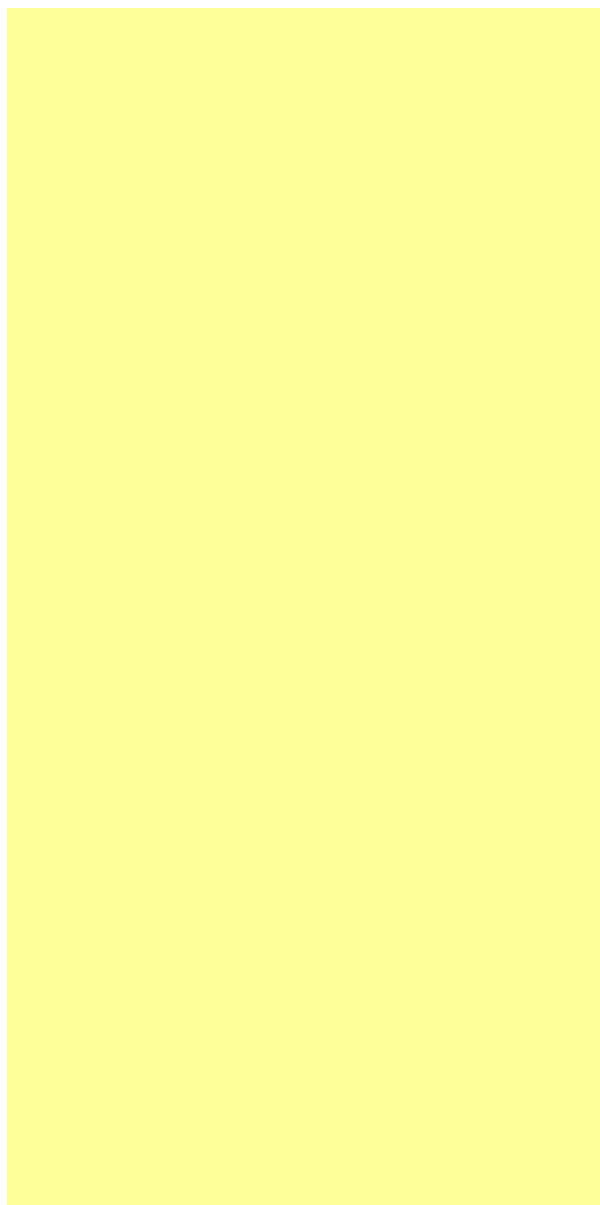
High school students comfort each other on Chicago’s South Side. A new Chicago study shows that students who attend schools that foster soft skills do better in high school and beyond. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

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In a large study of more than 150,000 students in all 133 of Chicago's public high schools, Jackson has calculated that schools that build social-emotional qualities such as the ability to resolve conflicts and the motivation to work hard are getting even better short-term and long-term results for students than schools that only boost test scores. The schools that develop soft skills produced students with higher grades, fewer absences and fewer disciplinary problems and arrests in high school. Later, the students who attended these high schools graduated and went to college in higher rates. In a few more years, we may learn that the students who attended schools that are strong in soft skills earned more college degrees.

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“What we’re showing is that schools that actually cause kids to become more gritty, those kids tend to be likely to persist more in college,” said Jackson.

“You could actually do a lot more good by focusing on schools that promote social-emotional development as opposed to focusing on schools that raise test scores,” he added.

We haven’t been totally misguided to focus on test scores all this time. Schools that boost test scores also tend to be the ones that boost social-emotional skills. But the overlap isn’t perfect. An exemplar school for boosting test scores at the 95th percentile might only be 75th percentile

for building soft skills, according to the Chicago high school data. Importantly, Jackson is noticing outliers: schools that are sensational at building soft skills but terrible at boosting test scores, and vice versa.

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Jackson declined to identify strong or weak schools by name because the research is in early stages. The study, “[School effects on socio-emotional development, school-based arrests and educational attainment](#),” is still a working paper, which means it has not yet been peer-reviewed and may still undergo revisions. In February 2020, Jackson [presented](#) these early findings at conference of the National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) and [the paper](#) was circulated by the National Bureau of Economic Research. Along with Jackson, there are four co-authors from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, Northwestern University and the Mindset Scholars Network.

Measuring squishy soft skills is controversial and complicated. Scholars have found many [problems in measuring “grit,”](#) a popular social-emotional trend in schools, for example.

Jackson and his research colleagues relied on students’ responses to a social-emotional survey given to Chicago public school students from 2008 onward. Students answered a range of questions about their own perceptions of their interpersonal skills, social well-being and hard work. For example, students said how much they agree with a statement like, “If I need to study, I don’t go out with my friends.” (For a more examples of survey questions, I typed up a bunch [here](#).)

To tease out how much of these skills could be credited to a student’s high school, the researchers factored in students’ prior academic achievement and how they responded to the surveys in middle school. They also adjusted students’ responses for gender, race/ethnicity, family income and the socio-economic status of the student’s home

neighborhood, down to the census block. All these adjustments are important because a student's context matters in how he or she answers a question. Kids are more likely to say "I'm a hard worker" if they're surrounded by kids who don't work hard, Jackson explained.

In the end, the researchers had an estimate of how much each high school boosted soft skills, based on how ninth graders answered surveys from 2011 to 2017. And they found that the students' self-reported answers had a significant correlation with school grades and attendance in ninth grade. The students who went to the high schools that were good at developing soft skills also had fewer disciplinary incidents.

For the older students in the study, the ones who entered ninth grade between 2011 and 2014, researchers saw that students who attended these soft-skills high schools had fewer arrests throughout their high school years and graduated high school in greater numbers. After high school, these students attended college, both two-year and four-year institutions, in higher numbers and persisted in college in higher rates. It's too early to see college graduation rates for these students.

To check their findings, the researchers compared siblings who attended different high schools and the ones that attended to schools that were better at boosting soft skills had better outcomes.

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The study is making several important contributions to educational research. It's more proof that students are self-aware and honest enough to give survey answers that can actually measure social-emotional skills. It also indicates that increases in students' soft skills matter for the educational outcomes that we care about like better grades and college attendance.

There's a debate in the research community about whether interventions to boost "grit" or "[growth mindset](#)" actually cause students to learn a lot more or do better in school. Those trendy social-emotional concepts

weren't tested in this study. But schools that improved social well-being had larger effects on attendance and behavioral infractions while those that promoted hard work, which is closely related to the concepts of grit and growth mindset, had bigger impacts on grades. Jackson's research is making a case that some schools are able to develop these soft skills much better than other schools.

A big question is what the schools are doing to achieve that result. Further research is needed to learn if the above-average schools had adopted a social-emotional curriculum or trained their teachers to foster these skills. Jackson told me he wasn't aware of a particular social-emotional curriculum that was in widespread use. It's also possible that successful schools weren't doing anything special but were staffed by adults who treated students with respect, fostered a sense of community and inspired students to study hard.

What do we do with this research? Should we start surveying every high school student in America and rank schools based on how well they're boosting soft skills? Jackson said that kind of ranking would be "misguided."

"Anything can be gamed," said Jackson. "If you say, 'We're going to reward you if you have students who say they are gritty,' you're going to have schools training students to report that they're gritty. That's not going to be very helpful."

Jackson's goal is to go into the schools that are at the top and learn what the grownups are doing in the building to promote social-emotional skills and see if those things can be replicated at other schools.

"Once we figure out what those are, maybe we can attach stakes to those behaviors," said Jackson. "We can use the self reports [student surveys] as a way to figure out which practices we want to promote in professional development or teacher evaluation."

This story about [social-emotional development](#) was written by Jill Barshay and produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit,