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# The Measure of Success

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Pause for a moment and reflect on the day your child came into your life. I am not sure if you do this often. I do. I know, for example, that when I held my firstborn, my son Tyler, I thought about how surprisingly small he was. And during that day, I remember having my hopes for Tyler. When my daughter Ali was born a few years later, I remember having similar hopes for her. I wanted each to be a good person. I wanted each to be happy. I hoped each would live a fulfilled life, and would find love in life. I wanted each to find something that would instill a lifelong passion. I had other hopes for them as well. I know, however, that during these important first moments and days, I did not hope for good grades, high SAT scores, or acceptance to any particular college or university.

Over time, my hopes for my children changed and became more specific. Those of you with middle- and upper-school children particularly will understand these feelings. I remember hoping each of my children would develop a deep love of reading, and continue to improve in particular academic disciplines. For many reasons, I hoped that each would earn high marks in school. I suppose life does that to all of us. It was not as if I lost sight of those initial hopes and dreams, it was just that the realities of the everyday began to overshadow the bigger notions I initially held dear. I had certain ideas when my son applied to colleges, and as my daughter begins her search for this next step in her education, I am beginning for the second time to have a set of hopes that were not on my initial list: a strong GPA, challenging coursework, good SAT/ACT scores, etc. But have my hopes and dreams really changed that much?

I ask this question as a parent. As an educator, I also ask myself very similar questions—but through a professional lens. And as I review (and strive to keep up with) the newest research on teaching, learning and the brain, as well as the best practices in my field to ensure my students perform at the highest levels, I am learning that my original hopes for my children still matter. In fact, they matter a lot.

## Process Over Product

As a new teacher in the early 1970s, I focused almost solely on improving my students' "product" without knowing how they might improve their process. I did not focus enough on what was really needed in order to generate better products—products that I knew they had the potential to create.

Over time and as my teaching repertoire grew, I realized that there were important characteristics and traits my students should possess if they were to perform well in school, and if they were to produce those products. I found early on that daily preparation, for example, is important if students are to perform well in school—and in life. Organization is another such trait that is important for students in their daily work. And if you are going to invest those "10,000 hours"—the amount of practice Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, argues is required for success in a particular field—then you also need to have some perseverance.

And daily preparation, organization and perseverance are only three of the traits on my list today. Over time, I began to focus more on the process—not just the content—that would help my students love learning and find success in school. In fact, learning the content became the mechanism I used to help students learn the process of how they learned best.

## Putting Happiness First

As I learned more, I also realized that a happy child learns better—and that happiness really does matter in schools. Shawn Achor, the

author of *The Happiness Advantage*, writes about the growing body of research in positive psychology and how that research informs us that happiness is not the product of our success. Rather, it is the precursor to our being successful in schools, at work, and in our relationships. In short, happiness must come first.

With that premise in mind, consider a slice of my generation's narrative. Growing up, we were mentored to believe that if we were diligent in school, we would be accepted into a strong college or university ... and then happiness would follow. Once in college

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or university, yet another message was given: If we were disciplined as an undergraduate, then we would be accepted into a strong graduate program or professional position ... and then happiness would follow.

And so the pattern continued: Following graduate or higher-level studies, in time after starting work in a paid position, we quickly learned that if we were the first one at work, the last to leave, and the one who continued to work during weekends, inevitably a partnership or similarly lucrative leadership position was achieved ... again, happiness would follow.

Along the way perhaps there was also the search for the perfect spouse or partner, and possibly the perfect place to live and, over time, the evolution of a family with children ... yet again, happiness would follow. Finally, with our family in place, we did all we could to support our child's enrollment in the best school because we knew that it was necessary for his or her happiness.

For so many, happiness is therefore delayed and even placed permanently in a holding pattern ... ironically, in the pursuit of happiness. Thus, one is inevitably compelled to ask: Was I as successful as I could have been because I stressed about the future

rather than happily engaged in my “present”?

Does this sound familiar? We all know those few people who are “ridiculously” happy—they love their work, they are successful at their work, and they are equally successful in their relationships with others. These individuals are creative and wonderful problem solvers and always seem to get everything accomplished. If you know such people, you witness all that research implies: that happiness must come first—and the rest follows.

In his book *Brain Rules*, John Medina explains why a happy mind better retains information, is a better problem solver, is more creative, and more efficient. In general, a happy mind is better than a stressed mind. It is both instructive and striking to note that surveys taken in the 1980s revealed that parents in the United States shifted from wanting their children to be “good” to wanting them to be “happy.” Psychologists at that time were likely both challenged and energized by that change in parental views. I recall articles in which that change reflected the reality of “modern” adults who had worked hard but had yet to find life-satisfaction. They just wanted their children to be happy—maybe because they were not. As an added bonus, this same research also informs us that one very important way for our children to become happy is to be good to other people.

## New Ways to Assess Students

In addition to encouraging us to focus on children’s happiness, emerging research challenges us to examine how we measure success. Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, has been instrumental in bringing the importance of non-cognitive traits to the forefront of public conversation.

A project I have been involved with, the Mission Skills Assessment (MSA), is helping us to learn more. The Independent School Data Exchange (INDEX) developed the MSA after it studied the

mission statements of several private colleges, universities and independent schools. While these institutions commonly claimed the development of certain traits as central to their missions, they did not have a way to assess them. So INDEX set out to assess six of the traits found in these mission statements: teamwork, creativity, ethics, resilience, curiosity, and time management.

In the 2013-14 school year, the third year of this assessment, the MSA was given to more than 13,000 independent middle school students around the United States. A robust assessment that incorporates three different measurements to triangulate methodologies and provide more confidence in the results, the MSA measures traits similar to those described by Paul Tough. These traits are also similar to those KIPP schools evaluate in the feedback they provide their students, and correlate to eight traits my own school is considering in a redesign of our comment-writing process. Not only is the MSA different from other tests because of what it assesses but also because, in addition to individual student results, it provides each school a cohort score for schools that can be used to improve program.

Another example we might consider is the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA). The CWRA was developed by the Council for Aid to Education in New York City to assess undergraduates’ improvement in critical thinking skills. Most every school talks about developing their students as critical thinkers; the ability to explore ideas critically is cited in the opening words of our school’s “Profile of a Graduate.” But most schools do not have a method for knowing if they are successful. The CWRA can track such improvement and inform a school if its program fulfills its mission.

## Evaluating, Not Grading, Traits

The traits our school is focusing on are engagement, perseverance, risk-taking, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, daily prep-

aration and organization. Yes, there are other important traits we could add to our list, but for starters we have decided that we would focus on these when we work with students, provide them feedback, and discuss ways in which they might do their best. These eight traits will rest at the core of the comments that our faculty will write to students, and which parents can read and discuss with their children.

We must be extraordinarily thoughtful and thorough, however, when going down the road of assessing individual traits. We must first assess large cohorts of students and our programs in an effort to create pedagogy and school culture that support all that is necessary for our students to become more successful learners. Teachers must learn how to best foster these traits and engage in more qualitative conversation with students.

Let's take the trait of risk-taking, about which there has been much discussion lately from the perspective of both educators and parents. Our school's aim is that our students should seek excellence, not perfection. We know that, to learn, children must be willing to take risks—they must be willing to fail. And we must not over-protect them, but rather help them take advantage of the important opportunities to learn if and when they do fail.

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So we should determine if our students are willing to take risks and if our program encourages them to take appropriate risks.

Now that we can measure such a trait, we must do so—but we must also be careful not to grade it in the traditional way. Students can sometimes brush off a bad grade in mathematics, but they will personalize a grade on a trait like risk-taking because it speaks less to their performance, and more to who they are as a person. We must help our students to learn to recognize and understand each trait.

Only then will students be able to become self-aware and

understand how they compare with that self-knowledge: Am I a risk-taker? Do I prepare well each day? Can I persevere when

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the going gets difficult? With knowledge and self-awareness, a student can begin to learn how to self-manage or self-improve: Can I improve? Can I develop coping strategies? Can I maintain? And as we learn more from studying and comparing the effect of our program from cohort results,

teachers will know more not only about how to foster traits but also how to help students improve.

### Educating for Their Future, Not Our Past

In her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck tells us that students must be taught a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. Simply stated, parents and teachers should discuss with and reward in our children the process they follow in their work, not the results they produce.

As parents, we might be the first generation that has no clear idea of the world in which our children will work. As educators, we are faced with the reality that we must educate our children for their future, not our past. Our parents and educators before us felt they had a clear idea of the skills and content we should master in schools to be successful, but the pace of change in our lifetime places our conversation with children in a different light.

Most who talk about the future do, however, narrow the focus on teaching children *how* to learn, fostering in children their creativity and passion for learning. Students should leave our schools knowing well how they learn. And schools must foster in our children a passion for learning. As Sir Ken Robinson suggests in his book, *Out*

*of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*, schools must foster creativity since research informs us that all children enter school with creativity but that parents and schools kill that creativity. Knowing that we want to graduate students who know how to learn, who have a passion for learning, and possess strong creative traits will inevitably transform the way we “do” schools. And if we are to serve this generation well, we need to assess such traits, not for individuals, but for entire schools—in the words of our own school mission, “in order to meet the challenges of a changing world.”

In a world recently obsessed with ranking our students on many standardized tests that are not correlated to success in schools or life, we must be thoughtful about how we use these results from the last forty years of research informing us of the value of the process—the *how* our children learn, not just the *what* they learn. And as more assessments like the MSA or the CWRA emerge, I encourage us to first use these assessments to evaluate our programs and to learn more about what works best in schools so that we can foster, and maybe teach, these important traits we all hoped for our children from the start.

I still hope that my children will be good people. I hope each finds happiness in life. I hope each will live a fulfilled life, and will find love in life. I want my children to find something in their lives about which they will be passionate. What is different now is that we know that certain traits will help them find success in school, in work, and in life. I also now know that we have a growing number of ways to robustly assess those traits. Conversations about these traits must become an important part of their education. And I personally look forward to energetically engaging in these new assessments, in order to help find ways to improve these traits in our children and not to rank order them as yet another way to compare them.

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